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Interview with Jeuel Bannister Esmacher

Jeuel Bannister Esmacher

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LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Interview #144
ESMACHER BANNISTER, Jeuel

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Music major and WWII code breaker

At Winthrop: 1940-1944

Interviewed: January 20, 2015

Interviewer: Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

Index by: Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard

Length: 01:37:36

Abstract: In her January 20, 2015 interview with Michelle Dubert-Bellrichard, Jeuel Esmacher Bannister details her time at Winthrop from 1940-1944. Shared are the memories of professors in the music department, her opinions on the expectations of students, and going to school during WWII. Esmacher Bannister recalls stories of the Army Air Corps Cadets on campus, and the courses offered by the U.S. government that led Esmacher Bannister to a career as a Japanese and Russian cryptographer. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Class of 1944, music department, The Swanks, the Great Depression, WWII, the Cold War, cryptography, ciphers, codes, Japanese, Russian, Arlington Hall

Interview Session (January 20, 2015): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:00:00 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:00:21 *Question:* When were you born and where are you from? *Answer:* Born 1924 and grew up in Starr, South Carolina.

00:00:43 *Question:* Can you describe the town? *Answer:* Small then. Smaller now. Three general stores, a train coming through with goods and passengers. Starr is down to two churches and a restaurant.

00:01:36 *Question:* Distance from Starr to Rock Hill? *Answer:* 120 miles south.

00:01:54 *Question:* Why Winthrop? *Answer:* Parents. JEB's mother and sister attended

Winthrop. Studied education. Women didn't have a lot of choices. Mother got married in her junior year. When JEB was a junior, her mother came back to Winthrop to finish her degree – was JEB's roommate.

- 00:03:30 *Question:* When were you at Winthrop? *Answer:* Graduated 1944, but actually graduated in December of 1943. Came to Winthrop in 1940.
- 00:04:05 *Question:* Process of applying? *Answer:* JEB's mother did all of that. Did not take an exam. Was not asked to send in grades. JEB not sure how Winthrop decided to accept students.
- 00:05:05 *Question:* Scholarships? *Answer:* No. JEB's father paid tuition. JEB estimates \$300-400 for either the semester or year.
- 00:05:35 *Question:* What was your father's profession? *Answer:* Rural mail carrier. Active in Masonic business in South Carolina. Avid hunter and fisherman.
- 00:06:25 *Question:* Your mother's work? *Answer:* Taught until she was 65 years old. Taught in Iva, SC.
- 00:06:50 *Question:* Initial time period at Winthrop? *Answer:* First time away. Not afraid or sad, because her sister was there – one year ahead. Was not homesick, but excited. Excited to go, because it was a new experience from high school. Heard so much about Winthrop from mother and sister.
- 00:07:50 *Question:* What did your mother and sister say about Winthrop? *Answer:* Was a good school. People were kind. Described Winthrop as a family. JEB says it lived up to the stories.
- 00:08:25 *Question:* Describe the family feeling? *Answer:* House mothers were available to students to talk. Student bodies got together, and students got to know each other really well.
- 00:08:55 *Question:* Major? *Answer:* Started as a piano major, but by the end of the first year, changed to band education. Not a lot of female band directors. JEB felt being a piano major was too restrictive. Piano was still a specialty. JEB didn't know of any other band directors that were female – called it a "novelty." JEB talks about getting interviewed at Winthrop for her first job.
- 00:11:00 *Question:* Describe a typical class in major? *Answer:* Music theory was one JEB loved. Dr. Kanitz. George Trumbull was her band director. JEB tells a story of George Trumbull buying her new pads for her saxophone. Mentions Lloyd Bender. Very hands on teaching. JEB tells a story about being in the Swanks – invited to

University of Georgia. Nobody had transportation. George Trumbull hitched a trailer to his car and the Swanks were able to play at the University of Georgia.

- 00:13:45 *Question:* Any other stories of professors going above and beyond? *Answer:* Dr. Roberts was head of music department. Dr. Roberts arranged for JEB to be a music counselor at a summer camp for girls, because JEB was ill. JEB tells story about her illness.
- 00:14:40 *Question:* What was your illness? *Answer:* Discusses anemia and treatment.
- 00:15:55 *Question:* Describe personalities of professors? *Answer:* Outgoing, caring, friendly, and available to talk to.
- 00:16:30 *Question:* Describe music counselor position? *Answer:* Sang and danced a lot. Children ages 7-10 approximately. One summer between sophomore and junior year.
- 00:17:25 *Question:* Describe yourself as a student? *Answer:* Not straight a exactly. Back then report cards went home to parents. JEB tells story about her father. Struggled with an English class, specifically grammar, in the first year.
- 00:19:25 *Question:* Was teacher helpful? *Answer:* No. English teacher was stern. JEB chalks it up to her personality.
- 00:20:45 *Question:* Describe dorm life before your mother was there? *Answer:* House mothers had to approve of everything. Couldn't leave campus without signing in or out. House mothers were very protective. Lights out. Stayed in Roddey freshman year. In McLaurin sophomore and junior year. Senior year, stayed in senior dorm. JEB talks about how much better the living conditions were in senior dorm.
- 00:22:38 *Question:* Positive feelings about dorm life? *Answer:* Yes. Liked getting to know people. JEB talks about being mischievous. JEB says that students didn't have much to do for entertainment, so the students had to make their own.
- 00:24:35 *Question:* Still mischievous with mother? *Answer:* JEB talks about hitchhiking to Charlotte. Hitchhiking was taboo.
- 00:26:25 *Question:* Rules and regulations? *Answer:* Talks about fire escapes.
- 00:27:22 *Question:* Dating? *Answer:* Everyone had to sign in, even friends. Had to get permission from parents. JEB did not appreciate rules and regulations.
- 00:28:15 *Question:* Ridiculous rules and regulations? *Answer:* House mother. Lights out. No arguing allowed. JEB would study in her closet to study after lights out.

- 00:29:00 *Question:* How did things change with your mother on campus? *Answer:* Air cadets on campus then. One night JEB had a date with a cadet. JEB asked for permission and the house mother said no. JEB's mother was told no. JEB's mother allowed JEB to go – her mother snuck her out and back in.
- 00:30:35 *Question:* Favorite roommate? *Answer:* First year a disaster. First roommate had bad body odor. Brought in another roommate who was so homesick and lovesick. Roomed with her sister during sophomore and junior year. Later lived with people from back home.
- 00:32:40 **[no question]** JEB talks about the Shack. Groups of students would go out for the weekend with a chaperone.
- 00:33:20 *Question:* What else did students do in their free time? *Answer:* Explored Rock Hill. Had movies on campus.
- 00:34:05 *Question:* Swanks? *Answer:* Went to USOs. Large sized group. JEB played the saxophone. The Swanks played what the big bands were playing. George Trumbull was in charge of. The Swanks wore pleated white skirts, sleeveless sweater and saddle shoes. Everyone dressed the same.
- 00:36:20 *Question:* Uniforms? *Answer:* Yes for certain events. Otherwise, students had to wear navy and white clothes. JEB talks about the Blue Line. JEB went to the closest church. JEB talks about the daisy chain. JEB active in Winthrop traditions.
- 00:39:10 *Question:* Opinions on uniforms? *Answer:* JEB was pro uniforms. Students had different monetary backgrounds and with a uniform everyone was alike. JEB's mother made all of her clothes she took to Winthrop.
- 00:40:30 *Question:* Describe the remnants of the Great Depression? *Answer:* No one had money. When the war started, that's when things really changed. Talks about how everything was rationed. Rationing were distributed by need/profession. JEB talks about saving oils.
- 00:42:45 *Question:* What about the atmosphere on campus during WWII? *Answer:* Everyone was worried. Male friends were all in service, besides those with a medical excuse. JEB had a boyfriend at the Citadel who was drafted. JEB was going to get married to her boyfriend from the Citadel. JEB tells the story of his service, how they each fell in love with someone else, and how JEB reconnected with her former boyfriend.
- 00:48:15 *Question:* How did you meet your husband? *Answer:* JEB talks about how she met her husband while working as a cryptologist in Washing D.C. during WWII. JEB

- talks about V-J (victory over Japan) night in D.C. when the war was over. Quickly married her husband. Husband drafted in his junior year. JEB wouldn't marry him until he finished his degree at George Washington University. Studied Spanish, then became a banker. JEB tells story of her husband Harry moving up in the banking industry. Married almost 63 years.
- 00:54:10 *Question:* How did the presence of the Air Cadets change Winthrop? *Answer:* Cadets arrived at night marching. Took over Bancroft. Many students ended up marrying cadets. Cadets had separate classes – studying how to be pilots, mechanics, etc.
- 00:56:20 *Question:* How were the cadets integrated? *Answer:* Dances, meetings, etc. Girls never went into Bancroft Hall. Cadets could sit in the parlor and talk with the girls.
- 0:57:35 *Question:* Special courses added during WWII? *Answer:* JEB talks about cryptology courses. JEB took approximately 4 semesters of courses. Courses added in 1941. Cryptology courses taught how to read codes. Approximately 15-20 students in that class.
- 01:01:05 *Question:* Necessary skills for cryptology courses? *Answer:* Logic. JEB says musicians succeed in cryptology. Courses came easy to JEB. Courses were not secretive, because students weren't cracking real codes.
- 01:02:35 *Question:* Describe position as Band Director at Kings Mountain? *Answer:* JEB was eager to leave Winthrop. Directed a large band of 60 pieces. At this position for one year.
- 01:04:30 *Question:* Describe getting contacted by the U.S. government? *Answer:* Shocked. Entire life changed. JEB not hesitant to accept a position as a code breaker. JEB talks about patriotism during WWII. JEB recalls a letter that roughly said, "We could use you in Washington."
- 01:06:25 *Question:* Describe the transition? *Answer:* A different world. JEB talks about the rules and regulations of her job as a cryptographer. JEB felt prepared to be a cryptographer.
- 01:07:35 *Question:* How many other female cryptographers? *Answer:* Many female cryptographers. Messages were coming in from Japan and Europe. JEB talks about initial training learning Japanese for her work. When the war was over, JEB received training in Russian – U.S. military preparing for the Cold War.
- 01:10:40 *Question:* Any other female cryptographers from Winthrop? *Answer:* One of JEB's roommates worked in D.C., so JEB stayed with her until she got an apartment. No residential places available at all. JEB lived in Arlington, Virginia. JEB worked at

Arlington Hall.

- 01:11:55 *Question:* Arlington Hall? *Answer:* The government built dormitories for the military. JEB describes the building she worked in. Both men and women working at Arlington Hall. JEB talks about the differences between the civilians and military. JEB talks about equality between men and women during WWII.
- 01:14:50 *Question:* Apart of women's organizations? *Answer:* JEB talks about her attempts to join the service.
- 01:15:55 *Question:* What other training? *Answer:* JEB was given practice codes. JEB started shortly after training. JEB sworn to secrecy – shares story about explaining to people her work.
- 01:17:25 *Question:* Any moments of victory? *Answer:* JEB talks about a special code she worked on. JEB talks about saving lives and war. JEB describes the feeling she had doing her work. Cryptographers worked one of three shifts.
- 01:20:25 *Question:* What did you do outside of work? *Answer:* Tennis player in the day. Code breaker in the early evening. JEB also played golf to unwind.
- 01:21:25 *Question:* Penalties for discussing work? *Answer:* JEB didn't want to know the penalties.
- 01:21:55 *Question:* When did your work end? *Answer:* Resigned in 1950. Russian cryptography. JEB talks about the difference of the work between WWII and the Cold War.
- 01:23:55 *Question:* Traveling after work? *Answer:* Went to four continents, but not Asia. JEB wonders if she didn't travel to Asia, because of her work as a cryptographer.
- 01:25:15 *Question:* Why were German classes required? *Answer:* JEB had to study, because she was a music major.
- 01:25:55 *Question:* Shift in equality after the war? *Answer:* JEB has never felt inferior. JEB describes her disposition.
- 01:27:00 *Question:* What did you do after the war? *Answer:* Mostly travel. Adopted two children. JEB became a stay-at-home mom. When her children were in high school, JEB became "bored" and started working at a bank. Retired from a bank as a training officer in 1973. JEB retired because she was getting "bored." Music teacher along the way and church organist. JEB still sings in her church choir. JEB is an avid reader and crochets.

- 01:30:25 *Question:* Where does your boredom come from? *Answer:* No clue.
- 01:32:45 *Question:* How has Winthrop's image changed? *Answer:* Students have more options. JEB talks about changes in the dorms. JEB shares her opinions on coeducation – speculates that it takes away from studies. Physical changes to the campus.
- 01:35:45 *Question:* Did you reconnect with old classmates? *Answer:* JEB was the only one to come to the reunion. JEB came back because she loves Winthrop. "Winthrop, to me, is almost like home."
- 01:36:40 *Question:* What did it mean to be a Winthrop student? *Answer:* JEB proud of Winthrop and proud of herself.
- 01:37:36 *End of interview*