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Phyllis J. Smith Short

Phyllis J. Short '47

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Meg Miner: ...get us started here. I want to make sure we're running. It looks like we're running. Okay, my name is Meg Miner and I am the archivist at Illinois Wesleyan and today is January 15 and I am at the home of Phyllis and Lee Short. And we've just finished the interview with Lee and we're going to talk a little bit now with Phyllis about her time at Wesleyan. So Phyllis if you could start us off by saying your name and maybe give us the location of where we are.

Phyllis: Okay.

Meg: And we'll go from there.

Phyllis: My name is Phyllis Short and my address is 201 West Lincoln Normal, Illinois.

Meg: And how are you affiliated with Illinois Wesleyan?

Phyllis: I graduated from Wesleyan—went four years here—graduated in 1947.

Meg: '47.

Phyllis: And we were gone for several years and then came back and Lee has been affiliated at Wesleyan since then, so my life pretty well centered around Wesleyan.

Meg: Wow, so what was your major?

Phyllis: It was music.

Meg: Okay, and you had a specialty in..?

Phyllis: Piano.

Meg: Piano. What was it that made you want to come to Wesleyan? Where were you from?

Phyllis: I'm from Streator, IL.

Meg: Okay.

Phyllis: Really the Ransom, IL community. I lived in the country and I had a really good experience in high school music. My high school music teacher was probably influential in me coming here. I really never looked at many other schools. I looked at North Central because that was our church school and Cornell in Iowa and then that was about it. And I came here, talked to Dean Green, and he offered me a scholarship—what was a quite nominal amount but at that time it wasn't! That's where I—came and I was never sorry. I really liked it.

Meg: That's great. So did you work while you were at school too?

Phyllis: No.

Meg: Okay.

Phyllis: Just in the summer.

Meg: Uh-huh. And you stayed on campus then throughout the year? You didn't go back to Streator during the summer?

Phyllis: No, no.

Meg: Were there summer classes?

Phyllis: Oh no, no I went back home.

Meg: You did.

Phyllis: Yes—in the summer and had jobs there.

Meg: Oh, okay.

Phyllis: And one summer, a friend of mine and I went to work in a resort in Michigan, so we spent that summer up there. One summer I worked for the— Chicago Bridge Company that made the LST boats at the Seneca, IL Boatyards.

Meg: Oh my goodness.

Phyllis: It was a shipyard, so I worked there one summer. And I don't know where I worked the other two but I did. I always had a job.

Meg: Great. Well did you have any extracurricular activities that you were involved in while you were in school?

Phyllis: Oh, well a lot of them were music things, choirs, orchestra, band. When I was here, there were very few men on campus because of the war, so I had a violin minor but I was not very adept with the violin. [laughs] But then the teacher got me on the viola, so I played viola.

Meg: Mhmm.

Phyllis: I played that in the Bloomington-Normal Symphony and things at school. And then I never played an instrument except the piano but there again—they just needed people, they needed bodies.

Meg: Mhmm.

Phyllis: And so I started on the clarinet in band and then later moved to the bass clarinet. I played that for the rest of my time here at Wesleyan. So I was in a couple of things, never really good but--

[Both laugh]

Phyllis: But it was fun. I enjoyed it. It was different.

Meg: Well that counts.

Phyllis: Mhmm.

Meg: Were there other ways that the war influenced your experience at Wesleyan?

Phyllis: Oh, yes entirely. It was more or less a girls' school. I lived at Blackstock with five roommates, which was really a big change since I was an only child.

Meg: Oh my.

Phyllis: But we got along beautifully and we have had long lifetime friendships, but three of them are deceased now, but there are still three of us.

Meg: Aww, that's sad.

Phyllis: And so it was just more or less a girls' school. There were a few men on campus—and there was one fraternity that kept their house going. That was the Sigma Chi's. We had a lot of fun. It was a good experience.

Meg: That's great. Are there any faculty members who stick out in your mind or anybody...?

Phyllis: Yes. In the Music School there was Ms. Brandicon, Lucy Brandicon was my piano teacher and then Dwight Drexler. And..let's see..I had Dr. Ratcliffe for a teacher, Mrs. Felsted was the Dean and she was also a teacher too. She was education I think. Dean Green, Spencer Green was the Dean of music at Wesleyan at that time..

Meg: Hmm.

Phyllis: I remember him very well.

Meg: So a pretty close-knit campus atmosphere then.

Phyllis: Yes, yes.

Meg: Great, so can you think of any traditions that existed then that maybe aren't so prevalent today? Anything about the social life or the campus traditions that have changed over time?

Phyllis: Oh yes. There have been many changes, but homecoming—that's quite different. They used to have a parade and floats and house decorations. There were more, I think, formal dances if you could scrape up a date.

Meg: [laughs] That's a great way to put it. So those activities continued through the war then, the dances and things?

Phyllis: Yes. Yeah, there were dances. I belonged to Delta Omicron, which is a music sorority and at one time we had a house on White Place, 22 White Place, and that was sold not many years after I graduated. I think about 1950—they gave up that house and became completely professional, not social. It was unusual because SAI and DO and Phi Mu—the three music fraternities—were all social as well as professional, and SAI of course still has their house and Phi Mu still has theirs, but the DO's did not and so members of that chapter (most of them) went into social sororities. But I had graduated by that time.

Meg: There are some big houses up in that area.

Phyllis: Yes.

Meg: Was it one of the big old houses up there?

Phyllis: Yes--22 White Place has been restored.

Meg: Oh, is it?

Phyllis: The man who bought that finally has really worked on that house.

Meg: That's great.

Phyllis: It's a beautiful old house.

Meg: Well what do you think the difference was in going to Wesleyan maybe compared to a big school? Maybe this isn't a fair question since you didn't experience a big college, but is it—do you think that it had an impact on your outlook on education or the course of your life?

Phyllis: Well, yes I think it definitely had an impact on my life and it was close-knit. It was small, very small during the war years, so it was a friendly campus, which I think it still is. There were a lot of friendships made there—and I'm sure that's the same way with any school, so I really can't compare it with a bigger school, except I have one daughter who went to a bigger university. She went to the University of Illinois and three

of them went here to Illinois Wesleyan. I don't know that—how she would describe it. She seemed to be very happy there as well as the ones that were here.

Meg: Well where were your classes then other than Presser?

Phyllis: Old North.

Meg: Okay. How was that as a facility?

Phyllis: Well that was very—

Meg: [laughs]

Phyllis: You know what I remember most about that were the steps. They were so worn, they were marble I suppose or some kind of real hard stone—but they were just worn by all those steps of all those years of those kids. It was an interesting old building...Buck Library was the place we studied...

Meg: And Old North was built in 1855—

Phyllis: Mhmm.

Meg: So that's—was a good long use out of that building.

Phyllis: And it showed it. It really did. It was very basic, very plain. As I recall, no pictures on the wall, nothing like that. It was just very sterile in a way.

Meg: But there were classrooms only in there, or were there offices?

Phyllis: I think there were just classrooms but I'm not sure of that. It was the only—you see in Music School we didn't have to go to too many—I shouldn't say have to—we didn't take too many courses in liberal arts.

Meg: Oh, really? Okay.

Phyllis: Oh, I forgot one that I was very fond of. One teacher was Professor Browns, Ralph Browns.

Meg: Mhmm. What did he teach?

Phyllis: He taught humanities. Philosophy was his field. So each year you would have maybe just a couple of LA courses, otherwise your life was centered around Presser Hall. That's where it was.

Meg: And did you do any studying in the community or any playing in the community as well?

Phyllis: We often had to—our sorority would go and provide the music for church. We did that. And there were other programs I'm sure. I'd have to think about it. I don't remember all of those but yes, there was quite a bit of things we were involved in in the community.

Meg: Great. So pretty good relationships, you think, between the campus and the community? Sometimes that's an issue.

Phyllis: Mhmm, yes.

Meg: Well, do you think that there were any other major events in the world at large that sort of infiltrated the bubble of Wesleyan? Did they talk about the bubble of Wesleyan then?

Phyllis: The bubble?

Meg: Yeah, you've not heard of that, okay.

Phyllis: No, but I often think how I—I wasn't very involved in the war actually. I had friends that were in service but I remember vividly a couple things. When Franklin Roosevelt died, we had a convocation for that. On V-J Day Wesleyan was closed. My roommate and I and her boyfriend rented a boat and we went out to Lake Bloomington and rode around the lake and, you know, maybe not all students but I don't think the music students had an awful lot of involvement in the war unless you had a brother in it or a boyfriend. Otherwise we just kind of went along.

Meg: Okay.

Phyllis: I regret that. I wish I had paid more attention.

Meg: Well, when you're young you have a completely different perspective. I mean, it's so basic to say that but it's so true. Well is there anything else you would like to add, or information on Wesleyan and how you felt about it?

Phyllis: Well, I have always been very fond of Wesleyan. I have a lot of respect for it and love for it really. It's ours—and because we've been so involved with it so long.

Meg: Right.

Phyllis: And the fact that our kids—three of them went here to school. And I always wanted a grandchild to come but so far I haven't been able to manage that.

[Both laugh]

Phyllis: Those were good years!

Meg: Well, I thank you so much for talking with me and thank you for sharing your stories.

Phyllis: Oh, you're welcome. I don't think they're of much value but—

Meg: Oh, I don't think that's true though. Everything has value. Thanks so much.

Phyllis: You're welcome.