

Rock Voices: The Oral History Project of Slippery Rock University
Wilma J. Cavill Interview
September 18, 2008
Bailey Library, Slippery Rock University, Slippery Rock, Pennsylvania
Interviewed by Sarah Meleski
Transcribed by Morgan Bonekovic
Proofread and edited by Judy Silva and Jane Smith
Reviewed and approved by Wilma J. Cavill

SM: Today is September 18, 2008, and I'm Sarah Meleski. As part of the Rock Voices Oral History Project we have Wilma Cavill here with us. Hi Wilma. How are you today?

WC: Fine, thanks.

SM: Why don't you start out by telling us a little bit about yourself? Where were you born?

WC: I'm a teacher. I was born in New Castle, Pennsylvania. I have been teaching since 1952 and last year celebrated fifty years here at Slippery Rock University, over which everybody made a big fuss. I keep trying to say to people if you love teaching and you stay healthy, you get old. [SM laughs] And it happens; it's not something you plan.

I think that question [on the list] asked about hobbies and I didn't answer that. My hobbies are reading, cooking, and a little travel.

SM: What's your favorite dish to cook?

WC: Usually I try new things; I experiment with things. I have a good friend who's a real gourmet chef. I learned a great deal from her and I add my own touch to the dish. It's never quite as good as hers, but it's not bad.

SM: So far what's your favorite place that you've traveled to?

WC: [Sigh and pause] Well, it's hard to say. England and Scotland, but then there's France and then there's Slovakia. Those are the places I've been, and I enjoyed each of them so very much.

SM: Well, what is your affiliation with Slippery Rock—the university?

WC: I've been a faculty member since 1958. [I] started in Health and Physical Education and Recreation and that split.

I think one of the questions that you folks were interested in is: you noticed I graduated from Slippery Rock State Teachers College. While I was here teaching we became a state college and then a state university. And the departments split and split again. I'm currently in the Health and

Safety Department, although we've been named the Health Science Department [and] the Allied Health Department. But since 1970 I've been over in Health.

SM: Okay. What other buildings have you worked in?

WC: All of the old buildings [laughs]. I've taught in East Gym, West Gym, the Behavioral Science Building, Spotts World Culture, Eisenberg, the Field House, McKay . . . all the older buildings.

SM: What were your first impressions of the university when you came here, both as a student and then when you came back as a faculty member?

WC: Well, not too much different. Living in New Castle, I was pretty familiar with Slippery Rock. And I had visited the campus numerous times for various reasons.

Slippery Rock had a gymnastics team. It was an exhibition team; they were a real PR arm of the school. And I was interested in that. And because I had mentors in New Castle in physical education who knew I was interested in Slippery Rock, they made sure I got over here to see what they call the "home show," which was the major exhibition of the team. [That] occurred in March at the end of their season.

So I did that my junior and senior year in high school and started to become familiar with the university. I visited it when my mother and I were looking for a place to go to school.

You can see what my age is, so it was a long time ago and there were no scholarships available in state schools. There was no money given. They did not have foundations such as we have today. There were no scholarships, so my mom and I were hittin' the streets looking for places where scholarships might become available. I was fortunate enough to be awarded a scholarship to Syracuse University, but it was too expensive to take advantage of. So I thought, "I could go to Slippery Rock, which is where I want to go to school." Excellent teacher education program over here; it's what I wanted to do and here's where I came.

I was very familiar with the school, so coming back six years later—after six years of teaching in New Castle—I was already very familiar with the school at that time.

SM: Well, obviously since you've been here awhile you've seen some changes that have happened at the university. What are some of the major ones that really stick out in your mind?

WC: Mostly the growth. When I was a student here we had about eight hundred students.

SM: Wow [laughs].

WC: [Laughs] yeah. Now we're at eight thousand.

I have jokingly said to people who've always asked about retiring, after all I've been teaching forever. [SM laughs]. And they inquire, "Why are you still working?" and I say, "I love to teach," and they say, "Yeah, right." So then they say, "Why are you still teaching?" and I say, "I love my job," and they say, "Get a life." So I have looked around for something to say to stop them from continuing to question me and the conclusion that was reached was "I'll consider retirement about two years after they stop digging on this campus." And that I think assures me of some longevity. Because they've been digging since my junior year in college [laughs], and they continue to dig constantly.

SM: While you were a student here what were some of your campus activities?

WC: I was a gymnast on the gymnastics team; captain of that team in my junior year. The way things were developed at that time in the health and physical education major: in our classes we learned theory and basic skills. But in order to practice the skills we participated in intramurals.

And the intramural program for women was incredible. It had a variety of levels so that people could pursue as much as they wanted at whatever level they enjoyed. It would start with pick-up teams which didn't require you to know very much at all. And then through the practice and the opportunities you'd move on to what were called invitational teams where the juniors in the program were identified as captains, and they went out and selected people who they had seen play in the intramurals [who] they wanted on their teams. And they would have an invitational tournament and out of that would come freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior class teams that would be developed and then we would play that tournament. Then out of those competitions would come the "green and white," which would be like varsity. So we didn't have varsity sports for women except for gymnastics. I was a gymnast for four years and loved it. And I think that it was one of the best things that the university ever did.

SM: Did you continue gymnastics after you graduated from the university?

WC: Well I taught of course, in New Castle at a junior high school; and I also had student teachers from Slippery Rock working with me at the junior high school. And then, President [Norman] Weisenfluh, who is more than a dining hall [SM laughs], invited me to come over and consider working here. I really enjoyed my junior high teaching, but it was a great opportunity. So they were looking for someone for supervision of student teachers in health and physical education. I had that experience, and also as an aquatics specialist, in addition to other things.

While I was here, about the first or second week I was here as a teacher, I had a message that the president wanted to see me in his office. That's a little bit like being called to the principal's office. [SM laughs]. But it didn't worry me too much because Dr. Weisenfluh had been my ethics professor as an undergraduate. So I waltzed myself over to Old Main and then in to see him. We had a lovely chat, and he remembered when I was on the gymnastics team and called me "Willie," as everybody did while I was in college and some people do today. Along the way I began to get the impression that he was inquiring as to whether or not I would be interested in

coaching gymnastics. I wasn't, but I eventually figured out that he wasn't asking, he was telling me that I was going to coach gymnastics [laughs], that that was going to be an assignment in addition to being student teaching supervisor and an aquatic specialist.

So I coached gymnastics for six years. I was the women's head coach and the men's assistant coach. We traveled. I introduced the Olympic events to the women's team at that point. When I said that we were a PR arm: we went out to high schools and communities and did shows, and most everybody—whoever saw the Slippery Rock gymnastics team remembered it for long after, because they were really talented people.

And I had great gymnasts when I was coaching. We eventually entered into competition, and I can remember the first major competition we had was at West Chester. I don't remember all the schools but there were five of them, and Slippery Rock took first place. My girls took first and second I think in every event.

SM: Wow!

WC: Yeah, they were good; they were very good. But if you speak to a lot of the physical education majors, they really would like to coach, and that was never a desire of mine. I did it; I think I did it well. I had great athletes. But every year I would ask, "Do I have to coach gymnastics next year?" and the answer would always come back, "Yes." So, we'd do it another year. Finally one year I asked, "Do I have to coach gymnastics next year?" and the answer was "No." And I thought "Alright! Hallelujah!" [Then I was told], "But you need to start another team, you need to coach." Actually they said "You need to coach another team," and there weren't any other teams. So then the comment was, "You need to start one." So I started the women's swimming team.

I put up a sign that invited anybody who had any interest in competitive swimming to come to a meeting, and a large number of women showed up. We talked about [how] this would be the beginning of a competitive varsity team. Then I sent around a sign up sheet and asked people to put down how many years of experience in competitive swimming they had. I don't think you could get a negative number out of that [SM laughs], but we didn't have much experience with the whole team. In terms of average, I think we were in the negative mode. But, they became very fine swimmers, and I coached that for thirteen years.

So I have eighteen years of coaching experience here. [Then I was] finally relieved of coaching. The interesting thing about that: the first thirteen years, no compensation. No money, no time. It was simply an additional assignment. That's not very appealing. Most coaches today would not do that.

Finally, with the advent of the union, my last five years were compensated in time. So under the union contract our full load was a twelve credit hour load. With coaching I received a quarter release time, so that meant I taught three classes and then the other quarter of my time was

devoted to coaching. That doesn't really equate to ten hours of practice, planning, travel, running meets, and all else that goes into coaching. But it's the same thing we have today where a certain amount of alternate workload assignment is made. At least during those last five years there was some compensation.

SM: What were some of your major accomplishments throughout schooling, and graduation, teaching?

WC: I think the major accomplishment is teaching: being well prepared for teaching as I was and then I think doing a fairly decent job. I have been honored as the service awards [recipient] from the union, APSCUF [Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties]. I've been honored with the president's service award from Slippery Rock.

I wrote and conducted a program in drug and alcohol prevention education. It was a federal grant; it was one of the largest grants Slippery Rock had ever gotten. Dr. Hannam and I worked together on that. That was quite a major accomplishment, and as a result of that I became affiliated with the Northeast Center for Drug and Alcohol Prevention Education. [I] became a trainer for the trainer of trainers and ran programs here at the university and elsewhere around the northeastern part of the United States and that was a lot of fun.

SM: What are some memories you have of being a student here at the Rock?

WC: Oh, you don't have enough time [laughs]. Because we were small, it was very, it was a very intimate campus. Everybody knew everybody, knew their families, knew their friends. If they had visitors on the weekend, we knew that.

And just marvelous memories, memories. Stories we can tell about being in the dormitory with our night watchmen. I don't know if you've heard this name before but "gumshoes"? I don't know if you've interviewed anybody else from this era. But we had . . . living in North Hall, there were restrictions. [At] 8:15 p.m., everybody was in unless you had a privilege. Privilege went until 10:30 p.m., and we had to sign out. And then as you move through the freshman to senior [years] you got more 10:30s per week and more 12:00s.

SM: So is that how they based privileges: by your grade?

WC: By your rank. Yes, but you could lose privilege. Lights had to be out at midnight. You had to be in your room at 11:00 p.m. [SM laughs] Quiet. I was just talking about this the other day. After 11:00 p.m. if you were out of your room in North Hall—North Hall is built in a rectangle, so you can get your way around. If you were out of your room after 11:00 p.m. you always had a toothbrush, with toothpaste on it. [You would say] "I'm going to brush my teeth" because there was the night watchman who was patrolling. "What are you doing out of your room?" "I'm going to brush my teeth." When in fact you were going to visit somebody or you had just come

from visiting somebody and you were trying to get back to your room safely. But if they decided that we were abusing the privilege of whatever, you lost privileges.

Stories from competitions and travel with the teams: just a marvelous experience. Well, we were all well-trained, held to a high standard of performance with good teachers around.

SM: Were you involved in any activities besides gymnastics while you were a student or did that take up [the] majority of your time?

WC: I was the women's sports editor for *The Rocket*. My column was "Whirlpool by Will" [SM laughs], and that was fun.

What else did we do? Oh, WAA took up a lot of time.

SM: What's that?

WC: Women's Athletic Association. Actually, this Saturday I'm being honored as a pioneer at the Hall of Fame dinner, along with several other people as early coaches, pioneers, in women's sports at Slippery Rock.

SM: Congratulations.

WC: Thanks! It should be fun.

SM: Being that you're teaching faculty, what were some of your best and worst teaching moments?

WC: I don't know that I'm going to be able to give you a worst teaching moment. I can think of some times when I was challenged in class and found myself thinking, "How fast can you think on your feet?"

I guess one of those memories is from a health class, when I was giving an overview of what we would be talking about and I was talking about getting older: aging. Some young freshman in the back of the room popped up and said, "Who would wanna be eighty?" and the whole class turned to look at him. Then they turned and they looked at me like, "Okay teacher, what are you going to say?" And I can remember standing there and my mind was just racing, because obviously they expected me to say something intelligent [laughs]. I'm not sure I accomplished that, but I finally said, "Probably somebody who is seventy-nine." [SM laughs]. And the class liked that. It was fun.

Best teaching moments happen all the time. The students are so much fun. They make me smile. I was just teaching bandaging today in my first aid classes. And it is hard to learn skills you're unfamiliar with. Some people mastered it very quickly and other people, I'm sure they have a hard time in the laundry [laughs], because they don't handle those bandages very well.

SM: [Laughs]. Who were some of the leaders that have been here while you've been here?

WC: Well some of my colleagues: Dr. Settlemyre from the History Department. She's retired from there. Leah Brown from the library [is a] marvelous, marvelous woman, highly regarded by the faculty.

SM: Who were some of the presidents that were here?

WC: Oh dear [laughs]! The pictures of the presidents over in Old Main . . . I think they go from the bottom up and I start about three from the bottom and know all of them [laughs]. Dr. [Dale] Houk was president when I was an undergraduate; when I returned it was Dr. Weisenfluh. [Sigh] If you counted all of the acting presidents along with all those who became president, I probably have worked under fourteen or so different presidents. But Dr. [Albert] Watrel [was president] when our union came into being. Dr. Warren Smith, Dr. [Robert] Aebersold, Dr. [Herb] Reinhart, and then Dr. Bob Smith as our most recent president.

I had a working relationship with all of them, and it's curious to me that I've been that fortunate because when I speak with people who come from other campuses, they seldom know their president personally. Here you have the opportunity to speak to your president. They come in and talk to you; they stop you on the campus. It's just typical Slippery Rock, but it's atypical in the university.

SM: Mhmm. Yeah. [Pause] I noticed that in 1974 you were the local president of the union. What was that like?

WC: I was elected four times for a year's term: 1974-1978. Amazing! I learned so much about the university and about all of our fourteen universities. It was a difficult endeavor, but it's one I loved. I've been acting in the union in a variety of capacities, a lot of leadership roles within the union.

First year was difficult . . . there were rumors of retrenchment—which means firings—around the campuses. And I can remember Dr. Watrel, who was president at the time, say, “We're in good shape financially, we don't need to retrench anybody.” But he was told he was going to have to cut the faculty by a certain percentage, and he didn't really want to do that.

Fortunately, we had a union. Not just Slippery Rock, but at the state level. And as the union got wind of these potential firings that were going to happen, they went to court and an injunction came up that stopped the firings. Now eventually there was retrenchment, but it was at universities who had overreached themselves in terms of hiring where they had surplus faculty and they had to get rid of some. And so that was . . . we were fine here at Slippery Rock. But it was a difficult time in the state for many faculty and some of the faculty who [are] here now came from some of those institutions where the institutions had to let them go. But the union

worked to find jobs for these people and we have a retrenchment policy or article in our CBA [collective bargaining agreement] now.

SM: So, what exactly is an Academic Forum that you were chairperson for?

WC: Well, before we had a union we had a Faculty Council, and I was secretary in Faculty Council and [then] I was chair of Faculty Council. And then the union came in and I was chair of the Council and president of the Union. But the council doesn't have any legal standing. The union, once you're unionized, is the legal representative that exists for the faculty.

Well, the Council had lost all of its powers because they were all transferred to the Union. So then the Council began to not really know what it was, what to do with itself. So we decided to change the name of it to the Academic Forum. Basically we kept the same constituencies: students, faculty, administration. And it's just a place to talk; it has no legal authority. Things that are done on the campus have to be done through APSCUF. But people who are involved in the Forum seem to enjoy it, and I credit them with the push on the no smoking on the campus. They agitated very well for that new position. Of course then it was timely, the laws changed, and now we know we have a no smoking campus . . . not only in the buildings but externally too.

SM: Many students, including myself, are very happy about that.

WC: I am aware of that. I talk about this because we talk about smoking in health class and first aid. And I can tell students are very supportive of "no smoking."

SM: Yeah. [Pause] Who are some people that influenced you or were very significant to you while you were here?

WC: I mentioned Dr. Settlemyre, and Mrs. Brown. [Pause] I'm probably going to forget somebody! My mentors before I came here were both graduates of Slippery Rock, and they taught physical education in New Castle. Marion Westlake Patton and Margaret Dunlap were big influences on me. Here, Mr. Eiler was my gymnastics coach.

We were so busy, prior to the union. I said that our workload is twelve credit hours. Before we had the union, we were about . . . those of us who taught activities had about twenty-seven or twenty-eight logged hours a week. Plus other activities and responsibilities and so [pause] I'm not going to be able to identify any unusual person who was here. Dr. Susan Hannam, who is now my dean, worked at our department and we worked collegially together to accomplish some things. She is a very fine organizer and probably had some influence on me.

SM: What are some major events or activities or maybe even building projects to happen while you were here?

WC: The entire lower campus [laughs]. When I came here we were planning the Field House, it hadn't been built yet. And it was interesting because it was the first time faculty had been asked

to be involved in the planning, to be included. And there were a lot of obstacles to overcome. For one thing, they didn't think they were going to have women's locker rooms in the Field House and we said, "Yes you will." But the most curious thing about the Field House, when we finally moved into it, and we finally toured it, we were in great need of classroom space for physical education. Everybody needs classroom space. People don't think that physical education programs need to have classrooms where you can teach and lecture and . . .

SM: It's not all hand on.

WC: Right, it's not all skills. And so we struggled with all of that, and we thought we had classrooms designed for the Field House. They call it a field house when we probably really should not have. Because a field house in most people's minds denotes a sports arena, and this is really an instructional area.

But we walked in, and we were walking around, and there were no ceilings in any of the rooms. We said [laughs], "Why aren't there ceilings here?" and they said, "You didn't ask for ceilings." And we said, "Well, we didn't ask for floors, but they're here! We sort of assumed there would be ceilings." The architects thought there was a better flow to the building if we didn't put ceilings on top of classrooms. So, having taught in the Field House, I've had arrows come into my classroom, tennis balls come flying [SM laughs] from the arena floor up to the first, to the balcony and into the classroom. What they finally did was they enclosed it in curtains and now I think they all have ceilings.

But that was a curious experience working with architects. We were able to get a new natatorium, a swimming pool. And the architects wanted us to have an all-glass wall. Well the old swimming pool was the little one in West Gym, and it has a glass brick wall and it's a problem with glare; it's a safety problem. And we said, "No, we don't want any glass." They said, "Oh, but it would be much more attractive." We said, "It looks out on a power plant. That's not terribly attractive." So I think they gave us the ugliest wall they could in that swimming pool that's not . . . I haven't looked at it lately but I think it's a little less obnoxious than it was. But architects have an idea; people who actually use the facility have a more pragmatic approach to the facilities.

But then we built Spotts World Culture [Building]. I can recall the president saying to us—because again we were in need of classroom space—we were told at our faculty assembly at the beginning of the year that Harrisburg had approved another classroom building for us, and everybody applauded and cheered and the president said, "And it will be just like Spotts," and everybody booed. Because, you've been in Spotts: narrow halls, doors that open out. Right? It's difficult. We needed wider hallways and doors that opened flush. So we got Eisenberg [Classroom Building]. It became "classroom building number II". Then it got a name: Eisenberg. But it's a little more convenient, a little more efficient than Spotts is.

Oh, Vincent Science Hall. The idea of a round building was a little strange to us and I think if you talk to the people who teach there it remains strange, because things sort of are pie shaped [laughs], which doesn't seem terribly efficient when most everything we have is rectangular or square. So they're remodeling Vincent now. There are high hopes by the people who teach there.

Eventually of course the new Union, Swope Music Hall, PT [Physical Therapy] Building, [Advanced] Science and Technology; they've all been built. Plus, the stadium, the facilities, we have what: six hundred acres here at Slippery Rock? And we take advantage of as much of that space as we can. One year one of the governors sent out a team of businessmen to visit the universities to see if there were things that could be discarded or gotten rid of. And they came to Slippery Rock and they said we had excess real estate. Now most of the campuses, if you've ever visited them, are landlocked; they are surrounded by residential areas. IUP [Indiana University of Pennsylvania], Clarion [University of Pennsylvania] . . . they don't have any place to grow. We do. And so, we use much of our area for practice fields, or for performance fields or areas. Take a look at that that baseball stadium out there. That is gorgeous.

SM: Yeah. Are there any words of wisdom you have for us, or anything that you want any current or future Rock students or community members to know or [that they] need to know?

WC: Well, I am very proud to be a graduate of Slippery Rock and I'm terribly proud of my career here. It's been good to me. I think it's a great place to work and I think our students . . . our students that come here are just fabulous. They're fun. We have our problems with some. There are some who think they're coming for education but they really want to come and party and they don't stay very long; they disappear.

But the faculty, the staff, they're just great people and they like the job that they're doing and so therefore Slippery Rock—like any university—can be, either for a student or a faculty member or a staff member, whatever they want to make out of it. All the opportunities are here.

We're fortunate I think, we're a collective party, faculty. It means that we can work to solve problems and minimize personalities. And at Slippery Rock we have made it a point that faculty leadership and administrative leadership work together. We recognize that we are in this together and so while we can disagree, we work to solve problems in a collegial manner and that makes a big difference in the atmosphere, the ambiance of a university. So I think we're very fortunate and I think the students have a great opportunity here to make out of their education experience whatever they want. You'll go far.

SM: [Laughs] thank you. Well I don't have any other questions for you, so I'd like to thank you for letting me interview you.

WC: Sure. Thank you very much.