

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 270-049

Interviewee: Adelaine Midgett

Interviewer: Annie Pontrelli

Date of Interview: September 19, 1991

Project: University of Montana Centennial Oral History Project

Annie Pontrelli: This is Annie Pontrelli interviewing Adelaine Midgett on September 19, 1991. Adelaine, just to start out the interview why don't you go ahead and tell me the dates you were on campus and how you were affiliated with the University and we'll go from there.

Adelaine Midgett: Well okay, in 1929 to 1933 we were students and I graduated in 1933 from the University. I don't really know what to tell you. I can tell you one thing, when I was a student from 1929 to 1933 that there were probably 1,100 to 1,200 students on campus. That was it.

I was interested in library work and at that time if you happened to be a junior in the right year you could take library courses. And actually I graduated in what was called Library Economy. It just happened that starting in 1929 in two years they were starting a library. So I actually graduated from Library Economy, it's a very strange thing, now if you find any listing for me it will list me as graduating in English and I did not graduate in English, I graduated from library economy. It was not-we discovered, well I discovered later, an accredited library school, and this was primarily because the instructors were all people who had to work full time at the library in addition to teaching their courses and of course that was inconvenient as can be. I always felt that I had maybe a better background in library science than some of the people that I got later when I actually was interviewing people for library jobs because of the requirements. They really required like two foreign languages, a minor in one of those and another one that you could use for cataloging and you had to have so much history, and so much English, and really, quite different requirements in order to graduate around that time. I think there were only about maybe nine people who graduated in Library Economy. It was a very small class. Well, it had to be because Katherine White was the reference librarian so she taught the reference course in the library. She was really a tough teacher but she gave you a really good background and the other people were all people who worked at the library who taught the classes. I graduated at a really bad time in 1933, there just weren't a lot of jobs and fortunately I got a job at Fort Benton. They had a community library there, two librarians, and I was the assistant librarian. So I worked there for about two years and then I got married. I married the coach.

AP: At Fort Benton?

AM: Yes, and then we left there. Well I did some school library work at Choteau and some at Harlowton, various places that we lived, and then eventually we moved back to Missoula. When I got back to Missoula, somebody, a friend of mine, wanted me to do something about the St. Pat's school of nursing library because at that time St. Pat's had a school of nursing here.

So I went down there and did some work down there and eventually they hired me to work, I had kind of strange hours so I could be home with my kids. I had two boys by that time. After that there was an opening at the University library and Kathleen Campbell was the head librarian and so I was interviewed by her and (unintelligible) in assistant cataloging and that's where I stayed and eventually I was a (unintelligible) at the library and I was there until 1978. I just felt that the University really gave me a good background. I really could handle it (unintelligible). If you want to know why I went to the University, I had two older brothers and a younger brother and a sister and all five of us went to the University of Montana and we all graduated.

AP: Great, now are you from Missoula originally?

AM: I was living here. My dad was a salesman for a (unintelligible) so it didn't matter a whole lot if he lived in Missoula, we were living in Great Falls. But my oldest brother came to the University and then when my second brother was ready for the University, we moved to Missoula because it was easier as long as we were all going to college. So we moved here in 1927 or 1928 and we all grew up and went to the University.

AP: Throughout your years of work (unintelligible) I'm sure you noticed a lot of changes and you probably more specifically saw a lot of changes in technology of library systems. Why don't you talk about some of the changes that you've witnessed over the years?

AM: Well I get a little bit-I was at the library about a week or ten days ago and I told one of my friends I am really get upset because all this technology seems to pass me by. I have been retired and I don't know how these things-"Oh," they keep saying, "you won't have any problem." You know, you really feel like you got lost in time. I retired in '78, so much of it automation since I retired so it really has changed.

Cataloging is so much easier now, just so much easier. So there's really a big change. I'll tell you one big change. I think that the tuition when I started was something like 28.50 [dollars] a quarter, I'm pretty sure it was, and that's a big change. I looked up in the college catalog because I was just interested and one of the things that was down for a requirement back in say 1928 or something like that was you had to be 16 years old, at least 16 years old to get in the University and a good moral character. I really love that because I don't think they check moral character anymore. (laughs) The president of the University when I was there was President Clapp and I think he was still there when I graduated in 1933. There was an acting librarian when I was there, Winifred Fife (?), and she was a little gal, she was short and you know she just was not pretty at all but she was the dearest person and I loved her.

When I started out there I went one year and then the next fall there were already two brothers out there and those were the years of the Depression at that time, and there just wasn't even money for me to go that fall quarter. I decided that I'd just have to find some kind of work and maybe I could make it if I can find some work. So my second brother was in

forestry and those fellows who were in forestry always had work because there were lookouts all over and so he always had a job. He came back from his lookout and wanted to know why I wasn't in school and I said there just wasn't enough money and he said, "Well I'll pay for your tuition next quarter if you want to go to school." So I went out to see if I could find a job at the University, and I'm not going to say where I interviewed first, but I went in the business office really to see if I could get a job and I could take shorthand and I was just turned down flatly, there was absolutely no chance of a job. So I was interested in library work so I went over to the library and Winifred Fife was the woman who interviewed me and I told her that I needed a job. This is my first interview for any kind of work and I was really, I didn't know how to be interviewed or what to say and I was scared and I never will forget, she looked at me and she said, "Well I think we can find work for you here." I think I got 35 cents an hour to start and I just came home walking on air because I had a job.

AP: That was during the Depression years too?

AM: Yes, it was really tough. Of course my sister is two years younger than me and she just doesn't want to hear these stories about how tough it was but we really, we kids didn't have a hard time because almost everybody was in the same boat. Everybody was getting along on practically nothing and she just feels so bad that I had about three outfits to wear to school, but that's the truth because there were five kids in the family.

AP: Well, let's go back to some of the changes. I know you talked about the technical changes. What about changes just on the campus, some of the social attitudes?

AM: Well it's just changed so much, you know when I was there, there were only 1,000 to 1,200 students, I think there was something like ten sororities on campus at the time and I'm sure there were ten or eleven fraternities and that's dropped way, way down. So when I was there lots of students belonged to the sororities and fraternities because if you just stopped to figure it out, with that many and so many members, the whole school was involved. The social part of it was so much involved with sororities and fraternities people belonged to. There were mixers, there were mixers on campus of course but most of the other social affairs were actually (unintelligible) and I think everybody had one formal a quarter or something like that and that was a lot of the social life.

As far as students really being that much interested in world affairs, kids went to school, and they just can't believe. It was just a different kind of a world. It really was. I can't remember kids really being that gung-ho about social issues and such. We had very few foreign students, and I think only just very few blacks, at least when I was in school. I remember a girl, a black girl, and I remember her from class and I don't remember her name. We just didn't have kids like that on campus. We had such social standards. There was a dean of women, there was a dean of men to keep things on the up and up I guess.

AP: Now was that J. Earll Miller?

AM: J. Earll Miller and Dean Sedman [Harriet R. Sedman] I think. Girls had to be in at such and such a time and fellows too. I remember my oldest brother got on social parole because he kept a girl out too late so he was on social parole. Actually when he finally got off social parole, his fraternity had a dance and it was too late to get a date so he took his sister. Well, that doesn't happen unless you're desperate! That wasn't so surprising as the other stories.

You know what I feel about him is-when I talk about we had to do this and we had to do that and it's not that great, I think it is because my oldest brother had an additional year. He didn't get a masters but he did have an additional year, the second brother just graduated and so did I. My younger brother- youngest brother, got a scholarship and went on and got a Ph.D. at (unintelligible) and he went there for (unintelligible) years. My sister became a dietician and took an extra year at least. They really had, I think, the incentive to go on and do things.

It's an interesting thing because when my older son was here a couple years ago we were up at the lake and we got to talking about careers and girls and women and what they do and everything, and I had never thought about it but Doug, my older son looked at me and he said, "How many of the girls, that you were in high school with, went on to college?"

I couldn't think of one of them who went on to college, and I couldn't believe it, some of them that I had been going to school with and had been friends with did go on to college.

He said, "How many of them graduated?"

I said I just don't remember how many of them graduated.

He said "You really"—and my sister too—he said "You two had careers, and how many girls your age at that time really had a career?"

It's a wonderful thing to fall back on, you just hear about these girls that can't do anything. It was interesting because I'd never thought of it. He said, "Well when girls went to college back then, they didn't even worry about whether they graduated or not. They were quite interested in going to college and maybe getting married." That was the trend. That was what girls did. I was never one of them. I was two years out of college and working. My sister stayed an extra year and also worked as a dietician for a year so she would be ready. College was different for lot of girls in that period in time.

AP: Well I know one thing too, Adelaine, that I meant to follow up on, when you were talking about some of the traditions on campus when you were a student and also when you were a faculty member you had mentioned fireside dances and some of the formal dances, what were some of the other traditions that you recall?

AM: Well they always had in the spring, I don't think they still do, they had an all-women's parade and it was the women students who put it on. It was at graduation time and they had a lantern parade which would go around the Oval and it was very pretty and bright. They used to have, believe it or not, a May Queen and Emma Lommasson, who lives in Missoula, was the queen one year. And I was an attendant, I remember that, that sounds so silly now.

AP: Now did the students choose the May Queen or was that something that?

AM: I think it was the women.

AP: I know Emma, I interviewed her.

AM: Oh did you?

AP: Now I know one thing when I was at the reunion they had talked about the Bear Paws and the Spurs and some of those things that we don't have now.

AM: The Bear Paws, yes that's right. They always had pretty ample spirit at the University, school spirit. It was an honor to be a member of it, I wasn't a member of it. Well, when you lived with 1,200 students, everything was so different, you just don't have the same-you knew an awful lot of people there's no question about that but once you got to the University very close friendships were students in the sorority or in the dorm. You form all of the friendships when you go through the first year.

AP: Who were some of the people that stand out in your mind as making the most impact on your life during those years, whether it was a student or faculty member or co-workers?

AM: Well, actually it was the people who were teaching the library courses, mainly in my life, and an English teacher who was here for many, many years, Mrs. Mirrieles was a...She demanded so much of you and when you look back you wish you had, you know you look back and you think "Why don't I leave (unintelligible) and do that?" because she was so good. I had a German teacher, Mrs. Weiberg, who was very good to me because I think she got me through German. Well, working and going to school and everything was a little bit rough and I didn't spend a lot of time on German, I just didn't have any time to spend on German but she was so good to me. I got through it anyway. I think I got a C, which wasn't very good, seems to me that's what it was. I would say mostly that these people who were actually librarians. Mrs. Focker (?) was replaced (unintelligible), she was replaced for the librarian by a Phil Keeney and I think that was my last year that he was there, I don't think he was there when I started. I can't remember what happened to him, he apparently was a radical and you just didn't have radicals on campus in those days or you'd get in trouble. Either he had the option to quit or else he was fired, I'm not sure. He was a real tall man, a very homely man, he really was. I think he taught one course, maybe two the last semester and when I was applying for a job and I was going to graduate, he took a letter I handed to him and he just tore it apart. I will say, he helped me get

a good letter of application out, and he impressed on me one thing that I have never forgotten, so I guess he was good in his ways. He said that you have to learn to live with the people you work with because you're going to have to live with some people and work with them and you may not like them. He said that most of the people who failed in their jobs couldn't get along. I've never forgotten it because I had to work with somebody, I shouldn't even tell this. My first job I had to work with somebody who did not have a library degree, lots of times that happened in those days if somebody had some library experience they could get a job as a librarian and she was difficult. When I applied out to the University in Canada, I had a resume where I had worked and everything and she saw where I'd worked and she said, "Well if you got along with her for two years you're good with anybody." She knew her because she had worked with her (unintelligible). Even though I didn't care for Mr. Keeney, he did teach me one thing and that was get along with people you work with.

I was not involved in very many activities because I was working. One funny thing that happened was that one, we had to have two years of sports to graduate and one of them was, actually bow and arrows, plain old bow and arrows. They did our scores from the physical, they did our scores, and I think five of us ended up making the team but we never did anything-we just made the team and I couldn't believe it when I got word that they wanted to take a picture of these people who had made the team. So I got my picture taken with these people and it is the most ridiculous thing I ever did at the University. I actually did not do a whole lot on campus.

AP: Do you remember on some of the (unintelligible) your classes and you talked about a couple of those but are there any other classes or teachers who stand out in your mind?

AM: I took education classes and that's one thing I did not like.

AP: Why is that?

AM: Education classes just terrible. They were absolutely terrible.

AP: How so?

AM: I just can't explain it. I'll tell you one thing, I had thought a little bit about teaching but believe me I had quite a few education classes and I wouldn't have taken my practicum for anything because I would not-I would have gone and done anything, it just never inspired me to go out and teach at all. They were-and that went on for a long time, a long time. They were just cut and dried, they were sterile. They were bad classes. I'm sure there are a lot better now. I think that's the only course that I took that just left me absolutely cold.

AP: What were some of your goals, and this may or may not be applicable, but just some of your goals or philosophies when you were working at the University? Did you have an idea of things you wanted to see accomplished?

AM: Well, I certainly wanted to see, I knew how automation had to come, it had to come. Of course, we just didn't have the money at the time when I was there but it was talked about a lot, especially the last couple years when I was head of cataloging, we really expanded our priorities. One thing was to get rid of the card catalog and have it all so it would all be on printouts or I don't mean printouts but little screens like we have now at the public library and it's about to come because the card catalog is a big headache. You have to file them every week and look at the space it took. Every few years you shift, you have to shift the whole card catalog because you get a whole new set because you run out of room. So you get another piece of furniture and that will all go by the wayside eventually. I know some people don't like the idea—they like the card catalog, but if you ever have to maintain it, it's terrible. That's one of the main problems with the catalog, maintaining the catalog. I tell you the filing is just endless. It's tiresome you know, there's nothing very inspiring about filing the card catalog. I'll be real happy when the card catalog is gone. It's been a long time coming because they talked about it when I was there and I've been retired for quite a few years. I'm glad to see that happen—

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

AM: I guess because you can't imagine the students who get to be juniors and seniors who've suddenly discovered that the library is just a wealth of material. They just become inspired in what they're doing when they finally find out what there is there. I don't know you do it, because we had orientation courses and it's just something you have to take when you're a freshman. It doesn't inspire them at that time apparently. So much material and what we had to do, it didn't mean I was in the catalog all the time, we had to take usually one weekend a quarter that we had to work on it, which was good for us because we found out what students were asking about and what we needed to know. It helped us you, actually in our work, because you were actually working with students and answering their questions and that's rewarding. Other than that, I don't know. Sometimes you get so kind of into a routine that you tend to forget to do some of things that you wanted to do at one time, you just-I settled into administrating and so forth and there doesn't seem to be time to do stuff with the (unintelligible). I had a really good job, I would say.

AP: What were your greatest accomplishments during the years at the University, whether as a student or faculty or both?

AM: I'd say just to graduate when I was a student. It was important to get out and start earning some money, it really was because (unintelligible) I had an interesting...One of the faculty members gave me because I was speaking up about things, started calling me Tiger, and he still calls me that and I never got out from under it and when I retired I came back to my desk one day. I came back and here was this picture on my desk and he was in the AV and so they had made this picture of this tiger and the tiger was just grinning like everything and here was this little guy and he was washing the stripes of the tiger and he was crying. I have that picture in my family room.

When I was on the faculty I did quite a few things in the library field. I was the representative for Montana for the American Library Association. I belong to the Pacific Northwest Library Association and of course I belong to the Montana Library Association. I did some things actually in the library field which were really interesting. I've met people from all over. One of the toughest things I think is getting good people for cataloging. You just don't know, people want paid for their (unintelligible). In most cases I ran the catalog hiring, it was difficult with the staff that did the typing and stuff but to actually interview for a cataloging job, there never was money to bring a person in, you hired from (unintelligible) mistakes, maybe I didn't, I don't know, it's hard.

AP: What were some the other challenges you had?

AM: Oh, keeping up with the backlogs with the number of people we had. When I took over there was terrific backlog. To me to pursue that should be our first priority to get rid of that backlog because that's terrible if you've got these books and they aren't out there for people to

use. We did, it was a cooperative staff and we did it, we pulled it off. I had interesting-at two different times I had Chinese cataloging. One of them was a very quiet person and very reserved person and never did-she did her job very well but she never mixed that well. Then we had Grace (unintelligible). Her husband was wood chemistry or something like that. Actually she was kind of neat—

AP: If you had a chance to go back in time, what would you want to do or what would you do differently or what memory or experience would you want to remember?

AM: Oh. That is a tough question. Well I would still be in the (unintelligible) because I wouldn't want to-I mean I was very (unintelligible) and I couldn't even change. At one time I maybe would've liked to go to another area instead of being in the same place but that's something that couldn't happen then but maybe under different circumstances (unintelligible). I don't mean that I wanted to do it but when I look back I think it would have been mighty interesting if I'd gone to a different part of the country.

AP: You'll probably think of all kinds of answers.

AM: Yes I will. I just didn't know what to expect before. I don't know, I don't think I've been very—

AP: Oh, no it's great.

AM: No I don't think so.

AP: What period of time was your favorite or most memorable?

AM: Well I guess, I think I would say coming back and starting to be a faculty member. It was pretty rewarding, really, to think that my little old B.A. degree got me out there and got me that job. I remember Bob Pantzer was the one who okayed my right to associate professor. It was a real struggle because you see, most librarians had a fifth year and I didn't have a fifth year because (unintelligible) but most of our people or a lot of our people had a fifth year and so when I started I was an instructor, and I don't know how to put it, but your dean does for you after so many years as instructor you should move up or else there's something wrong with you. So my first application was turned down to be an assistant professor and I'm not sure about the second but anyway I finally became assistant professor.

My brothers had-we had a real fight with the faculty senate to have them treat librarians on the same basis that they did other faculty members because you know they expect faculty members to produce, to write, and so forth. They have to write. Librarians have a 40-hour week. You didn't have classes and you didn't have anybody to help you with research if you wanted to do it. We worked hard at the University to convince those people that the situation was different, a little bit different for us. We didn't have the time to write and do things like

that because we had our job and if we did take time off, the whole thing was waiting for us when we came back. Nobody took our place while we were gone, I mean everything piled up while we were gone. We finally got-they were doing a lot of things to set up salaries according to rank and we decided to be treated on the same basis as the rest of the faculty and they had really good salaries. I don't know how they're doing now, I really don't, I think they do better because of the union, they'd just about have to. When I was-when the dean set me up for associate professor, I knew I couldn't get the rank of full professor because I didn't have that fifth year, I didn't worry about it frankly. Even though I'd been active in library organization I still hadn't written a book or done anything like that, and Bob Pantzer was a (unintelligible) and he was faculty. So he okayed it. I wrote him a letter, I wrote him a letter and I told him that I really appreciate it, I said because I have really worked hard and I haven't had the time to do some of these things that they want but anyway I did get it.

I also complimented him at the same time because he was president when (unintelligible) and I still remember a couple of protests (unintelligible) on the Oval and (unintelligible). He just kept a kind of a low profile, and I always saw that he was instrumental in keeping things in peace. There was one student who got up at one those meetings on campus, on the Oval, a student from California got up and talked to the students and he was very good. He said "I hope you don't do anything drastic. I come from California. I know how disruptive things like this can be on campus. You have a wonderful situation, don't do anything to destroy it." I think from another student they really took it to heart. I just think (unintelligible). It's kind of an exciting thing.

AP: How did The University of Montana affect or shape the person that you are today?

AM: Well I (unintelligible). The fact that I was ambitious enough to go back to work for instance. I'm still very much interested in libraries and to giving time and I just can't imagine how it would work if you couldn't read because (unintelligible). I have read to my grandchildren when they were little, I had read and read and read to them because I want them to like books and they do, they like books. (unintelligible) and I credit the University.

AP: What advice did you want to give to today's university teachers and students?

AM: Oh Annie, I don't think I'm the person to give them advice. I think they do pretty well. I really do.

AP: Any other observations, insights, memories, stories?

AM: I don't know, I probably shouldn't even have told you about the Tiger.

AP: Oh I think that's a great, great story.

AM: I've got the picture too.

AP: I'd like to see it.

AM: Okay. Because actually it was (unintelligible) who started calling me that and he still does it. Well at the time I was there, the thing I remember was our faculty at the library was really a closely knit group of people. We would go to state conferences and we were good about attending meetings and stuff like that. Such good times together, we just really-I can still remember somebody from Bozeman who said 'you people just have the best time when you come to conferences' because we were a pretty closely knit group, and we were. We went to a lot of the meetings too, you know sometimes it sounds like gee, we really did have a good time but we went to the meetings religiously. We were getting paid to go. It was a good time, I really loved it. I don't think (unintelligible).

AP: Anything else?

AM: No.

[End of Interview]