

Ontario Agricultural College,
University of Guelph
Alumni Oral History



Mary McEwen

B.Sc. (Agr.) 1967, M.Sc. 1981

Interviewed by Piper Boyd Bell

So where did you grow up?

I always say that I grew up in Listowel, which is a small town just northwest of Guelph. But I was born in Owen Sound, then my family moved to Belle River, near Windsor, then to Clinton and then to Listowel. I was in grade five when I started in Listowel; I consider that my hometown.

That's moving around a lot.

Well, this is post-war, so it wasn't unusual. It was, for my parents, the matter of getting a job. My father was a teacher. Then also to get closer to home, which was Owen Sound for them. Listowel met these needs. Belle River was a bit too far south; you couldn't really do it easily with a couple of kids in the car.

Where did you go to high school?

Listowel had a high school. It was probably about a quarter of the size of the school you went to. It's a lot bigger now, the whole town is bigger, and the roads are better. There are more and more people moving to small towns and then working in cities: Kitchener, Stratford, London, are all quite close to Listowel.

What made you choose to go to Guelph?

My parents really wanted me to go, my uncle had gone to Guelph. My ancestors were all farmers you know, a couple of generations back, but I didn't grow up on a farm. The clincher was that I didn't have to choose a major when I was in my first year. I wouldn't make my choice until the next year, but I could do all the science courses that anybody would have wanted. That was what I was expecting to do when I started to take sciences in high school and graduated with those credits. Grade 13, the old good old days.

Had anyone else in your family attended university before you?

Yes, two of my mother's sisters had gone to university, which is really quite remarkable, and she and the fourth one went to teachers' college. So, they all got post-secondary education. It was expected that I would too in one place or another. My mother really thought it would be better if I went to teachers' college, but my father encouraged me to go to the university and I'm delighted that I did.

Did you visit campus before you started?

Well, I'd been to Guelph before. It was on the way to Toronto from Listowel, you know, by the old roads. I visited the OAC, they showed me what the residences looked like and those sorts of things. And they guaranteed us first year residence. At that time, 4th year too if we wanted.

What year did you start and then graduate, do you remember?

Sure, very important dates. 60 years ago. 1963 I started university, and I finished in 1967, Canada's centennial year.

What was your major?

The good thing about Guelph was that I didn't have to decide right away. If I was going to Toronto, which was another option. I really considered pharmacy in Toronto. At Toronto, they had chosen whether you were going to do physics or engineering and all those things in first year.

Did you feel there were any stereotypes or pervasive ideas about the OAC then or now?

No, I don't think so. Of course, as I said, I was going to the OAC; it wasn't the university then it was only a college. In fact, I was expecting my degree to come from U of T because OAC graduates graduated from the University of Toronto at that time. So, I don't think I thought of that. I thought, OK, first year I can take a mixture of classes and so I took what everybody took. We all took english and history of agriculture but mostly physics, chemistry, botany, and zoology.

You said your father and mother expected you to pursue higher education, did you feel there was any adversity in pursuing a field in science as a woman?

I don't remember feeling that it was that unusual, but I knew it was. I think we had about 40 students in my Grade 13 class, which was our final year. We had to take Provincial exams and only three women were in the sciences group, taking physics and chemistry etcetera. So, there were just three of us, one didn't go on to university, one went into nursing and then there was me. Just goes to show you it was a rather rare thing. The Grade 13 science most of the other students got was botany or zoology. I don't remember that being an issue, but my memory is old, so I'm not sure!

Do you remember any of your professors distinctly?

I should have done some research for this. I remember we used to get some really good English professors. Of course, it was a small department because they were just teaching OAC and Macdonald Institute and OVC students in first year. It wasn't an arts college. I'm having a hard time trying to remember his name, one was very good, he was English. The other teachers were good too. I don't remember problems particularly or feeling that I was getting shortchanged. I knew I wasn't getting shortchanged because they were very well known. It was a small college not a 25,000-student place like today.

Did you feel there was a sense of community that came from such a small graduating class or just in general in the college?

Oh, definitely. Now that is one of the best things about Guelph. We all had class executives. I was in the class of '67 at the OAC and my group had 200 students and only seven women.

I think Guelph is primarily female now.

Is it? Oh, my heavens. Well, I certainly didn't have that situation. The OVC had 65 students in their year and maybe four would be women. Macdonald Institute was all women. But you know Mac Hall, the main women's residence, is where the Lang Business School is now, so somebody's sitting at a desk in my old bunk room. We did things together; it didn't matter how social you were or if you came from Toronto or Hamilton or places of "sophistication." At that time everybody was included in our social events, so we'd have a dance, a dinner, something like that would happen for our class. You know, it was different than the experience than I would have had if I'd gone somewhere else.

You lived in residence your first year what was that like?

We had fourth year students and first year students. In between the administration building (Johnston Hall) and Creelman Hall is Drew Hall, that was a residence for non-first year women in OAC and OVC. They had their own house, which was interesting, I never got to live there. The university started well (The University of Guelph was established in 1964, just after Mary McEwen started). We were told about it during our orientation at the beginning of first year and gradually those changes took place until the next year when the OAC became part of the University of Guelph. Everybody, everything shifted a bit after that. Of course, the population grew. We had arts and science students, some specialty activities, special courses and special degrees. You could tell it was a different place starting in 1964.

Do you remember feeling anything in specific about that change, positive or negative emotions?

It didn't affect me a whole lot because it didn't happen immediately, but it did happen. I was involved in women's athletics, so we did the orientation and preparation and organization of the intramural activities. We had to change the way it was organized because for years and years before that, it had been organized by the fourth years at Macdonald Institute, Mac Girls, and all the undergrad women OAC and OVC students; five teams. We held intramural competitions amongst ourselves and that did start to change too. We had more aggie and vet girls as well as the university students.

What was it like organizing all that?

Oh well we did it. It was just done. Everybody knew their role and how to do it. Intramurals ran well and included many students. Of course, there was a lot of work done by the staff securing the equipment and gear for intercollegiate teams. There was a lot to be done. There would be a couple of women in charge of activities, intramural and the teams. We had a hockey team, basketball, volleyball and others. We played against Western, McMaster, McGill, U of T, etc. even with our limited population of women. It's lovely to talk about hockey. My teammates and I may have had to play hockey in our figure skates, but we were lucky, we could skate. I don't think anybody went out and intentionally bought hockey skates. They just wore what they had. That's so funny to me now. I cannot believe we did it that way, but that's what happened.

Was there more funding allocated towards men's teams or was it all a bring your own equipment kind of situation?

I don't know. There was certainly more attention toward the men's teams. But it was a different atmosphere than it is now. We did a lot of the work ourselves as volunteers. As you can imagine people managed and would help the coaches. There were always staff

people who were paid for, but students would make sure there were uniforms and all those sorts of things. I don't know if we lost anything. It didn't change that much while I was still a student, we certainly didn't have any attention. I'll tell you; we've had more attention now 56 years after we won the championship than we ever had in 1967!

So was sport and intramurals in that sense an important part of community building for women at that time.

Sure, I would think it was. Most of the women on campus were students at Macdonald Hall and Macdonald Institute, so they were taking home economics. Very bright group of women, by the way. They had to have great grade thirteen marks to get in. They were all together when they went to class and would go around the campus together, moving from science classes in OAC, e.g. chemistry, back to the Mac Institute. Groups of women in a row walking around the campus from place to place. I was with the Aggies, The Bursar Buzzards, we called ourselves, the Aggie and Vet girls that is. We were just a few. We were probably closer than most. Our seniors would live in Bursar Hall (now Drew Hall), and they were always around us. But again, altogether they wouldn't have been more than what? Not even fifty women that weren't taking home economics on the campus. So, we knew each other pretty well. And there were quite a few athletes in the group.

Do you have any lasting friends from that group?

Well, I stay in touch with many of them. Lasting friends? I would consider them all to be friends, I think. The ones that I knew best played hockey, some of us have been in touch recently. I don't really see them all the time, except at reunions. My class still has class reunions, more than every five years. 56 years later we still have reunions. We have a new one coming up next year. It's just the 57th anniversary, but there'll be a good crowd, 60-70 people.

I think my class is perhaps a bit more ambitious in that line but I'm not sure. Somebody takes on the role of organizing a reunion but it's not always that simple. You know you have to commit to it for a few months in advance and etcetera, etcetera.

Where did you live after your first year, were you on campus still?

No, second, the third-year students at that time were not on campus. We weren't offered a place on campus, so I lived in the basement of a house in Guelph that was walking distance to the campus. One of my roommates had a car, that helped, but we mostly walked. I do keep in touch with two of them, I had three roommates and I have seen the third one since we graduated. I met them through intramural athletics. They were a couple of years ahead of me. You had to go around behind the garage and down the stairs into the basement, it was fine. We weren't uncomfortable. We made our own meals. I had a frying pan; everybody used my frying pan. It wasn't very

sophisticated, but if we wanted, we could have easily bought a card to have all our meals at the campus. I didn't spend a lot of time there because when I was in athletics, I was always at the Phys Ed. Building and would get my dinner there. It was a good time. We got along well.

Do you feel that the generations before us or even older students have a big influence on our university experience?

I'm just thinking about my children and now my grandson. At university, their experience seems to be somewhat the same as mine in terms of meeting people and residence, staying with friends. I don't remember thinking about that when I was in school or asking for assistance, but I must have just casually. There must have been some exchange and I wish I understood it better. In fourth year, I lived in residence again because I didn't have to pay for my room and board. I think that's how it went - we were called proctors. Oh, you want to get into something? It's the rules we had as women in first year university. We had to get permission to stay out after 10:00 o'clock or 11:00 o'clock. You know you could only do it 4 times a semester. You had to have a key and then you had to sign in, it was complicated. They didn't allow men in our residence. It changed quickly after I left into what you see now.

Did men have the same sort of rules with budgeted night sound and stuff like that?

I don't remember. I don't think so. I think they could stay out as late as they wanted. I don't know what they were protecting us from, well, I guess I could guess, it had just been like that for years, decades. A lot of change did happen in my first few years on the campus: the breadth of programs as well as rules around residences. When I was in fourth year I lived in residence, and I had a certain number of students who were first year students that lived near me. We had three proctors in Watson Hall, three 4th year students. We didn't have mixed residences then and by that time there would be a couple of times per semester when guys could come in on a Sunday afternoon. The rule was: Door open and feet on the floor! Changes happened shortly after that. In terms of instilling that common sense of knowledge I should elaborate. Mac Hall is a big residence and it had really wide halls, it probably still has quite resounding halls and rooms. It held a lot of women. In Mac we had one phone on each floor, so we had to take turns taking a phone shift. When the phone was ringing – we had to answer the phone which was at the east end of the hall and then go and get whoever the call was for. If you can imagine there I am sitting after my 2-hour lesson and somebody calls, male, female, it could be a parent, or a grandparent and I would go and get that student and tell her she had a phone call and she would come and take her call. Because of course, it was before cell phones, so that's how it was handled. One phone on each floor. In fact, on the first floor, I'm not even sure if they had one. Partly it was a nurse's office and a flat for the woman who were in charge of the residence and those sorts of things.

What was the social life like?

Probably a lot like it is today, but we were a little bit more constrained. At least that was the idea. I would love to be able to say “oh we all went out and watched fireworks every night because we were so happy” but it wasn't like that. You know, it was a residence. We walked around and we chatted with everybody. We probably got to know people a little better than you might these days. But my kids got to know a lot of people when they were in residence, that was special, and my grandson seems to be doing the same thing. So maybe it's just lucky that Queen's happens to have the same kind of camaraderie as Guelph. The reason that I liked the idea of the kids going to Queen's or to Guelph was that my husband and I thought the number of people who stay on campus on the weekends was higher. That was an important part of our lives as students, that everybody stayed on campus. We were social, we were able to have those connections because there were lots of us around.

You were involved in a lot of extracurriculars, what was that schedule like?

I don't know. I probably didn't focus enough on the schoolwork. I didn't do a lot of the actual work with the teams. I was President one year and on the executive board, but you know there were staff people. It wasn't as if we had to do everything, but we did a lot more than most universities because we were a lot smaller group and we had less faculty. I swam on the intercollegiate team for a year. It was another good way to meet people, obviously.

What drew you to athletics?

I was big into sports growing up and enjoyed it a lot. You know I still would love to be able to do that, I'm a little past playing basketball or volleyball but I find other things to do. It was easy for us to get on teams at Guelph, when you think about it, everybody could. Well, not everybody, but you didn't have to be a super athlete. If you were in Toronto, you can imagine there must have been 100 times as many women on campus each competing for a place on a team. So, it was easier for us to get on the teams, and it was fun.

You mentioned athletics, does that still play a role in your life?

I like to go cycling, skiing and golfing. The things that I could have done I did at university. I don't play hockey anymore. I haven't played hockey since Guelph but some of my teammates did. Until recently they played on women's recreational teams.

Do you have any other memories that stick out?

Being on the swim team in first year meant that I was in Toronto on the day that Kennedy was killed. I was in a swimming pool practicing at U of T and then somebody told us that he'd been shot. An hour or two later we drove back to the hotel and there's a great big picture of Kennedy with a black drape over it. That was the Royal York Hotel, we walked up the stairs and there was a big picture at the top. That's some memory that I won't forget. That was a significant happening at that time and everybody can remember it. I certainly can, obviously. A lot of other memories were just getting to know a lot of people and helping at College Royal, competing in a way that I'd never done anywhere else. Why would I, a town girl, not a country girl, be interested in showing a cow or something? Those experiences were fun. I didn't know how to do these things, but we learned.

You don't have to answer this if you don't feel comfortable, but were there any particularly tough times during university, and if so, strategies you used to cope?

My sieve for remembering things obviously tries to get rid of anything that was uncomfortable, and I've had lots of years to practice that. I didn't really have a lot of disappointments. Oh, you know, looking for a job sometimes they wouldn't even interview me. I was the only woman in my class in economics and business. But that was that.

That must have been particularly challenging.

Oh yes it was. It was the beginning. I was the first, or maybe the second woman to graduate in economics from the OAC. That was new for the people doing the interviews as well. They just hadn't changed their rules. They did soon after that. I was offered the same amount of money as the men were to work for either the federal government or the provincial government. The one thing though, I will say is that I didn't get offered equal amounts from people compared to my male classmates for some of the businesses. It could be \$65,00 a year for one of them and \$45,00 for me. So, it has changed, it's gotten better, you have more opportunities. I just did what I was doing. I don't think it was special. I didn't really do anything particularly special, it just happened. I stopped working fully you know; I wasn't really challenging the status quo. Although a lot of the volunteer stuff I've done since then has certainly changed that status quo.

Where did you start off and end up in your career?

Well, I worked in the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture for a couple of years and then we moved away. I had a couple of kids and fortunately we could afford not to have me working. There were all sorts of things happening around us. I came back to Guelph from Georgetown to study and did my master's. I got my master's because I felt out of touch with what was happening in the field. I did have opportunities after that. I mostly ran my own business and worked on contracts with others, which gave me a certain amount of flexibility. I worked in a firm for a while, but I found it was very consuming. I had the option to be on my own and it was a healthier thing to do for me.

Do you feel that Guelph plays a part in your life today?

Well, certainly know a lot of people outside of university now, but I still help with things like annual reunions and things like that. So that gives me exposure to people outside of the university. But if I'd gone to U of T and moved to Guelph, I'd be able to get the same things at the university. So, I think it's open in many ways to a lot of people and includes me, but it doesn't exclude others.

Would you have any advice for women who are starting out in university, particularly in the sciences, based on your experience?

Well, I copped out, I went into economics and I'm glad I did that. You know, it wasn't a mistake, but I would only be able to look really at the experience of my daughters because they both have science degrees. They both stayed in science because I encouraged them to. That's not the only reason I'm sure, but they went on in science. It's not as easy. It's not as much fun if you're a woman in science. It's just the tradition that's still there, I think. Although we are getting lots and lots of women winning the prizes these days and getting recognition and that's encouraging, really encouraging.

I know you talked about how you didn't feel that you faced many challenges but when you also talk about how many men were in a class proportionate to the number of women was that a challenge in and of itself.

I mean, I understand what you're getting at, and I know if I was somebody else, I would say that was a challenge by itself. But I had really nice classmates. You know, they're still my friends, nice, isn't it? That's a rather general term, but I had fine classmates. They were never difficult with me at all. I think that was maybe partly because it was OAC and there was this real sense of community within our class. It was unusual to be in some of these classes in those days. I don't know what it would have been like to be

at U of T for example, or even Western or McMaster. They were just so much bigger. I don't think I can speak for women who weren't in the same situation, but I was lucky, and my female classmates were lucky because we had good opportunities. We were very much singled out obviously, but we didn't feel that way. We were just part of the gang or the guys or whatever the expression is. That's my memory, and that's a good thing to me. I don't remember ever feeling hard done by. I enjoyed my classmates, they're my friends. I know I didn't spend a lot of time thinking about the fact that I was the only girl in the class. I'm sure you could ask many of my classmates, maybe they'd do better at remembering what it was like. It must have been different for them to have a class of all guys and one girl. You know, it's interesting in that article that was done for the OAC Alumni magazine I was asked how we handled that sort of thing, those situations where we were minorities. We both basically said we were aware there was an issue because you couldn't help but be aware that it could have been an issue and it probably did make a difference in some ways, but we just ignored it.

That kind of perseverance is admirable.

Well, I don't remember having felt that. This was potentially difficult: it's relevant, it's very relevant and it's unique to me, except for the other women in our class.

Anything we haven't touched on that you feel you'd like to add?

I think I'm lucky I ended up here at Guelph instead of taking pharmacy. U of T would have been a completely different experience, it's hard to even describe why. You know there wouldn't have been as many opportunities for me to be on sports teams playing the games that I liked or meeting a variety of people. So that has affected my life and opportunities, I think.

We're supposed to ask if you have any photos of your years at Guelph that you'd be willing to share?

OK. Yes, there are lots of pictures available. We actually had yearbooks for the whole college, everybody that was at the University of Guelph that first year is in a book. The activities, teams, clubs, all those things are in a yearbook just like high school. I've got mine and my husband's over here.

Well, thank you so much for doing this interview and it was really nice to hear all about your experience.

Good luck with your studies!