

Helen Kayser

Interviewed by Ruth Doyle on December 10, 1982 at Helen Kayser's apartment.
Oral history tape number: 30

Tell me where you were born.

I was born in Madison in 1892.

Were you born in your own home?

I was born in my own home, which was on the corner of East Gorham and Livingston Street, and is still occupied today, by a legal firm.

Tell me about your house.

It was an enormous house. We had a large family and the up-shot was that we had to have a large house to live in. We had rooms on three floors. On the third floor of that house, it was really a gaming room. And it had a piano in it and it also had marvelously waxed floors. We taught all of the young people in the neighborhood to dance in that place. When I was in high school, we used to have spreads on the weekend. You see, we had to make our own fun in those days. There was no radio or television, so you made your own fun.

What do you mean by a spread?

Your classmates would all come and their mothers would make the proper... make a bowl of potato salad or bake the proper pan of brownies, and then we ate up in that room.

How many children were there in your family?

There were seven children in my family. I was the third from the youngest.

Are you the surviving child now?

No. I have two sisters living. I think it's quite remarkable, Ruth, that the girls in the family all achieved octogenarian status. I have a sister in California and I have one who formerly lived in California but now lives in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin. Both of them at present are in nursing homes.

Are they older than you or younger?

My sister Vera is younger than I am by several years and my sister Esther is older than I am by several years.

Isn't that marvelous!

It was a wonderful family. As I say, we didn't have all this extraneous entertainment, so we created our own fun. We would play by the hour down at the lake, pounding stones and putting them into little vials to make pretty little geological arrangements. We didn't realize at the time that we were tampering with nature, I'm afraid, but we did it at any rate.

Where did you go to school?

I went to the Lincoln School, which was at that time known as the Second Ward School.

It must have been only a couple of doors from where you lived.

It was only a brief block. It was a wonderful school. We had no indoor facilities, so in the winter time we went out to an outdoor toilet house and sat on very frosty holes.

It makes me shudder to think of it.

It makes me shudder to think of it, too.

And you went there for eight grades?

I went there through the eighth grade. Then I went to the old Madison High School, which was then the old stone building, in the present location of the Madison Area Technical College.

The old stone building, I gather, was removed.

That was removed and the new building was erected. We walked to school every day. Then, after graduating from high school, I went on to the university. We walked every day of our lives from where we lived and back home again at lunch time. I think probably my strong genes can be attributed to the fact that I had plenty of exercise.

I'm sure that must have made a difference. But you probably wouldn't have been able to stand the exercise if you hadn't had strong genes to begin with.

Well, I had strong genes. I'm grateful to my parents.

What was your father's business?

My father [Adolph Kayser] was a lumberman. My father was also very much interested in politics. He was the mayor of Madison at one time. Did you know that?

I didn't know that. When was that?

There again I'm weak on dates. He was approached by a group of businessmen in Madison who thought... he had always been very much interested in politics and very much interested... he had a strong sense of commitment to doing his civic duty for the community in which he lived so many years. He ran for mayor and he said "I will do it with the proviso that I do it for one term and one term only." He said "It's very important for me to have time to dedicate to my family." And that's exactly what he did.

That's marvelous! You have two brothers? Three brothers?

I had two brothers. And five sisters.

And they all went to the university?

They all went to the university, yes. They didn't all graduate. Some of them decided to marry before graduation time. At that time there seemed to be sort of a stigma against married women attending the university. How that was, I haven't the faintest idea.

It was true in my time at the university. I remember a girl in our house got married and you would have thought she had done some dreadful, sinful thing. She couldn't stay in college. She had to move. That's when you were running it.

Running what?

The university.

Oh, no, I never had ambitions of that direction, Ruth.

What do you recall about high school and the courses that you took and so on? Did you feel well prepared for college?

Yes, compared with... I was a B+ student in high school. I felt very adequately prepared. At that day and age, you didn't go to college unless you knew your tables, which we used to call mathematics. And you learned to spell, by gum, or you were not graduated from high school. So

when I got to college – it used to be sort of a joke in one of the English classes that I took – the boys used to pass their themes to me to check the spelling before they were turned in, because they were poor spellers. I have a theory that spelling is either something you do naturally or it's pretty tough going.

Did you have a lot of writing to do in your courses?

Oh, we wrote a theme every week. The teacher read it and graded it. In grade school, too. At the Lincoln School, as it was later called, we had a wonderful teacher in the fourth grade. I shall never forget her. Miss [Elizabeth] Herfurth, by name. Friday afternoon was a special afternoon in school. You got to do the things you thought were fun to do. She was strong on educating people in all phases of things. She used to show us famous pictures of art on Friday afternoon. And then we'd always have a spelling countdown, as we called it.

Those are very exciting. I remember.

You learned to spell not just by accident.

You understood what you were doing. You were practicing it all the time.

She was a remarkable woman. She was light miles ahead of her generation in teaching. She could teach school today and employ with a firm but gentle hand all the techniques that are required of a good teacher today.

She did all those things.

And she probably just did it instinctively.

Tell me about your social life, as a family of seven children with parties on the third floor of your house.

Social life. My father and mother believed very firmly in bringing friends to our home, because we had a big house. You were always allowed to invite a friend to have Sunday night supper, and then after that we would have a sing fest. My father had quite a nice voice. My sister, Stella Kayser, who was a very beloved music teacher in Madison for many, many years, until her death about eight years ago, played the piano and we sang songs. We knew all the patriotic songs, we knew all the Christmas carols. We could just go through a whole book of songs without practically having to look at the pages.

Tell me about your outdoor recreations. They must have been considerable, because you lived right on the shore of the lake.

At a very early age, we had a swimming teacher who came and taught us all to swim. My parents were not willing to take any chances on having to fish a child out of the lake half-saturated with lake water, so we learned to swim at an early age.

I was absolutely no good in athletics. As a matter of fact, when I was at the university, I tried to learn to bowl, but the balls always went down the wrong trough. Finally Miss Abby Miggy, who was the director of that department at the time, decided that what I needed was to take a rest course over the period that would have been required for me to learn my other skills. And there were three of my good friends who were in the same category, so you can imagine three giggly university girls, lying on cots in Lathrop Hall and chatting through the entire hour! It was a joke.

I didn't think in those days they recognized the need for relaxation. She must have thought that

you were tense.

Maybe I was, Ruth. I don't know.

Were you a sorority girl?

I was a Pi Phi.

And your sisters, too?

We were all Pi Phis in my family. After I was connected with the university, I just declined any connection with a sorority. I felt it was not the thing for me to do. Today I take rather a dim view of all that. Of course, we made wonderful friends in that way. I have – had, I should say – lifelong friends. Well, I still have one friend, Florence Johnston, who lives in Appleton, Wisconsin, who was a member of the same sorority.

Let me ask you this one question: Do you think being a Madison girl it was helpful to belong to the sorority? To get acquainted with people from outside of the city?

Yes, I think there was that advantage in it. In my family, however, we were all a rather gregarious type. We met friends easily and we made friends easily. It was an advantage in one respect but, as I say, I think a disadvantage in another way.

Let me go back for just a minute and ask you about your mother and father. You speak of them with great admiration. I get the feeling from what you say that they were a team, that it was your mother and father that made the decisions about your sisters and all that.

Yes, they were very much so. And they raised a family with a firm but gentle hand. My father was really... today I suppose he would have been a wonderful psychologist. He understood the importance of sitting down and talking things through. If you did something that was a no-no, instead of giving you a whop on the fanny, he would sit down and explain to you why that wasn't a desirable thing to do. Now, that was really pretty advanced thinking for those days.

Also it represented a commitment of time by him, if he had seven children to raise in that way. Tell me about your mother. Where did she come from?

My mother [Hedwig C. Stein Kayser] was a Madisonian. Her father was a lumberman. She grew up in Madison and went to the Ladies' Academy when she was a child.

Where was that?

That was on State Street. So-called genteel ladies went to the Academy when they came of high-school age.

What years would that have been?

Ruth, there again, that's my late weakness.

It must have been Civil War time.

I'm sure it was.

There weren't very many people, much less many women, going to academies in those days.

Well, you know, when I graduated from the university, the total enrollment of the university was 6,000 students. When I think of the size of the university today, I don't understand how students are able to survive with that terrific enrollment.

A lot of them don't.

I'm sure it's still a marvelous institution, but they can't have the personal attention that we had from teachers when we were there.

There weren't many women, although my mother lived in Chadbourne Hall, I think, about 1902, something like that, and that was full of women. Chadbourne Hall.

Well, I've heard it said that it was customary for women to go to college. There certainly was no dearth of women when I was there. I graduated in the class of 1914.

And there were a large number of women? How big was the Pi Phi chapter?

Oh, they didn't run chapters the size that they do now, if sororities still exist. I understand there are still some that continue.

The Pi Phi house must have been on Park Street, was it?

No, it was on Langdon Street, right at the turn, at the bend.

Where it still is now?

Well, it's been taken over by some other group. The Pi Phi chapter is no longer active.

When you were there, that was the house that was the Pi Phi house?

No, no. Actually the original house was there and a wonderful Madison architect by the name of Frank Riley re-did the entire house. He converted it into sort of a colonial style, which was extremely charming. It was a beautiful house, really and truly.

Did you have a job in summertime? Did women do that?

No. Your job was to stay home and help Mother.

Did Mother have a lot of help in the house?

There was always help. I sometimes laugh when I think about it now. We always had help. There was always live-in help available. And that live-in help was paid the magnificent sum of five dollars a week. We had one woman who was with us for many, many years and out of that magnificent salary that she was paid, she managed to buy a house in Madison and lived in it in great comfort to her dying day.

That is fascinating.

Yes. As a matter of fact, once we went to visit her. When my sister, who lived in North Carolina, was home, she said "Let's go and visit Minnie." So we went to visit Minnie. She was well along in her nineties at that time. Somebody said to Minnie, "You must have had remarkable health all your life," and she said "Well, I had the flu." Then she took us to a window and pointed out a peach tree that was planted in the garden. She said "I planted that from a peach pit and I hope I live to eat some of the fruit from it."

And did she do so?

Oh, no. No. She was in her nineties at the time.

You mentioned a while ago about having a man come to teach you all to swim. I assume you had a pier behind your house?

Oh, there was a pier behind the house. We had several boats. You know, with a large family, every body had to have a chance at the oars. That was an equal division of property. My father and mother worked out a schedule. Certain days Helen was allowed to take the boat out and other days it was Esther's turn or Stella's turn. It was really a peaceful family existence, although it was all operated on a basis of do what your father and mother expect of you and we knew exactly what they expected.

Did any of their children disappoint them?

My oldest brother, who was a fine businessman, went to Chicago to accept a job. He went out to California on a vacation, fell in love with California and moved to California. That was the disappointment that my father felt in him. He thought he was making a terrible mistake moving that far from home. California seemed a thousand-thousand-thousand miles away from Madison.

Well, it is quite a ways away.

Well, 't isn't now that you get on a plane and whiz through the air.

Was it your brother Paul who was the Ford dealer?

Yes, Paul was the Ford agent. And he was one of the first men who had a transplant of the aorta. He sort of made medical records in Madison. Doctors today who date back that far still refer to the fact that that was marvelous surgery.

How interesting! He must have had a genius of a doctor in those days.

Well, he went to Mayo's for that surgery.

And he lived through that operation?

He lived quite comfortably for two years and then the thing just went kaput. He died of a blood clot.

Are there any Kaysers in the business now?

No. Absolutely none.

He had no children?

Yes, he had two daughters: Ellen Frautschi and Judy Cook, who lives in the East. Somebody once said to Paul, "It's a shame to just have to dump a highly successful business down the drain." But girls didn't operate businesses of that kind at that time. It would be interesting to know if there are any women in that. Are there any?

I don't know. You certainly don't see them. Of course, I assume he got into the business at a very propitious time, when Fords were very much in demand.

A man by the name of Fox had the agency in Madison, but he was just plain not a good business man. The Ford Company just regulated by rule and rote and so they decided to replace him. My brother Paul just happened to step in at the right time. He learned in no time how to operate a business successfully. I've been told that he was regarded as the most successful Ford dealer in the state of Wisconsin.

Tell me something about your sister Stella. She had so many admirers.

She was just a dedicated teacher. Children all adored her – and with good reason. She just gave absolutely unselfishly of herself to them. I think nobody will ever know how many children

Stella taught without benefit of any remuneration. She believed if children had a talent, they were entitled to pursue it and that it was wicked not to give them a chance to do it. David Welton, who is now a very successful doctor in Charlotte, North Carolina, was one of her project students. I still hear from David. David used to play the organ at the old Capitol Theater in Madison. Capitol Theater is now the...

It's now the Civic Center.

Yes, right in that building. He played the organ and he played classical music. He developed a style all his own. Somebody said to me at one time, "When he plays, it's like hearing Stella play." But that wasn't true. He had a certain snit for playing popular music.

The ball danced on the words?

Yes.

They all got to sing with the organ?

Yes, we all got to sing. There was great patriotism in going to a movie in those days. At intermission time – I don't know if you remember that, Ruth – David would play on the organ and we'd all join in singing the patriotic songs.

From your days at the university, the main interest of women students was?

Having a good date.

I suppose that was. Everybody thought about Friday and Saturday.

The weekend. But that's just part of growing up, isn't it, Ruth, actually?

And, of course, there were plenty of places, like the Chocolate Shop.

Oh, yes. If you could get a beau to take you to the Chocolate Shop after a dance for one of those famous Chocolate Shop... Mr. [George J.] Daniel I think will go down in history as the creator of the best chocolate sauce in the world.

And that hot Swiss milk.

Oh! Wasn't that wonderful!

And the lovely Sunday dinners they served there.

He wove himself into the hearts of... I think plenty of romances took place in Mr. Daniel's famous Chocolate Shop.

I'm sure. Of course, there was a certain amount of romance going on at Lohmaier's, too.

Were girls allowed in Lohmaier's? Wasn't that a beer joint?

It was a beer joint, but we were allowed there. And we were allowed in Julius Giller's "The Flame."

Oh! Wonderful old Julius Giller.

The Campus. Is that what that was called? Herman Wagner owned it.

I don't remember that.

I never joined a sorority, so I lived in a room.

You never joined a sorority?

I never did.

Well, good for you!

Some wonderful guardian angel tapped me on the shoulder at the right moment.

And said this is not for you.

Yes.

Good for you, Ruth! I made good friends in belonging to a sorority. But I look back on the thing as a horrible mistake, because I saw how many people were hurt by wanting to join a sorority. We were really terrible snobs at heart, although we didn't think of it that way. We just thought we were trying to create a kind of homogeneous group of people who could live together and enjoy good fun.

I must say that some intellectual discussion occasionally went on at the Pi Phi house. We would invite one of our favorite professors to come over for dinner and it was a question of who got to sit next to the teacher, not so much because we were looking for gems of wisdom, but I think it was provoked by the fact that it was a good chance to butter up your favorite teacher. We weren't beyond that at all.

I lived in a house where so I ate all my meals in the Union practically. I realized when I graduated from college that what you say is true. My Wausau friends were all sorority girls. I was the only one that wasn't. I knew everybody they knew and I also knew hundreds of people they never knew at all. Mingling around in other groups on the campus, you got acquainted with all different kinds of people. They missed a lot of that. They were talking about that at a little reunion we had a couple of years ago, that John Weaver, for instance, had been in the university with us but they had never met him. They were talking about all the famous people out of our time that were here that they never got to meet.

Was John Weaver the wonderful mathematician?

No. He was the man that became president of the university, you know. He was Andrew Wilkerson John.

Oh, of course. Of course, Ruth.

He was a debating partner of Jim's.

Was Jim a fraternity man?

He belonged briefly to the Chi Phis and then he belonged briefly to the FAEs. In his sophomore year he gave them all up.

Good for Jim!

Yes. It took him a while to realize that.

Well, being a fraternity man wouldn't sit well with Jim, would it?

No. He had different interests than they had, I think. Nevertheless, it was a wonderful university.

And it still is a wonderful university. I'm saddened to think they're having some of the problems they're having at the university today. I think President O'Neill is doing a valiant job. It's unfortunate that economically these are just bad times for all schools, public and private.

Yes. He strikes me as a very classy kind of person. I think they're very lucky to get him to come here.

And his wife. Have you met his wife?

Yes.

Isn't she a charming person!

Very charming. And beautiful children.

It's a wonderful family. Are they enjoying living in the old Brittingham house?

I think so. Of course, that's a lovely place.

Oh! A beautiful piece of property! Is there still a squash court connected with it?

I think so. And I think there's a swimming pool there.

There used to be. Well, they deserve that.

They really do. And a beautiful view in all directions out there from that hill.

They're lucky to be in Madison, I think, and I do believe they appreciate it.

I think they do. Now, your sisters all went to the same university?

Oh, we all went to the university. That was it, yes. Several of my older sisters became engaged while they were in the university and they were more interested in matrimonial plans than they were in their university career. Two of them discontinued when they were juniors in college which, to this day, they still regret.

And they never went back?

They never went back to complete their education, which was unfortunate.

We talked a little bit the other day about Stella, but not a whole lot. Your mentioning going to London with her reminds me that she must have brought a lot of life and interest into your family, didn't she?

Stella! She was everybody's favorite. Somebody said to me at one time, "Aren't you jealous of everybody being so in love with Stella?" And I said "No. I just consider myself extremely fortunate to be able to share her with all her admirers." She was such a dedicated person professionally. Somebody said to her at one time, "How come that you and your sister Helen never married?" Stella's reply was, "We didn't know the last one that asked us to marry him was going to be the last one." That was typically Stella, wasn't it? Your children studied with her, didn't they?

One of them, yes. Ann enjoyed it. And I enjoyed it. I used to sit in on the lessons, because I had to wait for Ann. She really was... she had such marvelous taste in music that she passed on to kids.

She often felt that students weren't all designed to be Myra Hesses. Her theory was if she could impart an appreciation of music in the minds and hearts of these cunning, young children, that was sufficient.

She was musical from the time she was born?

We had a beautiful, old fashioned Roslind square piano. From the time that Stella was old

enough to toddle over and get herself up on the piano stool, she was twiddling with notes on the piano. It was just such an integral part of her, you know.

But not of any of the other children? There are no other musicians?

We all studied music in some way. Some had vocal lessons. I had piano lessons for many, many years and, I'm ashamed to say, I didn't keep it up. But it gave me an appreciation of music that has remained a life-long thing with me. One of my sisters had a very pleasing voice. She studied voice. Another one studied violin. That was agony for the family, because if you've ever had an "eee-eee-eee" – a six-year-old trying to hit the right strings on a violin – you know what agony that could be for a family. We used to have a great time twitting her about it, but she was such a good-natured person that she took it all in stride.

Stella really knew she was interested in piano.

She knew exactly where she wanted to go.

And she was in the music department at the university?

No. She was at the Wisconsin School of Music, which was Ada Bird's.

Did she study music at the university?

She studied music at the university. There was a marvelous piano teacher by the name of Maude Fowler. She studied with Maude Fowler for many years. She did graduate work at the University of Wisconsin. They have a good music department at the university but really not as outstanding as it might have developed into, I suppose, if there had been more funds to bring more professional people to the department. Stella also studied in Germany with a wonderful teacher. Frau Goettingshaffen was her name, which we always stumbled around on. She would very frequently go to Europe for a summer and study either in Germany or in England.

Stella always preferred to teach rather than be a performing artist herself?

Yes. Absolutely! She had no interest or... she was an excellent musician herself, but that never appealed to her. It was a matter of sharing her own enthusiasm for music with young children which she felt was so terribly important.

Was she one of the founders of the Wisconsin School of Music?

No. She was just on the staff at the School of Music. Ada Bird was the founder of that music school. She lived in our neighborhood and used to hear Stella playing on the piano. I remember her saying to my father at one time, "There's a girl who ought to have the opportunities to study music seriously. She has a unique talent for it." And how right Miss Bird was.

Stella was a wonderful teacher.

I appreciated that more... I appreciated it always, Ruth, but I think after Stella died and I began to hear people talking... well, she was really practically being knighted by some of them, you know, in their enthusiasm. Now, Katherine Coleman is one of the persons, I think I told you the other day, who used to go to the School of Music for an hour. She said "I'm not interested in learning to play the piano. I just want to be able to appreciate music. If you can just sit down and discuss music with me for an hour each day that I come, that will just answer my demands."

Stella had a number of very, very good students, didn't she? Students who were successful musicians?

Very successful. As a matter of fact, she had a young man by the name of Larry Elliott, who still lives in Madison. He teaches piano and is a marvelous artist in addition to it. He paints in the style of Aaron Bohrod. He and Mr. Bohrod are good friends. Larry is absolutely a self-taught artist. He chatted with various artists at one time, thinking that he might go to the Art Institute and study with somebody there. They said “Don’t ever make the mistake of studying. You have a natural talent, a natural gift for this, and it will all be destroyed if you do.” So he’s absolutely a self-taught artist.

And he was also a piano pupil.

An excellent piano pupil. He played with the Madison Civic Orchestra when he was only sixteen years old and did a stunning job. One of my favorite pictures in my kitchen is a picture of Larry. He’s a very dear, young man. He comes to see me quite frequently and we have wonderful hash sessions, especially about Stella.

She certainly had admirers all over the city, didn’t she?

Yes, she did, Ruth.

And she was always so pleasant. And so respectful. I never heard her raise her voice with a child or get cross with them. I suppose they must have disappointed her from time to time. I know my child did. She didn’t practice very much.

They were getting something out of it, though, Ruth. Stella was, I think, not only a beautiful person physically, she was beautiful within herself, too. She had marvelous ideals.

But she wasn’t pompous or anything.

Oh, no, no, no.

She was very relaxed.

Quite a humble person, you know, Ruth. I lived with her all those years and somebody said to me at one time, “Don’t you and Stella have...” “Well, of course we had differences of opinion about things. But I said “Anybody who can’t live happily with Stella just better stop and think about it.” You couldn’t possibly have a violent argument with Stella. That just wasn’t part of her nature.

Madison was lucky to have her as long as they did.

Yes, they were. I’m sure Madison appreciated her.

Now can we go back for just a minute to your career in the dean of women’s office? Did you have a particular jurisdiction?

I was sophomore advisor, which meant that students when they got into their sophomore year were needing some directives. You had to begin to think about what your major field was going to be at that time, because by the time you got to be a junior – I don’t know if the same theory applies today – you had to be ready to declare your major. Many were just floundering. That’s a very difficult decision to make, I think. Some people just instinctively know that they’re interested in medicine or law or professions of that nature but many of them have no idea of what they want or are interested in.

I began to be interested in finding out what I could about what job opportunities there were for young women when they left the university. As a result of that, finally I was devoting so

much time to that sort of thing that I think there were days when I probably kind of cheated on other phases of the work. Eventually the placement office at the university came into being. It demanded a full time person. That was just a matter of the outgrowth of the work that we did and that I happened to be interested in the office. Emily Cherbniuk became the head of that department and she became an advisor not only to women students but men students as well. She had a real feeling for that subject. She's living in California today. She comes back faithfully every year for her reunion at the university. She and I always have a wonderful visit together.

I gather she's made a wonderful spot for herself in Santa Barbara.

She has. She does volunteer teaching at one of the seminaries. She's very much involved in seminarian life. She's a superb cook, you know, and they love to come over. She has a favorite dish which she has dubbed her "seminarians' stew." She lives in a charming house in Santa Barbara. They come over and it's just become sort of standard joke that they have seminarian stew. That's very cute of her.

Yes. I think the whole guidance and career part of the university, as you say, except if you wanted to go to law school or medical school, the rest of the people were just sort of floating around. I think that they needed more guidance and information than they had, so that that office got to be very busy, her office.

Oh! It was an enormously busy office.

When there aren't many jobs, it isn't very busy. I was reading yesterday about how many fewer people and companies have come to interview this year.

Why do you think that is, Ruth?

They just aren't hiring. I think it's Depression times.

I thought, for instance, engineering jobs were just plentiful, but I heard from somebody the other day that even those are tapering off.

When engineering is profitable, a lot of people rush into engineering school and then they fill up the jobs.

And then the market is glutted.

Yes. And they have to wait again.

Do as many girls go into education as did formerly?

I guess I don't know. I think probably both men and women do, but not as many as they used to. And there's an absolute shortage of people willing to teach science or mathematics in the high schools.

They aren't equipped to do it, are they?

If you have a science or mathematical background, you go into another field where you make a lot more money. You don't go to teaching. Fitting everybody together and making it all come out even is very difficult.

That's one of the major problems, isn't it?

I can remember in the days when I was a student and you were in the dean of women's office. I don't know whether it was you or not. I had wonderful grades in my freshman year and I

couldn't remember that I studied very hard, so in my sophomore year I was fooling around in the first semester. At the end of six weeks I got two D's. And you called me in.

Oh! Yes. That was a routine thing we did. I think it was hard, Ruth, for students always to understand it, but it was done with the idea of trying to find out what was basically the matter with their study habits. Maybe they were in a field that they couldn't handle. So if anybody had a D or two D's, they got a little invitation to come in and chat about the matter with us.

That really stunned me, because I realized that somebody else knew what I was doing.

You thought it was strictly private?

I thought it was private and I could take care of it by myself. Then I realized that somebody had been looking at my records and that I'd better clean it up. It did help, of course. It did help. I went right to work.

You got busy.

Yes. And got rid of them right away. That was an interesting experience. I must say, when I was briefly in the dean of women's office, I enjoyed those contacts when you invited people in just to talk about something. You meet a lot of interesting students.

You know, that office kept a personal record card of every student in the university. Susan Davis handled freshmen, I took care of sophomores, and Louise Troxel took care of juniors and seniors. By the time the junior and senior class came along, there was considerable dwindling. We sent for every student and invited them to come in to give us an opportunity to get acquainted with them, try to acquaint them with the services of the office, so that they could feel perfectly free and comfortable about coming in to chat with us at any time.

Funny, funny things used to occur in connection with that. I don't know whether that policy still prevails today, but it used to be if you missed the last class before vacation time, notice was sent to our office saying that the student had missed the last class. I remember one student after another coming in to say that their grandmother had died at Thanksgiving time and that they had to go home for Grandma's funeral. Well, one day, I think after about five or six of them had tried to do that, I did an extremely undiplomatic thing. I said to the next student that came in, "Now, don't tell me that your grandmother..." "I thought I was giving it a light touch, but I may have only fooled myself on that. With that, this girl burst into tears and said "But my grandmother did die." She was a very prominent woman who lived in Milwaukee. The following day the papers were full of accounts of her sudden death.

So you had to be careful. I've been retired now for three years, but I think at Thanksgiving time it's very common now for students to take that whole week off.

Oh! Do teachers pay much attention to class attendance now?

I don't think they do in the same way that they used to. I don't think they keep roll in the same way.

They don't?

I don't think so. I think some of them do, probably. It probably varies. And in smaller classes, of course, they would notice that you weren't there.

I understand they have a lot of social activity connected with students today on the last day of classes. And sometimes if there's a special occasion during the week or something like that,

students bring goodies to class to eat and even some of them occasionally bring a bottle of champagne which is shared all the way around in the department.

I think that's right.

Is that common practice?

It does seem to me also that the school year is so short now. The university is now adjourned, for all intents and purposes, until about the last week of January. We used to have that two weeks and then we came back for examinations.

I think in that respect the university made a wise decision there, Ruth. I think the idea of going home and having a jolly Christmas vacation with all the festivities that go with it and then having to come back and face up to exams, I think, was a terrible strain on students. I do think that the present system is an improvement in that way, although I do not agree with the university about beginning classes before Labor Day. How they can alter that situation, I don't know.

I don't know. I don't like it either. But I also notice that, for instance, in the law school, that long, long mid-year vacation which started on about the fifteenth of December and would end way, way in the third or fourth week of January, five or six weeks...

This will be a tape, our second conversation, with Helen Kayser. Do you want to say something, Helen?

It's wonderful to have a visit with Ruth. I haven't seen her in a number of years and she's just her same chipper self.

There are a couple of things I want to review after our last meeting. One is that I'd like to know more about your father. You told us about your mother, where she grew up and what she had done, and I'd like to know about your father and his business.

My father was a lumberman. He had extensive lumber holdings in the northern part of the state. At Christmas time we always had, we thought, the most beautiful Christmas tree in Madison. It was specially selected by the man who worked for him up there. Incidentally, Ruth, did you know that my father was mayor of Madison for one term? Did you know that?

You had told me that. But he worked his whole career in Madison?

My father spent his entire career in Madison.

Was he born in Madison?

No. My father was born in Germany and came to this country when he was just a matter of months old. His family moved on to a farm up in the area near Prairie du Chien. His father was a farmer. They were simple people. I never knew my grandfather. I never knew either of my grandmothers. I knew just my mother's father. I was denied all the privileges of being able to sing "Over the river and through the woods to Grandmother's house we go."

They didn't live long enough?

No, they didn't.

It must have been quite a job to be a lumberman up in the northern part of Wisconsin and maintain your family in Madison.

My father was such a dedicated family man. We were never neglected by him. But he would be

gone for long periods of time, particularly in the winter time. And he always arrived home with a deer that somebody had shot on the property. We indulged in venison steak during the winter time, which some people just dislike intensely, but my mother knew exactly how it should be prepared properly. That was just regarded as a high treat in our family.

Did you have other wild game? Ducks? Pheasants?

Oh, yes. Ducks and pheasants. Oh, yes. And fish galore. Of course, Ruth, you know, when you grow up in the horse and buggy age, you don't understand what the deprivations of people today would consider they were subjected to. You didn't have a refrigerator, you had an old-fashioned ice box. And, you know, speaking of buggies reminds me, Ruth, of a thing at the university museum. I wonder if that is still in existence today. My father used to take us down there, if we were well-behaved, of a Saturday afternoon. Daniel Webster's carriage was there and there was a marvelous, old, black gentleman [Benjamin Butts], whom we called "Uncle Sam," and who permitted us to sit in Daniel Webster's carriage.

Really a treat!

Is that museum still in operation?

The museum is certainly still in operation. And I think Daniel Webster's carriage is probably still there. I'm not absolutely sure. I remember seeing it, but I never can tell, either. That might have been thirty years ago when my children were little.

Did you take them on treats like that?

Yes, I used to take carloads of kids from the neighborhood – and then try to keep track of them all as they scampered around there.

You had a handful of responsibility, didn't you, Ruth?

Yes. So that was your father's total business? He never retired?

My father retired at an early age.

I remember my grandmother and grandfather retired. They were very young and went off to California in the winter time, both of them sleeping together in an upper berth with baskets of food to keep them on the trip. They didn't want to spend any money.

Weren't those wonderful times, Ruth, when we traveled by train! I much prefer it. Of course, flying is marvelous. But on the other hand, you don't see anything of the countryside and I hate to be denied that.

Were you able to travel by train? Did your family keep a cottage up there in the north?

Yes, we had a cottage up north. In fact, up until about ten years ago my family still retained the cottage. We would go and spend summer vacations on that beautiful lake up there. Of course, in addition to that, in the summertime we lived on the lake. My father would rent a cottage out in what is now Maple Bluff. We would spend summer out at Maple Bluff, or what is now part of Shorewood. There were cottages available there. That was considered a very exciting vacation.

That was country living!

Yes, that was country living.

There were lots of them. I talked to Mrs. Coleman. I had a long talk with her on the tape

recorder. Of course, the house that she lives in in Maple Bluff originally was their cottage, where they spent their summers.

That's right. How is Katherine?

She's quite feeble, but she certainly is nice. She must have gone to school with you.

She was in my class. I think she and Jerome were twins. They were so intellectual that it was just almost beyond any of us lowly folk to chat with them.

I know she went to Bryn Mawr.

She was a marvelous student.

She gave the oration at your graduation.

She did?

Yes. She told me about that. If you graduated when she did, she was the class speaker.

Graduated from high school? I did not attend Bryn Mawr.

Any of your other family go into the lumber business?

No. My oldest brother was totally disinterested in it. He had a strict, strict business career and eventually moved to California. My father thought it was so dreadful to move that far away from the family that for a period of time he was almost unwilling to communicate with my brother.

Your father did have strong family feelings.

Oh, he had intense family feelings.

That's nice, though, isn't it?

It made for a beautiful family life. I feel badly when I think of families that are so sort of disrupted today. If they haven't had the experience of knowing what warm, caring family living is about, they can't ever know what they've missed, can they, Ruth?

No, they can't. And it's so easy for people to get sort of separated and go off in all different directions now.

Well, of course, that has advantages. But as far as the family unit is concerned, it makes a difference, doesn't it?

It certainly does. When you graduated from college, did you go to work for the university right away?

No. I went into social studies work for a period of time. I was down in Alabama. That was a rude awakening for me. I wasn't prepared for the attitude that many southern people had toward black people at that time. I remember walking down the street one day with Roxie, a little woman, a black girl who came in to do housework and errands for us. As I walked down the street with her, Roxie was at least ten feet behind me. I turned around and said "Roxie, I can't talk to you. Why don't you get up here?" She said "Oh, no, ma'am. I ain't allowed to do that."

That was a shock!

That was a shock. But you learned to adjust to those things. My feeling was just one of compassion to think that people can be born with such instinctive prejudices against people just

because of the color of their skin.

What sort of work did you do?

I did social work.

Did you work for an agency?

I worked for the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company. We used to call on people in the area and try to make sure that they were comfortable and that their needs were being taken care of. It was an interesting job, but life in the South really and truly didn't agree with me in every respect. After several years of that, I came back to Madison. I grew up at a time, Ruth, when it wasn't customary to get out and find a job the minute you graduated from college. You probably stayed at home and did helpful things for your family.

And learned to sew.

Yes, learned to sew, learned to cook, and learned to do the things that I think many young people today aren't given an opportunity to learn much about.

When you came back, you were at home for a while?

I was at home for a number of years. I did what everybody in that day and age was inclined to do. Either I thought I ought to run a tea room, which I would have been... I'm not a good businesswoman. I love to cook, but I would have been a poor operator of a tea shop. Or to have a gift shop, which I had at one time. That was an interesting experience for me, too. I learned pretty quickly that I was not cut out for the competition of the business field and so I got out of that rather promptly.

Were you in it by yourself?

I was in it by myself. It was called "The Shop of Helen Kayser." It was over on Monona Avenue, next to the Orpheum Theater. Of course, that was a wonderful time because Melvin Douglas, who was then Melvin Hesselberg, was playing in a stock company theater there, the Jackson Theater people. Melvin and I got to be great friends. Once, many years later, after he had married Helen Geghan and was operating out of California, I went to see him in a performance. As we came away from the theater, all of a sudden Melvin walked out and he threw up his hands and he said "Madison! Madison!"

This was in New York?

No, in Los Angeles. It was wonderful fun to know him.

He must have been a charming person.

And his father was a marvelous musician, you know.

No, I didn't know that.

The family name was Hesselberg. As a matter of fact, he gave a concert at one of the clubs. What do we call the College Club?

The University Club?

No, no. Not the University Club. The College Club, which was in the old Vilas Hall.

He gave a concert there? What was his instrument?

Piano. Oh, he was really an outstanding pianist!

But Melvin Douglas really lived a long and fruitful career, didn't he? He never really retired.

He kept right on going. I think he died when he was along in his eighties and I think he had continued to work in theater all during those years. He had a great, great talent for that sort of thing. He fell into the right nest.

Well, what did you do? Did you sell your gift shop?

Yes, I sold it.

That must have been quite a responsibility.

It was, but I loved it because I love pretty things. It was fun to learn how to deal with the public. But I was just simply not cut out to be a businesswoman.

Did you lose a lot of money?

No. I disposed of it and I did so and came out, I think, even to the last nickel or dime.

Wonderful! So you really did have talent after all.

No.

You figure that wasn't talent, it was just luck?

Yes.

Well, then what did you do next?

My next career was connected with the university. Louise Troxel was the dean of women and a marvelous, marvelous person. She decided that it would be appropriate for me to take a job with the university in her office. It took a little persuading on her part to convince me I could handle the thing, because I had absolutely no training for the job. What training people have today, I'm not sure that it really prepares them for the job. You just have to almost learn on a job of that kind, Ruth.

Use your instincts.

Yes. Use your instincts and your heart, if you have one.

I did that kind of work, you know. I was in the dean of women's office briefly and then I went to the law school. It is a matter of learning on the job, learning the practical answers to difficult questions.

The thing that troubled me most about it was people would say to me, "How are the little girls behaving?" Well, of course, the job really had absolutely nothing to do with their behavior. It was a matter of trying to help them adjust to university life and to some of the many problems that come up in connection with it. There was always the dating problem for girls. Thank heavens there were no... at least we didn't know if that sort of thing existed. There were no drug problems and drinking was pretty much a no-no at that time. It wasn't generally accepted that young ladies drank. No.

You were in the dean of women's office, I remember, when I was a student.

Yes. I remember that very well, Ruth.

And that's going on forty-five years ago. I'm having my forty-fifth reunion this year.

Do you go back to reunions, Ruth?

Yes. Jim and I always go. We figure some Madison people should show up. Some people come from a long ways. We go particularly to his, because he was the president of his class and he's often in charge of it. He didn't realize it was going to be a lifetime sentence when he got elected. We do go. Not many people come.

I went back to my fifth reunion. A friend of mine, who had gone to Harvard, came back here with his wife to attend her reunion. He said "Only the fish come back for reunions around here." He just thought it was the most boring thing he'd ever attended. Well, I really had a pretty good time, although I must say that everybody looked so much fatter to me, especially the men. I didn't find them terribly stimulating.

I found the rare high school reunions – I've only had two – are much more exciting and interesting.

That's absolutely true, Ruth. I used to go back for high school reunions and that was fun. Of course, remember, when I went to the university, Ruth, the total enrollment was about 6,000 people, and so you really didn't have a chance to get acquainted. What young people do in this day and age, as far as getting acquainted if they don't live in a dormitory or something like that, I don't know.

They're scattered out throughout the entire city now, of course. It's interesting how many students get elected to the City Council or to the County Board.

A lot of people get just awfully critical of young people today. I think they're wonderful. They're interested in public affairs and they're interested in a variety of things that we probably didn't realize were going on in the community in which we lived.

Of course, when you went to college, women didn't vote at all, I suppose.

No. We voted. We voted and we walked to school. You didn't take a bus ride. That was great fun. By the time we had collected people on our way from where I lived to get to the top of Bascom Hill, we had a perfect tribe. I wouldn't give up those memories for anything in the world! It was fun, you know, to get out and hike along. Probably we were just indulging in a lot of gossip; I don't think it was always on a high intellectual plane.

What was your college major?

My college major was political science. We had lived in London one summer while my sister was studying piano. I did some work at the University of London in political science and in philosophy. It was a tremendously interesting experience. European universities operate so totally different.

In what way are they different?

The students, for one thing, have a very different approach to their work. It's one of great respect and deference to the teachers. There was absolutely no talking back to teachers. The whole system: they operated on a different time schedule, they operated on a different system of examinations. Examinations were rarely given. You were in such close contact with your teacher that the theory seemed to prevail that the teacher knew what you knew or failed to know by the time he'd gotten through with you for a semester, which has some merits, I think.

But you enjoyed studying political science in England? How long did you stay in London?

Just for the summer.

That's my favorite city in the world!

Is it? I adore London. I've spent so much time in London and in England throughout. But I must say, like all touristy-inclined people, Paris is still... it's the most beautiful city in the world.

I was so surprised to see how beautiful London was. I was angry at my friends who had never told me how beautiful it was. Every corner you'd go around there was a little pot of flowers, marigolds.

Yes. That's typically British, isn't it?

Yes. Every inch of ground.

And those adorable little Liza Doolittles on the street corner with their bunches of violets. British people have a great affection... Ruth, why do we call them "British" and when do we call them "English"?

I don't know.

I don't know the answer to that. I was discussing that with a friend of mine the other day and he didn't know the answer. I said "Well, we'll have to do a little research project on that."

I just wouldn't know about that. But when you came to work for Louise Troxel, you were with Susan B. Davis and...

Susan B. Davis and Zoe B. Bayliss.

And you.

We were the quartet. It was a great staff. There was never any disagreement among any of us. We were just extremely fortunate. With our personalities, we were totally different. Susan Davis, of course, was a marvelous Wisconsin historian. She was very much so. Zoe Bayliss was extremely prim and proper, and that had an effect maybe on some of the rest of us. Of course, Louise Troxel had been practically my lifelong friend, so my affection was deeply implanted in her.

Maybe we should talk a little bit about her. I suppose that when she left, she may have been interviewed by the archivist. I hope she was.

When she left Madison, you know, she moved to California. I don't know whether... is this a national sort of a program?

I don't think so. But they have extensive interviews with emeritus people. I hope that somebody interviewed her, because she lived through a very important... her career was at a very important stage in the university, too.

That's right. We lived through all the good years at the university, and I suppose we lived through some of the bad years.

The Depression years.

Well, yes, that's true, Ruth. Although, you know, strangely enough, people put so much emphasis on Depression years, but I don't remember... I can't say that we ever suffered because

of the Depression years.

I don't think so. But there must have been students who did.

Well, I think there are students who still suffer today, Ruth. I'm sure of that.

On the whole, life with girls was different in those days, when I was in the university, in the middle of the 1930s. We stayed out until 10:30 during the week and we were in at 12:30 at night.

And you were in. Yes. There was no... did they have WSGA set the rules? That was an interesting set-up in a way, because that meant that students had a voice in hours and all of the activities that went on on the campus. Isn't that true?

That's right. In the houses and in the dormitories. I lived one year at Chadbourne Hall, which I went to because my mother had stayed there in 1904 or 1905.

Really! That was a beautiful place. I am still sad when I go round that corner. I have so many happy recollections of both Chadbourne and Barnard Hall, which of course were right next to Lathrop Hall, where our offices were.

But Chadbourne was a beautiful place! The suites of rooms, the space that we were given!

An absolute luxury today.

And, of course, in these newer buildings, everything is built in. You can't move the furniture around. I remember Mrs. Elvehjem saying once that when she was in college, the one thing that she could count on, if she was down in the dumps or if something had gone wrong, she could always go back to her room and rearrange the furniture. But you can't do that now. Everything is built in in those dormitories. The beds are stationary.

Well, that's one of the disadvantages of modern technology.

I think it is. And the space that was allocated, of course, is so expensive now that they wouldn't have been able to ever give students the two-room suites that we had, with the big closets and the balconies.

Well, let's not sadden the younger generation to know what they're missing. And they are missing something, aren't they?

Of course, we missed something, too, I suppose.

Oh, absolutely! I'm perfectly sure if I were a young person today, I'd want to try everything. When young people are condemned because they're into drugs and things like that, there isn't a doubt in my mind that I would...