

CWU LIVING HISTORY PROJECT

Thelma Wilson

(Transcription of Tape 1, Side 1)

LL Today we are interviewing Thelma Wilson. This is March 27, 1995, and doing the interviewing will be Eldon Jacobsen and Larry Lowther.

Others present are Ham Howard, Milo Smith, Jean Putnam, and Thelma's husband, Roy Wilson, whom we interviewed earlier.

Thelma, could you tell us a little bit about your family background, about where you were born and were brought up, and what the family occupation was?

TW I was born in the Hawaiian Islands. My grandparents came from China and moved over there, and have lived there for some time.

And then I went to school up to freshman year at the University of Hawaii, and then decided I would broaden my education. And so I moved to Macalaster College in St. Paul, Minnesota, and did three years there. And went home to teach in the public schools there, and taught sixth grade and up for several years.

Then I went to Penn State for my master's degree. And from there, went up to Mansfield State Teacher's College in the northern part of Pennsylvania, and taught at their Lab School until it closed down – and every other Lab School. [chuckles]

Then, was asked to teach in college in English, and I said, "No, I don't think so. My major is Biology and English is only my minor. And I would be more comfortable teaching in the junior high."

I loved the junior high kids. People thought I was crazy, but I loved them anyway. And so I stayed there for a few more years, in the public school for junior high.

EJ What was your maiden name?

TW Chin [or Ching?]. A very common name.

EJ Did you come from a large family?

TW I have two brothers and two sisters. The two brothers came to Central for schooling.

EJ What was it that your parents did?

TW My mother was a housewife. And my dad took care of the payroll department for one of the pineapple companies. And my summer job was working under him, and that's how I got my money for school. [chuckles]

LL OK. And you came to Central then in what year?

TW Well, I taught in Pennsylvania up in the northern part. And then, my sinuses began to act up in that area. And I finally decided I can't handle this sinus, so I looked for different parts of the country.

And I had two choices, really, in moving out West – either Denver or Washington State. And at that time, Denver had very poor salaries. But everybody – I guess all the skiers wanted to move there, so there were very few jobs there.

So, I got interviewed by Wes Crum in New York, and then he offered me the job. Of course, you know how I drove out here? [Inaudible.] And then came out here and met the Gustafsons. Because Gus was my immediate boss, and he sort of took care of me, and so did Jean.

And Roy didn't mention it, but when I first came, I stayed a lot with them. And then one time, "Oh, on Wednesday, Roy's going to come over. And we'll all meet at my house and we'll [inaudible]." And I thought, Who's this Roy guy anyway? [laughing]

And then I said, "Oh no, I think I'll be busy that night." So I didn't show up on Wednesday. [Inaudible.]

LL Your first assignment then here in Ellensburg was what?

TW I was to supervise the student teachers here in Ellensburg. And there were three elementary schools that I had to supervise. And it suited me, because then I didn't have to drive too far. I didn't know the roads or anything. So I was right in town and that was great.

And it was quite interesting, with this program here. One is that the student teachers had to pass certain tests, so they had a basic knowledge that we thought all teachers should have. When I was a student at the Mansfield Teacher's College, they didn't have that. And so this was entirely new to me.

And it was great, because then you offered help to those that were deficient in spelling or handwriting or whatever it was. And the load was very reasonable. And then, of course, the teachers you picked out were the top teachers, so that was good.

LL You felt strongly that the student teachers [inaudible].

TW Yes. And if it wasn't up to your standards, you helped them. And that wasn't done. The other schools would say, "Hey, you don't make the grade. You're out."

Here, you said, "Well, we'd like you to get to a higher level. We'll give you this course for it." Which is what really education should be about.

LL Was there placement of student teachers in all the grades, from one through six?

TW Yes, I had all the elementary school grades.

LL Did any student teacher ever stand out to you, one that you remember who was an outstanding student?

TW I had several, but names escape me. But there were some really super ones that would go out, and I would hire them. Or I would put my child in their room without worrying about it.

LL Who did you get to know in the Senate besides Dr. Ralph Gustafson?

TW And Ham Howard. Those were my mentors. They helped me a lot, get through anything that I questioned. That was really wonderful.

LL Now, how long did you supervise in the Ellensburg schools?

TW Well, I taught one full year. And then I got married and started my family, so I did part-time wherever I needed. And then I did some [inaudible] teaching, where Roy would teach one part of the day and I would teach the other part of the day. And we had a babysitter, Grandmother Jones, who was very good.

LL There were some kids who were similar to Roy's?

TW Well, I did everything for them for elementary school. I had to learn the subjects. [chuckles] But I have a major in Science, a minor in Social Studies and a minor in English. So that covered pretty much all of it.

LL And in summer classes, what did you teach?

TW Well, it was ... the methods courses, mostly. And handwriting. But it was methods classes [inaudible].

EJ These seminars were for student teachers?

TW The seminar was with the ... with the students teaching. Once a week, I would meet with them, with the understanding that they could ask me questions. But they could not mention their teacher's name. And the idea was that other student teachers would learn from their questions, and our discussion on it. Because some of them [inaudible].

LL Did you ever supervise student teachers outside Ellensburg?

TW Yes. Right before I came, in Mansfield, I taught in the Lab School, and had two student teachers every term.

LL But while you were at Central, were you ever assigned outside Ellensburg?

TW No.

LL Do you feel that you were part of the Education Department, and were you included in the faculty [inaudible] and meetings?

TW Yes. I had my office in the Education Building. And then during the – when they had faculty meetings, there were very few women in there. So we always got involved in making sure that there was some kind of snack for everybody to eat. And you knew the program, so that we were there all the time.

LL I said department; I guess it was a division.

TW Division, yes. Right.

LL Did you feel that women were treated equally on the faculty?

TW Well, we didn't get out of anything *because* we were women. [laughter] Let's put it that way!

LL What sort of salary were you hired at? You didn't really start getting paid for about a month.

TW I don't really remember.

EJ We were wondering, because that \$6,330 was about the time you came, and it was my salary. And we were just trying to guess.

TW Probably a little less than that.

LL That was, again, 196...

TW 1961.

LL Or 1962?

TW Uh-huh.

LL And then you taught part-time until you left Ellensburg?

TW Because you went to the University of Chicago for school.

RW Yeah, but when we were here ...

TW Oh, when we were here, I worked part-time.

RW Actually, most of the time.

TW Uh-huh.

LL Did you feel any problems that existed between the University, in a college town, of course, and the public schools, and this arrangement for student teaching?

TW Well, not really. I usually went through the principal, and then to the teachers.

And one principal really stood out. Jim Fugate was a wonderful administrator. And he knew the teachers as well as the students. Because what he did is he would sometimes substitute in a teacher's classroom to get to know what it was like with that particular group of children. And then, that teacher could have gone out and observed someone else.

Which I think is pretty brave, for a principal to go in and put himself on the line.

LL He was principal of the junior high school?

TW No, elementary school. Uh-huh. Right.

EJ Was it Washington?

TW Washington, yeah. That was – yeah, I was always impressed with that idea that he would go and do that. Most principals would find you a substitute.

And he would say, “No, let me take your class.” That’s putting the teacher on the line, isn’t it? [chuckles] But that’s good, too, that he would know about their class.

EJ But he being a graduate and master’s student [inaudible] to Ellensburg, I guess he thought it bridged the relationships between administrations.

TW Right, right.

LL What about the other principals? How do you feel that they related –

TW They were [inaudible]. And they always made it easy for us to come on in. They never refused me. Like the September experience, when the teachers were running around and trying to get ready and it was hard, they always welcomed us very much.

LL Do you remember the other principals’ names?

TW I don’t really know.

LL But Jim Fugate stands out.

TW He really stands out, uh-huh.

LL Do you remember what your supervisory load was – how many student teachers you were supervising in a quarter?

TW Between 14 and 18. And so I always scheduled that noon meeting in the different schools. And I always – I wrote notes, and the students always got a carbon copy of what I had in my notebook. And then we would meet afterwards, and they could question me on anything that was on that sheet of paper.

And I started out with recess duty and [inaudible], because I thought those were the most unthreatening things that we could pick out. And then, when they got used to it, then I would watch them teach a lesson, outside of recess [inaudible].

EJ Sounds like a pretty heavy load, to me. Did it feel like that to you?

TW You’d need to know where I came from. [laughing]

EJ Did you compare them?

TW Well, what I did when I supervised there is that I had a class for myself in the Lab School. And I had two student teachers every term, and my office would be in-between. And then I would be responsible for them and what they did. So when they taught, I was to be in my office, and I would be watching two classrooms.

EJ Was that [inaudible]?

TW Yes. And I had to go through their lesson plans, and be responsible for any lesson that they taught. And then, when the college teachers wanted to have a demonstration, I would go in and teach the class.

EJ [Inaudible]?

TW Yes, because when I had two classes to watch, then I had to know both of them. Or sometimes, when they didn't have as many student teachers, I'd still have two teachers that would divide my class.

And they would take turns. And while one of them was teaching, I was checking lesson plans and unit plans with the other one, and listening to them.

And then ... college duties, I had a couple things. But most of these – uh – I did the yearbook, which was after school and at night. And that was college yearbook, not the elementary school.

EJ This was your extracurricular assignment, more or less?

TW Yes. Yes. [chuckles]

EJ How did they find you for that? Through the –

TW Well, they got to know whoever was in charge of the Lab School was the one who could do this. And then I worked on that.

LL Did you have any special committees at Central?

TW No. I think my first year, they were kind of easy on me, as long as I could find what I was supposed to do first.

And then the only thing that I was in charge of was to make sure that the meeting room was ready, and that the refreshments were ready. And then I'd lock up afterwards. And I assigned everybody a meeting, and they'd have to bring the refreshments. [laughing]

LL Did you assign grades to your student teachers at the end of their term?

TW Yes.

LL So it wasn't an S/U sort of thing?

TW No, no. It was grades.

LL And did you control that, or did you work with the cooperating teacher?

TW I [inaudible] with the cooperating teacher, but it was really my responsibility. Everything was with the teacher, except two credits were for the seminar that we had in connection with the student teaching.

And there, we widely talked about problems they had, without mentioning names. And then I would have different controversial issues that I would have them read about, and then we would discuss. Because I felt that if they had not met that particular problem in their work, they should still know about it.

And I also wanted them to get acquainted with the journal. Because sometimes, your first year of teaching, you don't have time for that. Unless you're made to do it. [laughing]

EJ And you would write a recommendation, I presume?

TW Yes, I would write their recommendation.

EJ That would go into their placement file?

TW Right, uh-huh.

LL Now, did you supervise teachers only the public schools, or did you also supervise some in connection with [inaudible]?

TW No, my main job was with the public schools. Once in a while, if they wanted me in for a certain subject, I was asked by the teacher of the Lab School to come in. Or, if they were going to be gone or something, I could come in and substitute.

LL Did you sense any kind of tension between the public schools and the [inaudible]?

TW I wasn't aware of that.

EJ Did you feel any problems did exist, not necessarily between them, but in your assignment from the University?

TW Well, sometimes the public school teachers did not want to take student teachers. And I don't know what kind of agreement was made about who would take them. So I think Ralph Gustafson sort of took care of it at that time, and I was not involved with that.

LL Was Ralph your only supervisor?

TW He was my immediate supervisor, uh-huh.

LL Do you remember anything that was the most humorous thing that happened while you were on the job?

TW Well, somebody asked Roy and me to talk to their family while we were working down there ... what was it about, now?

RW Something about marriage and the family, I think.

TW Marriage and the family or something. And he asked us to go over and talk to the students.

RW A month or two before we went to get married. [laughter] And we had to come back.

LL For a second quarter?

RW More like "Now that you've been married, what can you tell us?"

LL You must have been very good the first quarter! [laughter]

TW Well, whatever it was, it worked again.

RW The students were mostly 18 or 19. And here we are at age 30 approximately, talking about – I had a house that I had built. And we had two of everything. And we bought a freezer.

And these kids, their eyes just bugged out. I said, “Well, you’ll want to be able to buy those things when you’re 30, too. Not now.”

LL So what was your advice? “Wait till you’re 30 to get married”?

RW “Be realistic about what you can expect at this point in your life right now. Don’t think you can go out and have what we’ve got. We have a house full of stuff.”

TW And we each had cars.

RW And the looks on their face told us that they had never thought about it. That’s when we realized they were really young.

TW Right. [chuckles]

EJ So you felt [inaudible] to begin with, but you enjoyed it.

RW Yeah.

TW Well, the main thing is we told them, too, is – they asked us, “Well, you both work. Do you divide everything 50-50?” And we said, “No, we divide it 60-60.”

So I told them “You do a little bit more to make the other person happy, and the other person does a little bit more than 50% to make you happy. And that way, there’s no fine line between your job and my job.”

RW And we said that to the two children that have gotten married, right? [laughter] The other one doesn’t like it, so she hasn’t gotten married.

LL Well, having been with, sort of with, the public schools, did you notice any “town and gown,” or University and city, problems that existed at that time?

TW Well, I think the Lab School always had a lot more opportunities, and a lot more freedom. When you taught in public schools, there were certain rules; that if you wanted a field trip, or if you wanted your class to see something even in town, you know, you’d have to write out all these slips; get permission from this, get permission – and then, find out, should you walk four blocks. And could we really get into –

And they can’t bring their classes right into the college classes as easily as the Lab School teachers. And that’s where, I think, the children miss out. But that’s the way it is.

RW I think we felt that some of the teachers resented that at the public schools. You get a sense that “You’re up there and I’m down here.”

TW And “You can do it and we can’t” type of thing. But then, they have to do a lot more demonstrations, and have more people come in, than they had. So, you give-and-take on different ends, that’s all it is.

LL Were the salaries somewhat comparable with the public schools?

TW I have no idea whether the salaries were –

LL It didn't come up as a subject? As a topic?

TW No. But I know in Pennsylvania it did. I'd send out student teachers, and they would go across the border into New York State, and they made \$3,000 more than I did their first year. And I was supervising them.

RW You sent a substitute teacher out from here and you were very reluctant to send him. And he was earning several thousand dollars more than you the first year – in Moses Lake or someplace.

TW [Inaudible].

RW Well, they didn't read your recommendation until after the year had started.

LL Did you find that you did have a few students you had to grade maybe down to B- or C?

TW Yes. I had two, out of all the years during the time I was here. Only two. So that's not bad, for the number of student teachers we were handling.

LL But you didn't actually have to withdraw any of your students?

TW One withdrew.

RW Yeah, one withdrew. And that's the one they hired!

TW Yeah, that's the one who went to Moses Lake. That's the one that I said couldn't – well, his personality was wonderful. And his presentation of himself was good.

And I wrote down, you know, what job I thought he could do very well. I did not [inaudible].

But he did so well in the interview, he was hired right away. And he lost his job [inaudible].

LL He lost it?

TW Yeah.

LL And they never followed up?

RW Yeah, that's what she discovered. They never even checked. She didn't think they could have even read or seen the recommendation.

TW But most of the student teachers were here, because of their pre-training, and then that sophomore year, observing a lot – I think we probably lost some of them in the sophomore year – and then, the September experience, which helped them get ready for their own classroom.

But they were ready to teach, because of their training here.

RW I think the September experience helped some of them discover what level they really were, really. They didn't realize what was possible. And they'd had their minds set on a certain level, and then they did this.

I had a number go through my [inaudible], and *never dreamed* they would teach elementary. They were going to be junior high or high school. But they had to do some of it and they loved it. And it was early enough to get into it.

EJ So some of those components that we had in those days were –

TW Were very good. And then, Roy and I did follow up. After their first year of teaching, we'd go out and interview the first-year teachers, and we learned a lot.

RW We had to go visit – we went down on the Columbia River, and to some of these remote schools. It was a first-year visitation. And we went together on this.

And it was fascinating, because they got to talk to somebody from the college during their first year of teaching, and sort of ... let it all out.

TW There as no grade involved or anything, so they could say what they really wanted to. And I think we learned more than they learned.

LL Do you remember how many years you did that?

TW Well, we did it only one year.

RW Oh, we only did it that one year, but it seemed to be – it did go on for a while. I don't know how long. We found something powerful in that. You could feel it.

Because they felt – especially in some of these remote districts – that they didn't get to talk to anybody who had gone to college anymore. And there they were, doing their first year of teaching, and we spent a day there, didn't we? Or a half a day?

TW Yes.

LL Were you able to give feedback to the Education Division?

TW Yes, that was the idea; that we would sort of get everything together, and turn it back to the division, so that they would know what the first-year teachers thought about.

LL Was the response of the first-year teacher, was it generally favorable toward the program at Central?

TW Yes. The lowest – and I think this was to be expected – was the Introduction to Education. It was so far back when they were very young kids that they didn't think much of it. I'm sure they got more out of it than they really remembered.

EJ They rated each course they had, didn't they? And they did a sit-down interview as well.

TW Yes.

LL And which courses did they regard most valuable?

TW Student teaching, because it was the last one. [laughing] I think that because it was the last one.

RW And it was probably the most realistic.

TW Yes, that's true, when we put them in the classroom. But then, you see, we gave them more by giving the sophomore observation and the September experience.

So that really increased it for them. And they did mention that. But I would say the last one is usually the one they would answer "Yes, that was the one that was the most beneficial."

But they've got their background, so that they probably brought all that background into that class.

EJ What were people in the Education Division saying about the relationship, their relationship, to other departments in the college back then? Did they consider their relationships very collegial and friendly and without tension?

RW I can't remember his name, but somebody always – from some other department or division – had a fit about how we taught children. And, of course, his child was going through the school. And he obviously thought that we weren't doing anything right, I do remember that. So, that was frustrating to hear that.

TW There seemed to be one of those in every –

RW There was one who we really knew about. And I can't remember her name, but she was in Science, I think. So I must have been [inaudible] didn't really know what I was talking about, with her.

And she was easily critical of what we did. So, you know, those lessons were out there. I thought the best thing, for most of them, was to have their children [inaudible] school; that that helped more of them feel they knew what was going on. And that's a plus, in a way, to have actual children going through [inaudible].

LL Are there things we haven't asked you that you'd like to tell us?

TW Well, that I was really highly pleased and impressed when I moved here. But I did move from another Lab School into here, so I could compare the different things that happened.

EJ Did you think that Central's Lab School was superior to that one?

TW The whole teacher-training program. You had more to offer, because of these extra things, and extra help you gave the student teachers.

RW Thelma had everything but a dissertation in supervision when she came. And then she got married.

TW And I had to choose which one was more important. [laughing]

RW If she had gone to Ham's university, she could still be working on the dissertation. [laughter] They have no deadline.

TW No, Penn State had one – 15 years, I think. Penn State was ready to push me through, because I had everything except the dissertation.

And actually, they thought I'd be writing my dissertation on what I was doing here. And I probably would have done it if I hadn't met Roy. [laughter]

RW Well, Dr. [inaudible], our doctor – we went and talked to him as prospective newlyweds for a purely innocent perspective.

He said – and he talked and talked, because he said, “Well, I don't know what you want to talk about but [inaudible].”

So he talked, and he talked, and finally I said something to the fact that she was 32 and I was 30.

“Oh, for *goodness sakes!* Don't wait till you can afford a swimming pool!” [laughter]

And we didn't. Our eldest daughter says, “Yep, nine months later, I showed up.”

But we took his advice. He's not here either. I don't see him. But Dr. Verney is still here.

LL Yes.

RW Dr. Verney told – I met him at a PTA meeting the first year. I was doing a program on something – “our” first year – and she stayed home – she was pregnant with another child.

And he said, “Now, one thing that you have to learn, if you want your children to be independent, it starts at birth. You don't wait till they're 16.”

And I thought, *That's so sensible.* And I went home and told Thelma, and she had that look and she said, “Oh, I don't know about that.”

But when the real person came out – when that baby was born, we realized that we were right in line with Dr. Verney. That's what we were going to do. It had to start at the beginning.

And so we think we – not the eldest, who's still not married, and seems to depend more on us. But we thought we were working on making them generally independent.

TW Well, you worked with that in your student teaching training. You know what I mean? You helped them along, but you say, “OK, now it's your turn. I'm sitting back,” and then let them do it.

And I told them that I would even let them make mistakes, because they would be doing it on their own.

I said, “I won't let you fall flat on your face, but you will be doing these things. Because your personality is different from mine, and you're different from your master teacher, and you've got to do it your way. But it's got to be in line with the goals, and for the benefit of the children. And I'll help you. If you get in a jam, I'll help you.” And gradually then, of course, then I was back on.

LL So teaching was very good preparation for childrearing.

TW It fits right in. [chuckles] If you're not one of those who says, “You do it this way.” “No.”

RW Now, I did have a few parents who sent their children to [inaudible] for school. After I got married, they said, "I'm so glad you're married. Now you will understand what it's like." And I always thought I understood, but ...

LL Last time we asked you if you had anything else, it paid off. Do you have anything else? [laughter]

TW I'll think of it maybe tonight. You know how that goes.

LL Well, you can always write us a letter.

TW All right.

LL Thank you very much.

TW You're welcome. It's been nice doing this.

LL Have you ever held it against Central that Roy was here?

TW No, I think he's been very good to me. [laughter]