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Interviewee: Mary Craig Wilcox

Interviewer: Annie Pontrelli

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Annie Pontrelli: This is Annie Pontrelli on March 3, 1992 interviewing Mary Wilcox. Mary, the best way to start this is to give your connection with the University. I know your history goes way back with the first president and I would be interested to hear about that first of all. Then we'll just casually talk about some of the memories that you had at the university and your connection to the university.

Mary Wilcox: Well, I was born and raised in Missoula and attended schools here. I lived down on the 400 block of McLeod, just two blocks from the University so I spent a lot of my younger years playing on campus, gathering chestnuts, heckling the tennis players, running in and out of the buildings. Then I attended the university starting in the fall of '62 and attended for two years. Then in 1968 I went work for Leah Noel in the University Center. I believe it was one of the first years the center was open and I worked for a year and a half. Then I took a break and went to Europe and then came back. In July of 1971 I went to work for Mary Margaret Courtney in the Extension Division—which is now Continuing Education. I retired from Continuing Ed in September of 1991.

AP: I know you had a number of early memories about the university. What were some of your observations? Before we had turned the tape on you had told me about your memories of playing in the foundation of the L.A. [Liberal Arts] building and (unintelligible).

MW: The campus has changed so much but one of my earliest, fondest memories was they had a very large ROTC program out here—of course, in the '40s—and in the middle of the Oval they practiced and also the university band practiced. So several times a week there was always quite a large parade. My father worked with the Missoula Mercantile, so mother would get us in the car and we'd drive down Higgins Avenue, pick him up in front of the Missoula Mercantile—which is now the Bon. We'd come back over the Van Buren Bridge and drive around the Oval and often stop and have a nice parade. It was lots of fun.

AP: Tell me again your connection, you go way back to the first president which was Oscar Craig.

MW: Oscar Craig, yes. My grandmother came with him at the time and she wasn't married, but she came with him when he was first president. She was the librarian and I believe taught some math classes. At some point she met Mr. Wilcox and they were married and they had three sons.

AP: It was Mary Craig Wilcox?

MW: Mary Craig Wilcox, yes.

AP: (unintelligible)

MW: I believe she died in 1944 and her husband had preceded her in death. I think he died in 1939.

AP: Then the three sons were born in—

MW: Craig, Warren, and Bill. My father was the youngest. He was Bill.

AP: Let me look at my list of questions. Now you were born and raised here right?

MW: Yes.

AP: Who was the university president when you were attending school?

MW: When I came in and attended, it was Harry K. Newburn.

AP: Do you have any memories of him or any observations that you recall about him?

MW: No, I really don't.

AP: Did you have much connection with him?

MW: I didn't have much connection although I had met him at different times. [I was] not working on campus. You know how a president is, you kind of stand in awe sometimes. I believe he was here for two years and then he left. I believe the next one who came in was Johns, but I'm not sure. He was quite controversial.

AP: Do you recall any of that controversy?

MW: No...

AP: (laughs) Something that you want on tape?

MW: Well, you used to hear things. When he came in the university was having some problems and I think because he was one of these presidents, one of these kind of men who come in to try to straighten it out. I think he was having some of the same problems we're having now—financial aid and...I think he stepped on a few feet, but got his job done. I can't remember if Pantzer was after that. He was a really great president.

AP: Now what kind of social attitudes were the students experiencing? You probably observed some changes.

MW: There have been a lot of changes. When I went to school, of course, you didn't wear slacks. Everybody wore dresses. You had Dean Clow, the dean of women. You had dorm hours. It was the time when Leslie Fiedler from the English Department was here, and he was quite controversial. He was a writer.

AP: Why was he controversial?

MW: He was a real free spirit. I wasn't a great follower of his, but other than through his kids who were just wild. But the things he wrote...Montanans weren't ready to read these things. Very radical, very radical. Then when I left and came back in the '60s to work for Leah Noel, of course that was the year of the hippies, so there were quite some changes there.

AP: Did you observe any real changes. I mean what were the main changes that you observed like attitudes?

MW: I think that at that time a lot of students wanted to leave campus. They wanted to be more independent. Because when I was going to school, there were students in the dorm who still used the mailers and mailed their laundry home to their mothers to do. Then the next week a package would come and the underwear and the shirts neatly done up. They had regular mailers for those boxes. Then I think laundromats came in, that may have helped. I think the students wanted to be more independent. They wanted to be on their own and they resented the "hours".

AP: Do you recall any protests?

MW: Really not until I came back and worked for Leah. Of course, when I came back and worked for Leah, it was the Vietnam thing they were all protesting when I was going to school. I don't really recall it. There were different times when people were upset about the administration and they did have a few banners around.

AP What kinds of social activities were going on when you went to school?

MW: When I was going to school of course the sororities and fraternities were very active. I wasn't, I didn't belong to one. They had formal dances. I think the get-togethers were more formal. There were teas. Girls still gathered for tea in the dorm. (laughs) I think a lot of those things just went by the wayside. For one thing, I think that they were expensive. I think the first year I attended school I had three formals. Which was a big deal for me because I didn't date that much in high school. Then the usual, which has gone on for years, the fraternity and sorority parties, like the Sig Ep Barn Dance and the Sigma Chi Sweetheart Ball.

AP: Now were those things just for the fraternities?

MW: Well, you were invited to them, yes. They always had a big military ball on campus so all the ROTC people participated in that. That was nice because they all wore their uniforms. They held it

upstairs for several years in the Cascade room, upstairs in the Lodge.

AP: How about some of the traditions? I know there were a number of traditions that went on throughout the years and then (unintelligible).

MW: I don't know if they still paint the M but I don't believe so. At that time the M was made of rocks, big boulders. Quite often if there was an important ball game with Bozeman, they'd sneak up at night [Bozeman students] and change the M to a B. When we were freshmen, the freshmen were required to whitewash the M. You went up with your brooms and your buckets. During our orientation all freshman had to wear beanies. If you didn't wear your beanie...I don't remember what the fine was. I was terrified of being caught so I always wore my beanie. (laughs). With the Dornblaser stadium behind Main Hall you felt a little closer to many of the sports—track and field.

AP: Was Aber Day celebrated then?

MW: No. Aber Day didn't become—I can't remember what year it started—a really big thing again until the library keggers.

AP: Who were some of the people that made the most impact on you? Who do you have the fondest memories of?

MW: I think probably Leah Noel. I was very fond of her. She wrote the schedule. I can remember Leah from up at the Lodge. She made me feel welcome and taught me a lot of the office skills I needed later and I enjoyed her personality and enjoyed working with her.

AP: You worked with her for how long?

MW: Just a year and a half. It was a packed year and a half and it was a busy year and half. I did a lot of activities in the new university center.

AP: What kind of activities?

MW: Well, there was one afternoon Leah was in a meeting. For various reasons, there weren't very many people in the building and it was during the rodeo week. Somebody rode their horse through the Copper Commons and down the back stairs. I was quite impressed that a horse could walk down stairs. (laughs) They didn't have very good dog control on campus in those days, so there were always dogs running through the Copper Commons. Just a lot of activity. They seemed to have quite a few more student dances up in the Ballroom.

AP: Were they pretty well attended?

MW: They were pretty well attended. Lots of flower children. There were quite a few activities. The hippies kept them hopping over there. I think that probably brought a lot of people to campus

that weren't students, people who just came to sit around. I remember when I was going back to school there weren't really a lot of people on campus unless they had business with the university. Of course, when I was going to school, everybody gathered at the Lodge because in the fall of '62 you could still drive your car up to the front of the Lodge building. That was the main center. Of course, the university just outgrew that.

I remember when I was going to school we always had what we called "Fridays at Four". They had entertainment at four o'clock. Usually small bands or groups and they'd play in the student cafeteria. You'd have to have someone get there early and reserve a seat about one o'clock and sit there. We had what you called talent shows. That was before the loud music came into being, more of the folk music and Peter, Paul, and Mary.

AP: As far as the layout of the campus, you already mentioned the drive up through the entrance to the Oval. Then before we had the tape on, you were talking about that.

MW: You could drive clear around the Oval. Then there was also Maurice [Avenue] went directly through the campus right in front of Craig Hall and Turner Hall, and I do remember that. I can remember, as far as roller skating, the best sidewalks were in front of Turner Hall and the alumni center.

AP: What were the buildings that were here when you were first on campus, or your first recollection of the university? Do recall which buildings were here?

MW: Well, there were a lot of buildings that have been torn down. I don't know if they were considered temporary buildings or not, but there were two buildings behind Main Hall. They were dark brown, the ROTC building, and it housed a kindergarten at one time over there. Then there was another building across from where the UC [University Center] is now.

AP: (unintelligible)

MW: Yes. I don't know when that went down. Of course, there were the strip houses that housed the students during the war and after the war years. They got rid of those. The students liked them although they had holes in the floors and were firetraps. In fact, somebody hauled one section up to Seeley Lake as a motel.

AP: Is that right?

MW: That's right.

AP: First of all, tell me again what did you study?

MW: I didn't graduate, I just attended for a two years. I was in social welfare at the time. There were some people who are long gone, like Carol Asher. I took a course from Sugar Peterson's

husband in communication.

AP: Is that right?

MW: I don't specifically recall it. I took Dick Solberg's class and just flunked it flat on my face. I didn't know up from down. It was a science for teachers and I was in over my head. I was naive and didn't know about the dropping process. He kind of encouraged me along. It was just a disaster.

AP: Do you still keep in touch with him?

MW: Oh Dick, yes. I still see Dick.

AP: What did you like best about the university?

MW: I think probably best and probably part of my problem [was that] I liked the social life. I liked the friendships.

AP: What were some of the activities you participated in as a student, not only on campus, but what kinds of things were out in the community?

MW: I wasn't a real sportsman, but we did a lot of skiing. I tried a little golf at the time. I wasn't very successful. But, I did a lot of community activities. I belonged to a social work club. (unintelligible) and it showed.

AP: Did they have trolley cars then?

MW: No, they didn't even have a bus system then. I was fortunate because I lived at home and drove my mother's car. A lot of kids didn't have cars, so if you had a date with someone you had to take your mother's car.

AP: Chaperones?

MW: No chaperones, but you had hours. You had to be in on weekdays at 11. I had some friends who lived in Turner Hall and it was a sight, that back parking lot. It was just filled with cars with fogged over windows. People whipping into the parking lot two minutes before the 11 o'clock curfew. That was also a time of the Heidelberg. We logged in quite a few hours out at the Heidelberg. They would have a live band. We spent more time out there than we should have.

AP: I asked you what you liked best. Now on the other hand what were the things that you liked the least?

MW: I don't know. I guess I've never thought about it. I've just never really thought about that. I've

always had a pretty happy life. That's all.

AP: What would you consider your greatest accomplishments during all your years here, whether it's at the university or in Missoula.

MW: Oh, I think probably during my years at Continuing Ed. I think that held up a reputation of being very helpful for the teaching community in Missoula. In fact, I've been back and I've had several people call me already and ask me things. I think people always knew they could come to me and I'd give them help and do my best. I wasn't just doing my job; I was always willing to do a little extra to help people and make registration easier. That's what I liked: I liked working with the people.

AP: You'll probably think of all kinds of things—

MW: Well, I don't think I have any really great accomplishments down on paper, other than that I worked very well with people.

AP: What were some of your challenges? It sounds like school for one.

MW: School was the greatest challenge. I think probably too, like everybody else working in the office over all of these years, the challenge of the new machinery we had to work with and difficult people we ran into once in a while. Trying to laugh. It seemed like the people I worked for would come and go relatively fast and it was just trying to outlast somebody if you didn't care for them. It was interesting, I worked for two Jim Halls. When I came to continuing ed, the director was Jim Hall. Then he left the university and Pat Douglas came and was our director. Then we had another Jim Hall. He was relatively short lived.

AP: Oh my god. I wonder what the odds of that happening are.

MW: (laughs) There were a lot of years that I really enjoyed. I think we had a lot of big programs, of course there was more federal money. We had a lot of good programs. We had a pretty good program at the Montana State Prison for inmates and the guards. That was developed (unintelligible). We had a lot of other good programs for Indian, Native American students. We did a lot of outreach and had a lot of programs on the reservations. I enjoyed working with that. I think it brought a lot of students to campus eventually, because we were able to go up to Browning and offer three or four classes a quarter. Eventually a student would pick up so many credits and if they were interested would come down here. I know they tried some programs before that had failed, hadn't really worked real well. It was under Pat Douglas. It was interesting.

AP: If you had the chance to go back in time, what memory would you want to relive?

MW: If I had to go back, I think my childhood. I'd like to go back and meet some of the people again. They were happy. (unintelligible) I still have a lot of the same friends that I had when I was

very young.

AP: Is that right?

MW: Yes, from the first grade on. In fact, it is interesting because just when I left continuing ed, Mary Hall came to work and I got to talking with her. I went to grade school with her husband Lionel.

AP: (unintelligible) The Mercantile was a pretty big store.

MW: The Mercantile was a big department store, independently owned, a very nice store. My father worked at the Mercantile, and his brother. They were in the hardware department.

AP: Was that considered the biggest employer at that time?

MW: I think so. I believe so, yes.

AP: Did you ever meet your grandmother?

MW: I don't remember her at all. I was just probably about a year and half when she passed away or two years. I don't know, four maybe. I don't remember. I heard lots of wonderful stories and met lots of people that knew her. I would have liked to have met her.

AP: Do you remember any of the stories that you heard about her?

MW: Oh, just little stories that people would tell me off and on. Different people in Missoula knew her. My mother was so fond of her and always had wonderful things to say about her. Sometimes I feel as though I've known her through pictures and so many things like stories. We have a place up at Seeley that my grandmother and grandfather built. It was built in the late '20s. So, there have been a lot of stories around that fireplace of the olden days.

AP: Oh, I bet, the golden olden. Any other memories or observations?

MW: No, I really don't. (unintelligible) I should have thought of it, but there were lots of wonderful memories. When I meet my friends and we talk about it...I have a very good friend, a Mary Pitch, I don't know if you've met her. Her grandfather and great-grandfather owned the Mercantile, and she comes from a very old Missoula family—

[End of Interview]