

Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois

Martha Roberts Oral History Interview

Dana Channell, Interviewer

Alton Police Department Offices, Alton, Illinois

October 11 and 17, 2018

Please note: Initial audio recording on October 11 malfunctioned and recorded only the last portion of the interview. The interviewer recorded the first portion of the interview again on October 17. This document is a transcript of the interview recorded on October 17, 2018. Please see the other transcript for the interview recorded on October 11, 2018.

Dana Channell (DC): The following interview was conducted with Martha Roberts on behalf of the Madison County Oral History Project that is part of Madison Historical: The Online Encyclopedia and Digital Archive for Madison County, Illinois. The interview took place on Wednesday, October 17, 2018, in the Alton Police Department Offices in Alton, Illinois. The interviewer is Dana Channell, a graduate student at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. So, can you tell me a little bit about your background and growing up in Alton?

Martha Roberts (MR): Yes, ah, my parents moved here when I was two and I grew up in the Alton school system and played in band starting in fifth grade. And, uh, took up flute because my dad was a flute player and there was a flute in the house, and my older sister also played flute. And uh, so I played flute through grade school and junior high and even though was selected to go on a band tour of Europe by my band director in junior high. Got to do that, and played in high school and did the contests, you know, and Illinois Music Educators Association, got to go to Chicago a couple times, and that kind of fun stuff.

DC: Um, any memories stand out from those trips?

MR: Uh, I would say the trip to Europe when I was fifteen was pretty, pretty interesting experience all the way around. And I had a girlfriend from junior high who was a clarinet player who also went on that trip, and we're still in contact with each other. She lives in California. Um, she doesn't do any more music as far as I know other than, well, she does sing. I take that back, she's a singer so she takes part in choirs and stuff out in California.

DC: So, you continued playing music in college but did not major in music?

MR: Correct. I started out majoring in music. I did the first three years and, um, I had an older sister who was trying to find a job in music and she was struggling because she was limited to certain geographic areas because her husband worked in a town in upstate New York and because of those limitations, I thought maybe I should have something a little more uh, employable than a music degree. And I was also a music performance major, which really, if you can play you'll get hired to play with or without a degree, and the degree was just a way to get more training. So, I could do that regardless of what my major was.

So, I went to become an accounting major, and I went over to the business school and the councilor there said I would hate accounting, 'cause I was a music major, and there's no creativity in accounting. So, he suggested MIS, which at that time was computer programming, business computer programming. So that's what I got my degree in.

DC: Um, so tell me a little bit about the ensembles you played in at SIUE.

MR: I played um, some different instruments in the concert band, and they had a symphonic band that's like a wind ensemble, and I played flute in there. And I played in the orchestra, um, and really enjoyed orchestra. In fact, the first year I was at SIU, I had a roommate I rode with, and she was in orchestra and I wasn't in orchestra. Um, but every week one of the flute players was missing, so I would sub for whichever flute player was missing, and um, the conductor didn't know until several weeks in that I wasn't a regular member of the orchestra, that I was just subbing so that I could be at rehearsal and they could, you know, rehearse the music they needed to rehearse, so that was kind of fun.

DC: Did you ever play at concerts in the orchestra?

MR: I did later! That first year, I don't believe I did, but I did later, yes. I, uh, I ended up, I think my last couple years I was there I was first chair in the orchestra, so I got to play some nice little solo things and had fun.

DC: Any favorite pieces that you played? Memorable concerts?

MR: You know, I think my recitals - I played two full recitals at SIU, and I think those were the more memorable. And I accompanied some people on their recitals. And I had a friend who played French horn, and she played a piece for French horn and flute that actually sounded like a broken record. Like, she'd tap her bell with her ring and make like a clicking sound and the record would repeat, which modern day the kids probably couldn't relate to that at all, but back in the day if a record skipped it would replay a certain part of it multiple times before it would go on, so that's what that, you know, was meant to sound like, which was really fun, you know.

DC: So, you started in the Alton Municipal Band, uh, in '78?

MR: Yes, the year I graduated from high school I started in the Municipal Band under the leadership, the manager at that time was Jim Reinhardt, who just recently passed away. He was, he was a good guy for the band. He promoted the band well and organized volunteers. They poured a concrete pad at Haskell Park, so the band would have a flat surface to play on and um, he got new shirts made for one of the band anniversaries. They were similar to the old ones but had a special patch on the arm for, to celebrate the anniversary.

DC: Um, so you also taught flute starting right around then as well?

MR: Yes, I started teaching flute while I was still in high school and some of my students were only two or three years younger than I was. And then when I went to SIU, another flute player who was a few years ahead of me got another job, so she wasn't going to be able to teach at the junior high in Alton where she was teaching after school, so she gave me all her students there. I went on to teach for years, it

was a wonderful way to earn a little bit of money and still have the flexibility. I was able to be at home with my kids and, you know, spend a couple nights a week teaching private lessons.

DC: Nice! So, you have a degree in, you know, computer science, but you were a band director for a little bit?

MR: Yes! At Mississippi Valley Christian School. They were needing a band director and one of the parents asked me if I'd be willing to do it, and at first, I really didn't think I was qualified but then I remembered I had most of my music ed classes from SIU. I had had um, conducting, and I had had two years of music theory and ear training, and I'd had class percussion and uh, cello lessons and clarinet lessons and flute lessons and I'd just, I'd had a really good time going to college, taking a lot of practical classes. I was able to put that to use, and one of the things I had to do at the school because it didn't have a full band was find music we could use and re-orchestrate it for whatever instruments I had, which usually involved taking the score and, and having the piano player play quite a bit of it. Because at the most, I think the most we ever had was probably 16 people in the band, but we usually ran 10-12 people in the band. So, I needed to make it, so you could recognize what pieces we were playing, which was fun. I had a good time with that.

DC: Um, do you have any early memories from the Muny Band and flute lessons and any of that?

MR: Um, yeah. Early days with the, with the Muny Band, I just really was in awe of the age range, which is still something that amazes me. You know, people play sports and they play sports for a certain length of time, and then you know, they have to give it up because physically they can't do it. But we just had a gentleman pass away who, um, played 75 seasons with the band. And, you know, that's really admirable. And I was at Jim Reinhardt's funeral and a gentleman I believe he's at least 80, played his clarinet for the, for the funeral, and it's just, it's really neat that music, you can still, you know, participate even at an older age. You know, not everybody can, but a lot do. You know, if that's your passion, it's nice to be able to participate in it your whole life.

DC: Was it tough coming in as a younger player if there are a lot of older people in the band ahead of you?

MR: Um, it was kind of an interesting mix because in the flute section, um, that first year I played, I did not sit first chair, but the flute player who was first chair was just an amazing flute player, but she was just a year older than I was. So, there wasn't a big age gap there. Most of the older players were back in the brass sections, and you know, some of the younger players, well there were some older players in the clarinet section, but the flute section was generally younger people. It's not that way now. Our youngest person, um she's fairly young, but then there are only four people in the flute section and three of us are over 50 so it's not so young anymore.

DC: Uh, yeah. So, tell me a little bit more about the demographics today.

MR: We have um, we've had high school kids play, I think we, yeah I think we had at least three high school students play with us this past season, and some of the older people you know, 60's, 70's. Um, different backgrounds. A lot of people who have, you know, a wider music background, they might be music educators themselves. I think we have several, I know we have several music educators who are

playing in the band. Um, it's not a requirement, it's just we audition for the band and we really stress sight reading because we get one rehearsal, one two- hour rehearsal to learn a one hour concert. So, you can't really spend too much time working on anything together, you just need to be able to read it well the first time you play it and then that saves time for the band directors, cause there are always be things we're going to need to try, you know. Some of the music they've put out there we end up not being able to play for one reason or another. Maybe the instrumentation that week doesn't match what we need to really put a good performance in, um, sometimes it's just a matter of we just, you know, aren't compatible with that song in that arrangement. You know? It's just that simple sometimes. But we give it our best shot, and it's a good mix of trying to be serious and concentrate on the music and read well and, and um, you know, having a little bit of fun with it too. So, it's a good, good mix.

DC: So, do musicians get the music, um, for that concert at the time of that rehearsal?

MR: Yes.

DC: So, they're, they're sight reading the whole time.

MR: They're sight reading, yes. We sight read that Monday rehearsal, um, it's frowned upon to take the folder. If you want to take the folder home, you have to make arrangements with the band librarian. Um, a few people make attempts to take the folders home, but we really don't want that because music is so expensive. You know, if something happens to it, it's really expensive to replace. Um, and we've had, we've had problems. We had a librarian who lived in St. Louis for a while, and there was a time when he had an emergency and he couldn't get the music over to us for something, so now we try to keep it in Alton in case there's an emergency with whoever has it, somebody else can run and get it. You know?

DC: Um, yeah. Tell me a little bit about the music library of the Muny Band.

MR: We have a really extensive music library that's been collected since, you know, probably since before the official start of 1891. Cause the band did start 1845, I believe, somewhere around there, but we've been playing consecutive years of concerts in the park since 1891. Um, so some of our music we've been weeding out. Some of it is just so brittle and unusable that way, it would be even hard to copy. Um, and some of it we just don't have enough parts to actually pull out for performance, so some of that we're going to have to clean out of there to make room for newer things. Because every year we order new music. We want to bring a little new life and connect with the younger generation. I personally like to get a hold of the movie themes and the kids movies songs and things like that, and so I love a lot of the Disney music. And if we can get a hold of that, that's really nice and that connects with a lot of people. Um, we have lots of marches, we have um, old Broadway show tunes and you know, medleys, and um, we try to feature a soloist every week at our concert. Either a vocal soloist or an instrumental soloist or maybe even a small ensemble. Uh, to do that sometimes it's complicated to find music that you can use with a singer because you know, singers have one range, but it might not be something that fits well with the band. So, we have some arrangements that are specifically for vocalists and others that might be instrumental solos that somebody sings along with, you know, something that has words. Um, we have a very gifted band director, well we have two very gifted band directors. Uh, David Drilling, who also does some arranging of music, and that's helpful because sometimes it's easier to just arrange it ourselves, you know, have somebody arrange it for us, than to find an arrangement. There's just not that much out

there for concert band and vocal solo. Um, our other director Jen Schenberger is active in the Clayton School District and has a lot of connections on the other side of the river which is really helpful to us too. So, we've got more access to more musicians who can help us out, and sometimes we're missing instruments that we need, and we can invite people to come and play, and sometimes, like she has met, well Erin Bode who sang with us last year and this year. Just a phenomenal performer, wonderful person, gracious. She has the heart of an educator, she stood and visited with some young people in the band after one of her performances last year for probably 45 minutes. So, she just, she invests in people, and you can really tell she really connects with the audiences and the musicians that way, so it was just a really neat experience. Um, and we've had soloists, we've had Gary Gackstatter, um, who is connected with Jen Schenberger through, I believe through Clayton Music. But he has written some wonderful pieces and arranged things and he just, you know, he was a lot of fun to have at our concerts too. So, we really enjoy having that other connection, you know. We want to feature our local artists as much as possible and the St. Louis area is full of very gifted musicians, so we're grateful for that.

DC: Yeah, tell me a little bit about your connection with St. Louis.

MR: Uh, especially through Jen but we have other musicians who play in other ensembles. Um, David Drillinger, the conductor I was talking about, he also plays in some St. Louis ensembles, so he has connections with other players and uh, and with other audiences. So, I'm hoping we can get the word out about our group and even about small groups made from people from our band that could do some things other than our concerts in the park in the summer. I would love to see some small ensembles play throughout the year and represent Alton and represent the Alton Municipal Band. I think that would be really neat.

DC: Um, so how would you go about getting smaller groups out? How do you pay your members?

MR: Our members, primarily for our concerts in the park, are paid through property taxes from the city of Alton. It's just a really small slice of the pie. And um, so we have that regular amount that's budgeted for us every year. But the other money just recently this past year, the city has set up a separate account for us so that we can raise money, we can have fundraisers and we can purchase special things for the band which, you know, as most people know, the government operates on those fiscal years, and what the money - when you run out of time or you run out of money, and then they're both gone [laughs] so this way we have money that we can set aside and store in case there's something big we need to purchase. I know we needed a new sound system last year and we were really blessed with an audience member who just decided to purchase one for us and he wanted to remain anonymous, and we are so grateful for the kind of community support we have for the band, but that would have been an example of something we needed more money than we had in one year's budget, we would have had to carry it over a few years and we didn't really have a good way to do that. So now we've got this other account that we can use for things like that, or we could use it pay for the band members, you know, and the small ensembles if an opportunity comes up. And also, you know, for small ensembles, we could have whatever group wants to hire them pay for them, and we've had that happen. We had one of the neighbor business groups in town hired a brass quintet from the Alton Municipal Band to play at one of their gatherings and it went really well. And so, you know, they paid them through that fund, they were able to pay that small ensemble.

DC: That's awesome.

MR: Yeah.

DC: Um, so the Muny Band has come into some other changes as well, aside from just um, the new--

MR: Yes. Because of the contacts with the Small Business Revolution with Deluxe Corporation, we were able to get a new logo designed which I really like, because it features the gazebo that we have up at Riverview Park. And the history of the gazebo, I believe the band played its first concert there the year the gazebo was built, it didn't even have a roof on it yet, and I believe it was 1914. And um, that was a great feature in the neighborhood up at Riverview Park at the top of the bluffs, you know, overlooking the Mississippi river. Um, we love our concerts up there in the summer. We play while the sun it is setting and some of the views are spectacular. Um, with the changes that we had this year getting those new logos made, we um, also got new shirts. So, we've got bright red shirts with our, with the white gazebo on it. And um, we kept with a standard, it just says "Alton Municipal Band Since 1891" so it has that, that reach all the way back in time. But with the red shirts, gives it a little pop.

DC: Uh, and you recently got a board as well, correct?

MR: Yes. Last year we got started having a board of directors, which is a total change from how we had it before. Um, so now all of our, you know we've got the Open Meetings Act, we need to be responsive to, so any meetings we have have to be scheduled 48 hours in advance, so they can publicize it through the city of Alton. And um, and that way we have checks and balances and make sure we're being careful with the money, and just, you know, making good decisions.

DC: What are some challenges of working with a board now?

MR: Um, having availability and knowing that you have availability in enough time, and finding a good place to meet. It has to be handicap accessible and we're meeting at the police station right now, and that's a good place for meetings because there's somebody here 24/7. So, musicians often have strange hours, so it's kind of nice to be able to meet at a place like this.

DC: Who's on your board? Um, like what types of people?

MR: We have, right now it's all musicians from the band but it's not necessary that it's that way, it's just that it was the easiest way to start because they have history with how the band has been run. One of them is David Drilling who is one of the directors. Our assistant manager, um Debbie Kelley, is on there also, and she has taken care of the money, um, for several years, and has always been really good with that. She's always so careful with it that we've been able to do way more than we thought we'd ever be able to do. Um, and we have ah, Julie McPike who plays trumpet, and we have Erin Schindewolf who plays trombone with the band, and um, both of them are not musicians for a living. You know, they've got other jobs they do. Um, but they both have very good input and I, I definitely am glad to have them on board. Um, we also have Michayla David, who's a clarinet player, and also a music educator, and um, we have Sydney Reynolds, who's also a music educator. So, it's a good, it's a good batch of people. I think I got everybody, but it's a nice mix of people. Cause you know, we've all got different opinions, we've all got different strengths and weaknesses and we, um, we just try to do the best we can getting the job done. And the hardest part is probably paying attention in the off-season and trying to keep planning and keep the excitement level up and the energy level up so that we can get things done.

DC: Yeah, because the Muny Band season is just in the summer?

MR: Right. We start our rehearsals, we have open rehearsals in May, starting the first Monday of May, and generally the way the calendar works we have three open rehearsals and then we are off Memorial Day and then the week after Memorial Day we'll have our, um, our first real concert week. And so that week before Memorial Day we'll have auditions at the end of that third open rehearsals. But all musicians are invited. We had, we even had a fifth grader I believe, come and play in the open rehearsals and actually came and auditioned and I really respect that because you know, the kids will do better if they just learn how to put themselves on the spot and audition and get out of their comfort zone and just make themselves do that. And I, I respect the kids who are willing to do it and the parents who are willing to encourage them to do that. It's an overall, overall great experience for them, it's like a job interview. And the more you do job interviews, the more you learn how to do job interviews, the more prepared you are, the more likely you are to get the job. So, it's the same thing with those auditions, it just, it just provides that opportunity for them to grow.

DC: Yeah, and the less stressed you are during the audition too!

MR: Absolutely, absolutely.

DC: That's awesome.

MR: Yeah.

DC: Um, so how do you pick the music for one season? Do you do that all at the beginning, or does someone...?

MR: I am blessed with these great conductors who do that. They know what the library holds, and they know what they want to order, and as far as new music goes, and they will coordinate it, and they do a great job. And they come up with themes. They come up with the themes for each week and they actually organize the soloists and everything, so I don't have to do much work on that at all. But I'm very appreciative of the work that they do.

DC: Are they developing it, um, week-by-week, or do they kind of plan out the season ahead of time?

MR: They plan out the season ahead of time. They, we usually have the themes down just before the concert season starts so we get fliers made up with the, with the themes on there. You know, we've got a little bit of flexibility there, if we have. You know, sometimes we don't pin down a really specific theme. Sometimes it's a more open theme. Um, but one of the themes this year, Jen Schenberger had, was "Through the Green Glass Doors" and it was a game, and so we had people trying to figure out what the game was, and it was double letters. We had double letters in either the name of the piece or the name of the composer, and people in the audience were challenged to figure out what the game was. So, we had two people figure it out at each concert, so we had a little drawing then for a giveaway, which was nice.

DC: That's awesome.

MR: Yeah.

DC: So, tell me a little bit about your role as manager.

MR: Mostly I feel like I'm the PR person. Um, uh I really consider that the most important part of the job at this point because we want the community support and we want to, you know, we're providing a service for the community. Um, even though we're paid through the property taxes, everyone is welcome to come to the concerts, they are free and open to the public. And we play at two parks that are fairly easily accessible: Riverview Park has made all kinds of improvements, um they've poured `some concrete around where the benches are and there's even a, like a little extra behind the benches so wheelchairs could sit there pretty easily, and it's just a really, a more easily accessible place. Haskell Park is fairly flat, um, we have a little bit of terrain issues, but uh, but still people can pull up there and pull right up close to the park and pull right in and out of there, so.

DC: So, when did you start as band manager?

MR: I don't know. It's been a few years, maybe five, four or five years ago? And before that, I'd been assistant manager with Debbie Kelley as manager. Um, we really share, you know, it's like all the things she does that I really don't like doing, and then I do the things that she doesn't like doing, because she doesn't wanna be the PR person, she doesn't want to have to do all the personal contacts, but she is so good with doing all the money and the keeping track of everything and those aren't my strengths so it's nice to have that good relationship where we can lean on each other to take care of the stuff that you know, we each have our strengths and we should be depending on those strengths, so.

DC: Yeah! So, can you tell me a little bit more about the history of the band?

MR: The band started, the original name was White Hussar, I'm not sure exactly the background of that, but you know it was all male. And actually, the whole band's history was all male probably up until the '70s. And I believe '72 somebody told me was when they did Title IX where they made it changed so that girls had access to the same, the same experience in sports, not necessarily the same sports, but the same kind of experience in sports in the schools, and they started allowing girls to participate in more things in schools. So that was probably about the same time that Muny Band became open to women. And um, the band manager at that time, Jim Reinhardt, said that it was one of the best decisions ever because there were so many talented female musicians so, it really helped the band blossom. So, the band started out as kind of a small, smaller group, and I believe it started out as kind of a brass band with drums, and then it grew from there into the concert band format that it's in now.

DC: But some people, uh, have been around for quite some time. I think you said 75 years in one case?

MR: Yes, um, Mel Engelman, he just passed away this, actually in September, and um, he had played 75 seasons. He was 15 years old, he said, when he started playing. He didn't even have his driver's license yet, so he had to get a ride from somebody to go to rehearsals and concerts. And I, uh, had talked to his kids at his, um, celebration of life and they even talked about they couldn't go on vacation in the summer until Muny Band was over. And I could totally relate to that, because that's how it was the first several years I played in the band. I didn't want to miss out on any Muny Band.

DC: Um, so tell me a little bit about your experience with the history of the band. How it's changed over the past 20 or 30 years?

MR: Well, we started out, when I first started we had to wear um, white shirts, white button down shirts and I believe we had ties at the time and we had red wool vests. And before that, I think they had had hats, but I'm glad they got rid of those before I started. But I know it had to be horribly, horribly hot out before we could take our vests off, so I was really glad when they went to polo shirts, and that was under Jim Reinhardt that we went to polo shirts. That was definitely a positive improvement. And then the shirts, the actual quality of the shirts stayed the same until this year when we got the new, you know they have the new breathable fabrics, and you know, when you're playing out there and it's 95 degrees out, it's nice to have a shirt that lets you be at least a little bit comfortable. And we look a lot better too! [laughs]

DC: Um, so, oh also, you uh, you met your husband in the band?

MR: Yes! My husband and I met, I believe it was 1981. He had just gotten out of college, he went to college in Ohio and he started playing in the Muny Band and yes, we met there, and we got married in 1985. And then we raised our kids going to those band concerts. There were times that my babysitter didn't show up and Jojo would help with my kids at the concerts so that my husband and I could play. So, my kids have very fond memories growing up going to the Muny Band concerts. I think some of them even are still in contact with the other kids they met at the parks.

DC: [laughs] So how have things remained the same?

MR: I think, I think probably the biggest thing that's the same is the always reaching for good quality music and good quality musical performances. I think that's always been the goal. Um, I think over the years depending on the make-up of the band, you know, we've had better results some years and worse results some years but overall, it's an excellent band. You know, we'll have people who come and play solos with the band just comment about what a great musical experience that is. So, it's kind of exciting to be part of that. And we definitely want to connect with that next generation because we'd like to see the band just keep continuing for multiple generations.

DC: Great, well thank you so much.

MR: You're welcome, thank you! [pause] Did it save it?