

Interview with Dr. Ruth Roebke-Berens

October 25, 1989

Interviewed by Laura Bennett

START OF INTERVIEW

Laura Bennett (LB): ...when the Archives were started.

Dr. Ruth Roebke-Berens (RRB): I was head of the history department between 1981 and '88.

LB: Ok. To your knowledge had there been any moves toward the development of an archives prior to your involvement?

RRB: No.

LB: How and why did you get involved in the development of the archives?

RRB: I personally am interested in historical collections, I think all of us within the department felt the need for this. Perhaps one of the reasons why we had never had an archive in the past was because we depended as a community on the Longyear Research Library and the Marquette County Historical Society that does have some very fine history collections for this region. However, that has not, that did not take care of the problem of forming a university archives, and given that need I learned that there was a workshop available for people interested in learning archival techniques, it was called the modern archives workshop, and if memory serves me correct I wrote the grant proposal and got the funding for two faculty members to go the two week workshop, and those two faculty members consisted of Professor Gene Jones and Cliff Maier. And I'm not precisely sure, I think it was like the summer of '83, but I would defer to anybody else's memory on this, it was approximately five to six years ago, again, Professor Maier would be more accurate on that, I'm sure, than I am. When those two men returned, the department then discussed, you know, how best to implement this, since Professor Jones was

already involved with teacher supervision for the department and for all of the social studies, I think it was the consensus within the department that it be Professor Maier who would be best able, in terms of interest and in time, to devote some time to the archives. I then requested from the dean and the academic vice president that Professor Maier be given release time, two-thirds release time per semester, to begin work on the archives, and that is my recollection of how they got going.

LB: What were the problems involved with the establishment?

RRB: Getting a budget, and particularly getting space. Initially Professor Maier was operating out of, you know, his own office, then I think we got one additional small cubical and it's been a long, hard fight to get proper space. Now that the departments are being moved out of LRC we've gotten a fairly decent space within the old history-econ aisle. However, there are future problems there in that that whole lower concourse area has been officially designated as belonging, on one hand, everything, you know, to the road from where professor, the archives, all belongs to in the resources division, the people in radio and TV need extra space and everything on the other side of this line belongs to the library, they need space. The problem for everyone is, until we have funds to reconfigure all of this space, a lot of it leaves a lot to be desired in terms of usability. So we need funds to do that, and the archives is in a rather vulnerable position because it's right between two warring entities, as to space. Now, whether they will be there, you know, for a long time or not, I would expect that they'll, that the archives will remain as it is, probably, maybe in the future, four or five years.

LB: Ok. How was the funding problem overcome?

RRB: I believe that Professor Maier requested funds from the Dean of the School of Arts and Science. And that a small budget was established from the Dean's funds to give support to the archives.

LB: Ok. Were there any other people in the history department involved in the development of the archives besides Dr. Jones and Dr. Maier?

RRB: I think all of our faculty at one point or another had some sort of input. You know, it was kind of a collective decision to do what we did. I think specifically professors Magnaghi and Saari were very supportive of this concept. And all of the faculty really were, but I know I talked extensively to both of those men. And it was kind of a departmental decision as to the way we would go on this.

LB: How did the administration view the archives?

RRB: I mentioned before that the money came out of the Dean's budget, I think I was incorrect in that. In fact, I know I was incorrect in that. Professor Maier went directly to our vice president, Dr. Donovan, and it was Dr. Donovan who established that support budget for the archives.

[Phone rings] Just a minute, turn off the –

[Pause in recording]

RRB: Gave Dr. Maier, Professor Maier, the support budget, it was fairly minimal, but it was enough to get us started on that. Professor Maier then, and maybe I'm jumping ahead on my questions, on your questions, but also wrote a grant to this national, er, federal agency in which he was able to get a consultant to come in to advise us as to how to organize the archives, and then in response to that consultant's report Professor Maier, I believe, again got, you know, some computing equipment and a software package for archival matters through Dr. Donovan's office. Now, I think right now, and I don't know if I'm jumping ahead of you, Professor Maier has been

somewhat chagrined that there has not been a higher level of support for the university archives, you know, we've had to work and battle just to get the small budget and the small space that he currently has. What has happened, however, this fall is rather encouraging because Professor Maier wrote another request for additional support to our new vice president Dr. Beukema, and asked Dr. Beukema what his intentions were in terms of support of the archives, where is the archives in the total priorities of the university? Prior to this letter this August or September, I had advised Professor Maier to forget the argument that we need to do an archives for historic reasons or for the argument of preserving our tradition, but to link it up to a more practical objective, which senior-level administration would be ready to sign off on. And so for the past year I've been working, you know, behind the scenes, simply saying that what is needed throughout the university, but certainly in this building, is a proper reference management plan. We have, right now I sit on a subcommittee of the president's council looking at the desperate space needs just in this building alone, and every day this week so far, and we'll continue tomorrow, we have looked in every nook and cranny of this building to see where we could find more space. The first recommendation of this committee to the president's council will be that we develop or we implement a records management plan, because, you see, a good records management plan, I'm not talking historical records I'm just talking normal university records, it's a very well thought-out plan in which you decide which records are worth keeping, how long records are to be kept, and what way do certain records, at what way are they disposed, there's a disposal schedule, a retention schedule, there are some records, for example, like student financial aid records, or this kind of thing that we have to keep for legal reasons almost forever. But there are some records that need to be destroyed at very given, very quick intervals. The problem is having no policy on this we have more rooms dedicated to filing cabinets and paper,

which is all of questionable usage, and our first recommendation is that we come up with this policy. Now, I have an ulterior motive in doing this, because the end repository on a good records management plan is a university archives. And maybe the archives, and I'm not an archivist, I'm not sure what an archivist would say, maybe one percent, two percent of the total stuff, the paper that we generate, you see what I'm getting at. But I think that this year a decision will be made to adopt this records management plan, this federal granting agency that I mentioned before will give us the funds, we would request this a year from now, so it would be two years from now that the funds to hire a full-time archivist, a professional archivist, who would then be charged both to develop this records management policy, but who also would be the university archivist, and I might add, Professor Maier has no personal ambition in this, he simply wants to make sure that the archives gets up and going, that's why he did it six years ago and it's been a labor of love, he would be, you know, he's not ambitious for himself, he just wants to see this be accomplished, and then he would probably either continue to work in a limited capacity in the archives or possibly go back to full-time teaching, which we will need him at that point, as well. But I would say that it's going to take another two years for this to be fully implemented. Then we will still have to bottle the problem of space because once we do records management we're going to need to double the space that the archives currently has.

LB: Was there anybody in the administration, other than the people you've already mentioned, that were specifically involved, either directly or indirectly?

RRB: Well right now Mr. John Hamming [?] is very much involved in this whole idea. Mr. Hamming is the director of human resources and data information systems. He's been charged as sort of the czar of our computer policy on campus, both academic and administrative computing, and I have argued with John, and he's accepted this argument, that if he's in charge of all

information, it's not only computing information but we have to deal with paper and hard copy i.e. in archives. And he has brought, he agreed with me on this, and so he has become very supportive of this whole concept, and I think it will be his support that ultimately pushes this over the top.

LB: Ok. And did the president have a role in the development of the archives at all?

RRB: Not really. You have to understand, Laura, that priorities for the university are set by the members of the president's council. There are a couple of ways in which this happens, probably the easiest way to explain this is the fact that members of the president's council, these are all the vice presidents and people like Mr. Tom Peters whose office we're using, he's an assistant to the president, I'm a member of the president's council, Mr. Hamming is a director, he's a member, we're not all vice presidents but you sit on president's council and it is an advisor group. And every early summer we get together for a retreat, and we decide what the priorities for the coming year are going to be. And what this means is we decide we need to move, two years ago this was we need to move faculty out of those awful offices down in the lower level of the LRC. And so big discussion, we had first recommended that the faculty be moved into Gries and West Hall. Then the vice president of student affairs said, "Uh-uh, you know, I'm not going to be able to sell that." She came up with a different plan, faculty would be moved into first floors of a number of residence halls. That didn't fly either, and it came down to Magers Hall, you know, that that would be totally dedicated to faculty office space. What that, that was a real high priority, and that cost X number of dollars, I can't remember the exact amount, it was probably like a half million dollars and we spread that out over three years, so what we do at these retreats then is decide what our priorities are and what we can afford in terms of this money. Currently right now we are buying a new management information system, all of this computer software so

that, for example, you as a student, if I'm working as your advisor, I can call down to reference and I can get your transcript with no problem at all. Ok, I'm going to have a lot of trouble, however, getting your entire transcript for all of the years you've been here. We don't have something called a storage student record file. I can't just call it up, now the people at reference can dredge it all together, but it's really tough, and we need that kind of, I need to just go on my PC and say, "Laura Bennett took these courses in these semesters, got this grade point average," you know, all of this information about you, and that's what that new MIS system will do. What I'm saying though is that up until this point, up until this time it's been very hard to raise the priority level of the university archives due to the fact that we've needed new faculty offices or that we needed more computer technology or that we had to hire additional staff in education and business to meet accreditation requirements. By linking the idea of the archives, and again, our interest is purely historical, to a very practical need, i.e. space in this building, we've increased its priority level. And that's frankly how things get done around here, so the president never, or rarely takes, or rarely initiates something like this, but he will be influenced by things as they develop, and the way president's council works is that we lobby with one another, and it's a very political process whereby, you know, I'm going to talk to Dr. P_____ and that's how I managed to find the money to do this new cultural service last year, and frankly, as my advisor committee said, "Ruth, we can't touch that, that's dirty money, and it's the bookstore profits money," and I said, "Now, you give me that money," to Donna P_____, "you give me that money and I'll sell the student government on that," that's the only way, you know, we're not going to give it back to the students, but at least we can give the students something for their money, and so we politic with one another, you know, Donna P_____ wanted to use the money to redo the university center, and I said, "No, the students aren't going to sign off on that, they're going to be very

unhappy,” so we politic with one another but we also have to note the ideas, the needs of the students, the faculty, and the whole community. Now that’s a longer explanation than you needed to know, but because of that it’s taken this long to get the archives into the position that they are, but I’m confident that within the next year or two we’re going to see a full-fledged archives on this campus.

LB: Ok. So then you feel like this process has been successful?

RRB: I think it is becoming, it will be, it is not yet but it will be successful.

LB: Ok. And what conclusions do we come to about the archives?

RRB: Oh, I guess I’m still confident that we did the right thing, back in the early ‘80s, I think that Professor Maier deserves a great deal of credit for hanging in with minimal resources, you know, and spending a great deal of his time. I think that we will have really achieved something when we get the archives fully launched. And so I’m fairly pleased with the process.

LB: Ok, I think that’s it then.

RRB: Ok!