

ENGLISH, Sara  
INTERVIEWEE

Interviewer: Andrew Russell  
Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections  
Winthrop University

September 11<sup>th</sup> 20 year History

**Interview # 652**

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Abstract: In her interview with Andrew Russell, Dr. Sara English discusses her memories and thoughts of the September 11, 2001 attacks. Dr. English describes her experiences during the attacks, the response of the local area she was in at the time, as well as the country as a whole.

\* This is an edited transcript. Our transcription guidelines are available upon request/on our website.

<b>Time</b>	<b>Keywords</b>
00:00:02	<b>AR: Today is February 18<sup>th</sup> it is 10:15 in the morning. This is an oral history interview for September 11, 2001 attacks between Sara English and Andrew Russell. Dr. English I'm going to go ahead and have you state your name, where you were born, and where you grew up.</b>
	SE: Ok. My name is Sara English. I was born in Decora, Iowa and lived there about half of my life. Then moved to New Mexico, so that was a big change, lived in the four corners region. Graduated from high school in the huge dusty town of Farmington. Afterwards I went to Texas. I got out of Farmington before the ink was dry on my diploma. Went to Texas for my undergrad. The first shot at it. I stayed in the Fort Worth area for about 30 years until I found my—the love of my life, my hub, my husband. He is in the military or was he's retired now. So we've been all over since then.
00:01:36	<b>AR: So what brought you to Winthrop? Was it him retiring from the military?</b>
	SE: We had—he was retiring, it was during Iraq of course, and he had been stationed temporarily in Great Britain and received a consulting opportunity there. We were permanently stationed in Arkansas at that time and knew we didn't want to stay there. He wanted an old house to restore; so he was in the desert, I was in Arkansas and we found this old house online. Both of us found—it was

interesting both of us found the same house, separately, and we both said ‘South Carolina? What?’ Because we were looking in Virginia. South Carolina—we looked all over Virginia when he came home on leave, didn’t like any of the houses and ended up going here. Fell in love with that old crumbly house and are still restoring it. 15 years later, so. By the time we finish it’ll be time to start again.

00:03:08 **AR: During the 9-11 attacks were you at Winthrop or were you somewhere else?**

SE: I was not. I was in Fort Worth. Also, I didn’t tell you that when we came to South Carolina I actually went back to school after a long period of time and actually took my Master of Social Work here. I am a product of Winthrop as well as a faculty member. But during 9-11.. when September 11<sup>th</sup> happened I was an administrator at an assisted living home in Fort Worth. One of our residents was having her foot operated on that morning. I had gone in really early because, her name was Geneva, and I did not want Geneva to go to the doctor without saying ‘good luck, we’ll see you soon’ and things because it’s scary. Her appointment was in the middle of the day so it was uncomfortable for this 80 year old woman because she wasn’t allowed to eat. She wasn’t allowed to have anything in her stomach because of the anesthesia. I kind of wanted to go in and support her a little bit. So I went in. Of course, Texas is in a different time zone than the east coast. Anyway, I was in Fort Worth with Geneva when that happened.

00:04:47 **AR: How did you hear about the attacks?**

SE: Well, I went in to say ‘Hey, Geneva. Are you ready for your surgery? They’ll be coming to pick you up soon’ blah blah blah. I was just talking to her and she was a little nervous but I knew her really well. And out of the—the TV was on, NBC was on and out of the corner of my eye—you know how you see things out of the corner of your eye this—I saw this report because it was a little after what would have been 9:00 here. I said, ‘Geneva what is going on?’ because all this noise was on in the background. She goes ‘Oh girl, one of those planes hit that big building.’ I’ve been in New York and I had seen the tourist planes and the helicopters go down and had often said to my husband ‘a plane is going to hit one of those buildings one of those days’. So, my object wasn’t that building, it was Geneva so I just went ‘oh that’s terrible. What happened?’ She said, ‘oh girl, it just happened. I don’t know. They’re just talking about it.’ Then she just went on and started talking about her surgery so the noise was on in the background and we were talking. And then, she went ‘oh, Oh’ and I looked and saw the tail end of the second plane that I didn’t—it didn’t register that it was the second plane, went into the building. I said ‘Geneva are they showing it again?’ and she goes ‘I don’t think so.’ In my head I’m going maybe they’re showing it again and then I thought how can they show it again? Right? How can they have a replay of something that happened live? All this stuff is going on and Geneva goes ‘Girl,

another plane hit that big building' and I'll never forget this, she said 'Don't that beat all?'

00:07:26 Now in Texas, 'Don't that beat all' is like, it's kind of like a version of 'Bless their heart' only a little more exclamatory; and she's like 'Don't that beat all?' In my head, Andrew my husband, who I was—we were going—we were scheduled to get married the next month October 20<sup>th</sup>. He was overseas and had gone, because he was still active duty, he had gone—Andrew's in intel [intelligence] and he had gone on an assignment. He had called me the week before and said 'I'm going on an assignment. I'm not going to be able to call you. I'm going to be out of touch.' You know the internet was a lot different back then so it was dial-up. My head was going 'what's going on? Where's Andrew? Why is this plane getting hit?' because one time ok, two planes are not going to hit, right? I'm like 'ok' and still I'm trying to be cool because Geneva is going to her surgery. So, I said 'oh ok well, gee look at the time. I'm sure they're going to be here soon to get you. Let me go and I'll talk to you when you get back.'

00:09:15 So I left and went to my office. I tried to email Andrew and it was 'You are not allowed access to this email'. I mean it was blacked out immediately. The government—it wasn't fifteen minutes before his email was blacked out. It has to do with his clearance. It has to do with his MBS. It has to do with a lot of stuff, but I didn't know that because I wasn't married to him and really didn't pay much attention to what he did. That was weird. I got on his personal email to try to reach him through AOL, goodness. I just said 'well, Andrew, what's up? That's blacked out. Shut down. Everything. Nothing. Of course I didn't know where he was and of course I didn't know how to get a hold of anybody. Even if I had known how to get a hold of his commander, they wouldn't have told me anything because I'm not anybody then. I'm not a spouse. I'm not anybody. So, I'm like....ok. Ok. I went down the hall which—this is a little space, so down the hall was like fifteen feet, to the kitchen. We had a cook named Butch. Butch was there that day and Butch had wheeled in one of those little portable TVs on a rack. A rack, one of those stainless steel racks. Prep rack. He had a TV there. He had the rabbit ears and foil on it and stuff like that because we didn't have cable in the kitchen. He's listening to it. All this time—it's breakfast time, you know, we're going to feed the residents. There are 80 people trying to get breakfast and Butch is occupied. I'm occupied. I can't get a hold of Andrew. All this stuff is going on. I have to get Geneva out the door. Everybody wants coffee. It was ridiculous. The staff start coming down going 'what's going on? What's going on?' Of course, Butch knows everything and he's giving us blow by blow while he's serving up grits. And all this stuff. All I can hear in my head is 'Don't this beat all?' 'Don't this beat all?' 'Don't this beat all?' All I could think of was 'Yes. Yes, it does. It does.'

00:12:26 Every time September 11<sup>th</sup> comes around now in my head, and this has been almost 20 years of course, in my head I hear Geneva say 'oh girl, that building hit that plane. Don't that beat all?' I just think, 'Yes it did.' Later on, Andrew went to work with the Pentagon. He's *still* working at the Pentagon, he's a contractor at

the Pentagon. To go past that place—I didn't go to New York. I love New York—I didn't go to New York for a long time until after September 11<sup>th</sup>. The first place I went was to the church that survived in the—I can't remember the name of it. Saint Edward's or Andrew's, or Steven's or something. Some saint. Little church by the reflecting pool. It was so weird. Fort Worth was so removed from a lot of it. Although we had a base at that time—Fort Worth had an Air Base close. I remember I stayed and watched the news. The news is on like 24 hours a day. I didn't hear from Andrew for three days. Three days. It was nerve wracking. I didn't know if he was alive. If he was dead. Where he was. All these things go through your head. I finally had to go out. Go to the grocery store. It was like a tomb. Nobody was there. It was a 70,000 sq. ft. Kroger and nobody was in there. It was just a bizarre quiet thing and you didn't know what to say. You didn't know what to do. It just—the news, and the noise, and that coupled with the silence of not hearing anything from Andrew and this recurring...voice in my head saying 'Don't that beat all, don't that beat all'. That has become my go to explanation when the insurrection happened on the sixth of January; I was watching the news and I heard Geneva's voice in my head say 'Don't that beat all' and I'm 'Mmm hmm, yes. It does.' It was so real for me because not knowing anything and being separated. Being—the world wasn't as linked as it is now communication wise. It was weird. Between Geneva's voice and Katie Couric's voice, it was on NBC, in my head going 'The second plane has hit tower one' and I'm like...what? I had just been in New York about six months earlier and I'm like...what? It was really strange but I remember everything and I swear I'll remember that until the day I die. The sound of the television, her voice, the smell of grits cooking and coffee perking, and me trying to be... because I was the administrator, the calm person who was supposed to know what to do. Not knowing what to do.

00:16:30 It was something. It was really—and here now it's really strange to be teaching here. Teaching a group of people sometimes...they have no memory of it. It must not be dissimilar from people who grew up in World War II who went through D-Day, or who went through Pearl Harbor or something like that. I never really thought of it much like that even though I've always worked with older people that had had long ago experiences that I'm not a part of but they've shared. It's strange, you know 'Don't that beat all'. That I have a memory that they don't have at all of such a seminal event but that's—*my* memory is Geneva's voice.

00:17:41 **AR: That touches on the next question. What was your most vivid memory? Obviously you hear that every year when it rolls around. So switching gears a little bit. What was the response of the Fort Worth community both the day off and the weeks after the attacks? Do you remember any changes or anything?**

SE: Yes. I do. Fort Worth is—I don't know if you've ever been there, but Fort Worth is part of that giant metro-plex. Dallas is about 40 miles away, Arlington is a half an hour away, then you have the airport and all this stuff. There was more

separation back then between Fort Worth and Dallas although it was called a metro-plex. Fort Worth is... it still had kind of a small town feel to it although it was a large town. It was silent. Silent. Fort Worth has this clover leaf kind of highway that goes around it. Circles around it. Then it has a huge freeway that goes right through the middle of it, literally. It has another freeway that goes up the road the other way like for going to Oklahoma or down to Corpus. There's always traffic. There was none. There was none for days. One of my very good friends, her parents are immigrants. They were originally from India and they immigrated to the United Kingdom. When my friend was born, they immigrated to the United States. They had a group of laundries, coin operated laundries and dry cleaners in Fort Worth. They were really successful and they had been there for 30 years. Their dry cleaners were vandalized because I guess they looked Muslim although they aren't. People didn't know what to do for a couple days and then people got angry and took it out really on anybody that looked Middle Eastern. I remember thinking Poonam's [spelling?] parents had been there 30 years. People knew them and yet they were...you know. Come to find out a few days later a person that I had gone to high school with died in the towers. Was working at the restaurant, Top of the World, I think that's what it was called. Died—I hadn't seen him for years. I knew him in high school and that was awful. No body, no nothing. I have a really good friend in Manhattan, who lives in Manhattan. He was telling me, this is a week later, and he was telling me that there were just pictures. Have you seen this person? Have you seen this person? Have you seen this person? All over the city.

00:21:35 But Fort Worth was quiet, really quiet, and then really angry. I don't think that anger has completely gone away since then. I think when I look—I mean I'm a social worker so I'm going to analyze it that way. I really think this kind of divisiveness that we sort of see—when people were saying 'well this is all because of X, or this is all because of Y.' It's like no it isn't. I've seen that percolating for a couple of decades in my lifetime. I'm sure some pockets of anger and hate were around before then too, but I really saw it ramp up a lot after 9-11 and then never really go underground. Especially with my friend's parents, it was heartbreaking. So, Yes.

00:22:56 **AR: So I'm going to go off script for a minute. Obviously you touched on the anger that still hasn't been resolved. Do you think that there is a correlation between that anger and the capitol riots of January 6 that you mentioned earlier?**

SE: I do. I do. Look at the people. Look at the people who were there. Look at Charlottesville. I think—in social work the 25 cent term is called 'othering'. People who are different from you, in order for you to feel... comfortable, a person might 'other' people. It's almost like anything visual, usually, is how we sift people in our society. If they are older and that's visible, we sift them in that way. If they are a different race and we can visualize it—even people who might be living with a disability if it's something visual we tend to sift. When you can

start othering people you start dehumanizing people. So yes. I think it is related. I don't necessarily think 'oh the insurrection of January 6 is directly connected to 9-11' no, but that kind of tacit permission that is given socially to 'other' people. You take this tacit permission and combine it with fear and add in a little anger and then for good measure a pinch of religiosity to it. Yes, that's a real toxic mess, I think. People don't like to talk about it. It's uncomfortable. 'I'm not that person. I don't do that.' It's like 'yes you do. You do' Every time you cross the street, every time you say something, every time you make a joke, yes you do. So yes, I think it is. Like I said earlier, I think it's been percolating for a long time. When a lot of things came out that a lot of people who were being arrested had a background in law enforcement or the military...I wasn't surprised because of my experiences with people in the military and law enforcement. Wasn't surprised at all.

00:26:03 **AR: So the final question that I've got for you. How did your experience during the 9-11 attack affect you overall? Did any of your views or outlooks on life change?**

SE: Yes. We did get married, obviously. He flew home. Turns out he was in Kurzicstan, one of those stans, for some dumb thing. He flew to Fort Worth, we got married, and I stayed at the Courtyards for a while. He went to Italy. I flew with my big dog over to Italy like 2 months after 9-11, and that was when security was *really* tight. I had a lot of people that said oh you're going to fly? You're going to do this, you're going to do that? I'm like, 'Yes, Italy.' I had a dog. I had a Great Pyrenees/collie cross dog, Riley, who went with me. *In* the plane, not under the plane, in the plane. To Italy. We went through security. So here's this kind of frowsy red head walking through security with this big dog and not one person stopped me. I had all this paperwork; not one person stopped me. Either in the United States, in England, in Paris, or in Rome. Not one person stopped me and asked me for my paperwork and yet I saw people pulled out of line who looked a lot like Poonam's parents. I am hyper sensitive to that when I travel now because I have a global pass. I can just cut through the line, go through security. It's no big deal. But I see people pulled out all the time who don't look like me. This kind of profiling that goes on. It's one of the reasons why I went back to get a social work degree. I really wanted to make—do some research, understand it better so I could maybe do some things to change policy. As you can see I've been very unsuccessful. [laughs] But if I can change a couple people's minds to where maybe they're a little less likely to judge people exteriorly, then I guess I've done what I'm supposed to do. Well...

00:29:20 **AR: That's amazing. If you can get rid of one person's vitriol, then it's worth it in my book.**

SE: It's really hard but that's—I spend a lot of time in class—I spend a lot of time doing that. Now, it's shifted a little bit. But 'othering' is really a big thing, I did my dissertation on it in nursing homes, among younger people that live in nursing

home care and how they are discriminated against. Now, my research is moving into the Trans community and aging. A large number of transgender persons are now coming into care and they have very limited social contacts. That's generalization but some people do. What happens is that some people that are transgender that have been transgender but never fully transitioned. They end up going back into the closet in nursing home because people aren't trained. They don't know how to do them. They're dead named. It's like... really? At this stage of their life and so there's a real need for understanding and staff training. To not 'other' people. Again it's hate, fear, with a little bit of religion added in there and it's just...not good.

00:30:58 **AR: Alright, that's all the questions I have for you. Is there anything else that you would like to share with me?**

SE: I'm just wondering what are your plans for this project? I think it's a great project but what are your plans for it?

00:31:10 **AR: Right now we are planning to do an in-person exhibit on the day of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary here in the Archives. Then, we're going to transition the video into audio files as well as transcript them and upload them into a permanent memorial page on our Archive's digital website.**

00:31:42 SE: Oh it's so important. It's just so important to do this I think. The further you get away from these events the less vivid they become. Although for me it's remained very vivid.

00:32:03 **AR: The same for me. I've heard it said that this is our generation's Kennedy moment. For me, I was in the military as well during 9-11. I was in basics of basic training.**

SE: Where.

00:32:25 **AR: Fort Leonardwood, Missouri. We had the scare of a lifetime that day.**

00:32:29 SE: I imagine. Yes. Andrew said they were locked down. He couldn't do anything. A lot of things really changed. When we were in Italy, we were at a joint Air base. An AFI base. So Armed Force International—a NATO base. It was before they moved it from Napals to Turkey? To Istanbul. The security in the—every continent or big conglomerate had its own building. The Americans had their own building with the American flag out there, then there was the Union, and then England, and then there's Italy and all that. I could walk into the Italian building and get a coffee and nobody would ever...look, anything. With my dog, by the way, and I'll have to tell you a funny story in a second about that, but getting into the American...I couldn't. I had to wait in the parking lot. I couldn't get in. In the Carabinieri, the Italian police, they had the gate. They guarded the gate and one day I went to pick up Andrew. I took the dog—I took Riley with me

and I forgot my ID. Completely forgot my ID. The Carabinieri let me in. They just let me in but I had to sit in the office. Here I had this big dog in the office, I can barely speak Italian. I mean yes, no, give me a coffee, that was it. So they're arguing about Riley. What Riley is. Riley was a collie/Pyrenees mix. What is he, right? You can hear them going 'cane grande, cane grande.' Big dog. You could hear them and they go...cane grande canolio [spelling?] that means big dog in Italian. The main guy walked through, the Captain or whatever he was. He goes 'eh' and they go 'Canolio' and he goes 'no no canolio, Lassie'. I went 'no, metso [spelling?] Lassie.' He went 'metso Lassie'. Then he goes, 'Get out.' because I corrected him and he's like get out. The Italians were like you could just go where you wanted to go but not the Americans. It's been like that pretty much ever since. It's a little loose depending on what time of year it is and who's guarding the gate but it's a whole lot easier to get around there now than it was.

00:36:00 SE: Did you stay in or were you just there for a couple of tours?

00:36:10 **AR: I was actually medically discharged in January of 2002.**

SE: Ok, so you were in for a while. Were you in Afghanistan?

00:36:17 **AR: No, I was lucky and was able to stay state side.**

SE: Yes. I told Andrew at the end nowhere with a 'stan. I don't want you to go anywhere with a 'stan. He had a good final assignment in the UK. That was a good place to end.

00:36:43 **End of interview**