



2010

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Recommended Citation

Harbison, Helen Geneva '47 and Miner, Meg, "Helen Geneva Harbison" (2010). *All oral histories*. 26.
http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/oral_hist/26

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Homecoming 2010, The Ames Library

Meg Miner: Hi, my name is Miner and I'm the Archivist at Illinois Wesleyan University and I'm here today with one of our alumni. Please tell us your name, your full name.

Helen Harbison: My full name—Helen Lucille Geneva Harbison. Geneva, which is a first name, was also my last name...[laughs]...instead.

Miner: Okay, great!

Harbison: Helen—I was Helen Geneva when I was here at Wesleyan.

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: And I married—my husband's name is Harbison. He's British by the way.

Miner: Okay. And today's date is October 7th, 2010 and we're actually in the library and—may I call you Helen?

Harbison: Please do, yes.

Miner: Helen, why don't you start by telling me your major, the year you were here, and just what you wanna say about Wesleyan.

Harbison: Okay. My major was History, my minor was English. I was—I started in 1943 and graduated in 1947 and one of the most—my first memory was a matriculation test at Buck Memorial Library when over the loudspeaker came a voice saying, "Italy has surrendered."

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Harbison: Which was a major part...[laughs]...of the Axis—not a major, a minor part—but I remember that so clearly and that was—building was a predecessor of this beautiful Ames Library.

Miner: Buck Library, yes.

Harbison: Mhmm.

Miner: So you were testing in there...you were testing in there—

Harbison: Yes, during the matriculation test—

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: For entrance, yes.

Miner: My goodness.

Harbison: Yes.

Miner: And Italy surrendered.

Harbison: Yeah...[laughs].

Miner: That's a vivid memory.

Harbison: Yes. Well that was in the middle of my—the end—the beginning of my four years here. Other buildings—Old North Hall was still here. I don't know when it disappeared...[laughs]. It represented the past.

Miner: Mhmm.

Harbison: And there was a building called Duration Hall, which is what the name suggests. There are a lot of buildings, I think, in the country that had to last for the duration, and now it's the Admissions Office—beautiful new building.

Miner: Mhmm.

Harbison: I mean, after all, I went here how many years ago? Sixty? Fifty? Sixty-something?

Miner: Well if you started in 1943, Duration Hall must've been quote-on-quote "new" because it had burned down. It was another completely different building.

Harbison: Really?

Miner: Yep, you didn't know that?

Harbison: Since—No, what year was that?

Miner: It was in 1943, so it was in the spring of '43.

Harbison: Well that's—I don't remember that.

Miner: Oh.

Harbison: I guess I should, shouldn't I?

Miner: So Duration Hall was new and they called it that because they roofed over the foundation of the previous building and it endured.

Harbison: For the...[laughs].

Miner: Yes.

Harbison: Duration.

Miner: Yes. Sorry, I didn't mean to—

Harbison: That's alright. So I was a Kappa Delta.

Miner: Great.

Harbison: A lot of friends, I made a lot of friends. They're scattered now and they're old but I keep in touch with some of them. As I said, my father started here in 1911 I guess because he got his—anyway, he got his bachelor's in 1914. I still have—found his transcripts and for some reason he studied Greek. I didn't know...[laughs]...Greek was ever on the—perhaps that was in law school afterwards though. He got his LL.B. in 1917 and went right into the army over to France and came back and decided law wasn't what he wanted to do and he went into education and got his master's in education at the U of I.

Miner: Interesting.

Harbison: So that's—that's all that side of the story...[laughs].

Miner: So you were—he was here, I mean, he lived here? You're from here?

Harbison: Yes—

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: I was born in Freeport, Illinois in northern Illinois—

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: Where my parents lived with—I was here from the time I was two, yes.

Miner: Okay, wow.

Harbison: My mother—how can I put it?—said that she was a nurse and studied nursing at Brokaw Hospital. It was BroMed. "Bro" was the "Brokaw" part of BroMed and she said she had classes at Wesleyan.

Miner: Yes.

Harbison: I didn't know that they had nursing classes here 'til she told me that, so she feels part of it too.

Miner: Oh we definitely consider Brokaw nursing alumni—

Harbison: Yeah.

Miner: As part of our alumni.

Harbison: Mhmm.

Miner: Yeah.

Harbison: Well I paid for a brick for the...[laughs]...

Miner: Oh how nice.

Harbison: For her and for my father. I consider them such.

Miner: Oh absolutely. That's very nice of you to do that, too.

Harbison: What—oh, what else was on the agenda?

Miner: Well, I—it's—I have some questions here. Do you wanna talk a little bit about what your classes were like? Where did you have classes? Did you have any in Old North?

Harbison: If I did it was English.

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: I can't remember. I might well have. Dr. Schultz was the professor.

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: And I don't know where the history classes were but Dean Wallis, he was called Dean instead of Dr. or Professor Dean Wallis —

Miner: Uh-huh.

Harbison: Very interesting old man...[laughs]. In fact I introduced my husband to him after we were married. I wasn't a straight-A student...[laughs]...I'll have to admit. I had some but more B's than C's.

Miner: And your time in classes then was balanced with life as a Kappa Delta?

Harbison: Oh yes.

Miner: What did you do with Kappa Delta?

Harbison: Kappa Delta—it was a mainly female student body during the war. The boys went and the men came back after what they saw, but all of the fraternities were closed because there weren't enough members to keep them open and I think Sigma Chi might've been open for a while, but so it was a different sort of atmosphere...[laughs]...

Miner: Mmm.

Harbison: With fewer men. When they came back they were serious. They wanted to get on with it to make up for lost time. They were different people, but we heard that there was a Navy V-5 or V-12 unit on the—we didn't see they were phantoms...[laughs]. We didn't know where they would go with it or where they had their classes, but they were here.

Miner: Oh there—yes, definitely. There was training going on on campus. So you didn't interact with them at all?

Harbison: No, not at all, no.

Miner: Well I understood that there were barracks on campus. You didn't see—

Harbison: There were what? Barracks?

Miner: Barracks, long barracks buildings.

Harbison: I don't remember them—

Miner: Oh, interesting.

Harbison: If they—if they were, they were—I don't know, out of it. I don't know. I can't answer that...[laughs].

Miner: Yeah. Well I don't know exactly—

Harbison: I didn't—

Miner: The dates that they were here.

Harbison: I didn't meet any or see any...[laughs].

Miner: So you didn't have any interaction with the trainees?

Harbison: Not that I remember, no.

Miner: What did you do for fun?

Harbison: Well, the sorority provided a lot of interesting things. I...it's hard to answer...[laughs].

Miner: Okay, that's okay. You don't have to answer.

Harbison: No, it's not that I don't want to. I can't remember. I enjoyed—I enjoyed my four years. I was quiet and probably shy. The sorority brought me out of it. I lived at home.

Miner: In Bloomington?

Harbison: In Bloomington. My mother later moved to Normal but that was in Bloomington.

Miner: Were you able to walk to school?

Harbison: Oh no.

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: No.

Miner: Too far away.

Harbison: No, I drove.

Miner: How was it getting around the city? You drove your own car?

Harbison: Yes, yes.

Miner: Okay.

Harbison: Uh-huh. I took my driver's license at fifteen...[laughs]...in deep snow...[laughs].

Miner: Oh my goodness.

Harbison: But fifteen-year-olds aren't afraid of anything much...[laughs].

Miner: That's still true, isn't it?

Harbison: Yes, uh-huh, yeah.

Miner: What traditions do you think have changed on campus since you were here before?

Harbison: Minor Myers made a big difference. He put—he put Wesleyan on the map—

Miner: Uh-huh.

Harbison: And Dr. Wilson is carrying that on but Minor was very much an Anglophile. You know I told you my husband was—is British. He was in the Royal Air Force, flew Spitfires during the war and—

Miner: Yes.

Harbison: And he—he lectured here. Minor wanted him to do that lecturing, that one lecture from back-to-school classes at homecoming—

Miner: Wonderful.

Harbison: Which he did. Anyway, I can't think of anything more specific.

Miner: That's okay.

Harbison: Unless you have some more questions.

Miner: No, that's fine. We can stop with that. I thank you so much for coming in and for talking with me, sharing your Homecoming weekend and hope you have a great time.

Harbison: Thank you, I will. We always do.

Miner: Excellent.

Harbison: My husband's very pro-Wesleyan and pro-Bloomington. He loves it here. I have a lot of relatives.

Miner: That you still get to visit.

Harbison: Oh yes.

Miner: Yeah, yeah.

Harbison: It's all well when I come here...[laughs].

Miner: Oh, that's wonderful. Well thanks for taking time from your visiting schedule too.

Harbison: Well thank you for asking me.

Miner: Have a great day.