
INTERVIEW WITH IRENE NORDINE, CLASS OF 1934

Denise Cook

...State University. This is Denise Cook of the Class of 1981, representing ISU Alumni Services and I am talking to Irene Nordine of the Class of 1934. The time is Homecoming 1979. In this bit of oral history we hope to recapture some of the moments, thoughts, and events that were important in 1934. We hope that those of you who will listen to this conversation will find the content interesting and informative. To start, Illinois State University had a record enrollment of 19,576 students this fall. Ms. Nordine, what do you remember about the size of the student body in 1934?

Irene Nordine

Well, it—not nearly as large as it is now and I would think that our whole class could have encompassed one class coming out of a building as I just came through the campus.

Denise Cook

Those big lecture halls...

Irene Nordine

Yeah, they were just streaming out, and we streamed, but not in such a large volume as that!

Denise Cook

Really? Probably less than my high school had.

Irene Nordine

Right. I imagine about 1200.

Denise Cook

Really? What were the size of your classes like?

Irene Nordine

Oh, 30, 35. A big one was 500.

Denise Cook

That's big.

Irene Nordine

All the student body fit into Capen Hall, which we had to go to every Monday morning and sing "Funiculi, Funiculà" with Professor Westhoff.

Denise Cook

Oh, really!

Irene Nordine

Yeah.

Denise Cook

Oh. I don't think they'd stand for that now.

Irene Nordine

I doubt it.

Denise Cook

Today, there's about 2,500 faculty and support staff personnel working on this campus. Can you relate to or even imagine this?

Irene Nordine

Well, I can imagine it, but let me tell you what was there when we were there. Dr. Rachel Cooper and one nurse comprised the health team. The business office had Randolph Marsh, Elsie Brenneman, Fern Melrose, and eight other people, and they ran the school. The president and the deans each had maybe one part-time secretary.

Denise Cook

What do you remember about some of these administrators when you were a student?

Irene Nordine

Well, President Fairchild was the head of the school, we had Dean Schroeder, who was the Dean of Academics, Dean O. Lillian Barton, Dean of Women, and Ralph Linkins, Dean of Men. And one of the buildings is named for Ralph now. He was a rather short man. She was a tall woman. Very—I suppose you'd say "warm" then, but not really. We had very, very strict rules. I don't think anybody would stand for them now but we did, most of the time.

Denise Cook

Were you involved in athletics, dramatics, or any other out-of-class activities?

Irene Nordine

I was quite active in dramatics. Jesters, Gamma Phi, no, not Gamma Phi, that was the Gamma Phi Circus that we...

Denise Cook

Right, gymnastics.

Irene Nordine

Yeah, I didn't do that. We had orchesis. Is there still an orchesis director?

Denise Cook

Oh no, I don't think so.

Irene Nordine

And we had great main dancers come down and we got to watch them and got to practice with them. Running around with our flimsy little costumes and stuff and it was lots of fun. It was so much different than it is now. Although we thought we were sophisticated and, quote, worldly, end quote.

Denise Cook

Oh, I'm sure. Did they have a student government in those days?

Irene Nordine

Just the classes. There was a sort of a Student Council. They had an Honor Council for women and you were elected to that by the faculty and you had a small voice in the administration, but very small.

Denise Cook

Oh, can you tell us some—oh, okay—from the academic side, who are some of the professors that you like to remember?

Irene Nordine

Well, John Kinneman, I think he's retired. Is Dick Browne still around the campus?

Denise Cook

I wouldn't...

Irene Nordine

John—I was in Social Sciences and John Kinneman was a sociologist—and Dick Browne was Economics. He's since gone on to be, I want to say, head of the Board of Higher Education in Illinois and he always played tennis. And at that time I always thought both John and Dick were ancient men. Well, and looking back they had just received their masters about two years before, so they weren't much older than we were, but they—in those days you looked up to your professors, and they were something—they scared us to death too, I might say. Then there was Laura Pricer, from the south, who was in Literature, Malcolm [Hammerlund?], Peterman—Peterson, and Lancaster in Education. [Dewey?], we all were swearing by [Dewey?] at that time. He was just becoming a voice in the world. And then there was Eleanor Welch the librarian. A little bitty library, it's gone now too. Most of our buildings are gone, I might say. One—

Denise Cook

Yeah, how has it changed to, you know...

Irene Nordine

Oh, I can't relate to it. Old Main was still standing and we—our idea of communicating with one another and all the events were posters on the bulletin board. The four corners of Old Main, and there was a place, you know, where you'd sign up for this and being nice, gentlemanly little people and ladylike women, we would sign our friends' names up to some sort of... so its—and, you were called to say "Why weren't you at such-and-such" or "You owe so-and-so" because you didn't sign up and you didn't come, so... The lounge, the student lounge, was the classic seating [inaudible], we finally got that going, was one room. Those of us that lived in Bloomington came out and bought our lunch and we ate it in the basement outside the women's john in Old Main. Most unattractive! So—but those—we survived, I just, speaking of lunch, I just stopped at the Steak 'n Shake on my way up here and I had a hamburger and a cup of tea. \$1.39. In 1934, the year of our class, the first Steak 'n Shake was founded here in Bloomington—

Denise Cook

Yeah, this is the original...

Irene Nordine

—and you could get a hamburger and a cup of coffee for twenty cents. So it was fine to have change.

Denise Cook

It is unreal. I wish...

Irene Nordine

It is unreal.

Denise Cook

Okay, what were the major national moments and events that occurred during your college years?

Irene Nordine

Well, if you've talk with any of the other classes of the 30s, you know we were going through the Great Depression. Words fail me when I talk about. Radio was the highlight of our lives. We had a—I think I would say now that we had the first Second City. We had a little radio broadcast. I— It must have been over at Bloomington station and we would broadcast the news but we would get all the crazy things of the news and we would tell about [imitating toothless person: "somebody who lost all of her teeth and we would talk like this"] and it was sort of a Second City sort of thing and improvise as we went along. Some of us were script writers, some of us wrote larger things, but the whole group were sort of creating the [inaudible].

Denise Cook

Is that part of your—you said you were involved in theater—was that mainly the theater people, or—?

Irene Nordine

Yes, prob—mostly. It wasn't a part of our curriculum, some—I guess, some of them were getting—but there was no course for radio announcers, you know. Well, heaven forbid, you took classes to teach, not to [inaudible]. The other thing that was going in those times was Townsend Pension. Do you remember that? No. Mr. Townsend was from California and he decided that everybody should have 200—every senior citizen over 60 should have \$200 a month. And he or she should spend that within the month. There was no Social Security, you see the New Deal came in in 1933 and so there was no Social Security and everybody—well, for instance, coming up to campus from Bloomington was a nickel on the streetcar and some of my friends could not get to class because they didn't have the money. Tuition was \$9 a quarter, so—and some of my friends could not come because they didn't have the money. When we got out of school was another story because there were no jobs. If you were a Smith-Hughes, an Ag major, or a Home Ec major, or [Wilk Ed?], you could, because there was a national program for that, but us poor old Soc and History and Literature majors had no...

Denise Cook

The arts had one, right?

Irene Nordine

The arts a little, but not at that time, not in 34. That came later and our—my first job was \$70 a month for nine months. \$630 a year. But I was fortunate because I taught in Bloomington and the people who went to the country got \$60 a month and had to stay at a School Board home, get up early, and fix their own fires. So its—[laughs]—I talk about it, I just am not really sure I lived through history and I don't think I'm creaking as yet—

Denise Cook

...that sounds really [inaudible]...

Irene Nordine

—but when you pass a certain age, you get—you have your memories and things have happened within your lifetime and maybe will happen within yours.

Denise Cook

I don't know. What was your main source of information in those days? Did they have a Weekly Vidette back then?

Irene Nordine

Oh, of course!

Denise Cook

Yeah.

Irene Nordine

Of course, oh, *The Vidette* was always wrong. They always misquoted you. I'm sure that they don't do that now.

Denise Cook

They've been accused—

Irene Nordine

And they kept us informed on what was going on on campus and the—but that was about all. You had all your—the sort—the Wrightonians and Philadelphians, did anybody tell you about those? The debating societies?

Denise Cook

No, uh-uh, no.

Irene Nordine

And they were debating and speech, you learned to make speeches and then you had contests. The debating—there were great debate teams and our—the chairman of our class now, Wendell Oliver, the retired judge Wendell Oliver, and Clifford Scott I believe, were debating in international debates and Englishmen came here and we heckled and so on and so forth. So we thought that we were in tune with the world, but we had—and of course radio was our main source of current events and the whole world—with *The Vidette* giving us a...

Denise Cook

What did you do for leisure then?

Irene Nordine

Well, about the same things I guess you'd—although we danced to the big name bands. That was—we went to Mackinaw Dells, to Funks Grove, [inaudible] Valley was out there and there was a place in Bloomington—and of course, many times you went to Chicago to hear—to the Aragon Ballroom to—Wayne King and Jan Garber played for our homecoming. And there were a thousand people there. And that was in the old gym. I don't—do they still have that? I haven't been around campus.

Denise Cook

I don't think so. Which—what was the name of it?

Irene Nordine

It was McCormick Gym.

Denise Cook

Oh, we have McCormick, I don't know if it's the same one.

Irene Nordine

Well, I'll have to take a look. I—so busy dodging students driving here that I didn't get a chance.

Denise Cook

What were some of the things you remember about Normal and Bloomington?

Irene Nordine

Well, having lived in Bloomington all my life, it's sort of difficult to sort out all the things, the townspeople were, I guess, as cordial then as they were now. They—it was much smaller then. I noticed coming in its 41,000 and I think it was 20 then. And it's—at that time it was a railroad center, where the Chicago & Alton, which is now part of the Amtrak—and a lot of the men worked there. State Farm had just started, it also had its start here in Bloomington and I can remember the first secretary, the Mecherle, the founder, and they lived—they had just one little room. Of course, we lived through the bank closings and that—only one bank stayed open. Many people lost their shirts and more in that. People who were blue collar workers did better in keeping their jobs than the white collar, the [inaudible]. People—always was—Bloomington was then known as the Hub of the Corn Belt or the Buckle on the Corn Belt, you know, or either one of those and it was a shopping center for quite a ways around. We did some studies of where people lived and who subscribed to The Pantagraph and who the clerks were in some of the downtown stores. We found that they came from little towns around and I don't know whether that's still true or not because I haven't been—but I imagine the radius is much larger now than

it was at that time. So it was kind of fun, coming back and forth. And I could get here. I got lost getting here, I live—coming down Main Street I got lost. So...

Denise Cook

You said you lived in Bloomington, but do you remember where most of the other students had housing arrangements?

Irene Nordine

Well, they were either—you had to stay in Fell Hall if you were a freshman. Then there was no place for men as a residence hall at that point, but most of them stayed in homes, private homes. There were no apartments, my goodness gracious, there were no apartments. Many of the people worked for their room and board at that time because help was hard to get for the faculty and you worked for your room and board, period. Not for five or ten dollars or anything else, that was it. There were a lot of rooming houses and then there were a lot of places where people just took one or two students. And I don't know, they were down School Street, University. Some of them were built especially for that, those—I think they're all gone now too.

Denise Cook

Probably, yeah.

Irene Nordine

Great big old square houses with a family living downstairs and big rooms upstairs with two students and no more. And all the—

Denise Cook

Great sorority houses!

Irene Nordine

Yeah, all of the—they would, they would. But they were all approved, and you had to get the approval of the dean to stay in any of them. So...

Denise Cook

Is there anything I skipped over that—

Irene Nordine

Well, oh, prices, any kinds of prices. Would you believe that ladies' leather shoes cost \$1.79? Gasoline 18 cents a gallon, milk 10 cents a quart, bread 5 cents, coffee 26 cents a pound. But we couldn't afford it.

Denise Cook

Yeah, you didn't have the money...

Irene Nordine

It was almost as it is now. So—

Denise Cook

Yeah, it's all relative...

Irene Nordine

But, we were all—we thought we were having a lot of fun. We—and we—we really—I think those of us who graduated at—look back on—I don't know, before nor since. ISNU at that time, not ISU, had a very good reputation. I went to the University of Chicago for my master's following this and had absolutely no make-up and many of my friends there came from other schools, private schools, and they had to make—have courses in thesis writing. And we learned the hard way here, our professors were really tough. When you turned in a paper here you knew you were turning in one. Believe me, you knew that you had turned in one. And they had a depth and, you know, a love of teaching and as I say now, they seemed ancient. But they were all very relatively young. And with it, quite with it. Very friendly with the students, you know, it was—you knew them off campus as well as on.

Denise Cook

Yeah, someone else mentioned too...

Irene Nordine

But they still had the dignity. There wasn't camaraderies but it was just a fellowship, more formal. But they were really wonderful people to be around, and our classmates, we had—Bill Kuhfuss was in our class and he has been the national president of, and let me get it wrong, not the Farmer's Union, but the Farm Bureau. And it's gone quite on—see, all the guys that were in Ag really had it made because then they could buy up the land and—

Denise Cook

Right, yeah, get a head start...

Irene Nordine

Many of them—the course here was recognized as well as the one at—or better than the one at University of Illinois. So that they got good—Hudelson was the professor there. Being a drama person you got everybody, and you know I was also very nosy and I was in asking all these questions with every—all the other classes, so that I thought that it was—Bill I guess is about our most national, I hope I haven't hurt anybody's feelings, and I think Wendell Oliver is the judge and we have several attorneys now. See, not everybody could get a job teaching at that point. So we've had to do something else and both [Bernie?] and Wendell went on to law school

and I went on into social work so that I kept my concern for people that I would with teaching. But I taught for five years in Bloomington. So... is that it?

Denise Cook

Okay. This is Denise Cook closing a conversation with Irene Nordine of the Illinois State University Class of 1934 as a part of the Homecoming experience for 1979.