

Shirley Portwood, Professor of History
Transcript of Interview for the History SIUE Oral History Project
Interviewed by Ellen Nore-Nordhauser
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Ellen Nore [EN]: It's April 6, 2006. I'm Ellen Nore, I'm interviewing Professor Shirley Portwood for the SIUE Historical Collections. So, I usually start by asking how you um came to SIUE. You came here as an undergraduate in...

Shirley Portwood [SP]: Right, I was living in Springfield and this was the closest campus. So, I took classes here one summer, I think that was summer of '66 and I think I just took classes that one summer. But meanwhile, uh my husband and I decided to go back to school and he was gonna, he was looking for a school, I was looking for one and so what we decided to do is... he applied for a number of schools and got into uh St. Louis U [St. Louis University, SLU] to work on his Masters, and so I decided to go to SIU and work on my undergraduate degree.

EN: Right, I... Yesterday in the 1970 annual uh from SIU, the last one, I saw your picture with the seniors.

SP: Oh yes... right. [EN Laughs] Yes, Yes.

EN: Well, I wanted to ask you about your experiences as an undergraduate. Do you have any special memories... [paper crumpling]?

SP: Oh sure!

EN: ...of classes, or students or....

SP: Oh, sure, I've got a, I've got a lot of, of memories, mainly good ones, because when I finally came back to go full time it was '68. So '68 through '70 as an undergraduate and '70 through '72 as a graduate student. That was 4 years where some...

EN: Yes.

SP: ... a lot was going on...

EN: [EN laughs] Yes, a lot was going on in those times.

SP: So, at first I guess I was mainly going to classes because I was going to class in the evening and um... somewhere ah along the line I was able, probably my last couple quarters to go during the day because I had a few classes I needed to take to graduate and so then that gave me a change to be more involved in what was going on.

EN: Were you, um, do you remember any of your classes in particular? Particular classes, why did you become a history major, I guess?

SP: I became a history major because um I took several history classes and I really found myself enjoying history. As a high school student, I had hated history. If somebody had told me that I would end up being a history professor I would not have believed it. Ah the one history teacher I can remember in high school did a very, a chronological thing with focusing on presidents and their administrations and not getting into much depth. He also liked to talk about military history, he had served in World War II and I just was so bored but then I came here and I was, at that time I was going to, I was in the secondary ed program. I was going to do what they called at a time a Social Studies, I guess, um ah concentration where you took courses in something like at least 3-O Social Sciences. So, one of them was history. Partly, frankly, because of what was available at the time I could go to school and that was in the evenings.

EN: Okay.

SP: One of the classes I took though that first semester was one taught by Wayne Santoni. And meanwhile, the summer that I had gone to school I had taken a couple with Stuart **Weis**. And with Stuart Wise I had found that history was really interesting. Fun...even! And then later in Santoni's class, he was even more intriguing. Stuart Wise was excellent at lecturing, but Wayne Santoni was almost like an reenactor or something with the level of, of uh, excitement that he brought to it. And but I ended up in his class because it was an evening class at a time slot that I needed a class and at the level of class I needed. I think it was a Russian History class and I just really enjoyed the way he approached history. The next semester I took another and I ended up taking all of the courses that he, he taught in Russian History and meanwhile I was still um in Social Studies but he was also, I guess he was my advisor, for some reason I ended up talking to him and he didn't say "well I think you should become a history major." but he would keep asking me, "so what are you going to do now?" and I gathered from that he thought that maybe I should reconsider my choices. Meanwhile, I decided that I should go on to graduate school because I was interested in getting a Master's and it had taken me so long to get my undergraduate degree. I had started in Carbondale in uh '63.

EN: That's in your, that's in... [unintelligible]

SP: Uh huh. So, it had taken me 7 years from the time I began to the time I ended, mainly because I wasn't in school full time, the whole time. So, I decided if I wanted a Master's Degree I should get it while it was here.

EN: Sure [Both Laugh].

SP: And so, I decided to go on for a Master's Degree. Meanwhile, I decided that I wanted to um do it with a concentration in Russian History because by that time I had taken all of Santoni's classes and was very interested in, in Russian History. And so, I started taking Russian language and then as a graduate student I took more Russian language. In all, I think I ended up taking maybe 3 years of Russian language and more work on Russian History. Did a Master's thesis on Russian History.

EN: And your thesis was on some lawyer, isn't it?

SP: Mhm. Oscar O. **Gruzenberg**. I was intrigued by him because he was a Russian Jew and I found it really interesting the ways in which Jews in Russia were treated. Not just in terms of people's actions but also in terms of the institutionalization of anti-Semitism there. And I had initially done some research on **Gruzenberg** for a paper I was doing, and found him particularly uh, impressive, because he was apparently an excellent, excellent attorney, but because he was a Jew he had a hard time getting into law school. They had a rule at the time, something like, I guess they had a quota of the number of Jews, and [sigh] it seems like there was more to it than that, but anyway he did end up getting into law school. But as a Jew, he could not practice as the lead attorney, or as the sole attorney. He had to have to be a part of at least a 2-person team and the other person had to, in effect, be the attorney of record and yet in actual practice he was. But um he took a lot of cases that had to do with discrimination against Jews. And so, in my mind there were some similarities between the way that Jews were treated in Russia and the way African Americans were treated in the U.S.

EN: And it, you continued your interest in legal history?

SP: Yes, right. Actually at one point, I had wanted to become an attorney, many years ago, when I was a child, I wanted to become an attorney, and then, I think in retrospect, it's probably just as well as...that I didn't because I really enjoyed what I did choose to do. That was one of the things I wanted to do.

EN: Um, did you, um, did you, I asked if you felt that you were part of this new generation that was going to change the world, did you have that?

SP: Yes, yes. [Both Laugh] I had my share of crusading zeal.

EN: I know you always talk about your sister...

SP: Right.

EN: ...with the little smile...

SP: Right.

EN: ...and how the family reminds her of your activism...

SP: Right. My sister changed her name and was probably more radical in her activism than I. She was 6 years younger, so that kind of put her in a different cohort, where she was really more in the ah time period where people were doing the more - Black Nationalism focus. But yes, so I was going to help change the world. That was at a time that I believed that if people really got to know each other, and, and got to know what was going on, that their basic goodness would come through. And then they would be able to deal, barely, with everybody. And I thought that uh with more contact among various people, especially among blacks and whites, that that would make a big difference.

EN: Were you in the Black Students' Association? Um...

SP: Uh, no, I wasn't in the Black Students' Association at the time. I'm trying to recall... I'm not sure that I belonged to any permanent organization. I do recall at one point, and this is when I was an undergraduate, that Ed **Hudlin**, who uh was on the Philosophy faculty at the time, was doing a study of the housing market in Edwardsville and I recall being a part of that. And I remember going to what seemed like a million meetings, but usually they were not permanent organizations. [Long Pause] In fact, I don't really even remember what organizations there were at the time, that were really active, at, at that time.

EN: Do you remember any of the demonstrations on campus on uh Jackson State, Kent State, um April of 1967?

SP: You know, that's little bit before I actually came here. I came here in, I guess it would have been, it was on a quarter system then, so I think it would have been September of '68.

EN: Oh okay. Did you, do you remember any meetings in Goshen Lounge or in the Communications building or?

SP: You know, I don't remember any in the Communications building. I'm sure there were some in the Goshen Lounge but I can't say as I remember much in the way of specific meetings. I remember a lot of discussions, including a lot of discussions in classes and a lot of just informal discussions, but I don't remember any, attending any formal meetings and yet I think I must have. Of course, on the other hand, we are talking about almost 40 years ago [Both Laugh]. So, so I don't know.

EN: So, it's hard to remember?

SP: Right, yes.

EN: Well, um - well I asked if you felt, if you, you seem pretty positive about the institution, did you feel that it was, was it addressing the issues of white racism...?

SP: No, I thought it was very racist then. It's not that I, I felt positive, not just, not because I thought that it was doing what it needed to do, so much as, I had been out of school a number of years and I had been anxious to get back in school.

EN: Yes...

SP: That was just exciting to me, just to be back, that in itself. To be back was really, really exciting. I thought that at the time, when I came here, SIU had an administration that talked a good game. I didn't see much they were doing, in terms of really making things um better, in terms of race issues and I'm not sure they'd even started to address issues that had to do with gender at that point. So, my positive feelings were more because I...

EN: ...intellectual...

SP: Right, yes. That was good. I had really good professors in the history department. And yet, I thought there was some major problems there. For example, I noted and we talked about this, other history majors, us undergraduates, as well as graduates, about at that time, as I recall when I first came, in the history department there were, I don't know, maybe 20 full time faculty of which, at first, none were African American. I don't think, I can't remember when [unintelligible] **Branz** came here, so she might have been here...

EN: She was here...

SP: But she, I don't think I knew her at that time. And we were always challenging the history faculty to get African Americans, to get women, and they always claimed they would, except they couldn't find any qualified women or African Americans.

EN: Oh okay.

SP: As a graduate student, we actually, we graduate students offered to find. We said if you can't find them, we can. But we considered that an excuse that often is given, that you can't find good, whatever. And I realize, you find what you're looking for, so if you truly are looking, you can find strong African Americans, strong women candidates. One of the things they talked about was this one woman candidate, and they thought that she was really quite attractive and personal, but when it came to her knowledge of her field, then she simply was not up to par. Whatever we talked about, issues of women or African Americans, and she wasn't African American, she was white. They always brought her up. And to us, the fact they kept bringing this same one up, suggests that there was only one woman that they had interviewed at that time. Which may not have been accurate, but that's what it made it seem like. [SP clears throat] That they only interviewed the one woman. And interestingly enough, from the time I left SIU with my Master's to the time I came back, let's see, I actually finished my work in '72 although my degree wasn't conferred until '73 and that's because at that time they did graduations once a year. So anyway, I was done in '72. I started teaching at the community college. When I was hired [at SIUE], which was in '81, they had really only hired [pause], I'm not sure they had hired any, anybody in the interim as a full-time person. Cause when I was here as a graduate student, they finally hired **Wilbur McAfee**.

EN: Yes, I had his name written down here as... That was about 1972, or maybe '71.

SP: Okay. It may have been '71 because I remember doing a readings class with him, so he was here before I left.

EN: I know Jason recruited him.

SP: Okay. When I was interviewed here, one question I was asked is, how was I going to try and fill his shoes? And I said, "well, no. I'm not." [Both Laughing]. I didn't want to get myself in the position where I was trying to emulate someone **else**.

EN: Yeah. I just wondered, I know, it's just, um, [pause] hundreds of times you must have been hurt by people, just thoughtlessly, blabbing on, or just angered by their, their kinda being out of it. I'm including myself, I guess, in this too.

SP: Actually, that's something that, yes. I can remember many times as a history major, as either undergraduate or as a graduate student, being the only African American in the classroom. I was a Sociology minor and usually I was the only African American...

EN: Oh my gosh...

SP: ...in, in those classes as well. So, yeah, I can remember people saying a lot of really thoughtless, insensitive, and racist things. And uh, yeah, obviously I was hurt by it but I always decided that, I don't know, I guess I was good at compartmentalizing something, deciding it was a reflection on them rather than on me. I remember once, one of my colleagues, this is while I was teaching here, said, "Shirley, how are you doing?" And I said, "Oh, I'm fine." She says, "Are you sure?" I said, "Well, yeah. Why are you asking?" She had such a look of concern. And she said, well that she had understood that I was really disturbed about something and I don't remember what it was, that was a racial issue. I said, "Oh, well yeah, that's true. I am very disturbed about that. I said, but I am still fine, because I don't let how I feel revolve around what issues and what racist things people say or do, because if I did, I would be constantly crushed."

EN: That's right.

SP: And she was just taken aback. She said, "Oh. Well that's a good way to look at that." I said [SP Laughs]. But yeah.

EN: Well, I asked you about being a member of the Department of Historical Studies when you return...

SP: Actually, that was kinda interesting because, really almost the same faculty were here as when I had been a student. I wasn't quite sure how that would work, [EN Laughs] if because I had been their student, that somehow, I would always be in a subordinate position, in that respect. Um. I don't think that's how I was viewed, but when I came here, it was a very rigid, Old-Boy network. And so, I'm not sure that it would have mattered who I was coming in, I don't think I would have been included in the Old-Boy network. And I wasn't, and I was aware of that. One of the things the various, I saw a lot, was a bunch of guys duck into somebody's office and close the door. Often, that's where the big decisions were made. So, when we got uh to department meetings, often, there was little detailed discussion because they had already decided what to do.

For the first, I don't know, maybe 10 years, I think I was the only African American in, what was at the time, the School of Social Sciences. And of course, people contended that they simply couldn't find uh candidates, but of course African Americans had taught at the college level since the Antebellum years [SP Laughs]. And especially in Social Sciences! Interestingly enough, when I was, I guess it was when I was a graduate student, the Chemistry department had, I think they had something like 3 PhD's in Chemistry and it seemed to me if you could find 3 Black

PhD's in Chemistry, you could probably do better than that in Social Sciences, specifically in History. So I think it, to me it indicated that they weren't looking, but I do think part of what goes on is, racism and sexism become so ingrained, that people may actually convince themselves that what they're saying is valid. In the History department, for example, I thought I had a bunch of really nice colleagues. I had a collegial relationship; they were pleasant people and all that. So in terms of overt racism or overt sexism, I didn't see a lot of that. I think it was more of an ingrained thing from years of doing things the way you always had.

EN: Um, I was asking about new perspectives when you, when you, when you came back, did you have a new perspective on SIU, on the institution...

SP: Uh...

EN: ...from having taught across the river at a very nice community college and living in St. Louis?

SP: I'm sure, I'm sure I did. Actually, when I was here as a graduate student and when I taught here, I was living in Edwardsville the whole time.

EN: Okay, that's right.

SP: I lived in St. Louis for 2 years when I was an undergraduate student. I lived in University City, and then I moved to Edwardsville expecting to live on campus for 2 years and then move elsewhere and ended up staying in the area. That's been now for, since 1970. [Both Laugh] That's been a long time. I'm sure I had a new perspective. One of the things that I had thought as an undergraduate student and a graduate student is that faculty were very self-confident and very candid in faculty meetings and things like that. I don't know why I thought that but I did. I guess the faculty that I knew most, in terms of the kinds of meetings I attended and the kinds of discussions I had had in class, I thought there was a pretty high level of candor. I was really surprised to find that in department and in Social Science meetings, there really wasn't a lot of candor. And I guess I'd also thought people would be so highly principled, they'd be compelled to speak and address various issues and I was really surprised to find that, by and large, that wasn't the case. I think always, there are some people who are very outspoken. John Farley is always one...John.

EN: Yes, right.

SP: But that was one of the biggest surprises to me, was to find that people weren't as straightforward as...

EN: Yes, and I would say to my experience, that's true. Even, is true after 2000.

SP: Right, yes.

EN: You were one of the ones who would speak out directly on an issue but you were not the usual member.

SP: Right, and I think that's still the case. A lot of times when I spoke, that I had the lack of a second [Both Laugh]. But it's something that I've always felt compelled to do. I have always felt that I have to say something in certain circumstances, and I realize that a lot of times it's going to just get passed over.

EN: Well I asked, what are some of the major changes in continuities that you have observed during your decades as a professor and distinguished member of our faculty?

SP: Well, one thing that's really striking is if you look at when I came here in '81, look at what the course offerings were in history and the focus of the uh faculty's own research. It's really changed a lot. When I came in '81, it was a very traditional approach with political, economic, military history. And now, much more emphasis on women's history, African American history, and um social history. And that is, has been, I think due to a large extent to having um a lot of retirements, a lot especially in the last 10 years. And so that provided a chance to reassess, what do we really want to do here? Do we want to uh continue with social- I mean, political, economic, and military history, or do we want to get into some of the fields that are getting more attention within the discipline? That was a big argument too, because some people were inclined to sort of replace the retiring faculty with people very much like the ones retiring. And what finally ended up happening is making a decision that, that maybe it would be a good idea to have people in, in some of the newer fields. And so that's a big difference. For that matter, now that I've been here for 25 years, [paper shuffling] there's only 1 person on the faculty that was here when I got here. Everyone else has retired! [SP Laughs]. So that's quite a change.

EN: Right. [Pause]. Yes, you're now the senior, second senior person.

SP: Right, yes that's right. [Pause]...Yes, that's...

EN: Well, what about continuities or other changes in the university?

SP: Okay, there are changes like more **students** living on campus. Ah, when I came here as a graduate student, I was, I think, maybe the second year of housing at uh, that was on campus. That was for family housing at what was then called Tower Lake. And um then, for a while that remained where the housing was. But now, of course, there are dormitories and a lot more students living on campus, so that's something that, that's changed as well. And of course, in our own department, not only in terms of just different fields, what was really striking was a more diverse faculty, in terms of we do have 4 African American faculty and we have, I think women are exactly half of the department so that was a major, major change. Ah, continuities...[pause]. I'm sure there are a lot of continuities. [crosstalk] I'm trying to think, I don't know.

EN: Well, it is Friday afternoon. Well, how would you rate the leadership of the institution during your 25 years? Do you have any memories of... you always get asked, have been asked to do a lot and have been on a lot of university initiatives?

SP: Right, right. One of the things I've been struck by, is it seems to me, by and large, the administrators and faculty and mem... other people who are in the university staff, have had a collegial relationship and have a fair amount of contact. Now I'm not sure how much that translates into really having a lot of input by faculty and, and staff into university. One thing I was thinking about, and I don't know if I think this is bad or good, but it just struck me. It seems like every time we get a new campus level leader, we get a new university logo, which I think is, I know it's unusual. It seems to be kinda bizarre to have so many. I'm not quite sure what that means. Why is it that we keep spending that kind of time on designing the logo? Maybe it means we're not really sure what we're doing?

EN: Yes, I think that's part of it. Not exactly sure of our identity. And uh...

SP: Right. I actually, I like the focus, where the focus was supposed to be on serving students within what used to be, considered in something like the 19-county service area. The idea was, as I understood it anyway, that these were people who probably would have limited opportunities for post-secondary education. And with an institution in Edwardsville that people could, recently, drive here, or could, could commute, and that some people could ultimately, as it turned out, live on campus other than town. I think that's still a need. I really don't think it's a better focus for us to try to compete with the University of Illinois or try to compete even with Carbondale for students. I think we still need that focus. I think there are a lot of students who still need to come here and should be encouraged to come. And any thoughts of really making the entrance requirements more rigid is kind of scary to me.

I served for, I think, 3 years on the Chancellor Scholars Committee. And I imagined that that was going to be such a wonderful experience. I would just be bowled over by all of these brilliant students with high grade point averages, class ranks, ACT scores. They did have all of that and many also had impressive service. But I found when I actually met the students and interviewed them, that they were very different than what I expected. I... the Chancellor Scholars were supposed to be selected based on leadership skills and by and large I didn't find a lot there, in terms of leadership. In fact, I don't want to uh disparage them because there were good groups in many ways, but I found, in terms of creativity and thought, leadership and various other characteristics, that they were not as, as impressive as various other people I know. I guess my own views are shaped by the fact that my own husband dropped out from high school, dropped out of high school when he was 16 and joined the Air Force. And usually that would be taken as you know, that he was stupid or something. But somewhere along the line he decided to go back to school. He got an undergraduate degree in Physics and then he got a master's degree in Electrical Engineering from Stanford. Now I think that says, obviously a very capable, very brilliant person. And yet, one who might well have fallen between the cracks. He said that had it not been for other guys he met in the service who said "hey, you're a bright guy. Read this, read this book, read that book." and introduced him to various other great works of literature, and uh things about history and all, motivated him to get back in to school. He said had that not happened, he probably would be hanging out with his, what was is he called it... his partners. [Both Laughing]. His partners, yeah. And I think about how many guys are there like that.

EN: Yes, right.

SP: Or how many women are there like that. In fact, when I was at the community college, one of the things I really enjoyed is that we really had very uh lenient requirements for getting in. There, if a student has either been in the military or is at least 21 years old, they had to be admitted. And then the requirements for someone who was traditionally an 18, 19 year old were really not that rigid either. So it gave me a chance to have in class, students who would not have been able to get into a 4-year school. Some of them were brilliant. I would say some of the most brilliant students I have ever had were at the community college. And some of them probably, I'm not sure where they are now. I think some did very well, some I've been in touch with so I know they went on to school and became, a number of them became attorneys and professors and uh various other positions. I was watching television once, fairly recently, and I saw this one guy being interviewed. He was homeless and he was one of my former students at the community college. He wasn't a dumb guy, he was a bright guy! I don't know what happened along the way. One of my other most brilliant students I've ever had ended up in that same situation. Um and others who might have ended up in that same situation stayed in school and did end up graduating. One of the things that it said to me, um, is there are *a lot of people* who *could* do really well. And I think a lot of them aren't because they don't get the kind of support that they need. And with a class of 48 people, of 52, it's hard not to even know who's there and what they need. And so, I'm sure a lot of brilliant minds I've missed. Not even just brilliant minds, one of the things I really enjoy about uh when you're a student undergraduate advisor is recognizing some students who were good but not brilliant: who could go on to law school or who you would recommend for an award, who probably never expected to be recommended because maybe they were a B student and a lot of time the B students really don't get much attention. I think we really do need to do that more... and the C students!

In the '70s when I was coming back to school and the '60s, I really thought we were going to do more with that. I thought we were going to do more with recognizing people's capabilities and encouraging them, in much the same fashion as the traditionally black institutions at the time, where people do become very involved and provide some of the kinds of the services that, that many times at people at a university don't expect and that's one of the things I did see at the community college is uh professors becoming a lot more involved with student activities and uh doing a lot more um intervening. And it didn't always work but, I think it did, I think it did to some extent. [Pause]

EN: Are there other things that you'd like to develop? You must have had a time over these years, managing your own time [SP Laughs] and getting so much research done. It must have been years of very hard work, I think.

SP: Yeah. Actually, I think about it now, looking back, I think, wow! I went back to school, this was at, I went to a school in Springfield, Illinois that, at the time... well I guess it's still there... at the time it was a junior college as opposed to a community college. I went back to school 2 weeks after my daughter was born. And I think about that now, and I think, wow! But I was so determined to go back to school and that's when the semester started and so I went back to school. And I think one of the things that having a child and being married did was that it meant I had to learn how to really manage my time. And so, I learned to manage my time and that has

really been, for me, the difference between success and failure. I think it's been really good at managing time and staying focused. And uh, I still tend to do that, even though now sometimes I'm really amazed that I've got chunks of time when I'm actually free! [Both Laugh] And it's funny because for the longest time, when I would have time that was free, I would be furiously be looking through my organizer, trying to think, "okay, what did I miss? How has this happened, that I've got an afternoon free?" or something. But it's interesting to look at my daughter, who, is even more organized than I am [Both Laugh] and to realize how much, for that matter, she's got 2 children, 51 weeks apart and yet she still is able to, to stay in school and graduate and all of that. I think a lot of it is just staying focused and staying organized.

EN: Well, thanks...

SP: You're welcome!

EN: ...a lot and get a transcript... [Recording stops and starts again]

SP: Ph.D. dissertation that I had done a lot of interviews. Now that I think about it I did, but with most of them, I didn't even tape them. I just, I took notes, yes. And now I wish I had taped them...

EN: Yes, uh huh.

SP: ...and that I had transcribed them because I had some wonderful interviews of the county in which I grew up and about um local history, where people knew some things about their own family history going back to the immediate post-Civil War era. And, I'm sure there was all kind of things in there that I didn't use in my dissertation or later research and I keep thinking, "Oh, I wish I had at least taped it, but better yet, tape it and also transcribe it."

EN: Yeah. Well that's... [Recording stops]