



From Winthrop to Washington

Cryptology at Winthrop College

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Oral History-Sara James Stringfellow

Sara J. Stringfellow

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Sara James Stringfellow
INTERVIEWEE

Susanna Lee
Intern
Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections
Winthrop University

Interviewed on March 29,2016
Transcribed on June 2016
MP3 File Format

*This is an edited transcript. It has been edited for readability while being kept as near verbatim as possible. The original grammar is left mostly intact to preserve the “flavor” of the speaker, but filler words such as “um” and “uh,” false starts, stumbling and stuttering have been removed. Slang and dialects have also been edited. For example, instead of “yeah” or “uh-huh,” “yes” is used. Instead of “gonna” or “goin,” “going” is used. Our transcription guidelines are available upon request.

Interviewer = Anna Lee (AL)

Interviewee = Sara Stringfellow (SS)

AL: This is Anna Lee with the Louise Pettus Archives interviewing Mrs. Sara Stringfellow for the Cryptology Oral History project.

AL: Good Afternoon, Mrs. Stringfellow

SS: Hello

AL: I guess I'll start off with our first question, what year were you born and where did you grow up?

SS: I was born in 1922 in Chester South Carolina. Chester was a small town mostly dependent on Springs Mills Industries and when the Mills closed many people were out of work.

AL: For people who don't know Chester, how far is it from Rock Hill?

SS: Chester is about 20 miles south of Rock Hill.

AL: Why did you choose Winthrop? Was it because of the location?

SS: I chose Winthrop because it was the only college nearby that I could attend as a day student

AL: What years did you go to Winthrop?

SS: I entered Winthrop in 1940 and graduated in 1944.

AL: What was your Major during that time?

SS: What was my major?

AL: Yes ma'am

SS: I had a double major in English and French.

AL: Is there a reason that you picked English?

SS: I really picked French first (laughter) because I enjoyed it. I had some French in high school and liked it and did well in it. So then I decided to go for the double major because I liked English also.

AL: Do you remember what the process of applying to Winthrop was or how people were accepted?

SS: I do not know because I could not really attend after high school. I graduated and my family really couldn't afford to send me to college. So I worked for a year afterward eventually I was able to attend as a day student because my mother made arrangements with Dean Hardin, who was the Dean at that time and she was also a friend of the family. So she helped me get admitted to Winthrop as a day student.

AL: Is there anything that you remember about being a student at Winthrop? The uniforms? The rules? Anything that sticks out in your mind about being a day student?

SS: I remember being a day student and not liking it very much because I did not feel like I was included in the campus life. Of course I boarded a Grey Hound bus in the morning, which brought me to Winthrop and dropped me off out there on Oakland Avenue. And then in the afternoon after I finished classes I boarded the bus again and went home. So I was not included of course in campus life. I could not be included so for two years I really did not participate in college life. The uniforms, an arrangement was made with Dean Hardin that I would not have to wear the uniform or purchase the uniform. I agreed to wear navy skirts and white shirts

AL: Do you remember what the campus atmosphere was like during World War II? If anything changed or did people talk about it more?

SS: Yes it was a very difficult time. Students were involved in all of the activities but there was always an atmosphere of worry, of concern, and reading the newspapers everyday about a war going on and our loved ones, my brother was in the service. Many of us had relatives and friends. In fact the class that I graduated with in high school most of them were involved or drafted into the service. So I am sure that there was an atmosphere of concern every day. However the students did continue to study and learn and work.

AL: Do you remember the Air Cadets being on campus?

SS: I do. I was a day student when they arrived. But I heard there was quite a bit of excitement when they arrived. The girls were screaming, hanging out of the windows, throwing their panties out (laughter). It was quite an excitement, of course it was an all girls school at that time and the excitement of having men on campus was quite exciting.

AL: Do you remember if there were any special courses at Winthrop during World War II?

SS: Well the course that I took as a senior, cryptography, was the only one that I knew about.

AL: Do you remember how they were advertised to the students? How you found out about it?

SS: I don't know. I was looking for an elective. It was my senior year the second semester and I heard about this course and I thought it would be interesting. So I don't know how it was advertised. Although the professor of the class, I wish I could remember her name I'm sorry I don't, but she was the most influential professor because later I accepted and took a job in cryptography in Washington. And she was encouraging her students to apply for jobs in Washington. Because women were needed during that time to fill in the jobs that the men had to leave to go to war.

AL: Do you remember how you found out about the job in cryptology? Did the professor mention it?

SS: she mentioned it. She told us about the signal corps and the encouragement by the government for women to come to Washington to go to work to take over where the men had left their jobs to go to war. So she is the one who told me about the job.

AL: Do you remember the application process, or how you applied for the job?

SS: I remember that I did not apply right away after graduating. My mother was living with my sister in Sumter, South Carolina. So after I graduated, I didn't have a job, didn't know what I wanted to do, so I went to live with my sister temporary and during that time the Air Force at Shaw Air Force base...There were many young men who were looking for fun so we would often go by bus to the dances and entertainment that they would have at Shaw Air Force base. So I was having a good time. I didn't think about work at that moment, but I really really had to get serious so after I had heard about the job at the Signal Corps again I guess through the newspaper I decided that I would apply for it. So I just wrote to the Signal Corps and applied for the job.

AL: Do you remember what the training for this job was like? You said you took the class at Winthrop, was that all they required or did they train you?

SS: That's all they required. We started right away in the office where we worked and we were told by supervisors what to do and how to do it.

AL: What was living in Washington, D.C. like at this time?

SS: It was one of the best times of my life. Although a war was going on, I hate to say that, it was so exciting. After work our friends would get together and tour all of the national monuments. We went to the museums, we had picnics in Rock Creek Park, we went to the theater, we just had a wonderful exciting time. And also there were parades going on when Generals would come to Washington, there was always a parade for the General.

AL: Did cryptographers have to live in certain places, did you have a roommate in Washington, what was your living situation?

SS: The government provided us...It was called Arlington Farms, it was a government built building. There were dormitories, cafeteria, entertainment, a tennis court, recreation hall. It was beautiful and wonderful. It was formally a girls private school, a very exclusive private school, a beautiful building there was a campus. The Signal Corps took it over before the war started as their base for cryptography. So it was provided by the government.

AL: Were there any rules for living there? Did they have any regulations while you were there or was it like a normal apartment building?

SS: It was like dormitory life. There was always someone in the office like a supervisor, or like a den mother, there was always someone there. We had single rooms, no roommates, the rooms were small but adequate and we would often get together in the common area to talk and to listen to the radio, we had no television of course, and then we would get together to go out and tour Washington. But I don't remember any specific rules.

AL: Can you describe the work you did as a cryptographer?

SS: As a matter of fact it was a top secret job and we were not to discuss the job for five years after we left, after the war was over. So I never talked about it before. This is the first time I have talked about it before. I have told my children about it but they don't understand it, they don't understand computers, we did not have computers. We sat at a table, a long table, about four to five people sitting on each side, a long sheet of paper was passed down the table, each of us had a graph. We would lay the paper over our graph and we would punch holes in the paper. We never knew what we had deciphered. We never knew if it was a word or a letter or...it continued down the table until everyone had finished doing whatever they did to it. Each one had a different thing to do and then that paper I imagine was taken to the offices of the Signal Corps where the experts would interpret what we had deciphered.

AL: Did they explain to you what would happen if you told people about what you were doing?

SS: They may have at the time but I don't remember any such conversation. No we were just told that it was top secret and that we did not talk about our jobs outside of area.

AL: Do you remember any other Winthrop girls working with you?

SS: Not especially with me. Most of the girls I knew that lived at Arlington Hall and worked at Arlington Hall were college graduates and had recently graduated. They were looking for jobs and looking for excitement and looking to be part of the war effort. But I do not specifically remember. I remember you mentioned Jeul Bannister, and I knew her at Winthrop but I do not believe we worked together.

AL: Is there anything else you remember about being a cryptographer that I haven't asked you about already?

SS: I remember several things I would like to tell you about. One of the most interesting and memorable experiences I had was when General Eisenhower visited our office. He was walking through the office and he looked at me and he spoke to me and he reached out his hand and shook my hand. And asked me my name and if I liked my work. Of course I replied that I did and he smiled and walked on and met other people. But just to meet Ike Eisenhower was the thrill of a lifetime. That was one of the experiences I had. Another was I had a friend who just arrived, he was a Naval officer, he had just come into port on a United States destroyer one of the largest ships and he invited me one day to tour the ship which was also very interesting. To imagine being on a destroyer that had been out in the Pacific or Atlantic somewhere. I really enjoyed that. We enjoyed many of the concerts that took place. Arlington Farms was located at the foot of the Memorial Bridge in Washington and there were many concerts, outdoor concerts often so were within walking distance so we would go to the concerts there. Many of the people would come in boats to listen. They had the little paddle boats that a friend and I were able to use one of those one time and attended the concert in a paddle boat, that was fun. I guess the most historic experience I had in cryptography was on the night of August 14, 1945, the message that Japan was surrendering was received in our office in our area not specifically with one of us but those who had decrypted the message. They announced Japans surrender and we went crazy. Everybody was so excited and happy and screaming and crying, some people were kneeling in prayer the fact that Japan had surrendered was just the most wonderful wonderful news. However the announcement came over the intercom that we were not to leave. I was on the night shift that night we often had to change shifts, so I was on the eight hour night shift. So they told us that we could not leave the area. We could go outside onto the campus, the campus was secured with high fences all around, very secure. So we left our office and went outside, we danced, we sang, we played, we celebrated the end of the war. Cause so many of us had loved ones that we now knew were safe. And the war was over. So that was the most exciting time of my life.

AL: What did you do after the war?

SS: After the war I considered applying for another job because my job was over and we were released. As I told you we signed papers when we left that we could not discuss our job for five

or it could have been 10 years, I cant remember, but it was at least five years we could not talk about our position or what we did. But I considered applying another job with another department but by that time most of my friends had decided to return home and I stayed for a while because one of my good friends decided to stay and try to look for another job. We did but it would have meant that we would have moved out of Arlington Farms and it would soon be closed. So eventually I decided to go back home, which I did, I went back to Chester, worked there for a while and then decided to start my teaching career.

AL: And how long did you teach?

SS: I taught from 1948 to 1988 when I retired.

AL: Is there anything else you would like to mention about your time at Winthrop, or cryptology or after the war?

SS: Let's see...I think we covered everything. I did want to mention that I did return to Winthrop in 1979 while I was teaching here in Rock Hill and obtained my Masters degree and I often came back to take further courses.

AL: Thank you for your time today and we appreciate your contribution.