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Betty Bibbins '73-Susan Mabry Gaud '68

Betty Bibbins

Susan Mabry Gaud

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Betty Bibbins: This is Betty Bibbins, class of 73, uh, on June 2nd, 2018 with the Alumni Oral History Program, and I'm interviewing

Susan Mabry Gaud: this Susan Mabry Gaud I'm class of 1968 and I'm here for my 50th reunion.

BB: Hello, Susan. How are you doing today?

SG: I'm president of my class. My alumni class.

BB: Very good. Currently- or currently?

SG: Seemingly forever actually.

BB: Oh, very good.

SG: But I enjoy it.

BB: Okay. So, well, we will come right back to that in one minute. One of the things we would like to know is why did you decide to come to Conn College? What brought you here?

SG: Well, when I- when I was- when I was applying for colleges, people applied to maybe three colleges, possibly four, and you would have your- your stretch college and then you would have your pretty much sure thing and then an intermediate and maybe a fourth if there was one. But I came down here and when I came, lived in Boston and I'd gone to school in Boston and one of the women in my high school was a year ahead of me, was here at Connecticut. And when my mother and I came down here, she showed us around. She was the tour guide and she was very enthusiastic, and it was- but I must admit it was in November. The Fanning Hall looked like a penitentiary to my mother. But the people I met and the tour guide, you know, convinced me otherwise that it was just fine. The other thing was that, and I'll come back to it later, but Frances Brett, who was in the physical education department, was also the head of housing and she lived in the Boston area in the summer and I knew her from that and she encouraged me to come to Connecticut.

BB: Okay. Very good. What, if anything, surprised you when you came on campus other than looking like a penitentiary?

SG: Well, it- once I got here, it was not so penitentiary lookalike. You know, I didn't- I really don't know what- didn't know what to expect. I think given that I went to a- an independent school, a high school, all-girls school, so I was used to being all women. And I, you know, it started out being sort of an extension of high school because I was taking- I was doing the sports and I was taking the usual, you know, you had to take an English class and a math class and I took a science class. And so I think that when I first started out, it was somewhat

what I expected. I just- I think I found it a little harder, you know. And I - but- but I-was always one of these, really, really studious little people, so I've come out of that shell now, but yes- just but- so I- I would say it was not a big surprise. And, you know, as time went on, I realized, I- I think- I think I was good about taking opportunities available to me because it would never- and I think one thing that, I don't know if this is really a surprise, but I think it was a really good thing at the time, is that we did have the requirements, the distribution requirements that we had to take. Because I don't think I would ever have taken philosophy, for example, if I'd come, if I hadn't had to choose philosophy or religion. So that was, you know, both a- a surprise and an opportunity.

BB: So what was your major?

SG: Chemistry.

BB: Oh, right.

SG: Yeah. Chemistry.

BB: And tell us about chemistry.

SG: Yeah, well, chemistry, uh, chemistry was a little pathetic here. I actually- I mean, so it's my major, I actually spent one summer at Dartmouth doing organic chemistry.

BB: Oh really?

SG: The whole- whole year in one in eight weeks at Dartmouth with two other of my classmates actually. And I think the chemistry, it- it just wasn't very strong. The- in the sciences, the psychology department was very strong. The biology department was very strong, but chemistry and physics really weren't. But I- but as a result, I- I spent a lot of time because we had labs and lectures, so sort of under rock for a while. Yeah. There was a lapse. But- but I certainly- but there were only the whole time we- I was- the entire time I was in Connecticut, so for four years, I think only five people graduated with a major in chemistry,

BB: I believe you.

SG: Five or six. So, and as a result, I- I went on to graduate school because I kept thinking, well I've just majored in chemistry and I'm not sure I really know it. So ...

BB: Alright. And so what other courses you said that you ...

SG: I took philosophy- philosophy. I took quite a bit of English and I also took quite a bit of history, American history. So there's several different varieties of American history I really enjoyed. A little bit of math. I- I placed out of physics, so I didn't take that here. I, Oh, I had-, I didn't-, hadn't any biology. I did not have to have biology when I was in high school, and thus I had to have biology here and never really liked biology, but I, I did gravitate towards anatomy and microbiology, so I ended up taking those after. And botany nearly did me in, but

yeah- but it was- but everything, everything was good. I- I think probably the most difficult and least was French. I continued on taking French so I only had to take-, oh, and I had to take- and then I had to take German and I would say German. I really rec- I really remember this so vividly because our professor was on a Fulbright scholarship from Germany, and her role in Germany was to teach English to German-speaking students, so she was almost more interested in learning English than teaching us German. So that was- I think that was one of the- kind of a disappointing experience. It was fine. I got through it.

BB: You said you had to take German. Was that a requirement because you were a chemistry major?

SG: I think I- I think I had to have two years of language.

BB: Oh, okay. Just any language,

SG: Any language.

BB: Like French and stuff,

SG: And I, well, I'd had, I'd had French since fifth grade. So I took French, but then I thought exactly- I thought- well, because I'm a chemistry major and I knew that a lot of, well, I hadn't really anticipated going to graduate school at the time, but I did know that German was considered one of the languages that scientific people are supposed to know. And I don't-, you know, then when I went on and in my- my job after- after I got through graduate school and postdocs and everything, I went to work for a company that had a research and development organization in Germany and so I, even though I really didn't know German, it did help. It provided a- a kind of a fundamental structure that I could at least talk in phrases.

BB: No, I couldn't,

SG: I don't think I ever could get to complete sentences, but phrases.

BB: Very good. So since you were talking about the very ...

SG: What was your major, by the way?

BB: Zoology.

SG: Zoology. Oh, okay. So you're, you were ...

BB: So I was in German also. Yes. When you said that, I said I- I didn't know for organic whether it was required or not, but for- but for sciences in general.

SG: I think it wasn't, right, for sciences in general. It was so strongly encouraged.

BB: And I do- I- I just said organic. That was a Freudian slip because the one thing that challenged me saying, "Why am I doing this?" was taking organic chemistry for my labs were always over after sunset. And I would be coming out of the organic lab at nighttime.

SG: Well, we took- I took organic at Dartmouth. We took organic- we started at 20 to eight in the morning with our lecture. So we're the only people in the cafeteria at the breakfast time and then the labs went all the way until two o'clock or, or four o'clock. But it was daylight, it was summertime. But we were the only people in the library on Saturday night. Um, and I, but I developed a really, there was a kind of a core group of five or six of us who became ...

BB: Believe you.

SG: very good friends.

BB: Yeah. Yeah. I never didn't know a- or a chemistry major while I was here. Even though I figured out where, yeah. Yeah. So- so which faculty do you remember or in any way, shape, or form that you would like to communicate with?

SG: It's interesting. The one-, the most memorable faculty members to me, one was, oh shoot, Mr. Baird who taught English and I remember I took a American literature class from him. He was terrific. And so then I went on and took another class from him, I think, and Mr. Birdsall who was a professor of history and again, American history and I remember one class really I've never forgotten was it was called The Cultural History of the United States. So it was- it was very different than just your chronological, this is what happened in 1775. As far as my- I- I certainly remember my- the chemistry professors, but I didn't feel they were- I felt they didn't challenge us beyond sort of knowing what the text said. And that may not be fair. They- they were- they were very encouraging and they got me- got the- I got an award that gave me, you know, kind of a membership in the American Chemical Society. So they were very- they were very encouraging, but it was really- it was oddly the history and the English professors that I can remember. Maybe that's because those are areas that were out of my comfort zone and they made it seem very manageable.

BB: Very good. And so, do take a step away from the classroom. How did you like residential life here?

SG: I loved it. And again, the- Miss Brett, who I knew from Boston, she knew I was a tennis player and an athlete. And she put me- I lived in Morrison my first freshman year, and she put me in that dorm with people that she thought that I would really get along with well and a number of my classmates were in that dorm, but there were also a whole group of people that were not in my class who really- we really clicked and I, since then, basically, well, there were originally 11 of us, one unfortunately passed away, that was number 11. Number 10 never responded to anything, so we- we haven't included her as much, but we, even now, we, and so when we- we all graduated, everybody was busy with either graduate school or raising families or whatever and so we really didn't get back in touch until email. Once email came on the scene, we now have every 12 to 18 months, we take a trip someplace, eight or nine of us.

BB: That's nice.

SG: It is, It's, it's, it's wonderful.

BB: That's keeping in touch.

SG: Yeah. Yeah. It is keeping in touch. But there was a- there was a gap there. You know, people. Well I went out to graduate school in Illinois. Mm-hmm in Chicago and- and completely kind of lost touch, because again, I was in chemistry and it was even worse in graduate school, right, but- but then once we start again, and I- but I'm a connector. I always- I would send Christmas cards. I- I did keep in touch with people. It's something I enjoy doing. But I did go on. I went on to graduate school, like I said, because I didn't really feel like I succeeded.

BB: Where did you go to graduate school?

SG: I went to Northwestern University. And the reason I went to Northwestern was totally irrational. Some classmate of mine had come in and said that she had applied for a biology degree at Northwestern University Graduate School and I happened to go to a wedding, one of my classmates, semester break in Evanston. And while I was there, I had time and I went to visit the chemistry-, well, I went to the biology department and I was not impressed. Nobody was there. I went to the chemistry department and they were just terrific. Every- they weren't supposed to-, Saturday morning, everybody was there. They took me in. When I got back to school after semester break, the same woman came in and said, "I have been accepted to Northwestern." And I said, "By gosh, she can get accepted, I can get accepted." So I applied, and of course the application deadline had passed, but I sent a letter in anyway, and it was an unusual year because it was 1968, and that was the year that the draft rules changed so that men could no longer get a deferment for graduate school. So a number of the men who had planned to go to graduate school went and taught high school math and science. And so consequently there were more openings. Now, I don't know if, you know, maybe I would've gotten on in- on my own right, but I think there was more space, you know, and- and they didn't have any money available though. They said, "We can accept you, but there's no money." And so I talked to my father about this, who was very, very much all about education, which was also an anomaly because he was as much for education for his daughters as he was for his son.

BB: Wow. Good for you. Good for you.

SG: Good for him. Yeah, definitely, good for him. And although my mother kept saying, "How much chemistry can you learn." But, you know, and where's the- where's the man, you know, the marriage, but, which it didn't happen for a long time. But the- but as a result, I, so I said, "You know, we'll be able to manage it at least for the first year." And within a month I got a letter saying that they had secured some, you know, graduate school money for me. So yeah, I just, I think it probably was just the right place at the right time.

BB: That is very interesting.

SG: It was fun.

BB: Uh huh it has been, And so, were you involved with any groups or activities that were important to you?

SG: I was- I did a lot of athletics.

BB: You mentioned tennis.

SG: I play tennis. I played field hockey. I was inducted here into the Athletic Hall of Fame a few years ago.

BB: Impressive,

SG: I can't remember what year. Well, as- my son went here and he said, "Well, mom, you know, eventually everybody gets in there." Thanks. But- but it was- but I also was involved in student government. I was on honor board, very good honor board. In fact, I was on an honor board with Claire Gaudiani. She was two years ahead of me, and she was kind of the president of honor board at the time. And I-, and then, then I continued- I- I continued sort of in student government. I think I was secretary of my class at one point. I don't know what that entailed because I don't remember doing anything. And I was also president of the athletic association for a year. So I, yeah, I got involved, but I- yes, but it wasn't a- I don't think it was something that was so overburdensome, you know? And also athletics. Like nowadays, if you're on a team, not so much Division III, but if you're on a Division I athletic team, that's kind of your whole life for a whole year. You know, you do one sport, you do it for the whole year. You're in the weight room and all your stuff like that. That wasn't the way it was. And we didn't have- and they didn't have a- when you were here either, they didn't have the athletic conference at all?

BB: No. Oh, they had just started. We- ours was the first class with men.

SG: Right. And so, Well, that's right. So you- so they'd had more teams and stuff.

BB: Everything was intramural before.

SG: Right. We, we played- anything we did in athletics, like in field hockey and hockey and in basketball, I remember, that's about all I remember the- the athletic department, you know, if they had a friend at Southern Connecticut College or, we would, you know, they'd arrange, well, let's get together and play a basketball game, but it was nothing. There was no league or conference or anything.

BB: No formal, right?

SG: No, not at all. But I made great ...

BB: True that, you know, that bonds ...

SG: and I think the teamwork. I- I've always felt that team sports is good and I think it was especially good for women at the time, but ...

BB: Agreed even, and today, even more so, yeah, with the competitiveness is out there and women are good. Being competitive, we are.

SG: Well, yeah. I was pleased to hear what Connecticut's done. My son went here and I think I was pleased to hear, and he was an athlete and I think that he's pleased to hear that the school has done ...

BB: Have you ever had time to share your experiences at Conn with your son and are there any differences that you see in talking ...

SG: We- you know, he- well he was here when it was fully co-educational. And- and there was a con- athletic conference. So there was that difference. We definitely have talked because I do remember when he was, when he, he graduated class of 2007 and 10 years ago, 11 years ago. I can't believe it ...

BB: It flies.

SG: It does. But anyway, he was- I remember he arrived on campus and right outside Cro there were the crew grabbed him and said, You've got to do rowing. So he got- he got on the rowing team and I said, "Well, that'd be great. You'd be really good." And he finally decided, you know what? They get up at five in the morning and go down on the river and row. And he said, That is not what I'm planning to do in college. And it also conflicted with track and field, which he did. But we did talk. So anyway, what I- we're here, what I had talked to him about was Mr. G's restaurant. And I remember the first day he was so excited to be able to tell his friends, like the first time when they were allowed to go off campus or something, that they were going to go to Mr. G's and that he was so excited that he was, he felt kind of like big man on campus. I- I-, you know, telling these people he'd never met before that while we're going to have to go down to Mr. G's. But we-, yeah, we do talk and, and in fact today I sent, you know, a text saying I'm here. Well, he lived in Hamilton and I don't know if you took the tour of the ...

BB: No. How is it there?

SG: Oh my gosh. It's like completely different.

BB: I kind of have to go there.

SG: It's, it's really obviously, huh? Yeah, well it's- it's- it's really nice. I mean, I lived in Morrison. All the complex dorms were single, mostly single rooms, doubles in the corners. He was in a- the double had been converted to a triple when he was in- in school. But now they've- they've created like these double, they've taken singles and created doubles out of them. It's a very- it's a different- it's a whole different concept then. I thought so

BB: I have to go over there and see.

SG: Yeah. It, it was completely different. So, so I texted him, I said, "You're not going to believe what the place looks like," because he- I don't think he hasn't been back. He lives in Colorado.

BB: All right. That is so neat. Then. So you both had been able to compare notes, huh? Can you tell us a little more about your life after Conn and how your experiences here impacted life up until then through today?

SG: Yeah. Well, I would say, I wrote some notes down and let me think what I was thinking about. Well, I went on to grad school, I said, and I certainly think that-, you know, I certainly think that just the critical thinking skills and I had a very good high school education as well. It was a very- writing was really important and critical thinking. But I think here just the-, well, it'd be sort of the exposure to a lot of different things and I've continued to do that. So- so people- I meet people who know that I'm chem, well, I went and I got a PhD and then I went- I was at Yale for five years doing post-doctoral work. It's a ...

BB: You were where?

SG: At Yale University.

BB: Oh, Yale. Yeah. I started to say, oh, what country is that?

SG: No, Yale. Yale University as post-doctoral. And then, and then I had a job, I went back out to work in Kraft Foods out in Glen View in Illinois. And I think the-, I-, the-, just the sort of the breadth of experience I had here. I think I was in Junior Show too, you know. I- I certainly wasn't anything, I wasn't no star, but I think I was in there. But just being able to do all those different things here, that, because people know that I'm a chemistry major and you know, I'm telling them about, well, I just read it to book on Martin Luther King and- and- by Taylor Branch. It's a fabulous book. And I- I just- I read literature, I go to plays, I do all this stuff and it's sort of like, wow, you know, because and my one friend who's amazed at this, her husband is a chemist, but he knew he wanted to be chemist since he was in first grade and or maybe five years old and has never done anything else. Whenever he had to write about something in English class, he'd come around to something chemistry. And so she's-, so, she feels he's very linear, so, but I think I-, but he had a bachelor of science kind of engineering type focus. And I think that the liberal arts-, the- we really encouraged our children to get liberal arts degrees, both of them tend to have a science and math bent, but they, they got the liberal arts. So, I was trying to think there was anything else really. But I-, you know, I just ... Oh, and- and the other thing I think that- I think one of the things you get at a place like Connecticut is that you really get to know the faculty and so you're very comfortable with kind of all ages and because I know that Mr. Willauer I never had a class with him, but he was our dorm ... we still ate in the dorms and he was our adopted, I can't remember which dorm I was in at the time, but he was our adopted faculty member. So he would come once a week or so and have dinner with us and we all got to really know him. And I remember bringing my daughter here to look at colleges and I said, "Just a minute." And I went up to see if he was in his office, because he was still here. And he remembered right away who I was and I never had a class with him, so I think- so I- he said, "Oh, let me, I'll come down and say hello to your daughter and her friend." And we, we were hiking around colleges and- and she was really impressed. She said, "You know, he really remembers-, knows who you

are." And I said, "Well, that's kind of the way- the nature of this college is." And- and so in contrast, like at Northwestern, I was a teaching assistant to the undergraduate classes.

BB: Oh, really?

SG: Yeah. So that, I think that's a- a bonus is to knowing the faculty.

BB: All right. So that, that's beautiful memory there. And so thinking about college today, is there anything from your experience that you would like to communicate to students today?

SG: You know, I don't-, I haven't paid close attention to how the curriculum has changed here, although there's a lot of different opportunities. I- I really recommend that people- that people, you know, take advantage of the different opportunities and broaden yourself or do something that's outside your comfort zone. We were required to, because of the- the nature of the distribution requirements. I think they went through a stage where they got rid of all that in schools around the country. And I just think to really take advantage of things like that, I don't know. The other thing is, I didn't worry a lot about my grade point average. I mean, I worked hard and I wanted, but it wasn't something. I didn't go nuts if I didn't get an A, you know? And I- and- and I've observed- as I have observed younger people, they, you know, there's been a lot of the teaching to the test and the grade is all important and stuff like that. I- I- I just felt, you know, excuse me, here you are taking the opportunity. Thinking about, thinking of anything else. So that was- that was one. Well, and- and the other thing, my experience-, but again, it's the- how the world has changed in terms of athletics. I kind of played and I didn't have to be the star, but I think it's a more competitive environment. Really.

BB: It- it really is. Yeah. So is there anything else? We're kind of winding down there, but is there anything else that you would like to communicate to the future because the future is, is the way this is going to be.

SG: Yes. Well, I think- I- I do think- I- I do think we need to have people who can operate in a very global environment or in a- in a diverse world. One thing, because this is a big pet peeve of mine right now, is I really think it's important for students to learn how to engage in conversation over controversial subjects, because I think that we, you know, whatever side of the political spectrum you are on, and I'm not going to get into that, right, I just think that that whole opportunity for discourse people and the- the compromise doesn't seem to be ...

BB: without animosity.

SG: Without animosity. Right. I would really love to see that. I just read a- a wonderful book, Our- Our Declaration by Danielle Allen. Danielle is a professor at Harvard and I can't remember. She's mixed race. I can't- I can't remember whether it's her father or mother is African-American. But anyway, she's mixed race and she, it's a long story and if you read the book, which I highly recommend, it talks about the writing of the Declaration of Independence and the compromises that these people had to come to. And of course at the time you had- and the people from South Carolina had a whole different viewpoint from the people in Massachusetts and how they had to, ultimately, they came up with a brilliant document, but was, it was not without, you know, animosity and a lot of steam, but they were

all in the same room. They couldn't do, they couldn't do things by email. So, you know, it's- that's maybe an idealistic view of things, but- but I think if we could get people really talking, and letting- and letting- letting diverse views be heard, you don't have to like them, but yeah. Because there's-, Lord knows, there are lots of things I don't like, but at least I'll listen to them. And from a scientific point of view, I think we tend to analyze it and think, how could we, you know, what- what's this person trying to accomplish by this?

BB: That's wonderful.

SG: Anyway, so I, you know, my experience at Connecticut was wonderful. I have good friends. I keep in touch with the program, I mean with the- with the school.

BB: Well, thank you very much. Well ...

SG: You're welcome. Thank you. Thank you for taking the time to do this.