

Rock Voices: the Oral History Project of SRU

Barbara McGinnis Interview

June 6, 2008

Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania

Interviewed by Brady Crytzer

Transcribed by Brady Crytzer

Proofread and edited by Judy Silva and Jane Smith

Reviewed and approved by Barbara McGinnis

BC: Okay Barb, talk about your affiliation with Slippery Rock University.

BM: I began my career here [in] October of 1970. I was eighteen years old, right out of high school. I had taken all kinds of secretarial training in high school; I took a civil service test and that's how I got a job here. It was civil service at that time, in 1970. I got placed on a list and got called in for an interview and was offered a job. I began in [the] Public Relations Office with three others. I worked with the director of Public Relations and the Sports Information director. They were housed in Old Main at that time, first floor. It's now a president's conference room.

I worked there for three and a half years and . . . I loved the job. It was very interesting. We did all the publications on campus, did all the sports releases, got to know the kids on the sports teams; they'd come in. My boss also was in charge of *The Saxigena*, which was the yearbook at that time, so I got involved in that. I really liked that job. I was there for three and a half years and had gotten married and thought I needed to make more money. I couldn't get an upgrade there so I had a chance to move to the Computer Center, which was in Maltby Center. So I moved from a five-person office to an eighteen-person office—knowing nothing about computers.

BC: Do you remember what year that was?

BM: That was in, let's see, 1974 when I moved to the Computer Center.

BC: Okay.

BM: And things have really changed in the Computer Center since 1974. The computers have gotten smaller. There's less people working in the Computer Center now because a computer can do more things on its own; it doesn't need people. So my main job there was to help the director and work with whoever came in. And the computers were always going down at that time. So I'd get calls, "What's the matter with the computer?" So I had to call all the users on campus and tell them that the terminals were down and would be down for fifteen minutes and hopefully be back up.

And I also supervised several students that worked in the computer lab at that time. I was there for ten years, and my director left and I got a new boss. And then I decided I needed

a change after ten years. I worked in the Computer Center but never had a computer on my desk, if you can believe that. Everybody else had computers; I didn't have one.

So I went back to Old Main and got a job in Graduate Studies and Continuing Ed [Education]. I was there for twenty years. I've been around [laughs]. I was there for twenty years, worked for several people. I really liked that job too. And then from Old Main with that job I moved to Lowry Center, had a baby, came back to a new boss. She was there for three and a half years. Another boss came; I worked for him for thirteen years. We moved from Lowry Center into the newly-renovated North Hall. We were there for a few years; then we got moved downtown to the Lifelong Learning Center. He retired, and then I transferred to the job in the library in February 2005, and that's where I'm currently working.

BC: Okay. Slippery Rock went through a bit of a change from being a college to a university. We take that for granted looking back, but at the time what do you remember most about that period? Was there a lot of excitement about it, or was it just a change of labels?

BM: There was excitement about it. We got all new letterhead with the university, and it was Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania. We just made the title as long as we could because we were really impressed that we were now a university. It seemed that we got more freedom to do a lot of different things like ordering our supplies, and our paychecks came in a more timely manner than they had when we were a . . . state college, and more connected to Harrisburg. Everything that we did had to be preapproved by Harrisburg—everything. And when we became a university we became more localized and were able to make more decisions on our own. They had a big celebration when we became a university. Everybody was excited that we were becoming a university. It was a big step.

BC: When you were at the celebration do you remember any sort of, you know, obviously there is a lot of "rah rah" going on and saying that we have big things in the future. Do you remember any goals that the new school had in mind? And do you think we have met those goals, looking back?

BM: Of course we wanted to grow, which we've done. I think at the time that I started there were not quite five thousand students. Now what do we have? Ten thousand students? Eight thousand? The campus was a lot smaller. Now it's really spread out. We've always said that we had five hundred acres, but it wasn't all developed. We still have five hundred acres, but it's more developed now than it was before we became a university.

BC: As you . . . as someone in the administrative wing of things, did you think that having everyone much closer together instead of a different department in all different buildings was better? Or do you like the different departments. Because when you deliver something by hand that changes quite a bit, I would imagine.

BM: It does. It was easier to work when you were closer together. One of my co-workers had told me that years ago all the offices were in Old Main. Every administrative office was in Old Main. They used the entire building from the basement clear up to the third floor. They had all these little cubby holes and everybody was really stuck in there.

And then they started building the new buildings and moving people. The University Union was one of the newer buildings built when I first came. So the spreading out wasn't as personal. You don't know the people as well as you did back in those days, but we needed the space and now we have faxes and emails and voicemails, and we didn't have any of that back in the '70s. You answered your phone; if you weren't there to answer the phone it didn't get answered. We didn't have email; we didn't have faxes. You had to hand-carry everything. So in that sense, with the technology we have now, it's easier.

BC: You said you went to the Computer Center in the '70s. What was the general attitude of the Computer Center? Because I could see that being the kind of thing that a lot of people wouldn't buy into. A lot of older, more conservative people. Then there's you that really has to answer the questions because you're the one that's called. What do you think people thought of the new switch over to the computerized system?

BM: I think they liked it when the computers worked, but when everything kept going down it was frustrating for them. They were used to doing things by hand with cards and papers, especially registration, and when they were in the middle of registration and things went down it got really confusing because they didn't have that paper [trail] to work with. There were just a few [of] what they called "computer terminals" back in those days in all the offices. And when they did registration after we got the computers, they did what we called an "arena registration." They gathered up all the computers out of all of the offices, and I think they took them to the University Union and set them all up. For a week we registered the students. The kids had to stand in line and register. They couldn't just register themselves like they do nowadays. They had to go to an office and get registered. We didn't have RockTalk. They had to stand in line, and it was an ongoing process, so it was terrible. They did that twice a year.

BC: You went through all of the different buildings you've worked [in] and things like that. What would you say would've been your favorite building to work in and why?

BM: I liked working in Lowry Center. It was a private home at one time, the Headlands'. He was a professor here. He and his family—his wife and five children lived in that house, so it was a private home. It had a basement, two stories and an attic, and we used all of the building. There was Graduate Studies, Continuing Ed, [and] Orientation in that building and Retention Services. It was homey; we had stained glass in the windows. We had our own little private bathroom with a shower. And one summer a man came in through the door and said that he had lived there as a kid and asked if he could take a tour of the house. So he told us lots of stories about the house: where the boys slept and where the girls slept, and where the stepmother slept out on the sun porch. It was a cozy little place to work, and we became like a family there. We still keep in touch. Most of them

are retired now; I'm about the only one left from the Lowry gang, but we do still keep in touch.

BC: Do you remember about how many people worked with you in there?

BM: Let's see. There were five secretaries and four bosses. So it was very cozy and homey. We had our own kitchen. We had little lunches together, so it was nice. It's one of the nicer buildings.

BC: When you graduated high school . . . can you talk about what high school you went to and when you graduated? Most people, for the most part, didn't really go on to any college compared to now [when] it seems like everybody does. Were you excited to be around the university system? Were you familiar with it at all? What were your thoughts about it?

BM: I graduated from a small rural school: Moniteau Junior/Senior High School in West Sunbury. I was one of 113 in my class, so it was small. And like I said, I took all the secretarial training that I could take because I knew that I didn't want to go to college. In those days you were either going to be a teacher or a nurse, and I didn't want to be either of those. I figured I would just get a job and get married. I had no idea of this place even being here to work at until a friend said that she worked here, and why didn't I come and have an interview? So I took my civil service test and I came and talked to the dean of Education and talked to Personnel and got my job here. It was funny being here because I was the same age as a lot of the kids going to school here. In my very first job I was the youngest in the office and had students working for me that reported to me that were older than me. It was a funny situation, but now these kids could be grandchildren [laughs]. Things have changed.

BC: When you first started, that seems like a lot of pressure for an eighteen or nineteen-year old girl. Was that a lot for you at first?

BM: It was. I went home my first night from here and cried and said that I wasn't going back. The phones had buttons on them, and I had to put calls on hold and I was cutting people off and I didn't know anything; I didn't understand anything. And my mother said "You'll go back, you'll learn." So here I am thirty-eight years later and, things have changed. Typewriters to computer to phones with more buttons on them than we had years ago. It was intimidating, very intimidating. But people who I worked with were really nice and trained me really well.

BC: Okay, we have a section [in the questions] listed for campus activities. Is there any certain, what you could say, activity that you were a part of or something that you remember specifically from some point in history that would be important that we could compare with? You've kind of seen it all, from your vantage point, that's gone on on this university from when you started.

BM: I wouldn't say that I've ever participated in any activities. They didn't have any activities for us. I mean, our activities [were] break every day at ten and three. Everybody went on their break and that's when you got to talk to the other people, but there weren't very many other activities *per se*.

But now, in this day and age, they want you to participate in a lot more things on campus so I've served on search committees in the library and I've gone to a lot of workshops. They have a lot more workshops on campus, so you go there to keep your skills updated and learn how to deal with different things that are happening in the world today that weren't happening thirty years ago.

BC: We also have an area for accomplishments. I don't know that I've gone on campus and met a person who's worked here that doesn't know you. That's an accomplishment, probably one of the biggest you could have. What do you consider your biggest accomplishments since you've been here?

BM: That I've been able to conform and learn everything that I needed to learn to keep my job updated. I've met a lot of nice people, a lot of nice students. It's a very nice place to work. You can learn while you're here; you have the opportunity to go and take some college classes. I've never done that; [I] never had the desire. I was too busy with life being a young married woman and having a child. We have our own business at home and ailing parents. Life just kept me too busy to take advantage of some of the opportunities here, but it's been enjoyable. I don't think I would want to work any place else.

I've had the opportunity to move around and see different parts of the university. I've worked in administrative [departments], I've worked with students, off campus students, graduate students and people that come back for continuing [education]. Now I'm back in administrative [work], and every department has its own identity. You think it's all the same; we all do the same things and that's all we do. Every department is different, so you have to pick up and learn what's different about that department and go on.

BC: Okay. You said something to me about a year or two ago that was interesting. [Interviewer Brady Crytzer worked as a student assistant in the library's main office under Ms. McGinnis's supervision.] Obviously you're the secretary and sitting at the desk it seems like everybody comes to you to either bring up an issue or vent about something. Is that one of the unwritten parts of the job that everybody has to deal with, and what are your thoughts on your position doing that?

BM: I believe so. You're the first person that anybody that walks through that door comes in contact with. The students—I've never worked with a lot of students coming in, but some of my friends have students coming in, and they hear all of their problems and how can they help them, and we become mothers to the students. And the people that work in the building with you—you just listen to what they have to say and help them if you can. But . . . that is part of the job.

BC: We have a section about the leaders on campus. Can you think back about the presidents that you've seen since you've been here and maybe some thoughts on them as individuals? We see them now in 2008 as pictures on the walls at Old Main but we really have no contact with them. So what are your thoughts about them?

BM: Well, when I started in 1970 Albert Watrel was the president. He lived in the president's house with his wife, two daughters and twin boys. Everyone was always talking about those little twin boys, how they were always getting in trouble. He was fairly young and his wife was really full of energy. I can't remember her name. And I can't remember what year it was, but he was fired. I was young; I wasn't sure what was going on. I'm not sure why he got fired; I think it had something to do with finances, and then some of the people underneath him, they also lost their jobs. But he was a pretty much hands-on president. His office was right across the hall from ours, so I got to see him pretty often. Friendly man.

And then I think they had an interim president, Dr. James Roberts. He was president for a while and he had been the vice president of Academic Affairs, so he served as interim president. And I also—let's see, Bob Aebersold was president. Herb Reinhardt was president; he had quite a reputation. Herb R. Reinhardt, he always had to have that "R" with a period. And then President Smith.

BC: President Smith seems like the busiest guy in the world. From your experience is he unique in that or do they all do that?

BM: I think they all do that. There was another President Smith before this current President Smith. You didn't see so much of him. He was a "behind the doors" person, but I think they're all fairly busy. Dr. Aebersold, who was president before "the Smith brothers" came, he was always inviting people into his home. He was out on campus; you saw more of him than any other president I've ever worked under. He still keeps in contact with the campus people.

BC: We also have listed "any movers and shakers?" When I hear that, I think of Dr. [Robert] Watson. Is there anyone else like him that you can remember?

BM: Of course Dr. Watson is one. I've worked with Dr. Watson in several different capacities. Dr. Wayne Walker was the Dean of Education when I came, and I interviewed with him. He was from Texas—had a Texas accent. The nicest man, but the funniest man and people really liked him. Everybody knew Wayne, and he always had a joke for you. But he . . . as far as movers and shakers, everybody has their own job to "move and shake" things around here, but I can't think of anybody that stands out in my mind at this point.

BC: You said that secretaries become unofficial mothers. Whenever you first started out did you have someone take you under their wing, a mother figure, who worked for the university?

BM: Yes, I did. The other secretary in the office, the very first office I worked in, she was a single woman, [had] never been married, and still lived at home with her parents. She was about my mother's age. But she had gone to college, had a degree in [physical education] and had also gone to secretarial school. But she taught me everything. I mean office politics: "Go down on your breaks and talk but don't say anything about the office because it will get back to us and then you'll be in trouble." She trained me well and gave me lots of tips and helped me learn to answer that phone with all the buttons on it [laughs]. Her name is Jane Hockenberry. She's now retired and she's probably seventy-five. She was a great, great help to me. [I] always kept in contact with Jane. I wouldn't have survived those years without Jane.

BC: How long did she, were you with her in this?

BM: I worked with her for three and a half years when I was in Public Relations.

BC: Any major events or activities while you were here?

BM: I remember one time when I was in the office by myself. We were in the corner of Old Main; it was a little office, and all the adults were out for some reason, I don't know where they were at. I was there by myself, and a group of black students came in to our building, into the lobby, and demanded to see the president. We could not get out of our offices; I mean the lobby was full of all these students demanding to see the president. I'm not sure what the issue was, but I was really scared because I'd never been in a situation like that where there were groups of people demanding things. But that was part of the '70s on a college campus. I can remember that security officers called our offices and said "stay in your offices, close your doors. We will come over and get you all out." So they did, and the security police department came over and escorted us all out of the building. I mean it wasn't a riot or anything; it was just a gathering of all these students demanding to see the president. I don't know if they ever got to see him, but we got escorted out of the building at that time.

I was also here when they celebrated their one hundred years in business. That was a big time. They had hot air balloon rides and they had Hank Williams, Jr. come in and do a concert, and all kinds of publicity and brochures, and it was a big time for the town also.

BC: That was 1989?

BM: Yes.

BC: Building activities: we see the university as it is today with buildings that are staples of the campus. Can you think of any buildings being built which people thought were beautiful or others that they thought would never last?

BM: The University Union was one of the first [new] buildings. Very modern, very big—something that the students needed. Before that they didn't have a place to hang out. The commuters had a commuter lounge in Old Main, and all that was there was plastic

furniture, some tables, vending machines. And they also had what they called The Hut. It was just a little, white, dirty-looking building with wooden floors and it sat where the Art Building sits now. But everybody hung out there; it was just a real little, dumpy-looking place. They served food there, and they had a lady that worked there. “Hon” was her name. Red hair, real flamboyant, and everybody knew Hon. I think there were some offices; maybe the Art department was in the basement of that dumpy little building. But that’s all the students had, and the bookstore, before it went to the Union, was in the basement of Old Main. The bookstore was in the basement of Old Main, if you can believe that.

BC: It seems like everything is going on in that building.

BM: Old Main. Everything was in Old Main, and then after the bookstore moved out and went to the Union, then Duplicating and Printing Services moved in there and the mailroom. But that was the main building on campus where everything happened there.

BC: Do you feel that it’s lost its importance or significance because the university is expanding so much and everything has kind of gotten away from it?

BM: You mean Old Main or the . . . ?

BC: Old Main, yeah.

BM: No, it’s still an important building on campus because now all the VPs are housed there, and the president, and all the student service, so everybody has to go into Old Main at one time or another. They’ve done beautiful renovations on that building. Like I said, when I first started there were offices the whole way up to the third floor and little cubicles up on the second floor. I was always afraid that I’d get lost going up to that second floor because there were three stairwells up to the second floor and there were all these little cubicles that all looked alike. I couldn’t tell where I was at, so I had one route that I always went and always went down because I was always afraid that I’d get lost in that building. Eventually they tore all that out, and it is the way it is today plus a lot of upgrades. But they built two new dorms during that time too. Highrise I and Highrise II, which they are now currently tearing down. They’re just thirty years old.

BC: Do you remember any significant events that occurred while you were at Slippery Rock?

BM: The Challenger exploding. [And] one of our state senators committing suicide in front of a camera: Bud Dwyer from Erie. He had been accused of laundering money and doing something, and he was to have a news conference that day, and he committed suicide in front of the camera.

BC: What did the university do to keep order? Today we send out emails.

BM: Phone calls were made. Of course the flags went half staff. News releases, and they put out what they called *The Green Sheet*, which now is *Rock Pride*, and everybody got that once a week, and that was how people corresponded across campus. But you're right, there was no email, no computers, so it was a phone. And you had to get in touch person-to-person because there was no voicemail, and word of mouth. I mean everybody knew everybody back in those days. Most everybody knew everything that was going on on campus, as they do today.

BC: Do you remember a time when weather conditions were bad—that effecting things around the office?

BM: The winter of 1977 a blizzard came, and they sent us all home at noon. I lived way out in the country then, and a friend and I traveled together across the country roads and got stranded. I mean there was so much snow that we couldn't go any farther. We had to get out of our cars and walk to a farmhouse. We spent the whole day at that farmhouse, called everybody and told them where we were at, and my car sat there for three days until big loaders came and unloaded the snow off the road. I got home on a snowmobile. I was off work for a week. But of course the kids were still on campus so they were here, and the people that were here stayed here to take care of everything that needed to be taken care of at the time, but there were a lot of us that just couldn't get to work.

BC: Do you remember any best moments or worst moments while you were working here?

BM: Best moments

BC: Something that you can say was one of the best days that you've had.

BM: Well, I guess when I made it to twenty-five years. I thought that was a pretty good day. They had a picnic; I got an award. I was one of the "twenty-five year girls" now so once you reach twenty-five years, that was a real goal with the secretaries. We have a retired secretaries group and once you reach twenty-five years then you get invited to the dinners. So now I'm one of the retired secretaries group members and I get to go to the dinners.

Worst moments? Every . . . not every day is a worst moment [laughing]. Just, there are good days and bad days. There are no worst moments. Maybe when a boss is retiring or someone who I really liked, and I think about what's going to happen to me now.

BC: Looking at our list it seems that all the retired staff stay in Slippery Rock, why do you think that is?

BM: I think they like the feel of the community. They know everybody. There's not a place that you walk into that there isn't somebody there you know. Ellen [Pontius], one of the new employees that I'm trying to get acclimated to the campus, she said that "Everywhere we go there is at least one person that knows you." When you get around—

I didn't grow up in Slippery Rock, but I know a lot about Slippery Rock and a lot of the townspeople. I don't know, I think it's just a comfortable place for them to be. A lot of people don't want to move out of their comfort zone. They like it here so they're going to stay here. Me, when I retire, I'm going to go south for the winter [laughs].

BC: What do you miss most about the SRU of days gone by?

BM: I miss the genuine people. People have changed throughout the years. People that you worked with—you weren't friends with everybody but you knew where you stood with everybody, and everybody was genuine. Now, in this world people come in and they're just looking out for themselves. The kids have changed. They come in and demand things of you; they expect things of you. That's why we're here; we're here to serve the student. But the students, the staff and faculty and administrative don't seem to have the courtesy and the manners that they had years ago. You had more respect for the presidents, the vice presidents, the administration. The administration has changed; the faculty has changed. Of course everybody's gotten younger, so attitudes have changed, and common courtesy among fellow employees; so I miss that. I miss that.

BC: Things that you would like other Rock community members to know and how would you like to be remembered?

BM: Well I think Slippery Rock University is one of the better places in Butler County to work. You get a real education here. I mean you don't have to attend classes, but you see a lot, you learn a lot; you get to know a lot of good people. You learn a lot about the world here because we have international students. You get to know students. I'd just like to be remembered as somebody who came, did my job, tried to get along with everybody and left on a happy note.