AN INTERVIEW WITH FLORA WYATT

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Oral History Project

Endacott Society

University of Kansas
FLORA WYATT

B.A., Education, Southwest Missouri University, 1957
M.A., Education, Central Missouri State University, 1963

Service at the University of Kansas
First came to the University of Kansas in 1968
Teaching Associate
Assistant Professor of Education
AN INTERVIEW WITH FLORA WYATT

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

Q: I am speaking with Flora Wyatt, who retired in 2005 as Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, Kansas, on November 10, 2005. Where were you born and in what year?

A: I was born in Missouri in the small town of Urbana and graduated from high school there.

Q: What were your parents’ names?

A: My mother’s name was Delphina Hobbs Reaser and my father’s name was Linn Reaser.

Q: What was their educational background?

A: My mother had two years of college. My father was a farmer and a rural mail carrier, so he did not have any college experience.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?

A: I have two sisters. I have a twin sister and a sister who is four and a half years older than I am.

Q: Were you identical twins?

A: No, very much not. I suppose we have some features that are alike, but we are different in coloring of hair and eyes and everything.

Q: Did you grow up in the area where you were born?

A: Yes, I graduated from high school there.

Q: Where did you attend elementary school?

A: It was in that town. It was a K-12 school. I went to elementary, junior high and high
school there.

Q: This was probably a fairly small school.
A: It was very small. My graduating class was 20.

Q: What are some things you enjoyed in school?
A: There are advantages and disadvantages of being in such a small school. The advantages, I think, are that we participated in everything. We were in music and sports and just everything because in a small school you had the opportunity to participate in everything you wanted to.

Q: You said you were in sports. I suppose that was girls’ basketball. That was usually what girls did.
A: And softball. My sisters and I participated in music. We did a lot of music because we had a very good band and choral director.

Q: What did you play in the band?
A: I played the clarinet and then later I played the tympani drums.

Q: Were you the sort of child who played school when you were young?
A: Yes. I think from a very early age I would imitate my teachers when I got home and played school. At that time I think the things you thought about, especially if you grew up like I did in a small town where there weren’t a great many opportunities, I think you thought of being a teacher or a nurse. And, actually, I did think about being a nurse. But I think those were kind of our choices at that time. At least I didn’t see others. Of course there are people my age who did a lot of other things, such as being doctors or whatever, but not very many. I didn’t see that as an opportunity in life.

Q: Did you ever have jobs growing up?
A: Oh, yes. My sister and I did a lot of babysitting, and I worked in a grocery store part of the time on Saturdays in high school. I also did a little bit—not that I wanted to but the store I worked in wanted me to—of working in their bookkeeping department. So I did that also.

Q: Was this the kind of store that was small and very different from a supermarket?

A: Well, actually, it was not at all like today’s supermarket, but it was a typical store at that time that sold everything, such as groceries and feed, a co-op kind of thing. For that time it was very diverse in what it sold. It wasn’t just a little grocery store.

Q: Was it always assumed that you would go to college?

A: I don’t think so. I think it was hoped, but it was financially difficult. I think I was just determined. In fact, I didn’t go straight through. I stopped and worked in order to get through my undergraduate degree.

Q: Did you have honors in high school, such as valedictorian?

A: I did. I was valedictorian. I participated in debate, everything you could do in a small school.

Q: When did you graduate from high school?

A: In 1962.

Q: Did you start to college that next fall?

A: I worked one year and then I went to college for two years. At that time you could get a teaching certificate to teach with two years. I went to Torrington, Wyoming, and taught and then came back and finished school.

Q: What sort of job did you have the first year you were out of high school?

A: I was in bookkeeping. I’m a people person, so I was not happy. I knew that was
something I didn’t want to do.

Q: Where did you go to college?
A: I went to Southwest Missouri University in Springfield, Missouri, where my grandmother had gone. My grandmother had only gone there two years as well. That’s where I got my undergraduate degree.

Q: Did you commute there or did you live there?
A: I lived there. At that time that university did not have student dorms, so I lived with a group of girls in an apartment close to the university.

Q: You said you went to school two years and then you left to teach. Did you do student teaching during that time or didn’t they have it?
A: They had it, but I didn’t do it until I came back. I did two years at the university. I was an education major and you could teach after two years, which is true today for substitute teachers, if you have so many college hours you can get a certificate. It is not a permanent certificate. So I taught two years and then I went back to school and did student teaching and all that.

Q: After you had already had experience as a teacher.
A: I think I remember that right. I may have done a little bit. In that program it wasn’t like it is here. You didn’t do it as a culminating thing. You did student teaching in certain areas for so many hours a day, such as science methods, etc. I may have done some of that. But certainly I didn’t have any long-term student teaching or internship like our students have now.

Q: You said when you decided to teach you went to Wyoming. That’s a long ways away.
A: Well, I had an aunt and uncle. He was a superintendent of schools in Wyoming. The pay
was better there. They said, “Why don’t you come out here?” I did that. I wasn’t going to be in his district. But I would have been within 60 miles of where they were. But in the meantime after I took the job he was appointed by the governor to take a position in a special school way up almost to the Montana line. So I only saw them when I flew up there for Thanksgiving. The superintendent of the school I was in at Torrington knew that they were moving. He even called and said, “Do you want to keep your contract?” I said yes. But it was interesting. I didn’t know anybody in the world. But I was mentored by some wonderful teachers there because I hardly knew what I was doing.

Q: And you were quite young too. I suppose about 20.
A: I was 20.

Q: Were you teaching in elementary or junior high?
A: Elementary.

Q: What grade did you teach?
A: I started out in second grade and I loved it. Then after I finished my degree my next teaching job was in Raytown, Missouri. They put me in third grade. I thought, “Oh, I really want second.” But I loved third grade. What I found out is if you enjoy teaching and kids and inquiry, you will like any age level.

Q: When you were in the Wyoming school did you have children who didn’t speak English or not much?
A: Actually, I don’t recall that we had any children who didn’t speak English.

Q: I asked because you talked about the Hispanics who worked in the sugar beet fields.
A: I don’t remember any at all who didn’t speak English. I think learning to read was a challenge. Then of course at that time they didn’t have any special education programs,
so we also had children with all kinds of special needs. As I look back I think, “I’m glad none of my students have to go out and walk into a position like that with the kinds of diversity I had to deal with.” Of course we never thought anything about that. It was just the way it was.

Q: How many years did you teach there?
A: Two years. Then I came back to southwest Missouri and finished my undergraduate degree. Then I went to Raytown, Missouri, a suburban district, and taught.

Q: What year did you finish your undergraduate degree?
A: I started teaching in Raytown in 1957. So it must have been 1957.

Q: When you were in college were you involved in extracurricular activities?
A: Actually, not very many because I worked all the time I was in college. I carried a heavy work load.

Q: What sort of jobs did you have?
A: I worked in the university’s doctors’ clinic as an office person part of the time. I worked in a grocery store. At Christmastime I worked in a department store, different things like that.

Q: That’s quite a hectic job, isn’t it?
A: Yes.

Q: You said your first teaching job after graduating was in Raytown.
A: Right. Raytown was a very interesting district at that time because it was a very growing district. It had not gotten to its boundaries about where schools were built. I was there 10 years. Every year that I was there I think they built a new school. It was a very growing district and very interesting. It has now changed a great deal as far as the
population and the demographics. But it was a very up and coming school district.

Q: So the children were somewhat different than in Wyoming.

A: But most of them then were suburban children. We still had special ed and that kind of thing but it wasn’t diverse like it is now.

Q: Then you taught 10 years in Raytown. Were you married during this time?

A: No, I wasn’t. Part of the time I was a classroom teacher. Then the last three years that I was there I had a different kind of position. They asked to me to start a program called the Helping Teacher Program because we had so many new, young teachers every year. Just to work with them. I missed having my own classroom but it gave me experience with all different grade levels, which was good.

Q: So you didn’t teach while you were helping these teachers. You would sit in their classroom and…

A: Well, I did lots of demonstration teaching and I would team teach with them. I would take their classroom so that they could participate in some in service kinds of things. It really wasn’t just sitting as a supervisor.

Q: That probably would be helpful for new teachers. I would think it would be rather frightening to be a new teacher.

A: They were all young, beginning teachers. They were kind of like I was. They had the programs, but certainly not like we have today. I think all of us who started out then had a lot to learn.

Q: Then you were coordinator of the Helping Teacher program. And this was a rather large school district, I suppose. Were you helping teachers in a specific school?

A: No. All the elementary schools. Then they added two more helping teachers because it
got big, so I was coordinator of them. But I also had my own school.

Q: Were you working towards your master’s in the summers during this time?

A: Both in the summers and… I did my master’s at Central Missouri State because they had a program in Independence, which was next door to Raytown in the evening where you could take classes. So even during the school year I took classes. In the summers I went to finish also. We had the opportunity to take a class all the time while we were teaching.

Q: Were you thinking of going into college teaching, or were you just trying to move up on the salary scale?

A: I guess I’ve always been a student. You always want to learn. It was an opportunity. If you are going to be a career classroom teacher I felt that was important. I had no idea I’d ever be a college teacher.

Q: When you were an Education master’s student did you have to write a thesis?

A: You have a thesis or a project, something that you do that is major thing. By that time I had become very interested in the training of young teachers. So my master’s was in supervision. My project was in supervision of student teachers. That’s how I kind of got into the training of teachers at that level. I really was doing it only thinking about working with student teachers.

Q: When did you get your master’s?

A: It was in 1963.

Q: After you were at Raytown for 10 years, then what did you do?

A: I came to KU during the summer to start a doctoral program with a couple of other teachers from Raytown. We commuted.

Q: And were you still thinking of being a public school teacher even if you got a doctorate?
A: Yes. I wasn’t thinking about college teaching. Actually I had Nita (Sunbye Sewell) for a couple of classes. I was very, very impressed with her. I had four classes that summer. I had a very heavy load, as heavy as I could. I invited her to come to Raytown to do a workshop on reading, which she did. I know you know Nita well. I was a good student, but I never really felt close to her personally. But I just respected her so much as a teacher. So I was so surprised when she came to give the workshop and she said, “Oh, and by the way, my brother may call you to ask you out.”

Q: I didn’t know.

A: That’s how I ended up here at KU.

Q: She was from Arkansas, I believe. Where was her brother from?

A: My husband, her brother, came here to go to the School of Pharmacy. He has a degree from KU.

Q: So he was at KU at the same time you were there for your doctorate.

A: He had already graduated from KU. We are the same age. He was working as a practicing pharmacist at the time.

Q: In Lawrence?

A: Yes. So that’s how I came to KU, because we got married. I came and I applied. The School of Education here at KU decided that they were going to hire two or three people who did not have their doctorate yet but who had demonstrated that they were outstanding teachers. They were going to hire them to teach and supervise student teachers. So I applied there and for a public school job here in Lawrence. I ended up getting my choice. I decided to go to the university because I thought it would be good for me to get into a new setting working in a different kind of situation.
Q: Were you still working on your doctorate at this time?
A: I was. However, at that time the School of Education and KU in general, especially the School of Education, kind of had an unwritten rule. They had hired some of their own graduates and they felt they were getting kind of inbred. They didn’t want to hire their own graduates. So I was concerned about finishing and giving up my job at the same time. Of course I didn’t have tenure. So one of the persons who was in the same kind of situation I was at K-State came here. We worked out something so that you could do part of your course work where you were and part at the other university so you could get your degree from there. But I didn’t go ahead and do that. I should have. My husband had two children who were real young at the time. They lived with us. I would have had to go to K-State for night classes. I decided to just go ahead and teach at the School of Education as long as I could and then I would go back into the public schools and then go ahead and finish my degree. But I never left the university until 2005.

Q: How young were his children when you married?
A: His daughter was seven and his son was ten.

Q: That must be quite a challenge.
A: It was.

Q: Particularly working at the university and becoming a new mother of two. What was your position at the university?
A: Teaching associate was the title that they gave to us. There was an art teacher who did it, Dixie Glenn, who was an excellent art teacher and me. I think we were the only two who came in under that. Then after a few years we were told that if we were going to be able to stay in our positions we would need to seek tenure. Of course I didn’t have the
terminal degree. And neither did Dixie Glenn. She left saying, “I know that it is not possible to do that.” I was encouraged a great deal by my dean at the time, Dale Scannell, and by Ambrose Sarricks because I had won some university teaching awards. I was encouraged to go ahead and apply for tenure, which I did. And I was granted tenure, which is really unusual. But I have always stayed at the assistant level. So it was wonderful that I got to stay. It is unfortunate that my salary was always at the assistant professor level. But I am not sorry that I did it.

Q: What year did you come to KU?
A: 1968.

Q: That was quite an exciting time to come to KU.
A: It was. I remember one day when I was sitting at my desk in the office a young man just barged into the office with a big sign that he slapped down on the desk. It was at the time when the chancellor cancelled finals. I was a little alarmed. He wasn’t invited to my office, even though the door was always open. He just barged in and yelled something about a rally. It was like, “Wow, this is getting serious.” Of course education students were not rebellious. They were serious. But it was kind of a frightening thing to have happen. I was very disappointed professionally that finals were cancelled. I didn’t feel that he should have given in. But who knows whether it would have been better or not. I’m certainly always interested and now with the current rioting going on, of course for a different reason, in Paris, France, I think, “Wow, it’s really difficult to manage these kinds of situations.”

Q: Oh, yes. We came about the same time. We came in 1969. What classes were you teaching?
A: I did Supervision of Student Teachers in Kansas City, Johnson County and all around. But I also was asked to teach one course. It was in reading. So I started out teaching reading. Then I ended up teaching a lot of different kinds of things. I taught Language Arts Methods, which is the writing and the listening compatible to reading. I taught the middle school class for a while, which I really enjoyed, with students who were preparing to be junior high or middle school teachers. I was granted graduate status to teach graduate level classes. So I taught some classes in school districts for teachers, particularly in curriculum and writing, and also in working with student teachers and interns.

Q: So you would drive around to these various schools in Kansas City and Johnson County and sit in on classes and see how your student teachers were doing.

A: And give them feedback.

Q: There were so many opportunities opening up for women at that time. Did less people go into teaching then?

A: No. KU has always had a huge program. That didn’t change until the School of Education requested and was granted limited student enrollment. So it is competitive now to get into the School of Education.

Q: I didn’t know that.

A: Oh, it has been for 15 years probably. They take so many students in elementary, and so many in each content area at the secondary level. So it’s very competitive and very disappointing to some students if they don’t get in. The grade point average of admissions is high. We get a really high quality group of students. It’s been that way for at least 15 years.
Q: And this is on the undergraduate level.

A: Yes.

Q: I read in the paper that they are talking about raising the standards of admission to KU again. But some divisions have already done that.

A: Well, the students don’t come into the School of Education, the professional school, until they are juniors. So while they are freshmen and sophomores if they think they want to go into education they are advised by people what classes are going to be prerequisites. Then they apply during their sophomore year, but they are not really admitted to the School of Ed until they are juniors. But the problem is that about half the students who apply to get into elementary education do not get in. I think we may have fewer applicants now so that less than 50 percent don’t get in. But it is really high. The teaching fields in secondary that are oversupplied, or at least well supplied, are English and social studies. So they limit that to 25 students per year to admit. Then science, math and foreign language are open because we such great need for science and math teachers. And there are so many other opportunities for them to take other jobs that pay better.

Q: Do the students who don’t get in go to some other college to finish up?

A: They do a lot of different things. They can change majors. They can stay here and take courses that will apply to their minors and majors and try the next year, or they can transfer to another school. I’ll say quite a few of them stay around and apply the next year, and I can’t blame them. The fact is, they don’t want to leave KU to go to another teacher-training institution in the state of Kansas. We have lots of teacher-training programs in the state of Kansas, but they want to be here at KU. Our program is a five-
year program.

Q: When did that change?
A: That’s been in effect a long time.

Q: I’m trying to remember. I think they changed about the time my daughter was considering that.
A: It’s been a long time ago. What is the age of your daughter?
Q: She’s 42 now.
A: It’s been a long time. There were people who said that will kill your School of Education. But we don’t have any trouble getting applicants.
Q: So it didn’t affect your enrollment.
A: The students have field experience all the way through beginning at the junior level. Even freshmen and sophomores who know they want to come into education have a couple of classes they can take. They have a chance to work in schools with that. In their methods classes in their junior and senior years they are out in the schools a lot. Then in their fifth year they have student teaching and internship and some graduate course work to go along with it. So they are half way to their master’s, but not all the way.
Q: What is an internship as opposed to student teaching?
A: Student teaching is a shorter experience and the internship is longer. They have some requirements, such as to carry out an action research project, some things that would really apply research to what they are doing in the classroom.
Q: So they are still student teaching but doing it differently.
A: Right, different expectations and requirements.
Q: Then you were an education consultant with the Switzer Follow Through Project in Kansas City, Missouri.

A: Yes, that was really interesting. It was a Head Start program that was also in the schools. Switzer at that time was a school that had a very unique makeup. The demographics were one third Caucasian, one third Black, and one third Hispanic. It’s right down by the stockyards. It was very interesting, but so many cultural conflicts within the groups of families. The Kansas City, Missouri, schools have always been challenging. Switzer is in the Kansas City, Missouri, school district.

Q: What were you doing?

A: I was working with the teachers there. It was just an extra add-on thing. I worked with the teachers in reading and looking at their reading scores and those kinds of things and setting up workshops.

Q: Then you had something to do with previewing language arts and reading manuscripts for Prentice-Hall.

A: Yes, but I think that’s typical of most professors. When people are publishing books they want people who are actually teaching to review them and give them their feedback. I think that’s very typical.

Q: Did you ever have a sabbatical?

A: I never asked for a sabbatical. Before I even came to KU I had a wonderful opportunity, which is one of the reasons I postponed starting on my doctorate for a while. I went two summers for a project that was sponsored by the United States Agency for International Development and the National Education Association. They selected teachers to go to developing countries during the summer. So I went two summers to Sierra Leone in
West Africa. That was really interesting.

Q: Were you teaching? This would have been in the summer.
A: I was teaching teachers. It was their rainy season, so that’s when they didn’t have school.

Q: I don’t know much about Sierra Leone. Was this a primitive place?
A: Sierra Leone was a protectorate of Great Britain for many years. Then they got their independence from Great Britain. So they were very British influenced, although they have some French influence as well. We were there during the time that they were independent. I still have a diary that I kept, which I really treasure because the Lebanese were coming into West Africa. I felt that they had been so exploited by the British, who took out all their gold, because they had gold in this country. Then the Lebanese were there taking out their diamonds. These people speak 27 different tribal languages. They are very tribal. It is very difficult for them to produce all their own food. Here this wealth was going out. At the current time they have pulled out all Peace Corps workers and everyone from Sierra Leone because they have been involved in a civil war, which is predictable. But it was a wonderful experience at the time. I don’t think it was unsafe. It was just really interesting to have that opportunity. And I really treasured it. But I think it had an impact on my life. Any time you have an experience like that where you see people living like they do. They would never believe how we live, I am sure. You come and think, “Why, why, why? Just because I was where I was, I have had these wonderful opportunities, even though I didn’t grow up with wealth. They couldn’t possibly believe how we live. It does make an impact on you.

Q: I would think so.
A: They didn’t even produce their own paper. The U.S. Embassy would publish a weekly
newspaper. They would go get it, not to read it but they could use the paper to write on the back of it. And their schools were extremely primitive, the buildings. I had the opportunity one summer to be up in the bush country. It was way inward.

Q: Did the government provide a place for you to live?
A: We went altogether as a group of about 30. Then we were in different locations. We didn’t see each other until the end. In one of the cases we lived in what had been a British boarding school for British children who lived there. They were gone for the summer. Another summer we lived in some kind of institutional housing.

Q: You’ve had a number of honors as a teacher.
1967 – Outstanding young woman in America
1968 – Outstanding educator in Raytown
1971 – Bernard Fink award for excellence in teaching at KU
Twice a finalist for the HOPE award.
1972 – Outstanding woman teacher
1972 – Outstanding Educator in America
1976 – Outstanding Educator, Torch chapter of Mortar Board
1983 – Good Apple award from the Lawrence School District. Was that because of your work with student teachers?
A: I think so. Schools nominate you for that. I think it was because I worked with so many different schools with their teachers.

Q: You’ve certainly had a lot of awards. What qualities do you think make a good teacher?
A: Well, caring and concern is one. One of the last awards I received a couple years ago was the Make a Difference Award. I think that explains it. If you are a really good
teacher you work really hard to make a difference. The one thing I think is important in addition to caring and concern is that you remain a scholar and stay on top of things so that you bring the best practices to your teaching. I consider myself rather liberal. You are concerned about diversity and everyone having the same chance. There are just so many issues in education. Right now I’m terribly concerned about the control of the State School Board and the commissioner, who doesn’t even have an education background. I’m just like off the wall about this because I think people like that come with a political agenda. I don’t think that has any place in education. I’m sure they believe in what they are doing. But I believe education ought to be where students are engaged in inquiry. I’m just really concerned about that. I’m sure that the pendulum will swing. Hopefully, the next election will help take care of that. But I am really deeply concerned right now about that.

Q: Oh, yes. I realize I forgot to ask you about some of the influential teachers in your life. Can you remember some?

A: As a student, not a tremendous lot of them stand out. I think when you go to a really small school, sometimes you don’t have really excellent teachers. I don’t think I was challenged enough. I think the best teacher I ever had there was a music teacher who made us do research on musicians and that kind of thing. I’ve always been interested in science. I’ve always said in my next life I’m going to be a middle school science teacher, which people think is just crazy. I’m very interested in science, even though it didn’t end up being my major. I credit that probably to the limited opportunities in my high school. The interesting thing is that some of the people with whom I’ve taught I would say are my best role models. As a young teacher I really had the opportunity to teach with some
really outstanding teachers who I learned from. I think I would value them as much as anybody who was my actual teacher.

Q: I suppose you have been on committees at the university. Any you particularly remember?

A: I think the most memorable were committees that changed the organization of the school. I was on the committee that did the planning when we switched to a five-year program. Some things like that were very important. I was chair of a component of that. Many committees like that were important because they changed how the school was organized, the curriculum as well.

Q: I understand that you have had publications.

A: Yes. As you see, I am still working on that. I’ve had articles. Most of those would be about language arts or those kinds of things. The book I enjoyed doing the most, well, a couple of things. As a member of Phi Delta Kappa I felt that we should have a scholarship for our students in Phi Delta Kappa.

Q: Is that a teachers’ honorary?

A: Yes. Teachers and university educators belong to it. Actually, I was teaching here a long time before it was opened to women. I was chair of the scholarship committee in the School of Ed for many years and felt that we should have a scholarship. We did a lot of things to try to raise money for that. One of the things we did was to publish a little book called *Tales of the One-Room Schoolhouse*. We sold it and made lots of money off it. Then do you remember the days around the Fourth of July down at the river where we used to celebrate?

Q: Oh, yes.
A: We set up a little schoolhouse and reenacted. We all dressed up in old time costumes. That was really fun. Another book I really enjoyed doing was with a couple of librarians here, Margie Coggins and Jane Ember. They are school librarians in the public schools. We did a book on children’s authors of nonfiction that would be useful books in units of study. We identified children’s authors we’d like to have in it and contacted all of them and wrote their stories. We recommended their books and what units of study they would fit into. I really enjoyed that because even though you don’t get personal contact with the authors I did talk with many of them by phone, including one in London, England. That was a really fun project. That is something that I am truly committed to, integrated curriculum. Children ought to be reading. They love nonfiction. If they are in a unit of study they should be reading books by children’s authors who tell things about science or about the world. I found that to be really interesting. The reading material we are working on now is for children who have trouble learning to read, a basic sight word program. I have such a problem. I’m not an authority in remedial reading. I respect the people who are, Nita and Norma Dick, with whom I work. But I was invited to work on that project and to write some of the books with a controlled vocabulary and also to do some the activity sheets to do creative activity that would have kids do something kind of unusual on an activity sheet. So I did that, but it was really hard to do.

Q: I would think so. You are given a list of just certain words that you can use and you have to make a story out of them.

A: You have to write a story that would be interesting to kids using those.

Q: I think Nita said that this project was done earlier and that this is a revision that you are doing.
A: We did that about 25 years ago. What happened was it was extremely useful for children who have trouble with basic sight words. They hold no meaning and they all look alike. But they are just critical to being able to read. So we did it 25 years ago. A publisher had it for us and then they sold it to another publishing company. That happens. They had their own sight word program so they deemphasized ours. They changed it so that it wasn’t as attractive. It didn’t sell so well. So Norma, Nita and I got the copyright back. Then another company bought it and we are working with them. They are in San Antonio. I think they are going to do a marvelous job. They are redoing all the books, as far as the illustrations. This is what I have been working so hard on. We have redone all the activity sheets because if you read things that you’ve done 25 years ago, they had things we can’t use today. Plus we need to update it for things that are current. So it has been a real challenge.

Q: The world has changed a lot in 25 years. Have you had students you remember who have gone on to greater things?

A: I would like to come back to that in a second. One other thing I want to talk about is a project that I was involved in, in teaching language arts, which I value highly. Since I was working with my students in how to engage children in writing to be better writers, I started a project with the support of a bank here in town for my students to work with small groups of elementary kids and interview people and to write their biography. What happened was what I didn’t expect to happen. The first year that we did it the people who we chose were retired people who would have time to do this because they had to come to the school twice for these interviews with these groups of kids and then come back for a celebration when they actually handed them their published copy. Of course
many of these people at the time that I first introduced that were World War II veterans.
I was just like, “What a gold mine this is.” So I asked the schools to change the project to
a grade level where the kids are really introduced to World War II so that it would fit
with the curriculum better. It’s still going on, but it has changed from being focused on
World War II veterans. Often now we are doing it in the fourth grade where they are
doing a unit of study on geography. We choose people who have a background in a
different part of the United States so they could share that with the kids. I think it has
been really valuable for my students to have a real practice with teaching kids how to
make interview questions, how to do rough drafts, how to do revisions and then come up
with a published copy. The other thing is the comments I’ve heard from the people who
came back into schools who hadn’t been there. They said, “Wow! If all the kids are like
the kids we worked with in our group, the world is going to be okay.” I thought, “They
haven’t been back in schools. What you see about kids sometimes in the news and on TV
is like bad stuff.” I felt this was really valuable for them. I think that’s really an
interesting thing to have intergenerational experiences like that. Everybody wins.

Q: I’m interested in how you did the World War II study because of course I’ve interviewed
veterans of World War II and most of them won’t talk about it.

A: Well, what we did is we didn’t ask them to talk about World War II the first time around.
We said, “We need you to come and the kids would like to interview you about your
life.” And it just so happened that many of them had had World War II experiences,
either actually been in the war or…

Q: I was talking about people who had actually been in the war. Of course a lot of people
never went overseas.
A: Right. But there were a lot of people we interviewed and the next time we would tell them that they wanted to know about this. Well, of course there was Dr. Schiffliebush, who was a prisoner of war, Scottie Lingelbach, who was someplace in Washington, and women who were nurses in the war. But lots of people had really been in combat. I'll never forget George Baxter Smith came to the interview after he had been with the kids one time. The next time he came back he brought his combat boots and he had on his old trench coat smelling of mothballs. This is impressive because he brought pictures to show the kids. We never kept their pictures to photograph. During the time of the interview we would say to kids, “What pictures would you like copies of for your book?” We would run to the copy machine because I didn’t want to keep any of their pictures. There were a few people who said, “I don’t want to be interviewed about this.” But there were many who did and it was just fabulous.

Q: Oh, yes.

A: And the other interesting thing is that sometimes women did things that you wouldn’t dream of. Tensie Oldfather and Mary Wasson both had pilot’s licenses. Think of their ages.

Q: Women had to do things during the war because men weren’t available to do them.

A: They had pilot’s licenses because they were interested in flying. It was not a war kind of thing. It was really interesting. I found it fascinating. Now I haven’t taught language arts for the last five years because the last part of my career I did something else. The young professors who took it over have continued it. As a matter of fact, one who is doing it called me yesterday and said, “We are having a celebration next Wednesday. We hope you can come to Eudora.” They are now doing it in the Eudora schools. But it
is hard to continually get volunteers. And they ended up trying to tie it to a unit that would have more younger people who are willing to do this. But it isn’t tied to something like World War II. You have to get elderly people to do that.

Q: There are not that many of them left. You would have to go on to the Vietnam War. There are lots of wars, such as the Korean War.

A: I didn’t particularly want to dwell on wars. But it just happened. I thought, “Wow, to capture this is unbelievable.” So what we did was the kids wrote the biographies. I was thinking, “It is a shame older kids aren’t doing this.”

Q: I was thinking fourth and fifth graders are a bit young for that.

A: They get the gist of it. They write about their early life and whatever. But the details of writing about a war experience, I thought it was such a shame older kids are not doing this. My students were working with the students to help them. What I found out was that my students did not have a good background about World War II. They are too young. It was really interesting. That was one of my favorite projects. I always try to do projects that engage my students in really working with kids in an interesting way so that if they wanted to they could take this to their own classrooms later.

Q: You said something also about doing something else the last five years.

A: The last five years I went half time. About 12 years ago, I guess, the School of Education did what we call Professional Development School Partnerships. This came out in the research and studies in the late eighties. Everybody was blaming public schools for everything and blaming universities and teacher training institutions for not doing a good job of training teachers. So a group of deans from research institutions that had Schools of Education got together and they were called the Holmes Group. I don’t remember
why they were called that. Ed Myen was our dean at that time. They wrote a trilogy and in their work they were suggesting how to revise teacher training and supporting public schools to improve teaching. They proposed what they called Professional Development Schools. It was kind of designed after a medical model of if you work with the people coming in within an actual hospital setting and you have a continuous relationship with them it’s going to improve. The School of Education faculty voted to become involved in Professional Development School Partnerships. But what we did that was unique to the whole idea across the country was we chose our partner schools to be more challenging schools with more diversity and incidence of poverty, just more challenging. Because we already had great relationships with schools we work with. So we have three schools in Kansas City, Kansas, an elementary, a middle and a high school, an elementary school in Shawnee Mission which is on the north end, which is much more diverse than any other. There is one school in DeSoto and two here in Lawrence. Our students apply when they go for their internship if they want to go in that kind of school experience. We’ve been really fortunate that a lot of our students have wanted that. So we work really closely with those schools and train their teachers about our program and working with our students and provide professional development for them. What we have found is that it’s encouraging some of our students to take positions in those kinds of schools that otherwise they would not because of, you know, the myth of what an inner city school is like. So the last five years when I went half time I’ve been director of the Professional Development School Partnerships and then also doing the coordination and supervising of all of our student teachers’ internships. I still taught supervision classes but I gave up teaching my regular methods classes.
Q: Do you remember particular students who have gone on to high achievement?

A: Oh, yes. I think we have a lot of really outstanding people who are making a difference. They are not going to be the people like people in the sciences who can say, “I have a student who’s now done whatever.” We are not going to hear that in education. But I hear of former students winning teaching awards and doing all kinds of things like that. But it is not going to be like, my student discovered whatever.” I am in touch with a lot of my ex students as well. I think a lot of them really make a difference. And they have gone on to be leaders. That’s one of the strengths of our five-year program. I think we instill in our students that your responsibility is not just to be a good teacher. But you must also be a teacher leader in your in your district and in your community. I think a lot of our students assume that responsibility.

Q: Have you been involved in community activities here?

A: Through the School I have. I’m also very involved in Hidden Valley, the Girl Scout property. I’m on the board of Friends and I was on the Hidden Valley board. As I’ve told you, I am very interested in science and green space and whatever. And it doesn’t hurt any that we have bought property where we back up to that. So that is my back yard now. I’m very actively involved in that. I’ve been on other committees that I can’t recall right now. Through my work in education and the schools I have been taken into a lot of community kinds of things.

Q: Will you have continued involvement with KU in your retirement?

A: Probably. Right now I’ve just been so busy with this reading revision. I’m up to my head in that. And I haven’t decided. I’ve been really busy and tied up with that. I’m going to make choices about what I want to do. I have a friend who
retired from elementary teaching. Before she knew it, she had something every single day that she was volunteering for, like going to tutor or whatever. I’m thinking that I really want to make some choices of something that I really believe in and can commit myself to. I’m very interested in CASA because I think that’s a very good thing. Before I came to Lawrence, I was very involved in the Red Cross. I volunteered at a hospital in Kansas City one night a week, a research hospital.

Q: What did you do?

A: I was just going to be a volunteer. As soon as they found out I had an education they asked me if I would be in the psych ward. So I went to the psych ward once a week at night. It was to try to engage people in activities. That’s another thing that was really shocking to me. I don’t know what my idea of a psych ward was but it certainly wasn’t what I found. When I got there I found that it was full of really young people, late teenagers and young married people. There were older people of course. I guess I was shocked to find so many young people there who were seriously in trouble. It was really interesting. So when I got married and came here I didn’t do that. But when the Katrina incident happened I called the Red Cross here and said I had been a former volunteer and would be interested in getting back in, but not to go to Mississippi or Louisiana. They were so busy and inundated that they said, “We just don’t have time to interview you and talk to you right now.” And I haven’t got back onto that because of this reading thing. But that is something I may get involved in. If not, I might just do some volunteering at the hospital. But I just really haven’t made up my mind. It has to
be something that I really believe in and think is important.

Q: Anything you are planning to do for fun in retirement? Some people travel.
A: Well, we travel a lot. We love to travel.

Q: What are some of your favorite places?
A: Switzerland and Italy. We’ve been in a lot of places. My husband was a practicing pharmacist. Then he was director of pharmacy at the hospital. Then he created the job of starting a purchasing group for retail pharmacists to get better deals on buying. The big drug companies give discounts to big discount stores but not the small independent pharmacies. That involved a 15-state area. So we did some traveling with that in the country. We’ve been to Europe 12 times at least. We’ve been to China. This last year our daughter, who is a lawyer…She’s our late-born child.

Q: So you and your husband had a child.
A: Yes. She is a lawyer in Washington, D.C.

Q: What is her name?
A: Jamie. She worked for the Brian Kay law firm. They invited her to go with a team of about 12 attorneys. Six were from Brian Kay but not her office, but from New York and other places and another firm to go to Tokyo to work on a very big banking case, in which a lot of wealthy people in Japan had been misadvised on investments. She left right after Christmas last year and was there for four months. So we went to visit her. We got to go to Hong Kong and Kyoto. That was fun. This summer we went back to Switzerland. Now we are going to Hawaii to the Maui tournament. So we really enjoy traveling. We don’t travel
with a group. We do our own arranging. This last year—I think this will be interesting to a lot of people—we tried out a thing called Untour. They have places in Europe. What they do is give you all the information about a place—it’s on a website too—and then they meet your train and get you there and then you are on your own, which we love. This year we didn’t even rent a car. We just went by train everywhere. Unfortunately, the last three days we were there is when they had their major flooding in Europe and we had a hard time getting out. So we really have enjoyed travel a lot and plan to do more of it.

Q: Do you have grandchildren?

A: No, we don’t.

Q: To finish up, what is your assessment of KU, the School of Education, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?

A: I love the School of Ed. I think it is a great school. I don’t necessarily think this is just in today’s world, but I think education is facing some real challenges as usual. Of course that includes the funding and the mandates that come unfunded.

Q: You mean like No Child Left Behind?

A: Yes. I think that’s been really good. We’ve seen lots of good things happen, more concern for equity and looking at which kids are succeeding and which are not. But it also penalizes schools if you don’t make it with certain kids. It really concerns me that I see schools cutting out so many things because they are so concerned about the test scores and just doing what will lead to that. I think it is such a shame. I think it has taken out a lot of personal inquiry and integration of curriculum in which kids really got to explore things in different ways. I really
dislike it for that reason. The fact is that no matter what population you have you can be in the newspaper on the front page because a certain subgroup didn’t make it. I’d like to see those people come out and make it. I think we’ve made gains with those kids and we focus so much attention on them. I’m concerned for the kids who are really bright and who need inquiry. Minimizing them just to be satisfied with a test score just makes me not happy. Then I’m very concerned for all of us about the shape we are in here in Kansas right now. You know, I don’t know what direction we are going. There are some really good teachers and professors in the School of Education that I respect so much. They work so hard. They make some good contributions.

Q: Is there anything else you’d like to add that I forgot to ask?

A: Well, I just have very much appreciated a career that got me to this direction and having the opportunity to teach at KU. I have really enjoyed it. You come up on campus some beautiful morning and think, “Wow! I’m lucky to be here.” And to work with the kind of students we have. They have been really good to work with.

Q: Thank you very much.

A: You’re welcome.