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Nell Eckley

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Walter Farris '10
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Walter Ferris: It is July 31st, 2009. My name is Walter Farris. Could you please state your name and the location of this interview for the record?

Mrs. Robert Eckley: Nell Eckley. We live at 20 Walker Drive, Bloomington, Il. 61701

Ferris: Okay. Did you have any involvement with the Illinois Wesleyan University before your tenure started in 1968?

Eckley: No

Farris: No

Eckley: We had been in Bloomington several times during our 14 years in Peoria and I had seen the university but did not remember much about it.

Farris: Okay

Eckley: When my husband was approached about the job, we drove over with our four children. I remember saying "are we going to come here?" The campus was in need of new buildings and extreme landscaping. Over a hundred trees had been lost to the Dutch Elm disease. I said "how are we going to help, what can we do?" But Bob made the decision to come with the family backing him and we began what was a great adventure for all of us. We arrived in 1968 and retired in 1986 so we had eighteen years to do many of the things that Bob had planned from the beginning. We came at the busiest time of our lives. We were in our forties with our oldest son, Robert, a senior in high school, our daughter Jane a junior, our son Paul a freshman and youngest daughter Rebecca in the sixth grade. Actually they were wonderful about making the changes, leaving their schools in Peoria where they had been all of their lives. I think they thought it would be exciting, but it was difficult for each one in different ways. They had to learn one thing very fast and that was they could never do or say anything that would embarrass their father.

(Both laugh)

We started when many of the community leaders were less involved than Methodist ministers and church people, although Wesleyan had been a part of the town since 1850. We needed to raise money and I can remember saying to my husband who was an economist, "you have never raised money before, how do you go about it?" His comment was " we will just have to learn how NOW." He did learn quickly and was successful. For example, when he came the endowment was six million and when he left it was fifty million. My job was to care for the four children, to entertain often, to start a campus beautification project and to build a new president's home. The latter seemed my biggest worry as I had never built a house and never wanted to build a house. Bob did not have much time to work with me, but we had a very patient builder and the job was finished during the first year. It has been enlarged several times since we left. I am sure you have read about that.

Farris: Yes I have. So you were responsible for the original.

Eckley: Yes

Farris: Wow

Eckley: We went through some trials and tribulations with the house, but the next important thing was to help beautify the campus, to replace and plant new trees. We found an alumna, Nelva Weber Samataro from New York. She graciously came to help us with the planning for at least a dozen summers. She and her husband would stay with us at the president's home and we would ride around the campus while she took notes and sent her plans back. We followed her suggestions and reaped the benefits.

Farris: Oh it's gorgeous. So what are your thoughts on how the beautification has continued on what became the Eckley Quad?

Eckley: I think they have done a wonderful job. The fine maintenance staff have taken beautiful care of trees and plantings and have added and replaced so that it is a real joy to walk all over the campus. The last plantings just before we left were the lovely cherry blossom trees along the side of Shaw Hall, which glow with their beauty every spring.

Eckley: To entertain became very important. There was a period where I think we were having two dinner parties a week. I look back remembering how nice the children were during those times because it was their home too. They were trying to bring friends in also. We also opened the home up to outside board members, speakers and important people when they were on campus. We did not have a guest house then. The children would double up to help out. It was mostly an emphasis on raising money as it is in all of higher education.

Farris: Yeah

Our oldest son started college the second year we were there. As a matter of fact while we were at IWU our four children were in and out of eleven universities in twelve years. Three of them took courses during the summers at Wesleyan or somewhere else. One went on a foreign trip during short term in January. Our oldest son, Robert, attended Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and later got an MBA from Washington University in St. Louis. He worked for IBM for ten years, but now has his own successful business in photography in St. Louis with his wife who also teaches since she has her MFA from the University of Missouri. Our second daughter, Jane, also went to Lawrence, but received her degree in nursing from Emery University. While practicing nursing she decided on law school at DePaul in Chicago. She now has her own practice in Oakland, California, working with the medical profession and is married to an attorney.

Paul, our second son graduated from Northwestern University, then went on to the University of Chicago for his MBA. He is with State Farm as Senior Vice President of the investment department in charge of their stock portfolio. He married a graduate of IWU and has one daughter, age 14. Our daughter Rebecca graduated from Indiana University in music as a harp major. She married a friend of her brother's from Appleton, Wisconsin, and together they started and have a very successful antique business called The Harp Gallery. We have five grandchildren who delight us each time we see them.

Eckley: When my husband and staff asked me to talk to freshman parents during freshman orientation I reluctantly agreed. But I had plenty of information with our family to share with them on what they could look forward to—both pleasant and unpleasant. Actually we had fun during that session. I think it put some of them at ease.

Farris: Sounds great. So what kind of connections have you had with the university since those 18 years?

Eckley: We have definitely stayed connected. The first fifteen years after retirement we traveled abroad every year. Now we are here more as our travels take us to our children and to Chicago seven times a year for the Chicago Symphony. But IWU is never far from our thoughts and prayers. We think that Dick and Pat Wilson are doing a fabulous job, needed badly at this particular time. They are here for the university and not just for themselves, totally devoted.

Farris: That's great. And did you live in the house you built on campus the entire 18 years you were here?

Eckley: While building it we lived in Park Place, which is next to the chapel. Once we moved it quickly became home.

Farris: And are there any particular faculty members that stick out in your memory as having an extraordinary influence on your personal experience at Illinois Wesleyan?

Eckley: Oh yes, there were and are many faculty members who were helpful and kind and who have become special friends. Of course, with the size and turnover of the faculty, there were many who unfortunately I did not get to know. Since Bob interviewed all faculty before they were hired he was more fortunate.

Farris: Is there a favorite story or memory, or perhaps even several, that you can relate to during your time at Illinois Wesleyan?

Eckley: Goodness, there must easily be a hundred or more to think back upon and laugh or cry.

Farris: Oh, you can take some time, There's no hurry at all

Eckley: The first one that always comes to mind is about one of the first dinner parties we had. The Development staff did not know the community well so we were given two couples who definitely did not like one another. Naturally we did not understand what was going on, we just knew they were not speaking to one another and everyone left early. Of course we looked into the matter and were embarrassed. But what I have never been able to understand was why they could not have been courteous for just one evening, certainly recognizing that we did not know about the hate in their hearts. Hate is a terrible sin for all concerned.

One time we had a large group for dinner and Rebecca was out riding her unicycle in the vacant lot next door. She was twelve, had an accident and came in with a broken nose. She was lying on the kitchen floor bleeding and saying, "don't upset my parents, they have guests!" But of course we were called and happily there was a doctor in the group who took charge.

Another time she was taking a sewing class and on her way to model her dress she told the invited quests that she was going to win the prize of a sewing machine. Everyone stayed to await her return and were thrilled when she actually walked in with the prize. But Rebecca's favorite story is about sewing the button on the jacket of Helen Hayes who was such a famous actress. She was staying in our home over a weekend while viewing a play and teaching a class in the drama department. Each of our children have stories by the dozens that they now call their adventures. Rebecca was just here longer since she came in the 6th grade and liked being a part of the university.

Farris: Were there other activities that you were involved in besides building the home, beautification, and entertaining and speaking to freshman parents that you can talk about?

Eckley: Yes, I thought that there should be a group formed for the women of the university. This would include not only the faculty women but the wives of the faculty and staff. It began as The IWU League and actually was successful until we left. This created many relationships and friendships that otherwise would not have happened. We had dinners and coffees, but we also raised money for small needed projects on the campus. We baked cakes and sold them to freshmen parents at freshman orientation who loved the idea as it seemed like something from home. With this money we put up drapes in needed areas, hung pictures, or gave the money for some project that faculty or staff suggested. Finally we put together two different cook books which sold like hotcakes all over the university.

I loved the time when a freshman girl arrived at our home to pick up her cake only to discover that our Siamese cat had jumped into it when it was sitting on the table by the front door. I immediately offered to bake another, but she said she had a cat and did not mind at all eating around the paw prints! Dozens and dozens of cakes were baked by the League women during those years.

Farris: Is there anything you would like to say on what the impact of your tenure at Illinois Wesleyan has had on your life.

Eckley: We feel that it was a great privilege to have been a part of IWU. We learned so much about the field of education and hope that we helped many students during their time here. Bob came having been in the teaching world at the University of Kansas, in the banking world as senior industrial economist at the Federal Reserve Bank in Kansas City, and in the business world heading the first department of economics at Caterpillar Tractor Company. But he has always said that this was his favorite job. He worked with dedicated men and women on the board and with the faculty and staff and at the same time was able to teach in the field of economics for seventeen years out of the eighteen.

I agree also that it was our favorite place in life. We have had many blessings in our sixty-two years of marriage and family life, and thank Illinois Wesleyan University for eighteen years of that time.

Farris: Is there anything else you would like to add, just in general that you can think of?

Eckley: Not really. Thank you for the interview. You have done a very thorough job and we are happy to have been a part of it.

Farris: It was very nice to have met you, so thank you very much.

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Nell B. Eckley