Macon Memories Oral History Project

Betty Jean Seymour and Darrell Headrick

October 23, 2007

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Transcription by Bridget Gonzalez

LW: Hello, I’m Lynda Wright, Librarian at Randolph-Macon College. It’s Tuesday, October 23rd, 2007, and I’m here in a StoryCorps booth at Randolph-Macon College library and I’m going to let Darrell Headrick and B. J. Seymour have a conversation with each other about their experiences at Randolph-Macon.

DH: Hello, I’m Darrell Headrick, I’m the chaplain at Randolph-Macon College, and I teach in the religious studies department, and I’m the Director of Volunteer Services for the college.

BJS: And I’m B. J. Seymour, I came to the Randolph-Macon Campus 32, or 3 or 4 or 5, years ago, and have just retired. And I taught and was chair of the religious studies department.

DH: Okay, B. J. You’ve been here 32, 33, 34, 35 years, do you remember what year it was when you came to the college?

BJS: Yes, it was 1971, in the spring, and in the fall of 1971 we had this onslaught of co-eds.

DH: And was that why you came to Randolph-Macon?

BJS: No. We had no, I had no idea this was going to take place, but it’s turned out to be an absolutely goal of mine, as far as I’m concerned, in every way to have these women and men together.

DH: When did you come to the college, originally? What were you hired to do?

BJS: I was hired to teach in the religious studies department by Cliff Edwards, who was the chair of that department, and I had a friend in Richmond who knew Cliff and that connection put me in a possible place, you know, to come and to teach. And I’ve never regretted that. This is a wonderful place.

DH: But that changed a bit, soon after you got here, didn’t it, with the Dean of Students, Ira Andrews?
BJS: Well, after I was teaching we had another problem come up, and that was we had all these 55 independent, determined women who had come into a campus of 750 men, and we had to do something about having some administrator, you know, perform those services for those women. And we looked around, apparently, to see who might be on the scene, and I seemed to be the only woman left standing, and so I was appointed to do that.

DH: That must have been quite a time. Randolph-Macon was an all-men’s school, one of the oldest schools in the South, always been a men’s college. Can you remember how you prepared for the coming of women, and what did it feel like, having women on campus?

BJS: I can’t tell you how it felt to prepare because nobody knew. No one, I think, had a decent grasp on what this was going to do. Because they redesigned the college and the life of the students, obviously, and there were persons, you know, who resented that. The guys did because, first of all, the women came and inhabited a dorm named Mary Branch, which was where a lot of the fellas lived that some did the year before. And now they were taking over, and they had to move. And they actually rebelled, because many of them refused to date our co-eds. And so finally that all got ironed out, but for awhile it was just wild. It was so confusing, and it was ignorance on our part, because we had no idea what to do to get ready.

One of the things I can remember, though, is that for sure, we decided there were three things that we were going to do, that we had to do, to get ready, and one of them was to put up shower curtains, take away the . . . what? [whispered conversation.] The urinals, and also we, I think we gave everybody probably a drawer and a half of a dresser for each woman who was here. And that wasn’t very much.

And then, you know, as time went on, I got to know the students and they got to know me, and so the relationship warmed, and was very, very nice as a matter of fact. So I enjoyed that. I was not a good dean, because I sided with the wrong people, and I was so sympathetic with the wrong people, until one day one of the students said, “What, I don’t understand this, now,” because this order had come from one of the higher-ups that we couldn’t have any animals on the premises. And this one child who was just wonderful but so sad, she had a couple of dogs and cats and all. And so I had to uphold what I was there for, so I told her she would have to leave them out somewhere, and she said, “Dr. Seymour, I thought you were a Christian.” So that was the end of that.

DH: When you talked about wrong people, B.J, who do you mean you sided with the wrong people, are you talking about students, against the administration?

BJS: No, just . . . I mean, I was left up to make a decision about what to do in these cases, and I had no idea, you know. So when I could, I would decide with the people who had committed the crimes, or whatever you want to call them.
DH: So how long did you serve as Associate Dean?

BJS: Not long.

DH: And then you went back and you became, back to full-time faculty.

BJS: Yes, uh-huh. And I taught religion and literature, and a course in women and religion, because that whole field was beginning to be developed really well. This, we’re talking about 20 years ago, and then in addition to that, everybody in our department would teach Hebrew Bible, and New Testament. Old and New Testament. We had a small department, but a very very fine department. So I was happy to be a part.

DH: Yeah, I think, actually that was like 35 years ago, when you started. But the coming of female students paralleled you being the first full-time female faculty member. How do you remember being received by your male colleagues on the faculty?

BJS: Well, obviously, I did not know at all what to expect, but I found them to be warm, and receiving, and not really a problem, not at all.

DH: So you were accepted in a collegial fashion, and friendship, and all of that?

BJS: Absolutely, yeah.

DH: That’s wonderful. I also know you were very active in your church, and that’s not a Methodist church. The college is Methodist. Was there any concern with you not being Methodist?

BJS: There was, actually, and I’ll tell you a story about that.

The person who was the chair of the department, and who had found me some place and invited me to come was Cliff Edwards, and he became a kind of mentor. He’s at VCU now, I believe. But anyway, we had to go around and do the usual things, you had to give a lecture, and that kind of thing, and finally we made our way up to the President’s office. The President had to okay whatever was going to happen with me or anybody else. This was when Luther White was the President, and he was a lawyer and a very confirmed and committed Methodist. And so he listened to what Cliff had to say about my being a good fit, and what they had advertised for in the new person who would be coming in. And so then Dr. White turned to him and said, “Well I hope this person, I hope he’s a Methodist.” And Cliff laughed and he said, “Not only is he a she, but she’s not a Methodist.”

DH: (laughs)

BJS: That really happened.
DH: B.J., you also then became the first female to receive tenure at the college, and the first female to chair a department. Do you have any remembrance of how that felt? Was this a natural progression for you?

BJS: I’m not sure how to answer that. It felt, I felt like that was an enormous job to take on, and especially with the people who were teaching in the department. And, you know, I gave it my best shot, and if that’s what, you know, would be good for the school and the department, I was willing to do whatever that took.

DH: When you think about being, your time at the college, and attending faculty meetings, for example, and looking around that room of faculty, what changes did you see in that, in those meetings, and just among the faculty in general, from your first years at the college to the time you retired?

BJS: Well, of course, being the only one at the beginning was a very unique thing, but as the years progressed, so did our understanding of the fact that these women were here, and were quite as competent as anybody else to do a job that they had been trained for. And now I guess we probably have, maybe 50%, maybe a little over that, women than men. And I think it’s a very healthy collegial atmosphere, still.

DH: Is there anything else you want to talk about, to share with us, and your tenure here at Randolph-Macon?

BJS: I should probably tell you about the first thing we had to do, and my first assignment, so to speak, was with Ira. When those women came, what had happened was they had found out that the guys were operating under a different set of principles and rules and that kind of thing, and they said, very early on, they wanted their own rights. And so that was really something. This particular concern was with the persons trying to decide on how, what are the beginnings and ends of these times, you know, when your people could come in and go out and that kind of thing. And so we had a meeting of everybody, I think, in the whole student body, and Ira and me. Ira the dean, and me. And we sat there into 2:30 in the morning, and then we finally came to some kind of conclusion, I’m not sure what it was at this point, got on my way to go home, and I got arrested. And this guy came and he said I had run a red light, and I was speeding down England Street. Well, so much for that. But anyway, he took me out on Highway 1, and he questioned and questioned and questioned me, and he said to me, and this sounds like something out of a surrealist film or something, he said, “If you’ll tell me straight, I promise to make it go easy on you.” And I thought, “Good night, where am I? This is Randolph-Macon territory?”

So anyway, then the second episode of that was when I went to court, and we had several Randolph-Macon students in the courtroom, and I’m sure they were surmising all kinds of things that they were accusing me of, the courts were accusing me of. But anyway, that’s the last time I was arrested, I think.
DH: B.J., when you think back, what were some of the most enjoyable experiences you’ve had at the college?

BJS: Oh, gosh.

DH: I know you’ve had many. You’ve taught travel courses to Israel, and Spain, and Italy . . .

BJS: Okay, I think, for me, at least, and for our students, I think probably the most valuable thing that’s possible for a college to offer students is a study abroad. And that can be mission work, which more and more of our students are involved in now, and it can simply be a class where, you know, like any other class you would take. And I think one of the most enjoyable things for me was to begin way back in the end of the 1970s and the beginning of the ‘80s to take students to Israel. And now of course that would be impossible, but in the meantime, Darrell Headrick, who’s been asking me all these questions, and I came to came to the library one day and we mapped out a whole class for I think two weeks, probably, yeah, to Italy. And that to me, for many, many reasons was for a highlight of my time here. Darrell and I did these together for probably six or seven years. And we were a great fit because Darrell, aside from his own religious information and so that he has, he also is very interested in politics and geography and so forth. So he was very strong, that’s his forte, and then I came along and talked a little bit about the beautiful artistic, artistry of every step he took, practically. And so over the years we developed the way to work together, and discovered some things that most people, I think, do not discover. And so that would be a highlight, if not the one.

How about for you, Darrell?

DH: Highlights? I would agree. For me, those trips to Italy, the classes that you and I shared are unforgettable. We always had such wonderful groups of students, we had fun with them, we had eye-opening experiences all over Italy. And you and I shared some deep, meaningful conversations and experiences together that touched my life, and I’ll never forget. One of the wonderful memories that I have is a fun one that I think gets to your playful nature. Along with your scholarship and your intellectual abilities, you have this wonderful side that enjoys playing and having fun. I remember one evening, late afternoon, coming across the Venetian lagoon. We were in Venice, and we had gone to some of the islands, Murano, and Burano, and others. And the sun was just setting, it was a beautiful, beautiful late afternoon, and I was up on a deck of the boat and I looked around, and some people seemed to be missing, and you were one of them. And I started looking, and I went downstairs on the lower deck, and I looked out, and there you were with a group of students, and you were teaching them the Hokey Pokey on the Venetian lagoon, and I thought that was wonderful. I really enjoyed that.

And I also remember, B.J., that you were the reason why I came to Randolph-Macon. Do you remember that? We had a meeting at my house, I was the associate pastor of your church, and you were the chair of the missions committee, and that was one of the committees that I related
to, and we were planning for our meeting for that evening, and we had finished our work and walked you to the door and you were leaving. And after you got out the door you paused, and you had this look on your face like you were pondering something, and I asked you, “What? What are you thinking, B.J.?” and you hesitated, and you said, “Well, I want to tell you something, but I don’t want to tell you.” And what it was was you told me that there was a position open at the college, the position of chaplain. And you said, “I think you would be just perfect for that.” I remember you saying that. And then you said, “But I don’t, I think you would be great at it, but I don’t want to lose you as one of my pastors.” And so we talked about it and eventually I applied for the position and I was chosen to become chaplain. And so I will always be grateful to you, here I am 22 years later still in this position, and I always, when people ask me about my time here, I always say a little prayer of gratitude and ask God to bless you for your assistance in me ending up in this wonderful place.

[Pause in recording.]

Okay, and I think you wanted to ask me how the role of the chaplain had changed at Randolph-Macon over the years. It has changed depending on who the Dean of Students is, actually. That’s the one who supervises the chaplain’s position. But for the most part, the role has been the director of religious life for the college, as well the director of volunteer services and teaching in the department. What has changed in the most recent past is that, when I arrived at the college, I was responsible for all of the religious programming, period. The college had a policy that would not allow outside groups to come onto the campus and establish religious groups. And so we didn’t have Catholic groups, or Baptist groups, or Methodist groups, or anything like that. The college charged the chaplain with directing all work. And one of the reasons I was hired was because they perceived me to be somebody who was broadly ecumenical, and interfaith, and could work with liberal Christians, conservative Christians, Catholic Christians, Protestant Christians. A few years ago, three, four years ago now, we changed that model, and now we have six campus ministries on campus, and we work in a wonderful cooperative way together. And it’s been a real blessing to me because it’s been, as any interfaith work, it’s been a challenge at times, but we’ve been able to work in such a wonderful harmonious way, I think, and to be able to broaden ministry here at Randolph-Macon.

BJS: I’ve been asked to say something about my mentors here at Randolph-Macon, who encouraged me when times were tough. I would have to go back first of all to Cliff Edwards, who is a brilliant human being, I think. That’s a good way to put it. Taught me a lot about art and religion, but also about the way one deals in a situation that’s tough, and how one gets through that, and so forth. And he again was the person to whom I would look for times that were not as good as some other times. So he certainly would be one person. Ira Andrews was a good friend, is a good friend. He’s in the religion department, was in the religion department, and was Dean of Students for years and years and years. And, you know, he certainly was supportive. And Darrell, once Darrell got his feet wet, there was no stopping him, and so along
the way, he and I – he’s already told you a little bit about that – but he and I became the best, the closest of friends. And that showed up, I think, in the way we were able to conduct these trips over to Italy. So those three come to mind right away, I think.

Also, I was going to say something about a man in philosophy, but . . . well, I’ll do that. His name is Joe Beatty, and he came not much after I did, but he has been a consistent help and understanding, you know, the problems that I might have been going through, and helping me get through those problems. I have to say that it seems to me though, as I look back over the 30 years, I’ve had very little trouble of my own or with colleagues and so forth. It’s been an incredible, incredible time, and I wouldn’t trade that for anything.

DH: B.J., you retired in 2003? Yeah. Well, I think of you every time I’m in Haley Hall. Haley is where you taught, and where all my classes were in those years, and your office was in Haley Hall. And do you remember, often on Friday afternoons when we were both finished with our heaviest responsibilities, and I often would find myself wandering that hall and tapping on the door, and you so graciously inviting me to come inside, and I would begin a conversation about some particular issue, or something in the department, or something that affected the religious studies department, but we would end up talking, sometimes for a couple of hours, long after most people in Haley Hall had gone home for the weekend. And every time I’m in the Hall I think of that, and I remember that, and I miss that, very much. I also remember at times teaching in the Hall, and the door had a glass panel, and I would be lecturing away, and I might hear a little tap, and I’d look over at the door, and there would be B.J., making little funny faces at me. (laughs) And I thought, how wonderful to have a boss, a chair of the department that again is so intellectual and bright and scholarly but also enjoys life, and knows how to have fun. I love that about you, B.J.

Um, yes. B.J., you talked about some of your mentors at the college, mine definitely is one that you mentioned, Ira Andrews, Dean of Students. Longtime Dean of Students, I think he was here 36-7 years as Dean of Students, and then eventually became chair of the religious studies department for a few years after you had retired and Steve Toole had left. Was a very close friend and was one I would go to for advice in my work as chaplain here. And you were the other one, you two were my mentors. You helped me to fit in quickly, to feel at home, you came to some of the programs that my student groups would conduct, you were always good to give me feedback, encouragement, always very encouraging. Sometimes when I would be disappointed by others or some of my own work, you were very encouraging. So you were a wonderful mentor to me. And one that inspired me, just by the example of your dedication to your discipline, to religious studies and the love that you brought to that, to your own teaching, the way you connected with the students. I aspired to that. I wanted to be the kind of person that I saw in you as you taught. Students who came to love the subject because of the excitement and interest that you brought to it, and who connected with you personally, who, many of whom, years later, as alums of the college, would come to you, some asking you to perform their
weddings, to share good news with, just to connect back with. Which is wonderful, for those of us who work at a small college, those are the kinds of experiences we all cherish. And you were a wonderful guide and mentor in that.

LW: Is there anything else either of you would like to add, or reminisce about, anything this conversation has sparked?

DH: Well, I think one of the things I just alluded to, I think that many of us came to the college, and we stayed. I remember when I came I assumed I’d be here four to five years, and then I would move back into parish life, because I loved the parish. But I didn’t, I fell in love with this place and didn’t want to leave. You fell in love with this place, and with the students, and your colleagues, and you didn’t want to leave. And I think we, this community at Randolph-Macon, really, at its best, becomes a family, and we care for one another and support one another and I can’t imagine a more wonderful way to live out my life than to live it here at Randolph-Macon.

BJS. All I can say to that is Amen.

DH: Thank you.

[Pause in recording.]

BJS: One final note to all of this, I was thinking back over the times we had, the tough times and the struggle times when the women came. With so much confusion and ignorance going on about how to prepare, and what to prepare, and so forth, I forgot to say something about one ball that somebody let drop. And that was somebody, I don’t know who it was, thank goodness, but somebody got overzealous and ordered an overdose, in a sense, of some of the literature that they had previously used for the men. And what we all came to see was somebody was passing out little cards which said, “Come to Randolph-Macon. It is the perfect place for you to come. It’s called . . .” we had a kind of slogan, it said, “The college for the individual man.” And that’s right after I and all the women came in. So that made us a little touchy, but we got over that.

Thank you so much for having us.