

Julia Neal Interview at the Informant's Home, Bowling  
Green, KY  
7-3-1993

RESEARCHER: Now you were talking, you went to Bethel College when?

NEAL: I went. . . I was a Freshman in the year 1923-24 and I graduated in '25. Then, I came to Western [and graduated from here?] Yes, I got both degrees, my Masters and my AB or BA or whatever it was.

RESEARCHER: Now when you say Bethel College, I've been a little confused because I've read about Bethel Woman's College and Bethel Men's.

NEAL: Yes, and then there was Bethel College and they were both Baptist Junior Colleges that fed into Georgetown except I came to Western.

RESEARCHER: So you were unique. . . You didn't fit the trend. Now were you from this area?

NEAL: Yes, Auburn, down the road in between here and Russellville.

RESEARCHER: Yes, I have some good friends in Russellville. Now, Bethel Women's College was the one that had an indoor swimming pool [Yes] and all sorts of activities and horseback riding, is that right?

NEAL: No, not when I when I was there. They might have later. Of course, before it closed it became co-ed. I was teaching in Alabama and I was invited to give their alumni address. I'd been receiving the *Bulletin* all that time, and I'd seen the pictures, and so forth. I knew there were men there, but you know when I was thinking about what I would talk about, I was just thinking about the Bethel that I knew and when I walked into that dining room that day and saw those men, I was thrown for a complete loss! [Chuckles.] I had to sort of during the luncheon recast what I was going to say. It was just hard for me to realize that it was a co-ed school, but that was only--I don't know--the last four or five years before they closed.

RESEARCHER: As you said, it's been a long time...can you remember anything about . . .

NEAL: I can't remember anything. Since Nancy [our contact] called me, I tried to think, you know. . . Now, Mrs. Egar was I guess the sole English teacher of the school. . . she was also the girls' principal, or whatever you call it. She was the head of the thing. And I must have had Freshman English with her; I don't remember a thing about that. In Sophomore English, I had her again. It was the routine--one book with everything in it--poetry, fiction, short stories, and uh, I guess we read an outside book or two but I can't remember anything except she would make an assignment and page assignment and we were supposed to read it before we came to class to discuss it with her. Now that's just about all I remember [Chuckles.]

RESEARCHER: Well, I guess any of us would have trouble remembering what our freshman English class was. There's so much that happens afterwards. . . After you got your MA at Western, you taught at Alabama?

NEAL: Well, I went to the University of Michigan to do graduate work, and I didn't get a degree because I didn't think. . . well first of all I had eye problems, but I didn't think it would be worth my time as a woman to put myself through a Ph.D.. But I did do a lot of advanced work and then while I was up there, I was at a girls' school for two years, then I went to Alabama and I was in Alabama for 21 years before they called me back here for the Kentucky Building.

RESEARCHER: That graduate work. . . was that in English or ?

NEAL: Yes, in English. Uh, I've got a tale to tell [Chuckles]. Some of the people at the Kentucky Building ... All the excitement about the new collection with Robert Penn Warren--and while the men were up there, they had dinner with Cleanth Brooks.

I had a graduate seminar in co-ed poetry with Cleanth Brooks and that particular summer, he was working on a book called *The Well Wrought Urn*. I'm not sure, I may've been the only woman in that class--I was the only woman in another seminar, I know--if there was another woman I just don't remember it, but it was a very small graduate seminar and he was far enough along on his book and wanted to discuss it and he would throw out things to the men of the class and the men were very sharp and I was just a kind of kibitzer. So when that book came out, it was dedicated to the Seminar 300K

and I was in that seminar but I tell you I didn't make any contribution [Chuckle].

RESEARCHER: Well, I'm sure you probably did, but you may've felt a little awkward.

NEAL: Well, the University of Michigan was very much like Harvard--women weren't to be [pause] tolerated. But I got along fairly well. I just went to learn and uh so I guess I was recognized as not having much to contribute, but I learned a lot [chuckles].

RESEARCHER: There were some big names in the rhetoric and composition field at the University of Michigan--Fred Newton Scott and Gertrude Buck I think at the turn of the century--Did you, did they leave any sort of legacy?

NEAL: No, no, no.

Uh, I had Williams. In fact I had a lot--in the summertime they would invite people like Pearl [?] Miller from Harvard, Cleanth Brooks from somewhere and Mr. Whitfield [?] who was the Emily Dickinson scholar. I studied with them as much as I did with the University of Michigan regular faculty. But I had uh Williams and Joe Lee Davis [?] in the novel and Mencke [?] in Shakespeare who was blind and uh some others. Uh, but I enjoyed my work at Michigan, but I did not go to get a degree.

RESEARCHER: Now you said you had taught at a girls college up there?

NEAL: Yes, it was a finishing school, really, Kingswood Cranebrook, and I taught a class of English. I was the Junior resident and taught one class of English. How I happened to go over there. . . I had to work my way through the University of Michigan in the summer and so I always had a job in the dormitory and I was real well-acquainted with the dean of women and so she was a trustee over Kingswood Cranebrook and she called me one day and said there was an opening over there and she knew that I would like to stay at the University of Michigan that winter and study and that I could commute. So, I worked there two years; I commuted once a week back and forth. That's when I was working on what turned out to be a book later on the Shakers--*By Their Fruits*. So I had a varying kind of experience at Michigan. They had a very strong English department, or did have, and I suppose they still have.

RESEARCHER: Yes, it's a big one, especially in rhetoric and composition.

NEAL: I would be surprised. I guess you know this connection. Teddy Hornback's son--Bart Hornback--has been in the English Department [at Michigan] for years and has transferred back to Bellarmine in Louisville. I guess because his mother is not well; I would figure that's why he left Michigan to come to Bellarmine, unless he just wanted a smaller school or something, but I don't know the boy. I just know the parents.

RESEARCHER: That course you taught in English at Kingswood; was that the first time you had taught English?

NEAL: In Kingswood? Oh, I first began to teach here at Western right after I got my Master's. My mother died the summer I got my Master's, and I was keeping house for my father down at Auburn. Dr. Cherry called me one day and said. . .now this is a Western you never knew. It was when the schoolteachers--uh grade school and so forth--had to get certificates, you know, life certificates, and they would come in in April Spring Term or Summer Term and so Dr. Cherry called me once to teach some English courses and after that, 'course I'd gotten my Master's here under Dr. Wilson, he was still head of the department, and uh so he said, well--he just kept me on a string. I couldn't go anywhere. I couldn't leave my father and I couldn't commute from Auburn up here so I don't know how many spring terms and summer terms and finally it worked that the faculty here--the English faculty were going off to get Ph.D.'s and so whenever he had somebody off to get a Ph.D. I'd probably teach first semester or second semester and there was another faculty member, Sara Middleton, and Sara was sort of on the same schedule I don't know why she was temporary and so one time Sara said to me, 'Julia, I don't know whether we're temporarily permanent or permanently temporary!' [Chuckles.]

So that was my connection to Western for a while and then when I went to Michigan, I mean, Dr. Wilson had a---you just don't know how funny it is now to look back at how "loose" it all was and one day Mr. Wilson met me in the hall and said, 'I've just given you a class in American Literature to teach' and I said, 'Well, Mr. Wilson, [ha] I haven't had any American Literature!' [Chuckles.] And he said, 'oh yes, you had a class with so and so' and so I began to teach in American Literature and I didn't know anything about it, so that's

when I decided that in the summer, I better go off to graduate school and I decided to go to the University of Michigan and I focused mainly on American Literature while I was there. At Michigan.

RESEARCHER: Now in your writing classes--did you teach Freshman English and that sort of thing?

NEAL: Yes, yes I did.

RESEARCHER: Do you remember how you conducted your class? Did uh they do a lot of writing?

NEAL: Well, uh, here as a temporary teacher, I had them write you know all I thought I could grade, but I had classes with 45 and that limits what you can demand from your students. Now my best experience as a teacher of writing was at Florence State in Alabama because after three years of graduate work at Michigan off and on, I decided to go back to college teaching and so I wound up in Florence, Alabama. I taught a creative writing class down there. While I was down there--oh 21 years I think before I came back here. I uh I was pretty successful with my students. We had uh in Alabama English teachers, we had (I guess it included Alabama and Mississippi colleges) and we, once a year, we met and we, before we met, we submitted papers--uh short stories, poetry, essays--and my students won several times in those, we called it the Southern Literary Festival [Chuckles], and uh, it met once a year.

RESEARCHER: How important--when you taught writing--a role did grammar play?

NEAL: Well, I didn't teach grammar as such except as I would have conferences with students uh I guess. Let's see now, what did we do? [Chuckles] Uh, in advance composition, we would study the short story, the essay, and poetry as examples of what they could do. I'm sure we handled grammar to some extent, but not anything great.

RESEARCHER: Well, there's sort of a stereotype that what was going on for most of this century was [sic] drills and exercises and workbooks and oral recitation and that sort of thing--just hammering it into their heads you know. That's part of why I'm doing this study, to find out if people were actually doing that or not, you know, and according to what you're remembering. . .

NEAL: No, no I didn't. . .Course I was not only teaching advance composition; I taught my share of Freshman English and uh and courses in literature and uh--grammar, you corrected grammar every time you had a chance. You corrected your students in what they were doing and so on. It's all rather vague. It's amazing when you think back how faded. . .All this business about [chuckles] the Presidents trying to you know what they did when they were youths. Well, they don't remember and you can't dig it all up. It'll get away from you!

RESEARCHER: I saw today they were looking at Clinton's mother's passport!

NEAL: Yes, I saw that in the paper.

RESEARCHER: That seems like an invasion of her privacy!

NEAL: Yes, well I wouldn't remember what I said or did at certain times, uh, it's foolish.

RESEARCHER: Uh, you said you did a book on the Shakers and I can tell you have a lot of their furnishings. What was the title of that book?

NEAL: Well, the first one that came out was called *By Their Fruits*, and that was done at the University of Michigan; that was the reason I was staying over. We had a seminar one summer--a graduate

seminar and uh it was a very peculiar seminar. You went to lectures for three weeks. DeLille Malone gave the lecture; he was editor of the *Dictionary of American Biography*. And one week he would lecture on important clergymen in American history or important so and so and uh he had one series, one lecture--it was very late in the course--on women and you were supposed to, while you attended these courses for three weeks, you were supposed to get a topic. The idea was the lecturer would mention something and he didn't follow through and you could pick it up where he left off, and so I had been listening to the lectures all summer and I had. . .[chuckles] This was before I went up there. This was when The Kentucky Building was getting established and people were bringing in things and some of the Shaker records were coming in and. . .Just because I guess I was from Auburn, and we didn't pay much attention to the Shakers when I was growing up. I began to read those books, and I found them to be interesting. Well, so, a custom that existed in Bowling Green when I was a teacher--and still exists to some extent--all the women's/ladies' literary clubs had to have programs. They didn't want to give them themselves, so they were always finding someone to come and give the program for them, so I had my share of invitations to give programs, and I figured this Shaker material is interesting, so I started to started taking notes and that's why I had taken notes. So the summer I went off to Michigan, I had two cardboard boxes about like this [shows visually] filled with Shaker notes. Well, I figured that summer I had to write a paper that I could write it about Anne Lee. Well, the lectures went on and on and they didn't mention Anne Lee. And so they said they needed

something to be picked up that wasn't completed to your satisfaction and almost at the end of the course of three weeks, Du Mar Malone in his lecture on ten American women mentioned Anne Lee as one of the prominent Americans. Well, that gave me my leeway.

So, I wrote a paper and presented it and uh the two professors, Williams and Davis, who were coordinating the course, said to me, 'You have a great deal of primary material that's valuable, and you ought to follow through on it, and we think you ought to take a course under Dr. Cowden? in Creative Writing. Well, I don't know if you know the Hopwood Awards at Michigan. They're very outstanding and uh so every year they have a contest, Senior contest and Junior contest, in the essay, poetry, the novel, and so forth. And so they said I ought to work with Mr. Cowden? who was head of the Hopwood business. So I did and I submitted my essay, and to my surprise I won. I don't think there were any other essays submitted in fiction [chuckles] usually they go to novels and poetry you know. And so what happened is that week uh representatives from various presses came and asked to see the manuscripts and uh the University of North Carolina asked me for mine and decided to publish it, so just by accident I got into publishing. And so then of course Shaker began to catch on across the United States and so I was kind of in on the ground floor. I find it fascinating that I've still got a project going now for the South Union Shaker Museum.

RESEARCHER: That's when you know you've done the right thing when it keeps you interested for that long of a time.



NEAL: Well, what I'm doing now you might be interested in knowing. When people go to Pleasant Hill, they're so many buildings, and when they come to South Union, they're so few buildings. And they always want to know about it, and when the people down there say there was once 100 or at least 150 buildings there, uh, they don't believe it [Chuckles]. So, finally I said I'll just go through all the written records. I'll take down records for every building. That's what I have done. Now, I'm at the end of the project, about to list them and so . . .

RESEARCHER: How many have you found?

NEAL: Well, I haven't made the last count. The first time through, I had 152, and, but I have found. . . The first time I didn't realize that the, you know, they lived in families, east family, north family, south family, west family and if it mentioned cow barn, I didn't realize for a while that each of the families had a cow barn; each of the families had this, each of the farms had that, and so there'll be more when I get all this straightened out. There'll be 170 I think.

RESEARCHER: And that's only the one now? How many are left now?

NEAL: Oh, uh seven I think.

RESEARCHER: I'm just used to passing by. I've never stopped there. Well, you must stop! [Chuckles.] I've seen the big one.

NEAL: The center building.

Behind that is the Milk house which is now open. And then the Monastery still owns the other. There are three there, and then there's one across the street. That's four, and over on the railroad, there's two: the inn and the store. Uh, I thought<sup>x</sup> there was seven. Oh, there's a little cow-feeding business down kind of in the field, uh, a cow feeding/warming building, uh; there are seven only.

RESEARCHER: I always found that fascinating. Oh, as you taught your classes, how important was it that you followed a textbook--the order the author had it in? Did you just refer to textbooks occasionally, or how did you handle that?

NEAL: Now do you mean in literature or writing?

RESEARCHER: Primarily writing, if you can remember.

NEAL: Uh, [long pause] I can't remember. Uh, [long pause] I can't even remember having a textbook. Uh, what I would do uh in advanced composition course was to keep good papers from one class to another and use those as examples, read them to the class, then we'd discuss them and so forth. But in the freshman and sophomore classes, the freshman classes, we had workbooks. . .let's see what were those things called they put out for a while for freshman English? They would be--paperback books with excerpts and examples.

RESEARCHER: A reader or a rhetoric?

NEAL: Uh, well, they were--well, anyway they were one of those fads we went through and we used a lot of those, uh, and the main thing I always emphasized was spelling [Chuckles].

We had those little spelling books and I gave a test on spelling once a week, uh, a page, you know, a page of words the author had spelled. But I can't remember. . .my teaching of freshman English at Western was just a matter of getting through it! The classes were SO big! [Chuckles.]

RESEARCHER: That's been my experience right now! [Chuckles.]

NEAL: It was difficult, but I got them to write as much as I could, but as I said, for your own sake, you just couldn't do too much.

RESEARCHER: Right. Uh, you mentioned spelling. That's one of the things the public really seems to expect from people who've gone to school. They think if you've gone to college, you should at least be able to spell. Do you think that that is typical of the way people perceived English?

NEAL: Well, I don't know what people think [chuckles]. I think spelling is almost a lost art [chuckles]. You know you pick up your magazine, the daily paper. There's misspelled words everywhere, and the thing, the one thing America will never learn is how to use "i-t-apostrophe-s" [chuckles]. That just appears all the time. [Yea.]

And in last night's Bowling Green paper, they were referring to Cecil Garmon as he, you know, Mrs. Garmon who's in finance at Western? They thought Cecil Garmon was a man. So. I, uh, the public in general, and this reflects in the children, they are so much more ear-educated than eye-educated. I don't know if that's the way to put it or not, but I blame TV. But I think kids--and now not just kids, kids that have grown up--still are not acquainted with the written word, and therefore they can't spell it. Very bad about it.

RESEARCHER: Okay, uh. Well, I think we've covered most of the things I wanted to talk about.

NEAL: I'm afraid I'm little help.

RESEARCHER: No!

NEAL: It's just been a long while ago!

RESEARCHER: You've given me sort of an idea of what things were like and that sort of thing, which is as important as any specific sometimes. The environment--I think it's very interesting. . .the fact that you've been at so many schools, that sort of thing really makes for an interesting conversation! And the Shaker work is interesting too.

NEAL: Well, I've enjoyed having the Shaker interest. I think it would be true with any hobby. It opens so many doors and I know

so many people across the United States who share a Shaker interest. I have friends, and good close friends now, that I have learned through Shaker interest. Uh.

RESEARCHER: In fact, I think my husband did a paper on the Shakers while he was at Western and went to the Kentucky Library and did some research there, well, uh, on the cupboards and that sort of thing. He may've very well used your work!

NEAL: Well, I'm not an authority on Shaker furniture, but Western is a very rich mine of Shaker material. You could do just anything you wanted to on the Shakers by going to the Kentucky Library. It's amazing.

RESEARCHER: I guess they have something at Pleasant Hill as well?

NEAL: No, uh, when I did the little book on Kentucky Shakers for the Bicentennial, I went to Pleasant Hill to use their records. And I had to go to the Harrodsburg Historical Society. They don't have them out at Pleasant Hill. They have these big books; many of them are at Harrodsburg at the Historical Society; uh, that was an experience.

This was not the season for tourists much when I went, and, uh, the Historical Society was not open, and, uh, I didn't realize when I told the woman I wanted to view the material and when I got up there, I found out she had to get a hostess to come and sit with me all day while I did research. There'd be a different woman every

day, and one day, she brought all of her Christmas cards to address. And one of them, each one of them brought something they could do --I don't remember what the others did right now. And then we would close up at twelve o'clock and she would go home to eat and I would go around the block to the drugstore to eat a sandwich, having eaten breakfast at Pleasant Hill, I didn't need much lunch, and then I had to think of something to do until the woman opened up and came back again. And I'd be the only person there and this went on for a week and out at. . .now they do have more material now and have a library at Pleasant Hill but they don't have near the wealth of material like at the Kentucky Building. We were lucky, just lucky, but, uh, there's so much here that hasn't even been processed. And so Pleasant Hill has not been as lucky with their material. They're lucky with their buildings, but not so lucky with their original materials.

RESEARCHER: Well, I don't want to take up too much of your time.

NEAL: Well, that's all right; [I've really enjoyed. . .] I'm not going anywhere! I'm sort of on the handicapped side now, so I don't get out too much.

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