

Laursen Final version

WARREN WILSON COLLEGE  
SWANNANOVA, NORTH CAROLINA 28778

ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEES: Bernard and Kathrine Laursen  
INTERVIEWER: Mary E. Dille  
SUBJECT: The Laursens at Warren Wilson College  
DATE: March 13, 1971  
TRANSCRIBER: Betty Sue Ray

MD: We've heard from several other of the pioneers so now we want to hear from you.

KL: Pioneers -- right!

BL: It just seems that the chance to go to North Carolina came very suddenly. Dr. Randolph had been in contact with Mrs. Campbell and she in turn had contacted her sister in Boston. They needed a farm manager in the worst way at the Asheville Farm School and Dr. Randolph wrote me to that effect. It was somewhat of a surprise to get a job offer in 1931 because at that time the depression had already set in. But when I heard the remuneration, it was really no surprise to me at all. When Dr. Randolph explained that it was a mission school and we would be connected with the Board of Missions of the Presbyterian Church, that changed the aspect to some extent.

We were not certain whether we wanted to go all the way down to North Carolina because it felt like the end of the world as far as we were concerned. But we finally made up our minds that I should go down first and spend a month's working vacation as Dr. Randolph suggested. I did take off from Boston and arrived here at the Swannanoa station where there was no one to meet me. It was somewhat discouraging to see the surrounding territory even though the mountain area was beautiful and I loved it from the beginning. When I arrived, I could find no taxi and no one to take me to the Asheville Farm School. One of the old men working in the station suggested I go with him in his Ford truck and he would take me plus my baggage for one dollar. Well, I

consented.

We arrived at the Asheville Farm School and found no one at the Farm School that I could talk to or explain why I was here. So I sat down on my trunk and waited for several hours. Around 4 o'clock, the matron showed up and she was somewhat surprised to see a new man taking the job as Phys. Ed. man. I explained, however, that I had no certain job. Well, the result was that she found a room for me on the third floor in the boys' dorm. I was not really used to dormitory work since we lived in apartments both in Boston and New York. But I thought I could stick it out for a month or so.

Next morning I met the business manager and he assigned me to a job painting one of the faculty homes. I was assigned two boys and I had an awful time understanding those fellows. One was from Charleston and the other one was a Cherokee Indian. The boy from Charleston sounded more or less like an extremely foreigner because his accent was something I'd never been used to. It was later on I found out that it was the Charleston vernacular and that hardly anyone -- even if they're born American -- can understand that vernacular. However, we got along famously; got our jobs done; and in a few days I got to meet Dr. Randolph.

It was quite an experience because that man was just as friendly as any man as I have ever met anywhere in the world. He explained to me what the situation was and without knowing much about me, he said, 'Now, I want you to come and stay and be here with us as Boys' Director.' Whatever

that entailed; I wasn't quite sure. However, I continued my paint job until school started in the fall.

At that time, I wasn't quite sure yet that I wanted to make it a permanent thing. I wrote Mrs. Laursen, 'You better not pack up because things down here don't look too good. I'm sure you're not going to be satisfied with either apartment or other modern conveniences that you have now. So just wait and let's see.'

Next day, I changed my mind again because I met several of the people and they were extremely friendly. So the letter went back up to Mrs. Laursen, 'Better pack and come on down.' The letters that came back did not sound too encouraging because Mrs. Laursen was afraid of the possible diseases that were prevalent in the mountain area -- such as typhoid, pellagra, et cetera. But my fears were, of course, exaggerated.

MD: (question directed to Mrs. Laursen) Tell us your reaction to what the letter said.

KL: I came down in September and brought Ernst. He was ten months old and we did like it down here. I just love it. And a year after, I was running the kitchen and the dining room and that was just exactly what I had been trained for and that was good for me to do that. Matter of fact, I had the job 28 years and I always did enjoy it. But I've retired and I sure am enjoying that -- now. It is so beautiful here. After we had been here about a year, we just thought we had to go up North to have our two sons in a school but we found out we didn't need to do that.

MD: Where did you first live?

KL: We lived in Teachers' College --which has been torn down-- for six weeks while they were on vacation. And then we lived in Dodge for a long time --four or five years-- upstairs. And that wasn't too easy because Ernst would go out to sit on the railing and call me that he was riding a horse. But nothing happened. And then we went over to Mitchell's and that was a very nice apartment and pretty new. Since then, we have built our own house and very happy down here.

BL: Well, all these years of course have been a challenge to us. We have had some very, very hard years. Of course, finally I was assigned the job as farm manager which was my original intention. I wanted to get back into farm management. I was trained for farm management in the old country but I had, of course, to take over the Phys. Ed. program at the same time. For several years I taught singing games here and that was one of our favorite pastimes during evenings in the winter time.

I must say that it has always been a challenge. Whether it be the farm or working with the students away from the farm or working with the students in recreation. We seemed to fall in line to the extent that it became our job, our life and we often talked about it. We would do it over again even though we had some very, very hard years -- when I compare things to now. It just can't be compared, actually. Because living conditions are better and there's



more freedom. Of course, we have gone back into college work now and it is somewhat different.

MD: Did you have the whole farm when you first came. Were there this many acres?

BL: Of course, the farm management job didn't seem to be too difficult since we had only a small acreage of land to cultivate and so on. But we did have a dairy and it meant getting up in the morning at 4 o'clock, taking care of the dairy, coming back home, and at 8 o'clock -- back on the farm. In between time, I had several gym classes during the day and then again, back to the dairy. Then later on singing games at night. Some of the faculty members were not too happy about this folk dancing and singing games. It was somewhat against their religion. But, sooner or later, they fell in line with it and we seemed to have a good time. Dr. Randolph's idea was to get together, get to know each other and you'll forget about the small, insignificant quarrels that you have. I think he had something there. He was the type of man who could get everybody enthused and get the work done without any forcing or any autocracy or anything. We really had a wonderful time with that man but he was probably destined for bigger jobs. Eventually, of course, he left here and joined the Board of National Missions. Then, of course, Dr. Bannerman took over and it's been the same thing with him. He has been a man who was easy to work for. He never told you exactly that this had to be done or that had to be done. He said do your job and that was about the end of it.

We never had any disagreement either with he or Dr. Randolph as far as work was concerned, even though it got harder as the farm grew. We finally obtained additional acreage which finally amounted to a thousand acres. Things seemed to work along; the college grew -- as far as numbers were concerned, as far as faculty was concerned -- it was good in that day. I would never want to do anything different because we were doing what we wanted to do.

Unfortunately, in '57 I took sick and had to go through, I think, eight or ten operations. At that time I had no assistant and no one ready to take over the farm management. Fortunately, Ernst, our oldest son, had just finished his Army service and was returning to Swannanoa and Warren Wilson College and he knew exactly what was to be done because he had worked with me since he was seven years old. He knew the farm almost better than I did. So in '58, he took over the entire management and I had to retire on account of disability. It was, of course, wonderful that I had him take over because he knew what was going on; he knew I wanted; and he knew the students. I think that is one of the greatest things -- to know how to get along with a student body without having any dissension. At times it's been hard for both he and for myself, but things have always ironed out. If you're reasonable, you'll get along. On the other hand, we required an awful lot of hard work. Sometimes I ~~felt~~ sorry for them and for myself. But it seemed to work out.

Right now I'm still doing part-time work on the farm. I volunteer my services and I enjoy it. I could not think of staying away from that work. If I quit working, I'm afraid I'll fall by the way.

For some reason or other, time never gets heavy on my hands. I always seem to find something to do and I have several hobbies. I pursue them diligently. It seems to me that there's never enough time. One week, one month, one year slips by. But when you enjoy life, that about is the case for everybody. I have started making rugs -- braiding rugs, not only for myself and my family but I have been able to braid rugs and sell them to some of our friends. It's a hobby that's very gratifying and I enjoy it. Someone started me out doing that work while I was sick. They suggested I start braiding rugs during the night hours when I couldn't sleep. Usually, after two to three hours of work, I was tired enough to go to sleep again. I made several pieces of furniture. I built several things on the farm, including barns and finishing houses and farrowing houses. There seems to be a certain joy in creating things whether they be a pig house or braiding a rug or whether it be working just with the students and getting to know something about their lives or where they come from, et cetera.

Recently I worked with, I think, boys from ten different nationalities. It just seems that working with a boy who has never worked before and showing him what's going on is something that I enjoy. Sometimes it's hard to explain because



I speak a different language than they do; and they speak an entirely different language than I can understand. Even though I speak several languages, that doesn't always seem to be enough. But we get along famously and there seems to be new things popping up every day, every week, every year.

I hope that this continues, that the college continues to grow. What I am particularly interested in, of course, is the farm and the work program. I think that the work program is as essential as the academic program. I feel that if we give up our work program, we give up the college too. We would just be another college like a thousand other colleges; that just isn't enough as far as I'm concerned. You must have that combination of work and academic training. If we have that, I think that this college is hard to beat. To my knowledge, there is no other college that has that same program and the same free and open relationship with the students and that to me means a lot. I know the students don't feel that we are really a community. But, as far as I can see, every faculty member, every member that I know of the faculty, is interested in meeting the students, getting to know the students and helping the students. I've never heard of a faculty member who has felt that it was too much bother to help a student be it in work or academic programs.

So, if we maintain what we have now, I don't think that we need worry about the future. It might be hard for the college to raise money since we will not be connected to the Board after several years. But, I think, with the hard work

from both students and faculty, we can't help but succeed. During the last ten years of my service here, I was asked to go out to promote the college in different Presbyterian Churches all over the nation. I had some wonderful experiences. The Presbyterian membership seems to be just as cordial as any membership that I have known or met anywhere. They seem to be interested in the college, interested in our work and interested in both students and faculty. What the final results of those promotional tours have been I just don't know, except that I still keep in touch with a good many of the people that I got to know during those years. Recently, I heard from a judge in California. They were somewhat concerned about the Board's withdrawing their support for the college and they had started a movement either to get the Board to reconsider or they would send their contributions directly from their church, which is a church of 3000 membership. They would send it directly to the college. That was one place that I definitely know that I had some proof from my speaking tour. However, we have felt that many times people have sent in contributions as a result of those speeches. There was one result particularly that we knew of because I told them about the conditions in our old kitchen where the stove was not functioning. I'll let Mrs. Laursen tell you about that situation.

KL: Well, this is not very hard because I couldn't ever forget it because we came from Boston and New York. But when I started the job in the kitchen, we had a coal stove -- a wood stove -- and it was broken out. The ashes came down

in the oven and I liked to do a lot of cooking and homemade bread and all. But it just didn't work. It would get spoiled. So when my husband came home from a speaking tour, some people came to see it and gave us money for a gas stove which was very, very wonderful. I have enjoyed being over there 28 years, but have retired now and very, very happy being retired because it's so pretty down here. We live close to the college where the people come and keep on coming to see us.

MD: And we still enjoy your Danish pastry every now and then when we have a special dinner, you know, you come along and give us Danish pastry. We also especially enjoyed Mr. Laursen's speeches in Chapel -- when we used to have Chapel. All the students and all the staff loved to hear him talk. I surely thank you both and if there's anything more you think of later, I'll just be back and you can tell me again.

END OF INTERVIEW