

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Melba Tomeo Interview
September 29, 2008
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Sarah Meleski
Transcribed by Morgan Bonekovic
Proofread and edited by Angela Rimmel and Judy Silva
Reviewed and approved by Melba Tomeo

SM: Today is September 29, 2008 and I'm Sarah Meleski. As part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project, we have Melba Tomeo here. How are you today?

MT: I'm fine Sarah, how are you?

SM: I'm good thanks. Well, why don't we begin with you telling us a little bit about yourself?

MT: Sure. I am a genuine townie. I was born here in Slippery Rock. Actually, I don't seem to be able to get off Kiester Road. My family farm was on Kiester Road; I still live on Kiester Road. I attended Slippery Rock public schools. I worked for a number of years as the middle school librarian on Kiester Road. I've been at the university in different capacities: as a student, as a staff member. I started here in 1968 when the library was in Maltby, which was ever so charming. [I] joined the staff as a faculty member in 1990.

SM: Because you grew up in Slippery Rock, what do you remember about the university and activities that they may have put on for themselves in town, or maybe even for the town?

MT: Well [laughs] I do have a very clear memory as a young girl of the Maypole Dance, which occurred on the lawn in front of North Hall. And you know to a romantic little girl from the country it was very glamorous. There was a May queen and the court—all the women in their big dresses. This would be in the '50s. Faculty children got to be the dancers around the pole and attendants in the court, and so on. So that was pretty cool.

SM: Do you think the university has affected the town of Slippery Rock and how people grow up here compared to other small towns?

MT: Mm-hmm, totally. Slippery Rock, I don't think would be much more than a little intersection if it weren't for the university. It's really the lifeblood of the area. Just as the community gave birth to the university back in the day—before my day, 1889 [laughs]—but they built the buildings; they lobbied to have the university founded here and were in competition with Harrisville, Butler and so on to have the academy or the normal school established here, so there's been a constant back and forth. Actually when I was growing up in the '60s here there

was a lot of animosity between young men in the town and young men at the college. If you ever saw the movie *The Outsiders* it was sort of like that. There would be fights and brawls. I guess it was resentment of what some of the people from the town viewed as, you know, a “privileged” life or an “entitled” life. Fortunately [laughs] those days are long gone and there’s, I think, a lot of cooperation and collaboration.

And one thing I’ve always noticed about Slippery Rock is that, although it’s a typical western Pennsylvania small town, it’s just a shade more tolerant because of the presence of faculty from around the world, students from around the world. My son, growing up here, would be playing soccer with someone from Pakistan. You know it really broadened our viewpoint, just a little I think . . . I hope so!

SM: While you were a student here what were some of the activities you were involved in on campus?

MT: Well as a non-traditional student I wasn’t really involved in too much. I was a wife, mother, had a job, so my time was very limited. In fact, I thought that that may hurt me looking for a job, pursuing a career: that I didn’t have all these clubs and organizations. I just didn’t have time in my life for that.

SM: What buildings have you worked in on campus?

MT: Let’s see . . . Maltby, Spotts—the math department’s in the basement, the present day Campus Security used to be the Alumni Office, and then we moved over to the Lowry Center, which is the Howard Headland house. And I worked there and then I had been in and out of this building [Bailey Library] several times, as a staff member, as a faculty member, and as a student worker (I also worked here as a student).

SM: In a previous interview you said that most of your accomplishments have been technologically involved. Can you elaborate on that?

MT: Sure. I think I was probably the first person on campus to start blogging, and did the library blog for a number of years, which I really enjoyed doing. I was a co-convenor for TLTR, the Teaching Learning Technology Roundtable, for over three years, because I stepped in to fill a vacancy once too. I’m just . . . well my father did an interview for this series and he’s a very mechanical-minded man, very intellectually curious man, and I inherited like half of his mechanical ability. I love to take things apart, I love to know how they work, but I can’t put them back together again [laughs]! That’s the half that I’m missing. So technology has really fascinated me. It’s a great time to be alive if you’re fascinated by that sort of thing. And presently I’m doing a Web 2.0 workshop for anyone on campus—faculty and staff both. I teach online.

SM: Who have been some of the leaders that you’ve seen pass through Slippery Rock?

MT: Well I've seen a long array of presidents, deans and so on. Really the one who has made the biggest impression on me is our current president, Robert Smith, who I really, truly admire. I know he's not going to be seeing this [laughs], I'm not just kissing up. I am very impressed with how he sets a vision and marches to it. [The] campus and the town have really changed for the better under his leadership.

SM: Who are some of the people that have influenced you? I know that you mentioned a Dr. Claire Settlemyre, a history professor that you had.

MT: Yes!

SM: How was she significant to you?

MT: Just for the sheer power of what she knew [laughs]. She was just one of those brilliant lecturers who could just go and go and go and go on her subject. It was fascinating to listen to her. She was a world history professor—well that's what I had her for: Ancient and Medieval Civilization and History of the Bible.

SM: Who are some other people that have been significant to you, both while you were a student here and currently? You mentioned Dr. Smith, but is there anybody else right now that just sticks out in your head and has really helped you along?

MT: Well different people help you along your way. People sometimes set bad examples [laughs] that you want to avoid. I think someone that I'm impressed by in a way is Dick Wukich, the ceramics professor who's so involved with things like Empty Bowls, the ceramic water filters, and all the work that he tries to do in that area. Someone else I currently admire is Itzi Metzli who is so politically active and really brought a spark to campus about student [voter] registration.

SM: Have you seen a difference . . . students back in the '60s were very politically involved. What kind of differences do you see between the students that focused on politics in the '60s and the students now, now that the [presidential] election is going to be coming up soon? What differences do you see and what similarities do you see?

MT: I noted this earlier that back in my day we were very outraged by what was going on in the world: the Vietnam War was on. There was a campus moratorium day: everyone wore armbands, [and] marched on Old Main; as if Old Main could do anything about it [laughs]. So we had all of this outrage and sometimes, certainly over the '80s and into the early '90s, I've wondered, "Where is that outrage? Why are these students so complacent?" I see lately though, a different kind of activism: activism with an answer [laughs]. We had activism with a complaint, with outrage, and now I see activism for a better day, for community service and political action and the environment and all those things—more solution oriented. And I admire that.

SM: What are some major events or activities that occurred while you were here?

MT: Boy, it's hard to get perspective on that, when it's been your life. Of course expanding to a university was a big deal. Campus has changed remarkably, and the campus that I grew up with was just the upper campus slowly creeping this way with the Field House. Football games used to be played out in front of the Field House, and then we'd slide down over the hill on pieces of cardboard [laughs] when we were little. The growth of the campus is probably really the thing that would—the growth of the campus [and] the pervasiveness of technology. All those things would surprise the ten-year-old Melba [laughs].

SM: What kind of changes have you seen the departments that you've worked in undergo?

MT: Well “library land” has changed enormously. One of my earliest jobs in the library was to type catalog cards, have you ever even seen a catalog card?

SM: Mm-hmm, I have.

MT: [Laughs] okay. And we had to type those, the whole set, and then we had to file them in the drawers. In fact during the late '60s—our library director at that time was a little excitable— [he] was honestly concerned that wild-eyes hippies would come in and upset the card catalog, you know, the catalog drawers and mess everything up [laughs]. As if that was their major goal in life, to get things out of alphabetical order.

But anyway, I still see a charm in that sort of library work. For instance, reference librarians used to very carefully annotate books and write the little call numbers in, and I don't think that sort of things happens anymore. Well, it doesn't need to with all of the technology and electronic indexing and so on. So research has changed 360 [degrees]. You know, you would come in and get paper—books that were published once a year, twice a year, that were paper indexes so you're already lagging behind so far and you would search through each volume for each year and work your way down a long table of indexes. Now you do it with a couple of keystrokes. And of course the Internet is just mind-blowing, empowering, Gutenberg-like [laughs].

SM: Going back [to] earlier in the interview: you worked while you were a student here on campus, correct?

MT: Yes I did.

SM: What did you do while you were here?

MT: Oh let's see, I used to do displays here in the library. I had a job too as a student researcher for a professor who had a textbook contract. This is interesting, sort of eye-opening to me. He had his contract to do a textbook. He wrote the outline, then there were a little fleet of we library science students—because Slippery Rock had a library science major—who did all the research

to support the outline. Then that was all bundled up and sent to New York to a writer who worked for the publishing company, who actually wrote the textbook. And I thought, “Wow,” you know, I always thought the professor sat in a little garret somewhere carefully writing into the night [laughs]; so that was very eye-opening.

What else did I do? Gosh I don’t even remember. All sorts of different library jobs.

SM: Do you miss anything about the past years at Slippery Rock? Do you miss being a student here or anything like that?

MT: Not really. You know, I’m always looking for the next thing. Currently, because I’m working with instructional technology I’m not directly involved in the library this semester—I miss the interaction with students because that was my greatest pleasure: working with students and being face to face with them and helping them.

SM: Do you have anything that you want any current or future Rock members or students to know before they come here?

MT: While they’re here, I would say live it up [laughs]! Go on the trips to England and Italy and have all the experiences you can have, because this is sort of a golden age that you won’t get back. Whatever your form of exploration: go to lectures, go to plays, go to parties [laughs]. Do all of the things that a college student should. Eat it up. That’s what I would say.

SM: Were you able to go to any lectures since being here?

MT: Oh yeah, I’ve seen all kinds of people here.

SM: What are some that stick out in your mind?

MT: Dick Gregory just popped into my mind for some reason. He was here I think when he was on his hunger strike against [the] Vietnam [War]. Just a cavalcade of really . . . well I didn’t go to as many as I should have [laughs], but certainly a wide variety of performances and speakers and so on.

SM: Well I don’t think I have any other questions for you. It was a quick interview but it has been very informative, so I’d like to thank you.

MT: Thank you Sarah! It was very fun.

SM: Have a good day.

MT: You too.