

Oral History Interviews, Milwaukee-Downer Reunion Weekend 2006
Interview with Marjorie Harkins Buchanan Kiewit, class of 1943
By Julia Stringfellow
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1. Could you please state your name?

My name is Marjorie Harkins Buchanan Kiewit.

2. Could you state the year you graduated from Lawrence and what your major was?

1943, and it was either Language or History, I had four years of each of them.

3. Why did you decide to attend Lawrence?

I decided to attend Lawrence because our minister's son had come up here and invited me up for an inter-fraternity weekend and I had a wonderful time. Then he told me that Lawrence had a scholarship contest. So a group of us from the high school came up and we all took a test and I took one in English literature and won first prize which was \$150. My high school gave me a prize of \$150, I guess just for being me. When I applied at Lawrence they gave me a job waiting on tables in the freshman girls' dorm. And when I saw the uniforms we had to wear which were long-sleeved, green ones. Friday night was visitors' night and all the boys would come over from Brokaw. It was so embarrassing, but all of the girls who were waiting on tables were darling, of course. I was in with a good group. My sophomore year my father was back in the military, but my brother came up here and so my mother moved up to Appleton. I lived at home then for the rest of the three years. It was a long walk everyday back and forth. But I think that's why I didn't belong to clubs. Also, I met the man I was going to marry my second night here at Lawrence. He was over at Hamar House, the Union, waiting to pick up a freshman girl. My roommate and I, no one had asked us to the dance, it was only for freshmen. So we went over to the Union and that was that. He then went on out to MIT and didn't want me to date, so between walking back and forth every day and not dating, I had a lot of time to study. And I did study, I concentrated on study and so I did well.

And this is a funny little story I wanted to tell you. I graduated Phi Beta Kappa, *summa cum laude*. Well, from the time I graduated until 1972 no one cared and it was as though it had never happened. But my husband died in 1964 and by that time several of my daughters were married and the other two were in college, so I decided to go back to school. And I looked at various schools and went out to Harvard, George Washington, University of Wisconsin, and University of Chicago. And when I was at the University of Chicago talking to them, they said, "If you like ideas, you will like it here." I said, "I like ideas!" The trouble is, I was going to visit my daughter, one of my daughters who is now in Australia with her husband who was teaching. And I had made plans for a trip there so

I couldn't take the exams to get into graduate school. I said, "The only trouble is, I won't be here at the time of the exams." And she said, "Don't worry about it, if we want you, we will take you." Well, one of the main reasons they took me, finally, was because of my good grades at Lawrence. They appreciated Lawrence's standards, and it was a good school, and so I had a Ford fellowship for three years. Oh, it was wonderful, I got my PhD there. I like that little history because when people ask what you plan to do, I never really had the opportunity to plan anything because things happen. You just sort of follow the path.

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One other thing vis-à-vis Lawrence is that my second husband and I went on a trip to China when it had just opened up. It was led by a man who had the center at Stanford. Peter died maybe 6 months after that, and I was waiting, I was trying to decide what to do with the rest of my life. I was about 57 or 58. And this man who headed the center said, "Why don't you come out to Stanford? We can give you an office and you can do anything you want." So I did! They had the first contingent for the center of Chinese scholars. There were four of them. One of them was a young man studying American education. And because I couldn't sit around in an office, I had never done it so I couldn't do it, I took him around the United States looking at schools. And he ended up being president of Beijing University.

But this also is very funny, a senior at Lawrence wrote to me and said, "I'd like to come out to Stanford. Now can you tell me what you did to get out here?" And I wrote back and said, "There's no way I could tell you what I did because I didn't do anything to get out there. It just all happened." So that's the story of my life.

4. While you were here at Lawrence, was there a particular teacher who had a really strong influence?

There were a number of them. Mr. Bark, who taught Intellectual History, very good. Mr. Troyer, Renaissance English, was very good. They were all extremely sympathetic and nice. They were friends. And Mr. Weston who taught Latin and Greek, and I had had four years of Latin in high school, so I arrived ready for the fifth year, sixth year, and he also taught Greek, so I took a couple of years of that. And he was just so kindly; tall, aristocratic looking man, and I really enjoyed those classes.

And Mr. Bober who taught Economics and was called to Washington D.C. during the war and they had a man who replaced him, I don't know if he was from Serbia or someplace, and I remember so well, because the boys in the class were kind of noisy, I didn't feel they respected him with his accent. So I went in to see him after class, and I said, "You've got to be tougher with these boys! They're not nice!" And he said, "Oh, Miss Harkins, you're like an angel on the top of a Christmas tree!" It was just all, it was a great experience. I worked hard, Lawrence basically paid for my education, and then my brother who was killed in World War II was here for two years, another brother who was

in the naval unit, but anyhow, he came back here. My sister's husband-to-be came back, so everyone in the family eventually, basically just because I had gone in the first place. Dean Hulbert called me in, when the two younger men would come back, and he said, "Marjorie, they want to come to Lawrence, do you think they are capable of doing the work?" I really didn't know if they had fooled around in high school. I said, "Of course they are, Dean Hulbert." The Dean also called my mother in to ask her what she thought. Talk about intimacy with the school! But they've always done very well for me. I've gone through all of the steps of being on the Board; I was on the Alumni Board for about 12 or 13 years. I was on the Board of Trustees and ended up being the first woman chairman of the Board, and it's been a very important part of my life, beginning to end.

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5. How did the Second World War impact Lawrence?

Oh yes, because all of the men went away. I don't know because I had been committed for so long. I didn't make my graduation because I was married here the day before the graduation. And my husband who had gone to MIT was now in the Army and he came out here to get married. But then we immediately left for our honeymoon in New York, and the only thing that made me very frustrated was the fact that when you graduate *summa cum laude*, everyone stands up. And there were several people that I wanted to see standing up at the time. But my father came from Alexandria, Louisiana, so my family was there for part of it.

6. Were there any traditions here at Lawrence that you noticed, like senior traditions? I know that the ROCK was a big part of student traditions.

My younger brother was involved with the ROCK. One night, we were living at home to save money, and he came in laughing and I said, "What happened?" And he said, "Oh, they went down to Ripon." I don't know whether they took the ROCK or they brought it back, but anyhow, it was a group of Betas. And he said he was driving the car because he lived at home and had a car. And Vince Jones, who was one of our football players, a heavy guy. They were going fast because the Ripon people were after them and they were going around a corner and the car started to sway. Vince Jones got out and got on the running board which they had on cars, to balance the car to get around the corner. So I didn't think it was very funny myself at the time.

7. When you come back as an alumna from when you were a student, how has the campus and the people at Lawrence changed since you were a student, and how does it feel like it has stayed the same?

One of the changes was, I lived in a small house where the library is now and it was torn down. Our hours were, you had to be in by, I don't know, something like eight o'clock weeknights. After the first report card, I don't know what the average was, you could stay out until ten. And I was aiming for that because I had my husband-to-be here, who was a sophomore.

There's another thing, the tradition of freshman girls against sophomore girls. Something, I can't remember, out at the athletic field, they were guarding some fence and I can remember climbing over that fence. And there were a couple of boys I admired, football players, and I cut my leg on the wire, and they were there to rescue me and take me into the gym and put iodine or something on my leg. And I never knew what it was all about, it was early in my freshman year.

8. How was the relationship between students, faculty, and the administration?

We all got along; I don't think there were any problems with the faculty at all. The president was a little more formal, but after that everybody was very different. He had a meeting, I guess it was when I was a senior, he had the sorority presidents come in, and offered us all a cigarette to have, which made me mad. Number one, I didn't smoke and number two, I thought he was trying to soften us up. It was President Barrows. I saw a lot of years later he was visiting my brother-in-law who had been chairman of the Board and my nephew who was also chairman of the Board, but he told me he was going to Switzerland, there's a school that he was joining. He died on the golf course here before he ever got there. But in the meantime, my girls heard about it and I thought it sounded wonderful. My youngest daughter said she wanted to go to some school away from Appleton, this is still in high school, she said the next minute she found herself on the way to Switzerland. They all have traveled a lot. They did everything I wanted to do and I haven't been able to.

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But you've traveled a lot...

My main traveling has been after my second husband died. That was when I was associated with the Stanford center, with which I am still. We've gone to Russia four or five times, and I've gone to North Korea a couple of times, and China a lot of times, and Australia to visit my daughter, and Antarctica with my son. And I took each of my grandchildren on a trip, a Greek Island cruise, London, Paris. I've had a great time. I tell everybody not to think life stops at 50. Well, I was 43 when my husband died, but once I got into my fifties, I lived in a different way, not as a mother and wife, but as a world citizen.

9. What were some other activities that your sorority did while you were involved in it?

Many of them since have charities, they work with children, things like that. I cannot remember, maybe but I just can't remember. But since I was the president of the sorority my senior year, I should have known what we were doing. We did have a dance with lights overhead that went around and white gloves and things like that once a year, but it was not exactly something for fun. I think the important thing was that we supported one another. Once people were in a sorority and they needed help on work or anything, they got it. And I had never heard of sororities until I came up here. A friend of my mother's

in Shorewood, Wisconsin, had a daughter here and she must have gotten into the sorority because I didn't know anything. It was all a mystery and surprise. But I enjoyed it and made good friends.

10. And are you still in contact with these sorority sisters?

Two of my sorority sisters are here, we have four of us for the class reunion and two of them are my sorority sisters.

11. We're almost done. Is there anything else you would like to share or tell about your experience at Lawrence, or maybe during the time you were on the Board of Trustees or the Alumni Association?

Well, it's interesting. Because I think I was the first woman chairman, I found it difficult because there are various phrases and sentences you say and someone would always be correcting me. When we passed a ruling that no one could smoke during meetings, I talked to President Warch and my nephew who had been the chairman of the Board of Trustees, and they said, "Well you're president now, you've got to tell everybody." And we did have one trustee who was fine who had always smoked through all the meetings. And there's another one who in a committee meeting took out a cigarette and I said, "We don't smoke in the meetings." He got up and walked out and never came back. So I think if I had been a man I might have been seen as more forceful. I think everyone saw me as kind of a change. It's hard for men to adapt to women in authority.

Okay, well that concludes the interview.

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