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Interviewee: Sheila Stearns

Interviewer: David Brooks

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David Brooks: Okay, it's August 22, 2006, and I'm David Brooks, the interviewer for The University of Montana's Oral History Project. Today I'm talking with, now-Commissioner of Higher Education, Sheila Stearns. And Ms. Stearns, I was hoping you could start by just talking a little bit about your personal and educational background, what brought you to Missoula and The University of Montana to begin with.

Sheila Stearns: Sure. I am Sheila MacDonald Stearns. I don't generally go by my middle name but when I started here as a student, of course, and all the years I was an undergraduate, I was Sheila MacDonald. I grew up in Glendive, Montana. Father a dentist, mother a librarian. Big family. I kind of wanted to go to the University of Minnesota but [because we had a lot of] kids in school, we chose in-state schools. And actually, most of us chose the University of Montana. One brother chose MSU [Montana State University].

So I came here and decided to major in English and history because I couldn't really choose between them, and knew that I would probably teach, which I ended up doing. So that's what brought me to the University. I came in 1964 and graduated in 1968. I got married in '68 and went right on to get my master's degree under Ross Toole immediately. So I got that within about 18 months. So I got my master's in 1969.

DB: And that was in history?

SS: That was in history. Correct.

DB: And so you went on to teach after that?

SS: I did. I hurried to finish my master's degree. I'll stop there for a moment and we can come back to it. It was called *A Case Study in Academic Freedom*, and it was a subject suggested to me by Dr. Toole, and it ended up being footnoted in one of his books. One of his subsequent—I think *20th Century Montana* perhaps. But he was curious about Arthur Fisher. It's called the Arthur Fisher Affair, and I'd be glad to come back to that.

I hurried to finish it [my master's thesis] because that year I'd persuaded my husband, who was already teaching, that we ought to do—we would probably live, I said, in Missoula, Montana, most of our lives. We really liked it. So we should do something adventurous. So we applied to Department of Defense schools, and said that we would only take Europe, we didn't want to live in Greenland for a year, and lo and behold that summer we got a very plum assignment because someone retired surprisingly at the last minute. So someone who probably was waiting

in Greenland or Okinawa to get the spot in Germany didn't get it and we did. So we went. Hal was hired. Even though I already had my teaching degree you had to have two years experience to be hired by the Department of Defense. But I went over as a dependent. Hal had a job, and I had a job within a month, because they had the need, they had more students. I taught in junior high, English and social studies. And we taught there for three years.

DB: And then you returned to Missoula?

SS: We did. When we went, Hal took a one-year leave-of-absence from Sentinel High School. Then we kept extending it because we were having so much fun. We finally got to the point where I think Hal would have stayed and I once again said, no, we probably ought to return or we'll never get back. And partly it was because by then I was expecting and I thought it would be nicer to raise our children around family, extended family. So we came back three years later and Hal went back to work at Sentinel High School. He put in a full-career, the three years at Sentinel before we left and the 25, I believe, after we got back. During that time he earned his doctorate here in education.

Both of us had masters' in history and both wanted to get our doctorates in history but by then—we probably should have gotten our doctorates while we were overseas from the University of Maryland or Ball State or something for a little variety. But we were too busy having fun and seeing the world. So all of our degrees are, both of us, from the University—no, he was an undergrad at Notre Dame—but all of mine are from Montana because I ended up place-bound. The history Ph.D. was in moratorium at that time, so I couldn't, nor could he, get our doctorates in history. But in both of our cases, especially mine, the Education School worked with the History Department so that of my committee of five for my dissertation, three were from the School of Education but two were from the History Department. Particularly, the leader was Dr. Robert Lindsay, who died a few years ago but was one of my very favorite historians. He wasn't a Western historian, in fact he was a Europeanist, but he was wonderful and he was the main guide on my committee. Maybe not so much history, but sort of style and approach to writing a biography.

So to the extent that a person in those days could get a doctorate in history, I kind of did. Finished that after a few years of raising my children. Going back to work for a couple years as a school librarian, that was another sort of arrow I had in my quiver. My mother had been a librarian and I loved, you know, I'm a bibliophile. So I was also a school librarian for a couple of years in there. When I resigned from that to have our second child, because I liked and enjoyed having a few years at home with each of my two babes, I used that chance to start going back for my doctorate. So I defended that in '83, the year that my youngest started first grade.

I kind of mixed the flexibility of graduate school, not that it wasn't onerous, but I had time, and I was supported. I had a teaching assistantship, so I brought in a little bit of income to the family, but basically I got to, I thought, have the best of all worlds. I got to be essentially a stay-at-home mom, flexible at least, very flexible, and earn my doctorate, if not in history, at least in a

very—well, it would have been in the History Department had they had the Ph.D. at the time. And at the same time I was getting the credentials to be a principal or superintendent, which is what I thought I would be when I grew up. I'd been in public education, and was interested in leadership and had been encouraged, especially the years that I was a school librarian, I had been encouraged by my boss to get the credentials to be in charge of a school or schools, and I thought that sounded interesting.

So I combined those and finished my doctorate in '83 and then started looking around the job market. And in fact was surprised—I wasn't in any big hurry—but that summer there was an unexpected retirement in July or so of one of the principals of the 18 elementary schools in School District 1 here in Missoula. And at that time all 18 of those principals were men, but they decided to do a quick search and have a person at least for an interim year. At the same time I was encouraged by the dean at the School of Education to apply for the head of the Alumni Office because there had been some sort of event and the previous alumni director, who had been quite a senior officer at the University, someone I knew and respected, she had resigned. So that position was open. I applied for both, thinking that one was more frivolous, probably a lark, but I would apply and the other one was probably my career path.

Without going into boring details, I was offered both jobs the same week, about the third week of August, and just kind of the way the president and vice president of the University of Montana pitched the alumni job to me, was more intriguing and frankly more challenging. In other words, they said, well you can see we just fired, in effect, the person who was here, and it's a very important position to us, and we'll be starting our first ever capital campaign and we need good relationships with alumni and we need an office that gets into the twentieth century or at least the 1980s, and we need a lot of change and you'll sink or swim or not. And I thought that sounded nice, open-ended, give me a lot of responsibility but let me try to build it up and make it work.

The other one, they weren't sure whether it would be an interim and do another search, they kind of—how should I say it—conditioned it [saying], well, we'll have a personnel officer to help you if you have to hire anyone, we'll have a curriculum officer at the central office if you have to make any curriculum decisions, and so on; we'll have a budget officer. And they, the administration of the school district was much more—frankly condescending, patronizing. So even though that was my career field, the other sounded more of a challenge.

I would never have thought it. I had no idea really of what an Alumni Office did, but I knew it would be in higher ed, I knew it would be interesting and fun and I could do it for a couple years and get back into public education where I thought was where I belonged. But I ended up really liking the alumni position and they did give me a lot of responsibility and they did start the capital [campaign] —they—you know the president, President [Neil] Bucklew, and Vice President [Michael] Easton, and then the UM Foundation) started the first capital campaign, which resulted in—it was a \$6 million campaign. Sounds so small now. The University's just finishing a \$100 million campaign, but it seemed big to us then. Especially since half of it, \$3

million, was going to go to building a new stadium. So we needed, of course, or the President believed, I think correctly, that they needed to balance that with endowed chairs, or not chairs but he called them endowed stools, you know academically related things. The library and other worthy goals more academic and student-oriented than the stadium.

I did that job for four years and then my boss, the Vice President, Mike Easton, took a position as, they called it provost at that time, in Dillon, when Dillon was administratively attached in 1987 to The University of Montana. So he went to Dillon as the provost. Then I served an interim-role in his job as vice president for a year, and they had a national search, and I competed for it and was selected to become the permanent vice president [of University Relations]. So there I ended up in higher education administration, sort of by, I won't say by chance, but not something I ever thought I was going to be when I grew up and certainly not something I thought that I would be heading toward when I was writing either my master's thesis or my doctoral dissertation or doing my graduate work. Although some of my graduate work, of course, was in general administration, and educational administration, and that was of course helpful.

DB: I want to return to something you mentioned—well a few things you mentioned earlier. One is just Missoula in general, you started out by saying you figured you would live here, you and your husband both really liked it. You came from Glendive and had that evaluation of it and still apparently thought that after being in Germany and having, as you said, a good time for three years. What was Missoula like, and the University, that attracted you to come back here?

SS: Even then, and maybe always, Missoula has been an interesting university town. With a strong emphasis on the liberal arts, which now, almost any college or university has a good comprehensive liberal arts core for its graduates, but just the excitement of various lectures, concerts, the availability of the buzz. Just the intellectual buzz of the town. And it was pretty, it is pretty. It was still suffering then from a real haze, a real Horner-Waldorf they called it, the old pulp mill. They hadn't cleaned it up, and granted it still suffers inversions, but that was the only downside.

I mean my first visit to Missoula was in the summer with my family on an around-Montana trip, and the trees, especially in the University area, that just was—and with a mountain right there—we just liked it physically, even though we both now are very, very attached and love going back to our home areas. I think the Eastern Yellowstone River Valley is much more gorgeous than I really appreciated growing up. I liked it growing up. I hiked in Makoshika [State Park], but I like it even better now. And Hal is from the Harlowton area in central Montana, which is stunningly beautiful, so as we've grown we've realized that where we are from, all over Montana, are just beautiful. It's a beautiful land. But the presence of the university, and a town that was just a little bigger and more exciting, caused us to think, "We want to live in Montana. If you want to live in Montana, where do you want to live?" For us it was just Missoula, no question.

DB: So along with that, you had the opportunity to study with K. Ross Toole, as you mentioned. He certainly is a stand-out figure in the History Department here, if not the University. So I'd like you to reminisce a little about him, studying under him and the department at the time, as well as you mentioned that the Ph.D. was in moratorium, when you got finished with your M.A. degree. So talk about that, and that happening.

SS: Okay. I'm not sure when the history degree went into moratorium, the Ph.D., because I wasn't interested right away. But at least it was by the time we returned from Europe. Hal was getting interested first and I subsequently. Ross Toole was an icon, even on campus, even then, although—and the History Department was large and robust. It had Jack Van de Wetering, a Russian scholar, [Melvin] Wren, I believe was his last name, and just all kinds of—I don't know I think in the enrollment cutbacks of 1977, the History Department lost a few lines. But in the late '60s and early '70s, it was just large and bustling and robust and just full of interesting faculty. I'm sure it's always stayed that way but it did have a drop off and has certainly built back up since then.

But, gosh, you know Hal and I, Hal especially even more than I, was interested in western history and I was interested always a little more in the history of ideas than in facts and places, so different sorts of western history appealed to us. I was not interested—his master's degree was on the place where he grew up, the history of the Musselshell Valley, and my master's degree was on an academic freedom case here at the University. So Ross Toole, Hal became his graduate student I believe in '65 when Ross first came over from the Historical Society. And Hal says, I assume it's true, that he, my husband, that he was Ross Toole's first graduate student. He may not have been the first one to finish, although that may have been the case as well. So he got his master's degree, so we kind of knew—I got to know Ross Toole especially through Hal, a little bit.

Then when I finished my English degree, English History, I took the GRE and knew I wanted to do history and Hal said, "Go see Ross Toole. Go see Ross." And so I did. Ross said, "Boy, these are great GRE scores. We want you to stay here. We want you to study history." So I was of course flattered and interested, and I said, "Well, there's nothing I love more than history, if I could find a master's degree topic that interests me." So he was fun, you could drop into his office at any time. He was very witty. As probably everyone knows he was handsome and confident and funny and easygoing. And so we—I started my courses, and we kind of poked around and he presented several ideas in his seminar.

Ross Toole's seminar for his graduate students was famous. Again, we would write and he would critique our work, but basically he would let us critique each other. We were much harder on each other than he was, often. He was a beautiful writer, as everyone knows, but not that harsh of a critic. We really, in some ways, learned more from each other than [Toole] but it was a great experience. I didn't spend much time with my fellow graduate students. I had the luxury, again, of being supported that year, knowing that I wanted to something the next year. So I just took a full load. I wasn't a teaching assistant then. So I was just clicking right through

and didn't get to know people like Brian Cockhill as well as I would have liked. They were graduate students at the same time I was. In retrospect, I know you learn a lot.

But Dr. Toole was always an excellent speaker / lecturer / teacher. He was gentle, he was very bright, and just a great person to study with. It was a great 18 months. And then I needed to go up—he and his wife had a ranch in the Bitterroot Valley and because of the speeded up process so I could get to Europe, I took a draft of mine, what I hoped was the final draft of my master's thesis, up for him to look at and approve for a quick scheduling of a defense. He loved it. He said this is terrific, and scheduled the defense and got it done, and I think I flew out the next day. But that's how he was to work with. And the Graduate School was very accommodating as well. He was excellent.

During that time he [Ross Toole] said—one of the people you should interview for this is a guy who lives up north of here near Pablo, Charlo. His name is Ray Logan and he is a brother-in-law of Arthur Fisher—is that right, a brother-in-law? Well, a relative, maybe kind of a cousin-in-law. And he said he was in Chicago when Arthur Fisher—came from this distinguished Fisher family in Chicago—in fact the other day I heard someone mentioning the book *Getting to Yes*, and one of the co-authors is Roger Fisher. Roger Fisher is the son of one of those Fishers, you know, Arthur's siblings. Ray Logan—and when he was in Chicago he married one of the—a lady who had been married to the Fishers—anyway, long story.

But at any rate, I said that's a good idea. So I went up and I spent a wonderful day working on my doctorate, to visit Ray Logan about the whole Winnetka thing. Actually more his years in Montana. And when I got back, one of my fellow graduate students said to me, "You interviewed Ray Logan?" I said, yeah, Ross tipped me off to go see him. And he said, "Well did you ask him all about the Winnetka plan?" And I said, you know at that time I was getting my master's in history, not education, and I hadn't learned much about that. I said, "Ummm...peripherally." Sheepishly I said this. He said, well you ought to go back, because that's where he's famous in his own right, not just what he knew about his brother-in-law Arthur Fisher. And I said, oh.

I'll come back to Ross in a moment, but a few years later, gosh mid '70s, late '70s, when I went to see Ross Toole when I decided I was ready to work on a doctorate and the School of Education was willing for me to make it have a historical dissertation. Ross was in his last year or two of teaching. I went up to his office and said, "Ross is it true? I think I heard recently that no one has even yet written the—this is almost eight, nine years later, maybe 10—no one's written the story of Ray Logan and the Winnetka plan, and his work in Montana before he went there?" Ross said no. And I said, "If I go for my doctorate that's what I'd love to do for a dissertation." He said, "That is a terrific idea." But he didn't stay. He was retiring and you know, frankly, getting sick. So he didn't stay to be on my committee for my doctorate, but he passed it off to a couple of other guys in the department. So he was wonderful to work with and he got me started on both of the topics for my master's and my doctorate dissertation.

DB: So, I'm thinking of the years that you were in school here, and mentioning that your undergraduate was partially in the English Department as well. And those are years that there were some fairly well-known folks in the English Department.

SS: Yes, interestingly the best-known, Leslie Fiedler, his last year was '63-'64, and I started in the fall of '64. So I never got to take a class from Leslie Fiedler. I would have loved to. My older sister got to. And I'm going to not [be able to] think of their names right off hand, you know, some other luminaries in that English Department. Several of whom—Jesse Bier, you know, several of whom I did get to take classes from and they were—it was like the History Department. Gosh, I just thought those mid-'60s, when they were ramping up to teach all of us baby boomers, that those departments were full of interesting people. So the English Department as well. Walter King was my advisor and he became an icon. He was a British literature expert and I took every Walter King course I could and loved it. Loved him. So yeah, that was a robust, exciting department as well. So I thought, you know, how could you have more fun, in those years at least, than to major in English and history.

DB: I'm interested in your ability to have the School of Education and the History Department cooperate on a Ph.D. And I've heard from many people I've interviewed doing oral histories that there was a certain time at the University, and in places it still exists, [when] there was just maybe a greater sense of fraternity or fellowship between departments within the faculty. Perhaps it was school size. Did your ability to do that [get the degree] coincide with that? Does that even make sense to talk about?

SS: No, I understand what you're saying and I, as a student, would not really have been attuned enough to say how the faculty relationships were. [I] probably would have been too naïve to think that—if I thought something might work, at least not to ask. I do have to point out, of course, that what I got, what I earned, was an Ed.D., because there was not a Ph.D. And over the years it sort of amuses me because in many venues, not all, [for] an Ed.D. you do not have to do a serious, difficult, challenging dissertation. I did, and I think many did in those years. So to me, I felt very fortunate.

But at any rate, in terms of them working together, my advisor thought it was a great idea. Bill Fisher, wonderful fellow, just died a couple of years ago, and he taught some of the foundation courses. He was a genuine intellectual. He taught the history of education, and the philosophy of education, the sociology of education, and he had studied at Columbia. And so he certainly, I don't think he was the best friend of the historians, but he knew them. I don't think Bill published. He was not of the stature, maybe, that they were, but he certainly knew his field and was respected. He became my mentor in the School of Education. Actually he was the one who told me—I said, "I'd rather do something historical," and I think he was the one that tipped me off that the Ray Logan story had not been written. He knew about that from the foundations of education.

So I just think that, at least among a few faculty, there were enough connections in the field that—I mean I literally, they were all in the LA building, maybe they all still are. No, the School of Education, of course, is in a different building now. But I just ran from one floor to the next and caught Ross in his office. That was so exciting to me. I said, “Dr. Fisher just told me that you know this, is—.” And Ross said, “Yeah, what a great idea!” And you know, I don’t think it was any problem at all. And maybe, probably, unusual. But I was too young or too detached from academic politics to know if it was unusual.

DB: Right. I mean it seems common now that people have one outside reader from a different department, otherwise there is a Ph.D., I believe, in interdisciplinary studies now on campus. But that seems sort of like a middle ground between those two. So perhaps it was unique.

SS: And I don’t know if Dr. Toole knew this or not, I think he did, when I graduated I really wanted to go to the University of Minnesota. Remember I told you I wanted to go as an undergrad? I wanted to go again, and they had a well-respected American Studies [program]. Because I was more of an interdisciplinary-ist, to make up a word. [chuckles] I hope no one ever quotes it. And Hal wanted to get his doctorate, and I wanted to work on my master’s toward a doctorate. I really was interested in becoming a faculty member at a college or university. It was just kind of a glitch that—I got accepted to the University of Minnesota right away and Hal’s didn’t come and didn’t come and it got close to our wedding and he needed to sign a contract or we wouldn’t have a job the next year.

So we decided, well, we could stay in Montana one more year and go to Minnesota the year after and be on the safe side and sign that contract with Missoula County High School. Well by then, you know, I was working on a master’s degree here that I enjoyed and then got that Europe idea. So you know, at one point, I had considered a Ph.D. and had been accepted in a Masters-Ph.D. program in American Interdisciplinary Studies. But, you know, the road not taken. But I ended up, I think, crafting here, in Montana, a wonderful academic experience with two degrees. They were parochial, provincial, in the sense that they’re all from the same university, but I would argue that the quality of the professors that I had, especially in English and history and some of the education professors, in fact most [of them], was outstanding. And so I don’t regret my degrees at all. I think they well prepared me for this huge variety of careers I’ve had since.

DB: Speaking of your variety of careers, let’s fast-forward to you no longer being a student and your first job with the University, which was the Alumni Association. I want you to talk a little bit about the importance of that capital campaign, and was that—you know now, a lot of the University is really privately funded. There are more and more private grants on campus all the time in different departments, as well as something like the Coca Cola contract that has recently happened on campus. Was that really that pivotal of a time, that first capital campaign? Did it fit in to a shift in funding on campus at all?

SS: Oh, it definitely was the harbinger of a shift. Not quite so much in the research area. That really bloomed and took off later in the late '80s, early '90s. I would say that President George Dennison in particular put a lot of weight, if you will, support behind the growth of that area and private fund-raising as well. But, every college or university, I've found, depending on its maturation and its dependence on state support, begins to realize—especially if it has a huge or large group of alumni who love it and remember it fondly, —every university begins to learn you are not taking advantage of the support and the scholarships at the very least that you could get for your students, not to mention grants.

So that was very pivotal. Bigger colleges and universities reached that stage two or three decades earlier. The University of Montana's Foundation was founded in the late, oh gosh, early '50s maybe. But it didn't, it wasn't beginning to really mature enough to undertake a major capital campaign. So I would say it was very pivotal, but nothing happens overnight. That capital campaign ended up raising, I don't know, I think \$7- or \$8 million, and we all felt very proud of that. I remember a lot of details about it, somebody if you ever [are looking for someone] to interview is Monica Paoli, who lives in town. She was Monica Conrad at that time. And do you hire an outside counsel or do you get inside people, like Monica, who had worked for Governor [Ted] Schwinden, who kind of know the lay of the land and have a good way with people?

So at any rate, President Bucklew knew, coming from Ohio University—he'd been provost at Ohio University and he knew that no university that really wants to grow up can do so without private funds to supplement the state base. So yeah, that was pivotal. It became very clear to the administration and to the faculty and certainly to the Foundation members that that was key. You needed to have private support. Then gradually the private support kind of branched into two areas: the private support for scholarships, for endowed shares, for buildings/projects and then the grants and research took off. They had to bifurcate at some point. They used to have, for a while, a combined office in the '70s maybe, up through even the '70s, before they split offices. And both of them had matured magnificently I think, and really enriched the University and, pun-intended, enriched it in all kinds of ways.

DB: Great, well I know you've got to end here, and we'll continue the interview later. Thank you.

SS: Okay.

[End of Interview]