

Interview with Marian Wilson

Interviewed by Ann Pflaum, Associate Dean University College,
University of Minnesota

Interviewed on February 23, 2000

Marian Wilson - MW
Ann Pflaum - AP

AP: . . . Marian Wilson, and she is the spouse of O. Meredith Wilson, and you came in 1960?

MW: Right, July 1960.

AP: Let me ask you . . . One of the stories we use is your husband deciding on whether or not to come to Minnesota. That must have been kind of a difficult decision because you had a lot of children, and I assume you liked Oregon. Moving at the ages your children were must have been difficult.

MW: It was a wonderful challenge. That was the way he looked at it and really the way we all looked at it. Up to that point we had done a good deal of moving. We had spent eight years in Oregon, so they had wonderful friends here. But by the time we got to Minnesota, our older two were in college and our third, Mary Ann, was spending a year in Norway as an exchange student. So we actually moved in with three children—a fourth grader, a sixth grader, and a tenth grader. But they were lively, and I think that they, while they hated to leave Eugene [Oregon], they were really excited at the prospect. They knew about the University of Minnesota, and I think it was no big problem. They went to school on the campus—"U" High and University Elementary School, and they rather quickly had friends and were very happy there.

AP: One of the things I wanted to ask you about was the two Rose Bowls. I know that you went to both of them. Am I correct that perhaps the delegation took the train the first year and maybe flew the second year?

MW: We flew both times.

AP: You flew both times. Okay. That must have been very hard to lose the first time.

MW: Oh, it was! Yes, it was. The *Los Angeles Times* was so snide about the things they wrote about the team before—certainly not after, but before. It was a hard place to break into it. But you know we had been at the Rose Bowl the year before. It was a family joke that we spent Christmases in Pasadena because the University of Oregon had gone to the Rose Bowl the year before. They knew the little house around the Huntington Hotel where we would stay. It was a very happy adventure. We still have the program from those games, and it was really very interesting. When we got to Minnesota, I remember football was just . . . the team had not been

doing well, and as we arrived, I remember one of the first interviews there were so many questions about, "Are you going to fire the coach?" and "This team has not been doing well." Met [O. Meredith] said he really thought that it was hard to understand how a new university president would be quizzed about football first thing rather than about the university. Then he was told by an old friend, Ad Hoebel, who was head of the faculty athletic committee that really his problem was going to be with too much success with football instead of too little. It turned out to be true, that it wasn't a problem really. It was great fun. The games were wonderful.

AP: You mentioned a name that I didn't catch.

MW: Ad Hoebel. He was head of anthropology, a wonderful anthropologist, a wonderful man.

AP: What was his first name?

MW: E. Adamson—he was called Ad.

AP: Thank you. So his advice was, your problem is going to be too much success?

MW: Yes. It didn't turn out to be a problem, but it turned out to be a very successful few years of football.

AP: So his advice to the president was . . . tell me that again. He said something like, "The problem is not the team doing badly; the team will do well"?

MW: Yes. That it might be a problem, but it wasn't.

AP: So he sort of re-oriented you towards a different kind of problem, from the problem of failure to the problem of success. And what I hear you saying is, even the success was not a serious problem.

MW: That's right. The coaches there, the athletic department were wonderful while we were there.

AP: One of the stories that we're making a feature in the book is the recruiting of African-American athletes, and Sandy Stepens and Judge Dixon—how they were recruited from Pennsylvania to come to Minnesota, and they weathered the difficult years and had the triumph of winning the Rose Bowl.

MW: Right.

AP: Do you have any comments or memories . . . One of the other big challenges was the challenge of moving to the West Bank and the building at that location. I wouldn't necessarily expect that you would have been intimately involved with that, but if you had any comments about it, I'd be delighted to write them down.

MW: I really had memories of it, but it was a problem to be solved, and I think that Met [O. Meredith] was, obviously he was very much in favor. The campus had to be expanded, and that was the way to do the very best job possible. I know people were worried about students having to cross the river to get to classes on the other side, and he insisted on there being an enclosed upper level where they could go without being in the wind, and make it as easy as possible to do. It seemed a logical choice to develop the West Bank.

AP: Do you have any comments—again, I'm not expecting you to, necessarily, but I wanted to give you the opportunity if you wish to—on the curricular changes. Among them for example, was the movement of physics from the arts college to the Institute of Technology; that was a major development.

MW: Yes, it was. I really had nothing to do with those decisions. I was always extremely interested but had nothing to do with it. I just remember there was some unhappiness, but I think that worked all right.

AP: Tell me about the . . . Our impression is that once the president moved to Eastcliff, there was a heightened awareness of the president's family and the president's spouse. I think it was more of a platform for entertaining than the Pillsbury House had been, and it seems as if at the time each president came there was a big story about the family—that the president and his family became kind of the state's second family after the governor. People would know what you were doing and how many children you had, and so forth. Does that square a bit with the impression you had actually living this life, that you were a semi-public figure?

MW: Oh, I think so. It didn't effect our family life much. There was interest when we first got there. There apparently had been some publicity and some pictures from Oregon before we arrived in Minnesota, and one showed me taking some bread out of the oven, and made a point that I baked bread for my family. I know practically as soon as we got there, we got from three different companies a great big sack of flour as a gift, which was very cute. [laughter] We hadn't been in the Pillsbury House for more than two weeks, I'd say, when young John Cowles called to see if we could have a lunch there for Tyrone Guthrie and Lady Guthrie—Lady Judith, because they were trying so hard to get the Guthrie Theater there. I'm very interested in theater, always have been, and they wanted to invite some potential donors and some people who were particularly interested in theater and getting it established in Minnesota rather than in Detroit or some other places who were working hard. I bring this up because you said there was a sudden change when we got to Eastcliff. The Pillsbury House was a wonderful old house, too—very historic and a very interesting old house, and we did some interesting entertaining there. This Guthrie Theater project was well-discussed in that house in small and large groups. But then, of course, moving into Eastcliff, which I think is about the most beautiful home that I know, in its setting on the river and the wonderful warmth of the house as both a family home and an official residence are things that were very, very gratifying.

AP: To go back to the Pillsbury House, I had not realized then that when you first came you were in the Pillsbury House, and then moved into Eastcliff?

MW: Right. We were in the Pillsbury House from July until the next spring. Markel Brooks was building her home, and they kept having delays and finishing it, but it was fun to start our life there really almost on the campus.

AP: Can you go back to . . . I like the idea of Sir Tyrone and Lady Judith. Can you remember, were there twenty people there or four . . . ?

MW: There were twenty-five or so.

AP: Did John Cowles give a speech? Did you give a speech?

MW: Yes, I think that John spoke. From the beginning, Frank Whiting had the theater department from the university—very much involved—and they wanted that connection with the university.

AP: What was Guthrie's motivation? He had been a director in Stratford previously, is that correct? Was he moving to Minnesota, or was he coming directly from Dublin, do you remember? I wonder what was in his head.

MW: He always considered Dublin his home, but I couldn't ever read his mind, but he had a dream of a repertory theater of his own, where he would be involved. During the years we were there, he was always quite closely involved.

AP: And the university was quite closely connected.

MW: Yes, they were.

AP: There were Guthrie Fellows, I believe. It's interesting because right now, we are returning to that type of relationship.

MW: I'm glad.

AP: It's kind of a nice circle.

MW: I should say!

AP: Another thing I wanted to ask you about, as we have looked into the period we are seeing that social activism that began to mount—say the civil rights movement—in the middle '60s, that other campuses such as Berkeley or Columbia had a lot more disturbance than Minnesota. One of the questions that we are all trying to figure out is, What could have explained some of those differences? Do you have any thoughts on that subject?

MW: The early '60s were tranquil and I'd say idyllic. Our whole time in Minnesota was very, very pleasant. Of course, I'm not objective, but I think that Met had tried to deal with it, and I also think that the state of Minnesota is so proud of its university, and the in-state students who grew up there I think were mostly very pleased to be at their university, which was a fine one.

Met believed so strongly in the right to free speech and expressing ideas, and supported people with very controversial points of view, supported their rights to speak. We had a few unpleasant experiences during those years when someone burned a cross on the front lawn once, and when a Russian exhibit was on at the Union building, they had a Russian flag out and an American flag, and there was some burning of the flags. There was a fire in the R.O.T.C. building once, but there was never just a ground swell, terrible unrest.

I don't know all the reasons, but really I think that culture and some of Met's ideas and the faculty certainly . . . things were about as—there's never a normal at a university—but I think the main purpose of the university was still being honored and people were going to class, and professors were teaching. I know that when Met decided to leave to go to Palo Alto, a lot of his friends in education called him "The Prophet." They kidded him and said he certainly knew exactly when to leave before things got at the height of disorder.

AP: Certainly his timing would have been true. You have known a number of universities, and one of the things we are trying to catch in this history is some sense of the particular culture of Minnesota as it might have differed from Oregon, for example. Do you have any insights . . . It's always one of the hardest questions you ask anybody is how you capture a particular institution and its personality. If you were describing to a friend from Oregon, "We were at Minnesota, and compared to Oregon, Minnesota is . . ." Is it bigger, is it more liberal, is it more conservative?

MW: Of course it was much larger and much better known. Both Oregon and Minnesota have extremely interesting political activities and beliefs. They are both politically fascinating—their history of the people they've elected to the senate, as governor. They are rather similar in their way that they have approached it. There has been a great deal of freedom, and the people in both states I think are involved and interested in the politics. They are both rather liberal. One thing about the University of Minnesota that was different from Oregon, in Oregon they have the University of Oregon, Oregon State, Portland State—three quite large and more equal universities than the University of Minnesota main campus. They have these wonderful other University of Minnesotas other places, but somewhat smaller. We were struck by people's regard for the University [of Minnesota]. I don't know a place where people are prouder of their university or more united in their support of it.

AP: Do you have any sense as to why that would be?

MW: I think they are hard working people, and they believe in education and they established the university fairly early on, and they were just sort of united behind it.

AP: You must have visited the other campuses.

MW: We visited a lot. I just loved going. They were wonderful.

AP: I think that one of the accomplishments that your husband is well known for in the administration is the founding of the Morris Campus. That was, of course, a little bit of a change because it had been the agricultural school, so it must have been a great challenge to have built such a fine place out there.

MW: Yes, it was. There were some remarkable people who supported it so completely.

AP: Were there any world leaders or national figures that wandered into the life of the university those years, perhaps as lecturers or visitors that you would want to comment on or recall particularly?

MW: I guess that the person I remembered—oh, there was just a parade of them, of course—Robert Frost was there, and he just filled Northrop to almost the rafters. I remember that the safety people on campus said, "We're going to have to have a lot of these people get out of here because there are people in the aisles and it's a fire hazard." Met was just so eager that the students would have the chance to be close to Robert Frost and hear him and the interest was palpable, so they kind of worked out a compromise, figured it was an hour and a half, and they let the students stay just packed right in that day.

AP: Do you remember approximately what year it was?

MW: That would have been about '65, I think. One of the treasures we have is the book of his poetry from which he read, with his bookmarks in.

AP: Oh, wonderful. As you recall the event and looking at these students, it must have been for a lot of people there the only time they ever saw a poet in their lives. Did one particular poem as you recall, just bring down the house?

MW: I'm sure I could think of several if I . . . He did "The Fences," and he did "Death of the Hired Man," and hearing him read those was so impressive and so poignant. He was old at the time, but a very strong voice and an extremely strong presence.

AP: Did he stay at Eastcliff or did he stay in a hotel? Did he spend time in any classes, do you think?

MW: I'm sure that he did. When we were in Oregon he came, too, and he stayed with us that time, but when he was in Minnesota he stayed at a hotel.

AP: Of course the students would have seen him in the presidential inauguration in 1960. Remember when it was snowing and he couldn't quite read the poem at that point?

MW: That I do indeed.

AP: What's an interesting story . . . Earlier T. S. Eliot came, in the Morrill administration, and it was so crowded they had to move it to the field house. They say it's one of the largest audiences that ever listened to poetry in the country. That leads me to the Metropolitan Opera, which of course you would have been as the university president, along with the orchestra board presidents, would have been the kind of hosts for those weeks.

MW: Those were absolutely memorable. I didn't miss an opera in all the years we were there. I went to all eight. Met missed the matinee on Saturday. He said he couldn't quite go to two in a day, but I did and loved every minute of it. What an opportunity! We were the last campus to have the Metropolitan visit regularly with their touring group. The days of Rudolf Bing, I remember he said that these stars were just people with lots of ego and lots of problems and diseased throats. [laughter] He didn't really do much indulging with their whims.

AP: And then, of course, there was the Minnesota Orchestra.

MW: That was marvelous to have that at Northrop. We just loved that.

AP: Did you go periodically or . . .

MW: Oh, we went regularly. We always went to the symphony. It was wonderful, and we loved that connection with the community and the university having people come on campus for that. I'm sure that the time came when they had to have the beautiful Orchestra Hall that they have now downtown, but we felt very lucky to have had that on the campus during the years we were there.

AP: Another question that I would ask is that one of the issues that really surfaced in the, I would say probably in the Moos administration, but maybe towards the end, was the women's movement and the role of women faculty and the role of women staff at the university. Do you have any thoughts on that subject?

MW: The women's studies group was going while we were there. Those were faculty and administrative decisions that I wasn't involved in, but I was very interested in. The years we were there were really years when it wasn't the majority of women who had professions and who worked outside the home. There were lots of them by then, but certainly not the majority. And I know that it was something that was a problem that Met was eager to help solve, to have more equalized salaries for women scholars, women professors. I remember him recording some of the interviews that he had with very angry women, which made him . . . certainly raised his antenna. But I really don't know how to give a good comment on that.

AP: At this point of the interview I usually ask people, is there anything that I have not asked you that you would like to comment on?

MW: I have a special spot in my heart for Northrop. I've already indicated the symphony and the opera coming there, and the convocations there, and the wonderful guest speakers. We saw [Rudolf] Nureyev there, and they had some marvelous dancers through the years come. I always thought it was so beautiful in its setting and such a beautiful building. It's the building that I'll never forget. It is interesting that at the time, too, the art museum of course was there on the third floor. During intermissions of these productions that was always full of viewers. So there have been lots of changes. I loved the theater on the campus in Minnesota, the University Theater and the Showboat, and the wonderful music. I just have really nothing but good memories about the University of Minnesota. It was an exciting place of learning and a wonderful place to be.

AP: Well, thank you. That's a nice finish.

[End of interview]