3-10-2014

Mary Jo Comstock interview

Mary Jo Comstock

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/cwura_interviews

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.cwu.edu/cwura_interviews/107
Golden: (?Welcome) to a chapter in the Project of Living History for Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington. On the video is Dr. Eldon Jacobsen, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Psychology. I am the interviewer, Odette Golden, Professor Emeritus, Foreign Languages, and our guest today, the interviewee, Mrs. Mary Jo Comstock. Mary Jo, why don’t you tell us a little bit about your personal history? Your life before you came here, although they do say that life begins at Central. Yours did not, I take it. Where are you from?

Comstock: I was born in Alexandria, Minnesota in 1935, and my parents and family came to Washington about 1941. We lived in Tacoma for part of a year, and then moved to Chehalais. I entered school there, and went through all the grades and graduated in 1953. I’m married to Dale Comstock, and we have, we’ve been married for 41 years, and we have two sons, Brian, who is thirty-four, and Mitch, who is thirty-seven. Mitch worked in Seattle for a soft-ware firm called Asymetrix. It’s owned by Paul Allen, and Mitch lives in Cincinnati, he and his wife Linda. He works for Great America Financial, and he’s a systems manager, and I don’t see him often enough. After I graduated from high school, I attended Central for two years. I went to Central the Fall of 1953 and I attended Central for two years, my freshman and sophomore year. I met Dale Comstock, and it was his senior year. I left Central at that time, and worked for Portland Telephone for a year, and then Dale and I were married in 1956.

Golden: Were you married here in Ellensburg? Where were you living?

Comstock: We were married in Chehalais and then after we were married we moved to Kennewick. Dale was a high school teacher, and...there in the Kennewick schools. I worked for General Electric in Richland for a short period of time. Dale taught for a year, and then he was drafted into the Army. After a while, I went to school at Portland State while he was in the Army, and then after they...one quarter at Portland State, I left and went over to Germany where he was stationed, and we lived in Germany for two years. We lived with a German family, and learned some German, and we traveled throughout Europe, quite extensively at that time. After we were through with the Army we came back to Kennewick and Dale taught another year. He received an NS search grant, and after the year was up we moved to Corvallis where he pursued his Ph.D. We lived in Corvallis for three years where our two sons were born, Mitch and Brian, and after he received his Ph.D. he received a position in Ellensburg at Central as a mathematician in the Math Department. And later on he went on to become Dean of Graduate Studies and Research at a later time, about 1970.

Golden: And you finished your Degree here at Central, did you?

Comstock: After, well, when the boys were young I stayed home, and I didn’t work, but I took classes off and on at Central, working toward my Degree, and I finally, in 1981, I did receive my Degree in Consumer and Family Studies. And that was the same year that Brian graduated from high school. He went off to Western Washington University, and Mitch had gone out of town to the University of Washington. But after I got my Degree I went to at Park Creek Youth Home, which was a division of DSHS. And I worked there in the office for about four years.

Golden: That must have been a rather stressful place to work, wasn’t it? Not in the office, but at Park Creek.

Comstock: Well, it certainly gave you a chance to see another side of life that I had never seen before, and I did work in the office, and so I did have some distance from the harsher part of the life there. I was glad to leave, and I had an opportunity to move on to Central. I was very happy to move to Central, get a position at Central because I’d always been on campus and knew some of the faculty and the staff, and I have always felt very comfortable on campus, so I got...the first position I had was in the Personnel Office, and I
worked there for three months and then moved on to the College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, Dean’s Office and worked for Bob Brown and for a short while Millie Larson, and then she left, and Margo Fitzgerald took over the administrative position. David Lygre was the associate Dean at that time, and I worked for Dave up in the Language and Literature Building for several years. And then we moved down to Hebeler and Don Cummings became Dean and Phil Backlund an Associate Dean. Margo Fitzgerald, shortly after that left, and Judy Couture became the Administrative Secretary. So, as the Deans changed, the hirings changed, the Administrative Secretaries had different ways of doing things, so I was changing a little bit things that I did and the way that I did them which made it an interesting position for me because I wasn’t doing the same things over and over through the twelve years that I worked on campus. The next Deanship, Bob Brown came back and we were Bob Brown and Judy Couture and Phil Buckland I, and it was called the College of Arts and Humanities. And Bob stayed for a few years, not too long, a year or two, and then he left and this last year, last year ago Fall, this last fall, Liahna Babener came. They hired her off campus from Montana State. She’s a very petite, energetic woman, and she wanted to do things in different ways and bring in new ideas to campus, and so this meant me doing a lot of things, a lot of force, and just in general, changing things which kept the whole office very active. So we were working together as she was Dean. Judy Couture Associate... Administrative Secretary, Phil Backlund Associate Dean, and Anne Denman, also in the same office. And she’s the Dean of Sciences.

Golden: That’s very interesting. You’ve certainly had a varied background. I’m sure you could get a job doing anything, anywhere.

Comstock: I’m not sure about that.

Golden: Did you do a good deal of work with computers?

Comstock: Yes, it seems like we were on the computer just about all the time, either c-mailing other offices, or setting up the calendar for the Dean, she liked me to print a calendar, a daily calendar, each day she had a daily calendar with appointments. And I took a lot of classes with CTS Word Perfect, all the Word Perfect classes I could take and Netscape, and Windows 95. I tried to keep up with all the new software that came along which made it exciting for me because the opportunities were endless, with all the changes and all kinds of creative things you could do.

Golden: I’m just glancing at your notes here, Mary Jo, I don’t know enough about computers to ask you anything more. Is there something else, in more advanced level of Computer Science that I don’t know enough about to question you?

Comstock: No, It used to be in our office, we used, we used the e-mail, we used the Word Perfect, everyone in the office, just about everyone in the office used Word Perfect at some level, and that way we were able to communicate to each other quite easily, and trade our information and correspondence back and forth, so we pretty much wedded to Word Perfect in our office.

Golden: Tell me, your position as a Dean’s wife, did that involve any problems when you were a student here?

Comstock: The only two instances that came along, and they’re probably quite trivial, but kind of amusing, I took a class, I think it was a family studies class, and an instructor informed me on the first day that I would be treated like everyone else in class. I guess she thought that since I was a faculty wife I would want special privileges. She kind of floored me. I hadn’t thought of receiving special privileges, but anyway that was a little amusing. And I had another instructor in sociology tell me that because I was a Dean’s wife, I guess that’s why he said it to me, he said, “Not anything that we talk about, if you’re uncomfortable talking about it, you don’t need to talk about it.” Those are the only two instances which were a little unusual; otherwise, I never had any problems with the classes that I’ve taken. I certainly have enjoyed the variety and the instructors.
Golden: I’m certainly sorry that you didn’t take any French classes.

Comstock: I did. I forgot to mention. When we were in Pasco, Dale taught night classes in Pasco when we were living in Kennewick, and I took a couple of French classes at that time and really enjoyed them.

Golden: I meant from me.

Comstock: From you, of course. I’m sorry. Maybe I’ll do that yet.

Golden: Well, it’s not too late. And you did quite a bit of work with students who came into the office.

Comstock: Well, the Dean’s office is sometimes a scary place some of the students having a grievance problem, or they’re worried about a change of grade form, or...they need to get those signed by the Dean. But usually the kids were just polite, and sometimes funny, sometimes serious, but it was always fun to have them come in because usually I was dealing with faculty Chairs, really serious stuff, so when the students came in it kind of lightened things up. And then Douglas Honors College, and all that, they would come in and check their files, or have a question about, you know, what classes they needed to take. I had those very intellectual students come in and talk to me. Some of them were really, really nice. They’re the cream of the crop.

Golden: Did you find that you occasionally were called upon, or felt called upon to assist students with advice on problems that were not strictly speaking, academic? I did because I’m not qualified as a counselor, but I seem to get involved with other problems sometimes.

Comstock: I didn’t really get involved, and didn’t give them advice on anything other than just black and white things. If they needed advice, they usually went to the Associate Dean, who handled all the student problems. He was always glad to talk things over with them. If they had a grievance, or if they had any problems with classes or an instructor. He was always there to help them, so I... he was the expert, and I let him have it.

Golden: Did you get involved in work at Central in areas other than academic or professional? Sports, or foreign films, or anything like that?

Comstock: No, the only thing we, oh, we used to go to the basketball games a lot, and I always enjoyed them. And we went to football games in years past, but...and occasionally we go to a play, and I enjoyed Laughing Horse Summer Theater a lot. And used the gyms the athletic things as far as keeping healthy, and that’s about the extent of what we did other than work.

Golden: I know what you mean by that. Can you recall, we were talking before we started recording, about humorous events here. Can you recall any humorous events that come to your mind that happened to you, or that you observed?

Comstock: Well, there were a lot of humorous events in the Dean’s office, but I’d just as soon not talk about them because these probably aren’t the kinds that you want to record. I really don’t have any...

Golden: Strong feelings, that is just what we want to record, but I certainly won’t press you, but on the whole did you enjoy working at Central?

Comstock: Oh, yes. I really did. I enjoyed talking to the students, and just walking around the campus seeing how it’s changed. Over the years, there have been so many changes. I enjoyed walking around and seeing the students and enjoying their activity and all their...They’re so active and you just like to stand back and watch the energy that they have. I’ve enjoyed it very much.
Golden: Do you think that they are preoccupied with events that students when we were young, were not? Of course, we weren’t young at the same time, you and I.

Comstock: They’re involved in events that we weren’t?

Golden: Yeah.

Comstock: Well, I think they probably are. I think they may be more concerned about the environment than we. I don’t think we even thought about the environment or worrying about the future. We were (?)... I don’t think it occurred to us at that time. But I think a lot of students now are really worried about the future, and they’re out there trying to figure out how to save different things.

Golden: I think all of the press had something to do with that. I grew up in New York City, and I grew up on the New York Times, and at the mast head it was, “All the News That’s Fit to Print.” It seems to me now that most of the news is not fit to print, but they print it anyway, so... I want to ask you, they have some suggested topics on this sheet with regard to the Faculty Code and Academic Freedom. Did any of these things stir your memories at all,...or doesn’t apply, really, to your kind of work.

Comstock: I know. I have seen the list, but I haven’t even (?)

Golden: How do you feel about long range planning?

Comstock: I think you should ask the faculty or Deans about that.

Golden: Well, we haven’t achieved it yet, as far as I know. Some of these things are strictly for faculty members, it seems to me. What specific contributions do you feel that you have made to the progress of your, the Dean’s office where you worked, or the college in general?

Comstock: Well, I think as a secretary, the main contribution I could make, and tried to make, was to keep the office running smoothly, to have the Dean attend her meetings on time, and for heaven sakes, don’t let her forget a meeting, or not tell her about a meeting. That was really important that she make meetings that she was supposed to attend, and...

Golden: She?

Comstock: Well, at the end it was a she. After three male Deans I ended up with a she.

Golden: Delightful.

Comstock: And I think she was more concerned with being where she was supposed to be, and on time than any of the males.

Golden: You didn’t feel any pressure on you being a faculty wife, or in a rather unusual position even, a Dean’s wife?

Comstock: A little odd at times. Like when I first started I was asked by the President’s wife to come and serve at receptions, so I’d have to leave my office position and go serve at receptions at the President’s house. And, you know, how you... what do you say? Do you say,” I don’t want to go; I’ll stay here and work.” Or do you say, “Oh, yes, I’d better go help the President’s wife.” And it just was a little strange. It all worked out, I guess. I don’t know what other people thought.

TECHNICAL PAUSE
Golden: Did you have regular written evaluations of your work, and if so, were they valuable and in what way?

Comstock: In the first year that I worked in the Dean’s office I had evaluations that were quite thorough. And then when Judy Couture, Margo Fitzgerald did quite extensive evaluations on me. I thought they were valuable, and then Judy Couture took over as Administrative Secretary, and evaluations were not done any more. But I think as a whole, evaluations can be valuable.

Golden: Were they quite frank?

Comstock: Well, there wasn’t a lot of writing; I was given points, so many points for whatever was on the evaluation. I was given so many points for doing this and so many points for doing that kind of work, and then all the points were added up. I was working for Barry Donohue, the Director of the Douglas Honors College, so he evaluated me. Phil Buckland, the Associate Dean evaluated me. The Dean evaluated me. (?) evaluated me, and that was all lumped together in some form and I came up with a number on all these paths and things that I did on the job. It was quite complicated, but I felt it was valuable.

Golden: It’s very hard to know, I’ve never been evaluated by anybody formally. Nobody ever said anything about it.

Comstock: (?)... I think the idea is that you’re on the right track, at least. And they had (?) for many (?), you know about how you could improve, or different areas that you could improve in. You kind of got an idea if you were doing things (?) in the right direction.

Golden: Did you discuss them with a superior officer, or go over it with anyone?

Comstock: It really wasn’t discussed as much as I thought it should be. Mainly it was just the form that was completed. Maybe it was my fault that the form wasn’t discussed, but I felt that... Well, I guess if there were things that needed to be discussed, they would have been discussed, but there really wasn’t a whole lot of discussion.

Golden: Now, you mentioned Margo Fitzgerald and Judy Couture, forgive me for saying it in French, it’s a French name, who were helpful to you, let’s go for a moment to the faculty. Do you remember any faculty members who were particularly helpful to you, or to whom you looked up, or down as the case may be?

Comstock: Well, as far as, really, my working dealing with faculty were mainly setting up appointments with them. I really wasn’t... had that kind of contact with them where I could look up to them, or not look up to them. I didn’t have that kind of relationships with them. I did receive a lot of help, and I think, (?)...help, but I worked really well with Barry Donohue. He, when he came, he had never worked with an Honors College before, and I had been on the job several, only a few years when he came, and so we worked together, and I kind of taught him the ropes, and then later when he learned the job, he went on to enlarge Douglas Honors College and the program really grew, and so I had a chance to create new spreadsheets, and do new things with the computer, and to learn how to do things that I hadn’t done before because he was really anxious to have the program grow. And so I liked to work with him. I worked with him longest of any of the administrators because I had Deans that were always changing. (?)I enjoyed working with him a lot.

Golden: As you look back at the faculty, if you don’t mind looking back at the faculty, are there any memorable ones as you look back, in your experience.

Comstock: When I was going to school here?

Golden: Or working.
Comstock: Well, I had a favorite faculty member. I had him in school, that was back in 1963, so that was a long time to remember much about him, but I, after we came back to Central, we became acquainted again as, you know, casual friends, and then after he moved away and then he’d come back in the Summer time to visit friends here, I really became, not close to him, but I really enjoyed being around him because he was such an inspiration, and that was Reino Randall. And of course, he’s passed away now, but he was a very, very special friend. I enjoyed him.

Golden: My experience with Reino was that he went out of his way to help and be friendly to the younger faculty members, is that you’re...?

Comstock: Well, that wasn’t exactly my relationship, but he was just fun to be around, and was always thinking of crazy things to do, and even though he was a lot older than Dale and I, we always enjoyed doing things with him. Going out to dinner, and just fun to be around.

Golden: Do you remember any particular faculty members, I’m wondering if you saw a side of faculty members, in their interactions with administrators that other faculty members might not be aware of? Relationships, or clashes? We’ll give you a moment to think about that, shall we? My own experience was that the secretaries were the ones who were really running things here. That is when things were going smoothly, otherwise I blamed the administrators. Does that strike a responsive note?

Comstock: (?) There were some faculty members that, you know, rubbed the Deans the wrong way, but they’d have to deal with them anyway. It was kind of awkward because some type of faculty members... we had gone to dinner at their place, or, you know, knew them as friends, so it was kind of awkward when they’d come to the office, and a Dean would say, “Well, I don’t want to see him.” Or something like that. Even though in the end he’d see’em, but those incidents were a bit weird, awkward.

Golden: Very interesting. Is there anything that you’d like to discuss that I have not covered?

Comstock: Well, I’d like to mention a couple of people on the staff that helped me in my job when I first started. The first few years, when we were in L&L, you know, I had to work with Continuing Ed. Classes and load classes, off-campus load classes, and I needed to the payroll, and I needed to do all the paper work for the classes, and it was pretty overwhelming because, to step in and do the payroll for a bunch of faculty members, even though they were Adjuncts, and to keep track of that. Carol Mellergaard, who was over in Continuing Ed. was very helpful to me. She’s gone to be Administrative Secretary now, over in Professional Studies. She’s really on the ball, and she is articulate and I knew exactly what she wanted because she’d tell you exactly what she wanted, and it wasn’t any, you know, garbled messages. So that made the job a lot easier. And I want t say that Margo Fitzgerald really knew what she was doing, and had a real command of all her work. She kept up with the work. Everything was done one on time, very few errors. She got along very well with faculty and the Chairs and faculty, and she wasn’t the easiest person to work with, but then who is? So I had quite a few years working with her, and I liked working with her because I knew what I was supposed to do. There wasn’t any... question as to what should be done and how to do it. She had a good command of direction, I believe. I enjoyed working with her.

Golden: Personally, I got a lot of help from the secretaries. A lot of help. I think it probably, in some cases I wouldn’t have been able to do my committee work without the assistance of... Do you think... when I came here it was Central Washington College of Education, and then it became State College, and now a University. Do you think that one of those denominations is preferable to any of the others? Which one fits us best in your opinion?

Comstock: Well, I like to call it Central Washington University because we have the different Colleges now. I don’t know how you’d say it’s Central Washington College when you have several Colleges.

Golden: That’s a good point. I hadn’t thought of that.
Comstock: College of Arts and Humanities, College of Sciences, The College of Professional Studies...

Golden: In your opinion, what is the significant difference between a State college and a State University? What makes a university that a College is not?

Comstock: Well, the programs are at a more advanced level, is one distinction, and probably the money coming in from the Legislature would be at a different level. I’m not sure I can answer you that...

Golden: I’m thinking primarily library situations and acquisitions and laboratories.

Comstock: . . . The programs would be much...

Golden: Would require a.... Is there anything else you would like to have go down to posterity in this interview?

Comstock: Well, I’d like to thank you. I had a lot of fun. I’m glad you got the film in the camera.

Golden: It helps, especially when we have an attractive interviewee. It helps a lot, that film. Well, thank you so much, Mrs. Comstock. It’s been a memorable afternoon.

Comstock: You’re welcome. It has.