AN INTERVIEW WITH THELMAs HELYAR

Interviewer: Jewell Willhite

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THELMA HELYAR

Librarian degree, Northwestern Polytechnic, London

Service at the University of Kansas

First employed at the University of Kansas, 1977

Librarian for Social and Environmental Studies, 1977-

Librarian and editor, Policy and Research Institute
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Q: I am speaking with Thelma Helyar, who retired in 2003 as Librarian and editor, Policy and Research Institute at the University of Kansas. We are in Lawrence, Kansas, on September 29, 2004. Where were you born and in what year?

A: I was born in Karsholtan, Surrey, in England on April 30, 1929.

Q: What were your parents’ names?

A: My mother was Alice Belinda Collits and my father was Norman Victor Winchester.

Q: What was your father’s occupation?

A: He was carpenter to start with. Eventually, he became superintendent of works at Phillips, which was the largest factory in the south of England. It was right on the path of the German bombers going up to London during the war. His job as superintendent of works was to keep the factory going 24 hours a day. They used to make radios and television sets but during the war they had to stop and make radios for the British aircraft. So his job was to keep the factory going. If the Germans dropped their bombs and the windows went out in the factory, then it was his job to go down there and get them boarded up so that the factory could keep going 24 hours a day.

Q: So there was German bombing in the area where you lived?

A: Oh, yes, because we were on the path to London. I lived just south of London so that was the path the bombers took.

Q: When there was bombing, what did you as a family do?

A: Well, if we were old enough, we went to school. We still had to go to school and carry on with our lives. At nighttime during the bombing we would sleep in a shelter out in the
back garden. One day the people next door got incendiary bombs right in front of their shelter. My father had built bunk beds in the shelter. One morning my mother went to make the beds and found water coming up through the floor. So we had to sleep in the dining room. Eventually my father got the shelter up out of the yard and put into the dining room. Then we had our bunk beds in the dining room.

Q: That must have been very frightening for a child.
A: No, as far as I can remember, it was just the way you lived. That was going on. You had to get on with your life. You had to go to school. People had to go to work. So you just got on with it.

Q: Did you have brothers and sisters?
A: Yes, I have two older sisters, a sister Zena, who was six years older than I, but she’s dead now, and a sister June, who is five years older than I. Then my brother came along six years after me. My brother was Jeremy. I was very jealous because I had been the baby for six and a half years.

Q: Did you grow up in the area where you were born?
A: I was born and lived in that house until the day I got married.

Q: You talked about school. Did you go to something like what we call elementary school?
A: I started school when I was four and a half, which was about the right time then, and I went to an infant school, which was mixed, boys and girls. When I was seven or eight I went to the junior school. Then the students were divided. The girls were on one side of the school and the boys on the other side. When I was 11 I went to what was then called a central school, where you left school at 14 and went out to work. But you could also, if you wanted to, take a scholarship and go to a grammar school. I wanted a bicycle badly.
My father promised me that if I won a scholarship he would buy me a bicycle so I could bicycle to school. So I won the scholarship and I went to the grammar school. Usually you left there when you were 16 instead of 14. Or you could stay on another two years and go to university. I took that track. But when I was 17 I realized that I wanted to be a librarian. You didn’t have to go to university. You could go to night school or school during the day. You didn’t have to go to Oxford or Cambridge to be a librarian. So that’s what I did.

Q: When you were growing up, what was it like in the aftermath of the war? Was there still a lot of rationing?

A: Oh, yes. Rationing went right on. I got married in 1954. Sugar came off rationing just a few weeks before that. That was the last thing. My mother was able to make my wedding cake because she could buy all the sugar that she needed.

Q: So it lasted that long.

A: Things gradually came off, but sugar was the last thing.

Q: Was there a lot of destruction in the town where you lived?

A: No, there wasn’t very much. I think the worst was the incendiary bombs. Closer to London and in London it was terrible.

Q: You said you realized fairly early that you wanted to be a librarian. Did you read a lot as a child?

A: Oh, yes. I read and read. We were encouraged to read. We had an aunt who gave us lots of books. As I grew older, I read the books my sisters had had. I used to borrow my sister’s library card. I think you had to be eight before you could join the local public
library. So I used to borrow my sisters’ cards to check out books. On my eighth birthday
I rushed home from school and rushed up to the public library to get my own ticket.

Q: What kind of books did you like to read?
A: Oh, anything. When I joined the library, you could have two tickets, one for a nonfiction
book and one for a fiction book. So you couldn’t take out much at one go.

Q: When you were in grammar school, what were some of your favorite subjects?
A: I always liked English and I liked French. I took Latin as well. I liked history a lot. I
liked writing stories and essays. English and history were really my favorite subjects.

Q: Do you remember influential teachers from that time?
A: Oh, yes. I can’t remember her name, but the Latin teacher was very influential. She
encouraged me to read. I do remember being able to write a play once in Latin. I could
never do it now. Then the English teacher too was very influential.

Q: When you were in the older grades you were in classes of all girls.
A: Yes, except for a while we had the grammar school boys with us because their school got
bombed. So the boys came to our school for quite a few months. But otherwise it was an
all girls school.

Q: Do you think there are advantages to separating the sexes for education?
A: You didn’t have to show off. You didn’t have to attract the boys. You were all the same,
being girls. I think it was better. We had a school uniform.

Q: So everybody dressed the same and you didn’t have to try to dress to impress everybody.
A: We had a summer uniform and a winter uniform and the headmistress would tell us when
we could change from winter to summer.

Q: I know that American students often have jobs. Did English students have jobs?
A: They didn’t then. Definitely not. If you did any after school things it was maybe being a Girl Guide or something like that.

Q: That’s something like Girl Scouts, isn’t it? Were you a member?
A: I used to be a Brownie, which was the lower level. I did do a little Girl Guiding, but I don’t think I took to it very much.

Q: You said you decided not to go to the university because you didn’t need that to be a librarian. What kind of school did you have to go to in order to be a librarian?
A: I used to go to Croyden Public Library for classes in the evenings. The librarian of Croyden Public Library was one of the giants in the library world and had written one of the standard textbooks. So I first of all went to his classes. But then when I had taken the first part of the library exams and passed them, then the library that I worked for in London let me have Wednesday afternoons off to go to Northwestern Polytechnic to take the other classes that I needed.

Q: So you took classes at a library.
A: To start with. But afterwards it was at the Polytechnic, where they had a lot of different classes.

Q: So you ended your public school or grammar school education when you were 17. What year was that?
A: It was 1956.

Q: Then what did you do? You mentioned London. Did you move there?
A: No, I just commuted every day from my parents’ house. It was about a 20-minute train ride.

Q: Did you say you were working in London?
A: At the University College, just down the road from the British Museum.

Q: And you worked in a library.

A: Yes. It was called the National Central Library.

Q: Were you helping people check out books?

A: No, it wasn’t that kind of library. We did have some books, but what we basically had was (unclear) area books. The country was divided up into regions, such as the southeast region, the southwest region, the northern region, etc. They would have their own card catalogs for their regions. We had all their card catalogs too. We had all the card catalogs for all the library regions. We would get requests for books. If it wasn’t in one region, the request would come to us. We had our own stock as well, so we would check our own stock. Then there were people who would mail the books. But if we didn’t have them in our own stock, we would look in the other regional catalogs to see which region had it. Then we would ask them to send the book to the region that had requested it.

Q: So you were living at home, working in London and going one afternoon a week to the Polytechnic School.

A: Yes.

Q: How long was the program to become a librarian?

A: I’ve forgotten how long it was, probably about three years. Soon after I started at the library the man I eventually married started working there. He started about three months after I did. So we got married in 1954 while we were still working there. Then in 1955 Jim had this opportunity to come over to KU for one year. So we came for one year but we stayed for two.

Q: What was he coming to KU to do?
A: To work in the library. Bob (unclear) was the librarian and he wanted a British librarian, so my husband got the job.

Q: Was that in Watson Library?

A: Yes. Initially it was for one year but we were asked to stay for a second year. Then we were asked to stay longer, but we wanted to go back home at that point. So we went back to England in 1957.

Q: Were you working at a library here while your husband was working in Watson?

A: I did voluntary work at the public library when it was in the Carnegie Library. Then when we went back to England, I got a job at Zion College Library, which was a library for Church of England clergymen. That was very interesting, because it had been bombed during the war. The books, the card catalog had more or less disappeared and they didn’t know….They had (unclear) and they didn’t know if they had the books. So my job was to take the card catalog and try and find the books so that they could rearrange the library so that they would know what they had.

Q: Was this in London?

A: Yes. It was a very nice job.

Q: Was your husband also working in a library?

A: He worked for a periodical called Engineering. They had their own library.

Q: Did you have children?

A: Yes. I think I got pregnant more or less at the time that I started working at Zion College Library in January. So in October of 1958 Peter was born. By that time we were buying a house in Woorster Park. I had been commuting, but I stopped working in August.

Q: Did you have other children?
A: Yes. Two and a half years later we had John in February of 1961. Nine weeks later we boarded the Queen Mary and sailed for the United States. And we have been here ever since. We decided we were getting stuck in a middle class rut. And we wanted to get out of it. So Jim applied for a job in Thailand, Ibadan and I forget where else, four places. Anyway, he gave KU as a reference. Well, KU got a letter from one of these places wanting a reference. So KU wrote to Jim and said, “Look, if you are thinking of going abroad again, why not come back here?” At that point we had Peter and John was on the way. We thought, “We can drink the water in Lawrence.” But we might not have been able to drink the water in Ibadan. And we probably would have had to send the children back to England for school. So we thought maybe we should come back to Lawrence for a few years. We thought about five years. But we’ve been here ever since.

Q: What was Lawrence like in those days? It was quite a bit smaller, wasn’t it?

A: Yes. I remember Franklin Murphy being the chancellor. He was the one who got movie houses to accept black and white because he threatened to open a movie house on the campus if the downtown movie places didn’t allow blacks as well as whites. Lawrence was a lot smaller. When I look back, it was incredibly smaller.

Q: And the university was smaller too.

A: Yes, much smaller. I think it was only 12 or 14 thousand.

Q: So your husband went to work at Watson Library and you were home with your children.

A: Yes. But then I went back to the public library and got a paying job this time. I started working three evenings a week from 6 to 9 p.m. because Jim was home soon after five and we could have supper and then he would look after the children. That helped,
because we knew we needed to make trips back to England with the children. My working helped to make that a bit easier.

Q: You said you came on the Queen Mary. Is that the way people usually traveled to and from Europe in those days?

A: When we first came in 1955 we came on the (unclear), a French boat. When we went back two years later we went on the (unclear). You see, we had a lot of luggage with us, big trunks. When we came the first time we bought blankets and silverware, etc. We lived the first time in those barracks.

Q: Sunflower?

A: Yes. We had a lot of luggage so it was better to go by boat rather than plane.

Q: How long does it take to go by boat?

A: It used to take about five days. When Jim had a sabbatical, we went back just before Christmas and we went on the Braiman that time. Then we stayed in England until June. Then we came back on the QE2 because we were bringing a car back with us. We went on the Queen Mary with Peter and a tiny baby, nine weeks old. So we have been across the Atlantic five times by ship. I got seasick every time. On the Queen Mary I was breast feeding John and I got seasick and my milk just dried up until I stopped being seasick and then it all came back.

Q: Then you were working at the public library. Were you checking out books?

A: I used to work in the reference department. Then when the children went to school I worked half time from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. down in technical processing doing cataloging and book selection, that sort of thing.

Q: How long did you work there?
A: I started in 1977 at KU. I worked there 24 years. I think I stopped working at the public library in 1976. Then I started at KU in February of 1977. I started at the Institute for Social and Environmental Studies up on the top floor of Blake Hall. We had different names, different directors.

Q: So you were here in the sixties. I think you came in the late 60s the second time. So you were here when a lot of things happened.

A: One time we were on our way back to England about the time they set fire to the Union. We read about it in the papers. I don’t remember a lot of things going on, really.

Q: So it didn’t really affect you or your family.

A: No.

Q: You started working at KU in 1977.

A: Yes, at the Institute for Social and Environmental Studies. I was the librarian. One half of the top floor was their library.

Q: What did this institute do?

A: Well, we used to supply books to some other libraries, but mostly we were a reference library. We used to get a lot of questions about the economic side of it. We used to get a lot of the state publications from Topeka from the different government departments. We used to put out the Kansas Statistical Abstract, which was started in 1965. I took it over about 20 years ago, a long time ago anyway. So that was a major publication. We used to do a reports and research for the state departments in Topeka. We had a lot of reports that we put out. Then gradually I started doing proofreading as well as the library work. I enjoyed the proofreading. It wasn’t pleasure finding mistakes but pleasure in making it correct so that it read properly.
Q: Libraries have changed a lot during the time you have been working in them. You mentioned the card catalogs you began with but now it is all computerized.

A: By the time I left the library in Blake Hall the card catalog had gone. It was on the computer.

Q: Was it difficult to switch over and learn the computer?

A: Not that bit. But there is something about a card catalog, to know that you have everything in the correct alphabetical or numerical order. There is something satisfying about that. There’s something satisfying about opening a drawer and looking through the cards for a book. It’s not quite the same doing it on the computer.

Q: What I’ve noticed is that if you are looking in a card catalog for a book, maybe that one is checked out but you can see other books on the same subject.

A: You can do a lot of browsing.

Q: You can’t do that as well on a computer.

A: I don’t know how younger people feel, but I still like a card catalog.

Q: But you can’t find them anywhere now.

A: That’s right.

Q: When you were working at the public library in Lawrence, they would have still had the card catalog.

A: Yes, they did. And the Institute’s library had a card catalog to start with and then they switched over.

Q: You said the name of the organization you worked for changed over the years.

A: It was the Institute for Social and Environmental Studies when I started. Then it was the Center for Public Affairs after that. Then it became the Institute for Public Policy and
Business Research. When I left it was the Policy Research Institute. Its outlook changed too. We weren’t always doing the same kinds of work.

Q: What kind of work did you switch to doing? You said you began doing research for the state.

A: We put out a big publication. I forgot what it was called. It was all about what Kansas was like and what its problems were. Then when we were the Institute for Public Policy and Business Research Tony Redwood was the director. He gave the legislature so many things that he thought would improve the economic outlook of Kansas. The legislature adopted a lot of those. I think they did make a lot of difference to the economic development of Kansas. So that was good. By the time I left we were not doing so much of the economic development things. It was more policy research and policy issues. We were doing a lot of surveys for different people. We were set up to do surveys for people who wanted to know what was your opinion of the governor’s speech or what did you think about environmental issues.

Q: Did you call people and ask them?

A: We had a survey lab and we would hire students to do that. Then we would take the answers and write a report outlining what the public’s attitude seemed to be.

Q: So this was a service to the state?

A: Yes.

Q: So you did some work with students?

A: Oh, yes. We used to hire quite a lot of students to help with the research.

Q: Did you belong to professional organizations?
A: Yes. The Institute at first used to belong to the Council of Planning Librarians. I used to be sent to the meetings, which were in the spring. But then I got on the board. I was secretary first and then vice president and then president and past president. Then, as well as the spring member meetings, I would go up to Chicago about the last weekend in September for board meetings. Then we used to get a great deal of census information. We used to get the books that the Bureau of the Census would compile after each census, particularly the one for Kansas, which would tell you everything about population, how many were employed, what their income levels were, were they single family homes? You know the questions. We used to get all their publications at the Institute. So I used to go to the Bureau of the Census meetings. There was a fall meeting in Washington, D.C., and then there was a regional meeting in the spring.

Q: You said your husband had a sabbatical and you went back to England and that you made periodic trips there.

A: We made a lot of trips back but only once on sabbatical. Otherwise it was on vacations, because we needed to go back and check up on family. Having left all our relations behind, we wanted to go and see them. They wanted to see their grandchildren.

Q: Of course. So that would be a lot of trips back to England. Were you involved in community activities in Lawrence?

A: I used to be in the plays of the Community Theatre.

Q: Oh, really?

A: I belonged to the Community Theatre for a long time when it used to be in the old Carnegie Library. We started up there.

Q: Do you remember any particular plays or roles that you played?
A: Yes. I was in *On Golden Pond* with Charley Oldfather. That was a big success. I was in a play called *Wings*. That was with KU. It was about a woman who had had a stroke but she didn’t know it. So she’s out in front grumbling and complaining all the time, whereas behind she is really lying on a bed in the back. I did a play up at KU one summer called *Noises Off*.

Q: So you were in plays at KU.

A: In the summer when they opened it up to the public. At least one of the summer plays anyone could try out. I tried out for *Noises Off* and got in it. I had seen that play on the stage in London. Then I was in *The Road to (unclear)* and *Inspecting Carol* and *I Hate Hamlet*. I’ve forgotten all the plays I was in at the Community Theatre.

Q: How did you happen to get interested in acting? Had you done this as a child in school?

A: Yes. I’ve just always been interested in the theatre. In Carsholton before I was married I used to belong to the Carsholton Amateur Dramatic Society.

Q: Will you have continued involvement with KU now that you have retired?

A: I belong to the University Women’s Club. I go to the stitch group meetings. But that’s about all because Wednesday mornings I am working at the Community Theatre, so I can’t come up for the coffee hour.

Q: Do you work in the office of the Community Theatre?

A: Yes. People call in for tickets for the plays.

Q: Are there other activities you plan to do in retirement?

A: Tomorrow I start working at the Dole Institute for Politics on Thursday mornings.

Q: Is that a paying job?
A: No, it’s a volunteer job. Then on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons from 3:30 to 5:00 I go to Kennedy School, which is in my area, for the after school program. I work with children who have difficulty reading. I don’t know if you know that the Judicial Center downtown has a law library for all the attorneys. I relieve the librarian down there every so often.

Q: What do you do at the Dole Institute?
A: That’s what I’ll find out tomorrow.

Q: Oh, you’re just starting.
A: I’m just starting tomorrow.

Q: I didn’t know that they had volunteers.
A: Yes. I think Wednesdays and Thursdays are the days they have volunteers. There are all sorts of different jobs.

Q: That’s quite a building with wonderful displays. What is it like helping children with reading? Had you done anything like that before?
A: No. I started after I retired. I did it last fall and I am going to be doing it during the spring.

Q: That would be a big help to children, I would think.
A: You find sometimes that they are not encouraged to read at home.

Q: I think a lot of homes may not have books or parents who read. It’s just television.
A: So they are not pressed to read at home and they get a bit behind at school.

Q: So you read with them.
A: To get them up to the grade level.

Q: Do you have grandchildren?
A: I’ve got four.

Q: What is your assessment of KU or the Policy and Research Center, past, present, hopes for the future, that kind of thing?

A: Well, I just hope that KU can keep up. It has become a good university and I hope it can stay that way. But I think a lot of it depends on money from the Legislature, whether we keep the faculty or don’t. They could easily get lured away with bigger salaries. I think that’s the danger. I think it is a very good research university.

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

A: No, I can’t think of anything. I think retirement is fun.

Q: It sounds as if it will be for you. You have a lot to do.

A: Yes. I like reading a lot too. I still go down to the public library once a week and come back with about six books. I’m going to be helping out at the book sale this coming weekend at the public library.

Q: Maybe I will see you. I usually go down there for that.

A: I think I will be doing Friday and Sunday afternoon.

Q: So you belong to Friends of the Library.

A: Yes.

Q: Do you help with the sorting too?

A: No, this is all I am doing, helping at the actual sale.

Q: I guess that’s all then. Thank you very much.

A: Thank you.