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Donna Maurer

Donna Maurer '44
Illinois Wesleyan University

Courtney Barrett 2020
Illinois Wesleyan University

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Oral History Interview with Donna Maurer '44,
Conducted over phone, October 29th, 2018,
Conducted by Courtney Barrett, Illinois Wesleyan Archives Assistant

Courtney Barrett: Today is October 29th, and this is Courtney interviewing Donna. Is it Maurer?

Donna Maurer: It's Maurer.

Barrett: Maurer, okay, and you can begin by introducing yourself and talking about your time at Wesleyan and after Wesleyan.

Maurer: Okay. Well, my name was Donna Lou Brandt. B-R-A-N-D-T. When I came to Wesleyan in the fall of 1941, I had gone my freshman year to Stephens College in Missouri, which was—and still is a girl's school. I don't know. Maybe now they have boys, but I don't think so. Anyway, and so—and that was a good experience. But I had a boyfriend, and, and he was starting as a freshman from Bloomington at Wesleyan the next year, so I decided I would transfer back so I could go to school with him, and he also lived here in Bloomington. It's almost like—I lived in Bloomington. My parents moved here when I was two and—so it—my experience was a little different than some who lived on campus. I—I pledged Alpha Gamma Delta that fall and, you know, it was—it was a great time. My—my—my husband to be, Marvin Maurer, pledged TKE, so we had the usual campus activities with our sorority and fraternity. But I majored in home economics, which in those days most girls either did nursing, teaching, or Home Ec. Not—not everyone. There were some—various people who went into science. But anyway, so the campus—and I'm sure you can look at pictures, the campus was much different in appearance than it is now. There was a street that cut through it there in front of Presser Hall from Main Street, then cut it and went straight on down to the east, and that was a period of time when—I don't know whether it was in the forties—the winter of '41 or '42 or '43. I can't remember that. But the main building was called Hedding Hall, and it was a big, old two-story structure. I don't think it was three stories. I think it just went to two, and it caught on fire, and now I don't remember what the reason or if they even knew but I frequently thought about the fact there were very big, broad stairs—broad stairs that went up to the second floor and the chapel was up there, and the whole—the floors of the whole building just creaked. They were so old, and they had all been—that wood had all been oiled and—so many years. And, you know, you went up those stairs, you just thought, "Boy, this is—this is really old—old wood." But that's where we had chapel that time, and then when it caught on fire, you know, it just really burned because of all that old oiled wood in there, and it was, you know. It was—I remember we were at a basketball game, and it caught on fire at night. So my husband to be was big into photography, and I used to have a lot of pictures, and I'm sure they have them at Wesleyan of the fire and—and the structure after the fire, and that—that was really a big deal because that's where we had classes. After a period of time—I'm not sure. I'm not good on dates exactly. You know,

they cleared off all the top of the burned down part, and they kept the basement, and it just has—and I'm sure there are pictures of these. It was just this little flat-top-like basement and they had classes in there and offices in there, and life went on because at that time the war was going on, and whether they could've actually rebuild at that time, I don't know, but let me go back to which was a bigger and even larger occasion, when Pearl Harbor, when we were attacked at Pearl Harbor, and it was on a Sunday, and so in those days, we had radio. That was it.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: You can't imagine your life with all these limitations. But—and so—and then—and then for the news, you know, you went to the movie and they'd have the world news before the movie would start off, all of what was going on the world, and that's how we got a lot of our pictures and another explanation of what was happening in the world when they ran this series before the actual movies. They're showing all these pictures and an explanation. But then on Monday, they had a—chapel convocation, I guess. I forget what they called it. Anyway, it was held in Presser Hall at that time and after that, and so it was discussed about this horrific thing that had happened, and I'm sure Wesleyan didn't know what was going to happen or anybody else. But it soon became evident that all the young men that were there in college would have to go in some service. You know, they would—they could enroll in the Army, Navy, Coast Guard, or in Air Force, and—and shortly after that, they weren't—they weren't inscripted yet at that time, but they knew they would be, and shortly after that, all these various services came on campus to recruit, and I think it was in the next year then that most of them took off and went to wherever they were—they had signed up to go.

Barrett: Hmm.

Maurer: And my husband to be went into a Navy program for officers called the V-2 program, I believe it was, and it was—they were called ninety-day wonders because he was sent to Greencastle, Indiana to the university there and they started the—they continued their schooling but they started other training, and then they were sent to Northwestern University for their final training to be officers. And, you know, these were young men, twenty and twenty-one, and they were made officers and were sent out to handle ships. Most of them weren't commanders of ships at that young, but they were officers. And he was sent overseas to pick up a ship. Well, no. Allow me to back up a bit. He was assigned to the submarine service in San Diego, and so he finished—he finished in the fourteenth of September in '44. So he—they didn't get into this pro—I'm sorry I'm backing up like this.

Barrett: That's okay.

Maurer: So they obviously didn't get into this program until '93—

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: —til '43, I mean. And so when you finish the program, he got his commission on the—the fourteenth of September. We were married on the fifteenth of September, and three days later we caught a train to California and he was in the submarine service, and some friend of a friend knew a family out there and we were ready to call them to see if we could get a room in their house, which we did and there was a mother, daughter, and a granddaughter in that house, and the grand—the daughter's husband was in the service, and they were nice people, and he would have to ride the bus. It was actually in Pacific Beach, and he had to ride the bus down to the submarine base. The Navy base is part of them and actually in—in San Diego. But, you know, we didn't have cars.

Barrett: Hmm.

Maurer: We walked, and—and that was one thing I was going to mention also. We walked to school as kids, you know. We—there wasn't a bus, or this or that. When we went to Wesleyan, and there was a bus service, and we both could ride the bus to Wesleyan on a daily basis and back. Some nights, my mother would loan me her car and I could drive, but, you know, it was just if she was going to need it or not. But it was so entirely different from the life you experience now in so many ways. But let me get back to Wesleyan a bit. At the time I started at Wesleyan, I—I needed to have a job to—for spending money. So State Farm Insurance had started a program of—for Illinois Wesleyan and ISU students, a night shift program that ran from four o'clock in the afternoon to eight o'clock at night, and so I signed up for that and I worked there mainly filling out information about policies that were mailed in. They were mailed in every day, and I can't begin to tell you the thousands of policies they received in every day as a company, but it was a large number.

Barrett: Uh-huh.

Maurer: And that was—that was also the period when some of the students delivered something, policies or whatever, on roller skates, and they made several floors I think, and they all roller-skated all over the building, and that was a big deal for then. I didn't do that, and my husband to be worked in the—the head of the mailing room at night. So I've—I've wondered since, "When did we study?" but whenever we studied, I presume we studied in the library or we studied after we got home, and I presume I rode the bus home because I, you know, I'm from Wesleyan to my work, and you know I didn't have a car. So it was another side of my experience at Wesleyan, and the Alpha meetings at Alpha Gamma, I—I made those. A lot of the activities I didn't make because I had to work those hours and I couldn't be involved. But my last semester in school before I graduated, I got to quit working, so I became more involved in some of the daily things

that went on at the sorority. But we had a—we had—Alpha Gamma was a great sorority, not that the rest of them weren't, and they had—their students did well at Wesleyan. We had a reputation for that, and great friendships, great friendships that I have kept—well, actually I am now ninety-six and most of my...[both laugh]...dear friends were—that were close with me are all dead, and there were several that lived here in town or they moved back here after the war, and if you know if you belong to a sorority, it's—it's one of those associations that you keep for many years. And to backtrack my time at Stephens College, I had—some were close friends, but two of them I corresponded with over the years, and one of them, she lived across the hall from me. She wasn't my roommate, and she came from Seattle, and we still send Christmas cards every year and letters and sometimes birthday cards. But my other friend from Indiana died a number of years ago. So, you know, it's a—it's a really—a period of time in your life when you make new friends that really you keep for a lifetime, and let me say this also, that in fact, when I was at Wesleyan, and I have been thinking on this for several days, I can't think of anybody who came from out of state, just the people I knew... in—people in the Alpha Gam or the people in the—Marvin and the TKEs, or just people that you went to school with, you know. That's one of the major differences. Maybe some were from Indiana, I don't know. It seemed like the ones that were the furthest away came from Chicago area. But—and I don't remember what the enrollment was at that time. But it was—you know, we had so many students from all over the world now, it's—I think that's good. I'm not against it. We're a world economy now, but then it wasn't that way so much. One of my best friends who—she was a Sigma Chi—or I mean a Sigma Kappa, and her boyfriend was a TKE, and his name was Miyato, and so because of the Japanese having attacked us, before he left school they got married and he changed his name to Mayo because it was, you know, he just didn't want that association. He wasn't Japanese in any way, but those were the kind of things then. And before I started to—after I had started signing up to go to Stephens College, and you know, I was seventeen. I wasn't worried too much about world affairs. After I had registered and everything, my father told me a story I had never heard before, that his father who came from England, his name was spelled B-R-A-N-T, and so we were facing this war with Germany it seemed like. I mean, that was his opinion, which we did actually eventually become involved, and he said, “Oh, I wish we had—we had registered you under the real family name,” which is English, and it's because the Germans deemed us as German, and I couldn't believe that. He was the youngest of ten, and I said, “Well, who changed your name?” and he said, “My younger brothers and sisters, when he went to school, they had a German teacher, and she just told him that it was—they were spelling their name wrong. They had to spell it B-R-A-N-D-T, and they—they did...[both laugh]...if you can imagine such a thing happening today...[Barrett laughs]...the teacher telling the kids you have to spell you name this way. But that's what—that's what happened, and we never did change it, you know. It was—it was just a thought. But I had never heard this story, and—and many of my cousins hadn't either because their parents had not told him this story about our name. Okay. Now, what—what—is there something else I can say? Am I losing my memory here? Not really, but you asked me a lot of questions.

Barrett: You covered a lot. Do you want to say a favorite story or memory about your time on campus?

Maurer: Well, let's see. There were so many. Oh, one of them was my...they were two best friends. One was a Sigma Kappa and one was an Alpha Gam, and I—she was married at the Alpha Gam house and her husband was also a TKE and went into the Navy, and that was a—that was a special occasion for me because I was her bridesmaid, and I was a bridesmaid for another friend, Betty, but she was married in her home, and that was outside of—just a normal life. Both—and the fact that—the trauma of the fire and getting adjusted to the classes and all that was not a just a memory that you just don't forget, because we stood there with all these people, students and everyone else, helpless as we're watching this big building go down in flames, and I don't know whether the—or the fire trucks at that time had these big elevators—ladders, certainly not to the height that they have now but that's...that's a memory that you just don't forget. And then when Pearl Harbor was attacked, those are two things that really changed our lives a great deal, and there was a great article. I'd read the *Wall Street Journal*, and I actually sent it to Meg—

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: —describing the end of the war, which—the end of the war with Japan in '73—or was seventy-three years ago, and if you would like, I could send it to you. It really is the best. I was so impressed. It doesn't talk about the—me, personally, of course, but it talks about the world and our lives at that time.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And if—if you ever need to write a paper, it would be a great thing to write about because your generation didn't experience that, and it was—it was—I thought the best concise commentaries so to speak on the world and how we reacted to that at that time.

Barrett: Yeah.

Maurer: So those, you know, I can't remember all the—all the fun days we had, but one other memory I have was Alpha Gam had a house mother—a lived-in house mother. And I liked the girls, but I loved her and that was one of the reasons I joined, Mother Minor. Oh, she was a wonderful lady, and we had great food, but, you know, she managed everything and looked after all of the girls, and a lot—most of them, you know, didn't live in Bloomington. But she's a favorite memory of mine. But a-a person—you would go away to school, and it was—it was just

such a comfort just because if you were upset or you had a problem, you could go and talk to Mother Minor about it, and I don't think house mothers exist anymore, do they?

Barrett: They do. Yeah.

Maurer: Do they?

Barrett: I think they still do.

Maurer: [laughs] Anyways, she was an outstanding lady, and it was there for a long, long time, long after I—I graduated. And I will say this. After—when I graduated in the spring of 1944, and we were to be married in September, the factories here had all by at that time had government contracts with military needs, whatever they build, and I got a job as a timekeeper at Eureka-Williams, which had a government contract back then, and they made all these parts, or something, although I don't know if I ever knew. They—everything was very secret also because they didn't talk—they didn't publish what they made. Some did. Some could, but most of them were just listed as a part for whatever, something. But that was interesting for me because—I'll—I'll backtrack a little bit. My father started a truck line—trucking business, really right before I was born.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And...so if his business grew—we lived in Atlanta, Illinois which is just south of here a little bit, and if his business grew, we moved to Bloomington when I was seven, and he got—rented a terminal space here, which was small compared to today's truck terminals, but it was—that was our reason for being here, and it was, you know, for my mother it was an adjustment. It would have been a little town but Bloomington was a big city, but it was—the schools were good, it was—it was a growing time for us as well as the community. There were a lot of—of factories here and the business was really good. Okay. What else?

Barrett: [laughs] Is there anything else you would like to add?

Maurer: Well, yeah. I guess I'll add this. My—my husband went overseas the next—maybe March, and that would be in '45, and we had gone to Connecticut and we had lived there for a while, and then we went to New York and lived on Staten Island for a while. We lived in New York for a while, but that's pretty expensive, so we moved out to Staten Island and he went overseas, and before we went to Connecticut, we came home for Christmas, and I just found a picture of me. I'm going through old pictures the other day, and when we were home that Christmas, and then—so we brought our used car, and I'll tell you this. My grandmother had died and left me some money, so I put it in this bank here, and I went to draw out some of this

money to help my car, and the man at the bank argued with me and asked me all these questions. Why I was removing my money from the bank?

Barrett: Hmm.

Maurer: Which at the time I found very irritating, but you know I don't think if you have money someplace, you could pull it out now and nobody has to ask you why.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And, "Are you sure you're doing the right thing?" Attitudes were a great deal different then, and bankers were—they knew everything about everybody in town, and also this is a—strictly an aside about business. There was a gos—gossip sheet that was published every week, and because my father was in business, he subscribed to it. But the sheet would tell everybody that took out a loan and for how much and all kinds of other business information that they thought would be interesting to the business public, but later on, and many, many years later, I remember I went into a different bank. It was where we had accounts, and he explained to me that the rules had changed then, that they couldn't even ask you if you were married, if you had a college education, or all those things that they used to make such a deal out of. A law was passed and they could no longer ask you those things. So anyway, after we took the train to California and we both slept in an upper bunk, and I have claustrophobia so I was hanging on the outside all the time. Marvin was six foot one, about two hundred pounds and we got there. We got in this house, and I told you all that.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And then so we came home at Christmas, bought this car, drove it to—actually it was Norwich, Connecticut. He went overseas, and my mother and my mother-in-law and my younger brother took the train out to New York to drive back with me in the car and my younger brother was in Ann—Annapolis so we stopped there to see him. And, you know, and my little brother just loved the subways because we lived on Staten Island, we had to take the ferry. He was just in heaven, having so much fun in New York. And then so I stayed with my parents until Marvin came back from overseas, which was—I—I should remember the exact date, but I don't.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And I went to—he came into Florida, and another officer that he met on the ship was from Indiana, so when they came back, his wife, who I had never seen before, took the train to Galesburg—no, I think it was Champaign, and we met there for the first time and took the train the rest of the way to Florida together, and, you know, it was just a—a wonderful. Two people,

we'd never met, and we were the closest of friends the rest of our lives. She's been dead a number of years, and—and we just had such fun together and we got apartments in the same complex, and also let me say this, which I hadn't ever experienced in my life. When we got to Florida, I didn't know this, and they had little signs out, "No Jews allowed—"

Barrett: Oh!

Maurer: And this was so prevalent all over Florida. I could not believe this, because we had never experienced anything that—like that in Bloomington that I ever knew about. Maybe there was people who did, but, you know, it wasn't like that. They put little signs out there, and I always felt the horror of that, and so after that I had many Jewish friends. I had no idea that you could say, "You can't live here." But that's what it was at that time.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: Anyway, so we were there and he got discharged. We were riding—we were riding home on a train from Florida I believe when VJ-Day—Day was announced and it came on the radio there, and we moved to Lincoln, Illinois and his father had an insurance agency and he went into that, but ran—but that's another whole story. We won't go into that. But, you know, I think my friendships and—well another, you know, if you'll let me tell you, we had a—then we lived in Lincoln, Illinois and our first son who just turned seventy-two yesterday was—was born. Well, I came up to Bloomington and stayed with my parents before he was born and after he was born for a while. And then in—the Korean War came along, and we had a new house in Lincoln, and I remember I went out to the mailbox and this huge manila envelope—and I thought, "What is this?" and it was from the Navy, and Marvin was called back as an engineering officer in the Korean War. So, much to my parents' consternation—

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: —we packed up the little boys and he was to go—he was to go to Tongue Point in Astoria, Oregon. And so we packed up the—my youngest boy was eighteen months and we took cross-country to drive to Astoria, Oregon, and during that time we moved up and down the coast. He was an LST at a McLennan ship at that time, and so we lived in Seaside, Oregon. We went to San Diego, then we went back to Seaside and before he got out of the war, we stayed in La Jolla and lived in—on Coronado Island and we lived in Bremerton, Washington during all these trips up and down, and there are many stories to that. And then he was sent overseas and he was—he was based in—I think—I think his ship was based in Japan maybe, but you know I—I don't—I don't remember. I'm not—I just can't remember the name of where the ship was based, and he was over there for about ten months, and he had thought when he got called back he would just stay in the Navy as a career because he wasn't unhappy with it. But after he had spent that much

time away from his family, he decided, “I don’t want to do this,” and he was offered a job at the Bank of America in San Francisco and he said, “No. I don’t want my children raised in the California atmosphere.” It was always different, still is, and so we came back to Illinois and he got a job here and later on—let me say this ‘cause he...he was short three hours I think from getting his degree at Wesleyan because they had to have humanities or you couldn’t get your degree. So after...he got—he got a job here and he said something to his boss and he said well you go back to school because Marvin didn’t want to ask for time off. And he said no, and so he went to class at I think eight o’clock until he got the hours that he needed. And I remember when I went to his graduation, I was—the son that we had, my third son, he was born the twenty-third of June, and so here we sat at the balcony down in the old fieldhouse and I was so pregnant with our two little boys and everybody was so proud because daddy walked down the aisle and got his diploma and then later on, he was hired by an architectural firm here in town, and he was the project manager on all the high-rise buildings at ISU except the tallest one. I can’t say it’s name, but you know what it is.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And on many buildings on Wesleyan and then they did all the dormitories at Northern Illinois and then they built the whole university of Governors State, and he was project manager on all those jobs, which he was—he was outstanding. He really was, and it wasn’t a field he’d thought he’d go into, but once he was there, and so...and then—and then after thirty-eight years I divorced him, which is the sad part but that’s life.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And I’ve had a great life since then. So is that about enough, Courtney? [laughs]

Barrett: [laughs] This is—is there anything else you’d like to add now, or did you cover it all?

Maurer: I—well, you know, we had three sons, and my oldest son’s a doctor, and he started a neonatal unit at St. John’s Hospital thirty-six years ago, and was director, and now he’s partially retired and he works in the hospital in Myrtle Beach because his daughter moved there with their family and his unit was a hundred rooms at St. John’s Mercy in St. Louis, so this is a much smaller unit, but you know he’s kind of slowing down. And my second son—none of them had to serve, and when their father went into the Korean War, he said, you know, “I’m doing this for my sons so they never have to go to war.”

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And—but it was right down to the wire in the Vietnam War. They were going to be forced to be joined by somebody or be taken in, and Mike, you know, he was about to graduate from medical school and they had—they could go into any service as a doctor, and we would say, “Oh, just wait. Wait.” you know. “Don’t jump in and join.” And all of them—well, Chris was too young anyway. Tim was barely old enough but anyway, the war ended and they didn’t have to go, so that—that was a big deal. And then Tim worked in construction for a while, my middle son, and then he worked at State Farm, and now he’s retired from State Farm. And Chris, my youngest son, took him a few years to settle down, but then he decided he wanted to go to pharmacy school, and he’s been a night pharmacist at Bromenn now for thirty-some years. And, you know, he’s old enough to retire, he just isn’t ready yet, and so I have nine grandchildren and I have two great-grandchildren out in Myrtle Beach, and when your family’s all healthy and bright, it’s the greatest blessing you can have, and I text all my grandchildren, and my sons got me started on a computer way back when. Some of my friends don’t do anything. I’ve got an iPad. I have an iPhone, and I got the world right here in my hand.

Barrett: Mm-hmm.

Maurer: And I enjoy it every day because when you’re old and you can’t run around so much, you really keep up with what’s going on in the world, and that’s one of my greatest pleasures, besides being involved in my grandchildren’s lives. So, you know, from starting out at Stephens and then Wesleyan, I will say Stephens—and more like Wesleyan now, all these friends I met came from different states and—and different attitudes, and the one friend that was from California, oh boy. She was the one that gave everybody the word on everything, and we all sat there wide-eyed as she told us her episodes. In the sorority that we thought she played around too much, we all worried about her, and you know, she got married and had a family. She was fine, but it was just—it was just something that was not done.

Barrett: Uh huh

Maurer: And it’s a—the attitude was so different, you know. We were far more Puritan in a way in those—basically, we were accused of that sometimes because European people live differently, but that’s where we were, and was a whole attitude. Okay, Courtney. [Barrett laughs] I’ve worn you out with stories. You can pick and use what you want.

Barrett: Thank you so much for taking time to talk to me.

Maurer: Well thank you for listening—and I appreciate it. Thank you.

Barrett: Have a great day.