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Oral History Interview with Marie Ann Hill, October 2019

<https://soundcloud.com/ames2001/marie-ann-hill>

Meg Minor: Good afternoon, this is Meg Minor I am the archivist and special collections librarian at Illinois Wesleyan University today is October 22nd, 2019 and I am in home of one of our alumni Marie Ann Hill. We are in one of the cottages at Westminster village in Bloomington. And Marie Ann if you would please tell us – well I guess I just already said your name. Tell us a little bit about your major, the date that you went to Wesleyan, and how long you or when you started there and all of your other affiliations and involvements with Wesleyan.

Marie Ann Hill: Alright, I am Marie Ann Schiemmer Hill, graduated in 1952, my family moved here to Bloomington in 1941 and, I wasn't sure where I wanted to go to school. My family owned a hotel in Bloomington.

Minor: Is that why they moved here?

Hill: And that's why they moved here. The Hamilton hotel – it's now a parking lot, as a lot of places are. [Hill and Minor laugh] and I thought I wanted to go to the University of Michigan for hotel – business.

Minor: Is that where they came from was Michigan?

Hill: No, I was born South Bend, Indiana.

Minor: Okay, sorry go ahead.

Hill: No, that's alright. South Bend Indiana, and the more I thought about, I thought I don't wanna go into the hotel business. So, I enrolled that summer, I enrolled at Wesleyan, in 1948. And, as I said I graduated in '52. In the summer of '48, at that time, the sororities were allowed to have parties. And, so I attended several parties and decided to become an Alpha Gamma Delta. That's another story of how active I was in Alpha Gam. But, I decided to be a Speech or Theatre major and English minor.

Minor: Could you maybe explain a little bit by what you mean by the parties they were allowed to have? Why was that important, compared to whatever else you would be doing?

Hill: Because it helped introduce the actual frater – well fraternity and sororities during the summer time, rather than having recruitment for just a week or so in the fall. You got to meet the people – and at that time, there were very few men because it was right after the war. And, most of everybody that was actually in Wesleyan at the time were local or very close, we didn't have the diversity that they have now. And so, I knew women from all the sororities actually. . . and that's why I knew Barb Starcevich Barb Zoux Starcevich. And, I knew her quite well, that's one of the reasons why I joined there. And, I was in the theatre department under Dr. Tucker,

that goes way back and, I think one of the highlights of that was that the little building that's behind Pfeiffer Hall that was a carriage house. That year, well not that – in 1950 I believe it was, they turned it into a little Theatre and we named it the Spotlight Ally Theater and so, I was one of the ones that was in the original group that summer in Spotlight Ally Theater. Then in 19 – in the fall of 1950, Dr. Tucker had someone produce – write a pageant for Wesleyan's 150th anniversary.

Minor: In 1950? The 100th right?

Hill: The 100th yes, I'm sorry. And I was Dr. Tucker's assistant and I turned over the original script to the theatre department.

Minor: Wasn't that called "Constant Star"?

Hill: Yes it was.

Minor: Yes, we have a copy of that in the archives too, how wonderful.

Hill: Well, it might be my copy because I turned it in to you a while ago.

Minor: Oh that's great, so I did not realize that you were part of that – that process.

Hill: Yeah, and, at the time the – of course I had to make sure all the characters were there. And, there was one young man who was there and he told me his name was Roland Hill and, I said "Oh, are you" – now this is my version – I said "Oh, are you a Freshman? I haven't seen you around." And he raised up to his six feet height and said "No, I'm a Senior." [Minor and Hill laugh]

Minor: Oh my goodness [Minor laughing], so he hadn't been involved in theater before or your paths just hadn't crossed.

Hill: No, he hadn't been involved in theater before.

Minor: Okay [Minor giggling]

Hill: But, at that time as I said there was not an awful lot of men and those that were there were sold – former s – soldiers and they had families and so there weren't too many young men and, we need a lot of young men in the – in that play.

Minor: For the benefit of the people that are listening to us, could you tell us a little bit about the plot line of Constant Star? Perhaps that will help them understand why it was – why young men were necessary.

Hill: Oh, definitely because it was the founding fathers told the founding fathers, I guess Jessie Fell and I don't know who all, and some of their stories and then and the hist – some of the history of what had happened to get Wesleyan where it was, and how it developed more and more. Some of the buildings had talked about the burning then of – was it Maier Hall

Minor: On campus? The main building – main hall?

Hill: Yeah, mhm, but it gave – but mostly it was dedicated to the founding of Wesleyan. Yeah, and I think the Constant Star was because we were shining, we star – as a star and we kept on shining. And so. . . well then I – I didn't do much acting, I did a lot of producing and assisting directors and things like that, and building scenery. Then, this Roland Hill and I happened to get together and, he went into service – he was from the class of '51 and he went into the service and we decided that we would like to get married. And he was home on leave in 1951 at Christmas and, we got married in the Alpha Gam house by – and I should've looked this up. I think it was the Dean of Men of Wesleyan who was an ordain minister. I could look it up for you –

Minor: Oh that's fine no, that's great that you got married in your sorority and –

Hill: And then he went off and he ended up going to Korea.

Minor: He was Army?

Hill: And he was Army, yes. He was a cryptographer. So, I stayed with my parents in the Hamilton Hotel until he came back. [Both laugh] And he was a speech major and had enough credits to be a teacher but, he wasn't sure that he wanted to be. So, my parents asked if he'd like to start working for them in the hotel and, he liked it because he could fix anything and so he was very handy and that worked out really well. So, I needed a – I needed just my teaching – student teaching. And we were able to arrange it so that I could do that in Augusta, Georgia where my husband was before he went overseas. And so, I was able to do that so then I got my teaching degree but, I never taught – well I did I taught Sunday school and things like that but, I was not an authorized teacher. . .

Minor: So he had been in Augusta, Georgia, while he was in the Army?

Hill: Yes.

Minor: Okay, and then but he – when he came back and started working the hotel that was after he was in the Army.

Hill: After he was in the Army, yes.

Minor: Okay, and then you just went back to Augusta

Hill: And then we . . . well we came back – we were in Bloomington then, came back to Bloomington and in our bus – then we decided we needed more than hotel business so, we went into the coin laundry business.

Minor: The coin operated laundries? Here in Bloomington

Hill: Yeah so, we had three coin laundries here in Bloomington. In the meantime, if I can go back to being an Alpha Gam, when my husband was overseas I was pregnant. And, my sorority sisters really gave me a lot of encouragement and love and, that was something I'm – never forgot. [Hill's voice cracks] So, I became a very active alum and for 35 years I was treasurer of our house association and, very active I had held all the offices in the alum chapter. And um, so, can we stop now?

[STOPPED at 11:56]

Minor: Okay Marie Ann, well lets go to the question about IWU traditions and customs that you were – you've seen or memorized that you have of participating in them. Are there any of it stand out in particular or things you wish they would bring back?

Hill: Oh, I don't know about bringing back but, I remember that all the Freshman had to wear beanies, green beanies their first semester. A –

Minor: Did you have to buy those or were they given to you?

Hill: You know what, I don't remember, I think they were given to us.

Minor: Okay, so Freshman beanies.

Hill: And then, I remember at Homecoming we had – we worked ourselves to death. [Both laugh] because we not only had to decorate the Alpha Gam house, decorations in the yard, we had to decorate a float for a parade, they had Greek sing, and what was the other one there were four different things that we had to do. I can't remember the fourth one but, we were so busy I don't know when we studied.

Minor: [Minor laughs] Now when you say "had to" what was –

Hill: All of the sororities and fraternities and groups, the indie groups, and they all had to, if they had homes, they had to decorate because this was all a competition.

Minor: And what was the prize for the – what did you win for all those –

Hill: Well we, meaning the Alpha Gams won the float and the house decoration, and Greek sing. And we got what we call a keg and it was a small keg, and we got our –

Minor: A keg of?

Hill: It was empty [Both laugh] Oh no, no Wesleyan was pretty dry at that time. It was called a keg and with your name on it and then the next year it went to whoever else got the prizes.

Minor: So did you win all of those in one year? In what year was that?

Hill: In one year, yes. '48, 1948.

Minor: So, 1948 won an empty keg but, you got bragging rights

Hill: Oh absolutely, yes, yes. And, I'm trying to think of some of the other traditions.

Minor: Can you tell us a little bit more about the freshman beanies?

Hill: Well they were little green beanies, and you always – you had to wear it, I don't know what the penalty would have been had you not been wearing the beanie. But, it was to distinguish you of course from the upper classmen.

Minor: And did you think that this was an honor or a helpful device?

Hill: At the time, I don't think it mattered. We were happy to do that, it was a tradition. And, I don't know when the tradition stopped, probably because when some of the men came back from service, they were not interested in wearing a green beanie on their head.

Minor: So, tell us for the benefit again of the recording, of the people who are listening. How long did you have to wear the beanie?

Hill: For one semester. One semester.

Minor: And was there a particular – you just had – at the end of the semester you were done or was there a particular event.

Hill: No, there was no tradition –

Minor: So no ceremony or –

Hill: No, no burning of the beanies or anything like that [Hill laughs]

Minor: Okay, okay, alright just checking [Minor giggles] So what other kinds of things?

Hill: Well another tradition and this was for all the fraternities and sororities, we are – in January at the end of January was the end of the first semester. And so, we were not initiated until February because we had to have our grades turned in, by the end of January when we had our finals and everything grades turned in. And then, we could be initiated into which ever

group of course, we belonged. And, then we went to school through probably the middle of June. We didn't have any May or January break.

Minor: It was a different semester system.

Hill: For different semesters. And I think one thing now that I've noticed, and of course they talk so much about the diversity and as I said so many people from Bloomington went to Wesleyan. And then gradually people – Wesleyan expanded its outreach to other groups and other cities and things. So, I think that has made a wonderful difference at Wesleyan I think.

Minor: Was there any racial diversity in the campus that you recall?

Hill: The only diversity was they had an independent men crew, men that didn't belong to a fraternity. And my husband always said he was an independent-independent he didn't belong to the independents he was too independent. [Both laugh]

Minor: Well maybe having the military background did something for that as well.

Hill: Oh, that could be it too. But, I enjoy going back to Wesleyan to homecoming, and I try to go back and of course go to the sorority houses to meet the girls and to see the difference of things that have happened on campus. All the new buildings and it's just amazing to me how Wesleyan has expanded from – I think they were what 1000, 1200 when I went to school. It's a wonderful university, I've always been proud to say that I went to Wesleyan.

Minor: Do you feel like your – did you, you've got your degree in Speech and Theatre?

Hill: Yes, I have a BFA

Minor: Okay, and so that was I think the first – that was very early on when BFA's were being offered in Theatre too. So do you remember that being a big deal that the change to offer a BFA or does it not resonate with you?

Hill: No, I don't think that – I never thought about that, I never thought about it particularly. I knew I was going to get a BFA and that was it.

Minor: Sure, you wouldn't know it changed because you didn't know before.

Hill: And my sister went to the University of Illinois and got a BFA in Art so, BFA meant. . . that's it.

Minor: What do you think – you probably can't tell us about your AGD initiation. [Minor laughs]

Hill: No, well I do know that there were 18 of us and we had two more pledges – only they call them recruits now – the second semester. So there are actually 20 which was a large group at that time.

Minor: It seems like a really tight knit group too that you have a lot of associations still with the university and with your other sisters as well.

Hill: Yes I do, and I was quite – as I said quite active in the alumni group. As treasurer, whenever we needed money I had to send out letters “Please” [Hill laughs]. And Wesleyan was always cooperative in helping me get addresses and things like that too so, we always appreciated everything Wesleyan could do for us.

Minor: Were there independent Women’s groups like there were Independent Men’s houses?

Hill: No. No.

Minor: Okay so most of the women would have been associated with a sorority in your time.

Hill: Yes. Mhm.

Minor: Was it friendly rivalries on campus with all of that.

Hill: Oh yes, of course yeah and one of the nice things that we did we would have interfraternity meaning sororities and fraternities dances and things. So we would get to meet the other women and the other men too. So that was nice that we had those interfraternity things.

Minor: There are some wonderful programs the dance programs the little dance booklets in the archives. There’s a quite a few of those maybe you donated some of those too. What can you tell us about that tradition because that’s something when I show them to students I tell them what little I know. Can you share some of your thoughts about those?

Hill: Well that goes way way back to the old Civil War even earlier. Oh yeah probably earlier where the women would have a little book and the men would write down that they would like to dance with them. And of course, if you had a favorite man he was always the first one and maybe the last one. It was – it got to be more of a souvenir in my age because we would have a date and we would get one so, the dance books were – as I said just more of a souvenir from the dance itself.

Minor: So you didn’t necessarily change dance partners?

Hill: No, no. [Both laugh]

Minor: Okay that's good to know. It's hard at a distance to tell how artifacts like these were used. I understand the intention of them but, it's wonderful to have your perspective on that. So, you were committed to Roland.

Hill: Oh yes, yes from the first date. Actually -- our kids know this. Literally we stayed out all night because I was a townie and even though I lived at the house off and on, I was not staying at the house when we had a date one night. And, the next day, I think it was Tony Bennett who was suppose to play for a dance at Wesleyan. And my husband and I went downtown to the Jefferson Cafeteria because that was open all night. And these musicians came in and he was a musician. And so, we'd think "this one played that, and that one." And so, the next night at the dance we were completely wrong. [Both laugh] We got to see the actual ones.

Minor: What instrument did your husband play?

Hill: Well my husband act -- started out on the clarinet and then he learned all the other instruments all of the saxophones and he had a collection of all the saxophones. And then when he retired, he bought himself a flute and had flute lessons and plays the flute.

Minor: How about you?

Hill: My joke is I play the radio! [Both laugh]

Minor: I'm very talented at that too, I think it's a difficult skill to use [Both laugh]. That's wonderful, did Roland play in bands on campus?

Hill: Yes he did he played in the marching band. And -- I think he played in the orchestra too. He knew Morris Willis real well and he was a music teacher at Wesleyan.

Minor: Okay, I'm not familiar with that name so thank you.

Hill: That goes way back and . . . actually where memorial stadium is, right next to Pfeiffer Hall isn't it? What's the dorm right next to it?

Minor: Next to the stadium?

Hill: No not to the stadium --

Minor: The Memorial Student Center, yes Pfeiffer is there.

Hill: He played in the band in the basement that was there for the dedication of Pfeiffer Hall.

Minor: Oh my, how wonderful. I didn't know they had bands at dedication too.

Hill: Oh in those days they had bands for everything. [Both laugh] And actually, a lot of people thought he was a music major because he was always at Presser Hall.

Minor: So were there other groups that you were involved in or was AGD your –

Hill: I had forgotten all the things but, I was – I got roped in to being in – what is the wo – League of Women Villagers because as a pledge you had to belong to some groups. Okay, so I got roped in being in to League of Women Villagers.

Minor: And that's a community group?

Hill: No, no, that's a Wesleyan, that was a Wesleyan group

Minor: I wonder if your talking about the Women's Circle, the IWU Women's – IWU Women's League, IWU Women's League.

Hill: Well, at the time it was League of Women Villagers, but it was a chapter for the university. And the Women's sports association and . . . well there were several other organizations that I'd belong to.

Minor: What sports did you play?

Hill: Well at the time they didn't have Women's sports, they had intramurals. So, I played field hockey, badminton, I think that was about it. But, I was a mean character in field hockey.

Minor: What position did you play? Forward? Center? Oh my.

Hill: My friend of mine Pat Yoder, I can't remember Pat's maiden name. But anyway Pat Yoder she saw me at – she lives at Westminster and when she saw me she says "I was always afraid of you."

Minor: Watch it, you swing a mean stick.

Hill: Yeah boy, you said it. [Both laugh] But see, they didn't have women's sports in those days, which is too bad. . . because I think a lot of us would've enjoyed. But, they had a Women's Sports Association.

Minor: But it sounds like you were – if you were feared by your opponents it sounds like the – I mean the intramural program was much stronger because of that.

Hill: Oh, I think so yeah. And, I was glad that they had some sports for women, that we could at least do that.

Minor: That's great.

Hill: Okay. . . so you wanna pause a minute now, please?

Minor: Absolutely.

Minor: Tell us a little bit about the other family members who have Wesleyan association.

Hill: I met my husband's sister, Nancy, Nancy Lee Hill, who was a KD. And I knew her before I actually knew that her brother was Roland Hill.

Minor: Was she younger than him or older?

Hill: She was my age so she was younger than he. He was the big brother, in fact, when she first came on campus they thought – people thought they were dating because he was taking care of her so much, because he was the bigger brother. And then Nancy married Owen West who was a Phi Mu at Wesleyan. And they had a daughter Gale Ann who became an Alpha Gam like me, and my husband and I had a daughter Susan Hill, who became a KD. So, the two of us switched so there's quite a history of two generations there at Wesleyan.

Minor: Anybody match your record in staying involved with Wesleyan afterwards.

Hill: No, no.

Minor: [Minor laughs] You're carrying the torch.

Hill: Well, because I stayed in town I think that's one reason too, and that does help. At one time, many years ago, I was on the Wesleyan board and I don't even remember the name of the person. But, I was on the board for a while.

Minor: For the alumni group?

Hill: Yes, for the alumni. But, I think Wesleyan still is a wonderful school to go to. And I'm pleased with some of the new buildings, they're absolutely gorgeous and I think we're very fortunate. I never was much into science, but I understand the science building is absolutely terrific, and the new library –

Minor: Can't be beat.

Hill: Can't be beat. Oh, there's so many wonderful things there on campus and I think any student that is involved at Wesleyan should be very proud to be there.

Minor: Did you have classes in the science building that was on campus during your time that we now call the Stevenson building. It's the brick building that's –

Hill: No, we had, the theatre had most of their classes in Old North.

Minor: Okay that was going to be my next question. So tell me about classes in Old North.

Hill: Well, the downstairs wasn't too bad but if you had to go up three flights to get up where the stage was. And, pretty rickety old stairs. And then of course, we had no real theatre, so we had to share Presser Hall with the musicians. And it was always kind of a rivalry there when we tried to plan having some kind of a play, and they had some kind of recital or orchestra. There was always a little pressure there in Presser Hall.

Minor: Did – do you still go to theatre productions on campus?

Hill: Yes, I do.

Minor: How do you think the productions that they're offering now differ from –

Hill: Oh, out of this world. Absolutely, just unbelievable. And of course, with the – with the auditorium you have now, the stage that you have now you can do so much more than we could at Presser Hall.

Minor: So, when you say unbelievable you're talking about the quality of the production the scenery?

Hill: The quality, the acting, the scenery and, just a complete – you couldn't – you'd have to pay a lot more to see that somewhere else. And, I'm astonished at the talent, we were just plain actors and actresses. And now, you really have the talent. And we didn't have musical theatre which Wesleyan has now. I think that's very, very good.

Minor: So the type of classes that you were taking as a Speech and a Theatre major and I think it's –

Hill: English too, yeah English Minor.

Minor: Can you talk a little bit about those and what kind of classes you remember.

Hill: Well we had learned how to build scenery, of course. And we had to learn how to announce clearly and speak, and I think I was fortunate being here in the Midwest, I didn't have much of an accent.

Minor: To people in the Midwest you don't [both laugh]

Hill: Yeah right! But there were some that had to work on their speech. In the contest we had speech contests and things and did short skits, or things that we did. I think I Wesleyan pretty well excelled in some of those against like Millikin and Bradley and some of the smaller schools.

Minor: Were you on debate team at all? Because I know that was apart of campus tradition for a while.

Hill: No, no I was not. Now, my husband was because that was more than a speech. He had Marie Robinson for all of his speech things. And I had, when I took – When I was being an English minor I had to take: American Lit and English Lit, and all those courses. But, I loved it because I was a good reader, I could read very quickly and I really liked all those courses. Little playlet we did – oh we also wrote and did some radio work on WGBC.

Minor: Oh great, which was broadcasting on campus still at that time.

Hill: No WGBC was – at that time was above the Castle Theater that's in downtown Bloomington. And I – I had some of those scripts and I turned some of those into your department.

Minor: I will have to look for that. So ones that you wrote?

Hill: That our class would write.

Minor: I'll look into that. That's a great tradition to hear about . . . Radio plays.

Hill: So we had a wide variety of things that we did probably not what they do now. Then as Senior I had to – my senior project was a play and it was "Night Must Fall". And, Sam Smiley who was in my class, went on to write and produce some shows. I don't know if your familiar with that name.

Minor: I'm sorry I'm not no.

Hill: I should've thought of these ahead of time. But, there was a bill who went on to New York and he was in several plays in New York. That was from my class.

Minor: Do you remember Suspense Theatre?

Hill: Yes.

Minor: Someone donated several, I think couple of years worth of scripts of those to the university. And, front page detective was a TV show we have those scripts too.

Hill: Oh wonderful, good so you have some great things in your archives – And I am so glad that you have now that you archive that your saving some of these things.

Minor: There were people before me that saved them that says – those are the people you should be grateful to. That's to people like you.

Hill: Well, I am very happy to have done that, and I did have some scripts, some play bills I mean from community theatre, and I gave them –

Minor: Oh were you involved locally too.

Hill: Yes!

Minor: Oh wonderful!

Hill: Until I had three children and worked with my husband.

Minor: That's wonderful, well is there other memories that you – anything else you would like to add that you want people to know about?

Hill: I just think that it was wonderful to be able to go to a 4 year university I was very happy to have been in town because then I can take part in a lot more things I think, than those that left. I can I guess stay connected with the university. And my husband and I do have scholarship, and for the first time – it's the music scholarship, for the first time we knew the little girl well she's a young lady now who received our scholarship.

Minor: How did you know her?

Hill: Well my husband played in a civil war reenactment band, and her mother played in the band and so I knew Lindsey when she was probably about 8 years old and one of the members of the band, the wife, made costumes for her and her sister. And so little Lindsey –

Minor: What was her last name?

Hill: Ring, and so I was just thrilled that they had Lindsey get a music scholarship. That was really wonderful so, I appreciate that.

Minor: Well I'm sure she appreciates our support it's so important to our students, thank you.

Hill: And I enjoy going to the sponsor dinners, I think that is an excellent idea. Where we get to meet the young people and they get to meet us. As they said, they started that so that the young people would know that there's a face that belongs to this scholarship.

Minor: Yeah, that's a nice tradition isn't it?

Hill: Yes, it is.

Minor: Did that just start recently?

Hill: [Hill sighs] 15? I could tell ya almost exactly but, I think 15 maybe 20 – between 15 and 20 years ago but –

Minor: Seems like it's been there ever since I got there so.

Hill: Mhm, and I think that's about all, it's a lot of memories but, [Hill laughs] it's my age as I said I'll think of something later and think "Why didn't I mention that?"

Minor: Well, this is just wonderful. I really appreciate the details that you share about your college – your coursework experiences as well as your social activities and the tradition so, thank you so much for taking the time.

Hill: Oh, thank you so much for asking me

Minor: Have a great day.

Hill: Thank you.