

# An Interview with Dorothy Ramsland

July 29, 1996

Interviewer: Kathryn Anderson

Western Washington University  
Centennial Oral History Project

Center for Pacific Northwest Studies Bellingham, WA 98225

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K: Interviewing Dorothy Ramsland [at her home] on July 29, 1996. Dorothy was a faculty member and chair of the department of Home Economics on Western's campus for many years.

[break in tape]

K: You were talking about how they had gotten in touch with some of the former students this summer, and I was wondering if you could reflect on what it was like for you working with the groups of students over the years here at Western.

D: I think Home Economics was special in some ways. Being a very human-oriented department, we had very close contacts with our students. We knew them by name. We knew what their majors were within the department. We also had a strong counseling system where we worked very closely with them. In fact, when I think about the time that our faculty put in counseling students, it was considerable. We developed our own system for getting, for example, students into our home economics classes because the majors needed these classes. This was done before you had computers. Every member of the faculty took responsibility for students, and this attention paid off, I think, in many ways because we really knew the students. This summer in seeing a graduate from these years- '56, '62, '69, '72, and they told me how much it meant to them to know faculty so well. We're still getting, even after ten years of retirement, people writing us to ask us for references. I think that's a bit unusual for faculty, but it means that they knew that we knew them well enough to write a recommendation. I think the students changed a little bit, the seventies, ('71, '72) that time was a bit hectic. Perhaps we thought we had more conservative students in home economics, this was not true. We had the whole range. Some of our majors went to Fairhaven, and then came for a major in the department. They represented varied socio-economic backgrounds, like my '62 graduate [who] came to Western for art and didn't like the art department. She had a background of having been in 4-H, and so therefore, home economics was a very natural choice. She was so happy because she still did her art as an integral part of home economics. I always felt that in home economics a general major was like general education, because it was a great variety of concepts about home and family. One woman has recently gone into home economics teaching, and had to go to Central to finish her teaching certificate. At Central they were just amazed at the background that she had in home economics, such a broad background. I think our majors have enabled our students to do a variety of vocations. We certainly didn't think that we were preparing them to do some of the jobs that they've done. We have a graduate who's in New York City, who's a financial advisor into stocks and the marketplace. Our graduates did have something in consumer economics, and they had something in financial home management.

We have one who had a minor in English, who has developed her own publication in Seattle called the "Butterfly Press," it's gardening and butterflies! Well, they have done so many things, our graduates have been very successful. I don't think it was just home economics I think it was the education they had at Western. We were a very small department, the maximum number of faculty we ever had I think would have been eleven, and then about five of them would have been part time. So six or seven [full time faculty] was the largest number that we ever had. I think being mainly women, although we did have some male faculty in the later years, in the seventies and eighties, there was a great commitment not only to our profession and our department, but also to the students. That's one of the reasons why I'm really sad to see home economics go off the campus, because it gave a particular kind of student who was interested in that aspect [of home and family], a place to go for a major. Thinking about students, they did change over the years. We had some [with] problems, we knew that, as other departments also had. A problem student that we had during her undergraduate days came to our reunion last year; she is now a very successful preschool teacher, and homemaker.

K: What other thoughts, about a huge range of several decades of students. How would you ...

D: From '49 to '86--that was 37 years, and so that's really almost four decades. The students changed. They were in the beginning, I think, from more small towns and rural areas. I remember taking a field trip to Seattle. I had these two girls who lived on Orcas Island who waited for me at the end of the trip. They said, "Can we go with you? We've never been in Seattle before." And to me, this was just amazing. But as our students changed, we had more from urban areas. I think more from Seattle, more from Bellevue, Olympia, Tacoma, so that they weren't just from small towns and rural backgrounds. They became more sophisticated. I ended my career teaching for the last five years in the interior design program, where we had some very sophisticated students.

K: In what way?

D: I think in where they had been in the world. The kinds of things that they had done, the experiences they brought, what they had seen, like they'd visited museums, they'd seen art, they'd traveled. They had been in a lot of different kinds of homes that would help them in terms of their interior design. The problem solving, was at a very highly sophisticated level. I saw change over the years.

K: How about their goals?

D: Most of them were goal oriented. They knew what they wanted to do. The ones who knew the most that they wanted to do were the ones that wanted to go into teaching. And at one time teaching was THE program in home economics. I think under President Jarrett when we changed as an institution to more humanities, more of our students went into other majors. A general major was developed, which gave them an option. They weren't quite so definitive in their goal, but they knew that they had a good background, and like any liberal arts major, they could go different ways, and obviously they have gone into different vocations.

K: Did you, do you get a sense that their goals as women changed over those decades?

D: I think that's an interesting question, I'm not so sure about that. I think

that probably they were in home economics because home and family, the values of the family, were important. Some were single parents, I don't think that their goals as women were so much spoken of among the home economics majors. Maybe in the later years, as faculty faced some of those problems, and thought about those kinds of things too, we changed our definition of what a family is from mother father and children, to a more flexible model. We had many majors who also went into things like nutrition and nutrition counseling, working with the Dairy Council, and working in federal programs relating to nutrition. We had a good program for practically any student who wanted to do it, of going out and getting work experience. Our interior designers, and our nutrition education people went out for real work experience. But I think anybody really had that chance, if they wanted to do that. Perhaps there was an awareness of more options open to women.

K: Did you keep any records on the numbers of your graduates who ended up working outside the home, and for how much of their lives?

D: We don't have good records on that, I wish we did. We did keep a lot of records on students for a long time (I don't know what has happened to them). Last year when we had our first really home economics reunion on the campus (80 people come back for the luncheon), we realized our records were incomplete. We had many students, when I count it up, how many students I've had, they're in the thousands. We sent out a questionnaire for the reunion, and we got information back about them. The Alumni Office assisted us. We asked what they'd been doing in their jobs, that's why I really know more about them now than I did. I wanted a questionnaire to be done so that we could put the information in the archives. If somebody wants to study home economics sometime and what it was at WWU, the information is available. Home economics started almost in the very beginning of this school. It encompassed a hundred years, I think. But it has dramatically changed. I would say home economics is not the title now. The professional organization has changed the name to Family and Consumer Studies. So that you're not a home economist now, as Lynn Dee pointed out to me the other day when she saw me, but you are now a family and consumer scientist. People made changes across the country and we tried, we tried to change our name to Human Ecology. It was voted down in the council that handled those kinds of decisions. We never could understand why because we had an interdisciplinary committee that studied the name change. Faculty from economics, English, education, and chemistry were on that committee with me. The faculty were in favor of it. We got up to the presentation and it was just scuttled by a senior professor who said, "You cannot change the name, nobody will know what you're talking about, you can't change the name." Well, it has been, the name had been changed across the country. I have my doctorate from Michigan State, I'm from the college of Human Ecology. So home economics I think, like the students, probably changed over that time. We had more men in varying programs. At our reunion we had a young man who's been teaching in child development--in Texas; he's received awards for his program. He came out of our program in home economics. We had male students in interior design, and there were some men in nutrition programs. We had one man, I think, who graduated in teacher education, but that was quite rare to have a man teach in home economics. In the more contemporary sense of encompassing so much more for the individual and the family, however you defined family, home economics

broadened it's scope totally. I don't think there's anything that would make me madder, or most of our faculty, like waving a red flag in front of us to say that home economics was cooking and sewing. That just totally antagonized me, because I don't sew. I never have. I know a lot about food and cooking, but I learned cooking from my family at home. You had the scientific part from home economics. I think over the years that home economics became more toward humanities and socio-psychological, perhaps moving out of the scientific background. When I graduated, as an undergraduate, I had a major in chemistry. So you see from the 40's to the 80's, there was tremendous change in that profession. And I think few people would understand that.

K: I was going to ask you about a lot of what you've described as changes nationally and regionally and I was wondering how that related to change as implemented on this campus.

D: We were what I consider to be one of the more liberal progressive departments in the state. In contrast to Central and Eastern, I think Western, but that was the whole program.

K: Now, what would that mean--"more liberal"?

D: I would say that we would probably change our focus more, and go with national trends. We did a tremendous lot with summer school. They were all workshops that had to pay for themselves. We brought a lot of national people with revolutionary ideas in home economics programs. We used the community; we went to Seattle and Vancouver for field trips. We did a lot of that, in fact, some of our graduates will say that that's one of the things they remember the most--the opportunities that we gave them to go and see things that they would never have seen and make professional contacts. I think we were very, very much in touch with national issues. We were involved in the state organization and the national organization, I even went to some international congresses and so we knew what was going on. I think a lot of times, we were really ahead of things. I think that's why it's especially sad to see home economics go. I think we were changing and our numbers of students were increasing.

K: That's interesting that it would happen, but that it would be more liberal on the West side, than at Central or Eastern.

D: I think so. I think maybe even more, we had close contacts with the University of Washington professionally. The dean at the University of Washington and I started the first meetings of the deans and administrators of home economics in the state of Washington. And I served one year as president of Washington Home Economics Association. We had good professional contacts, and so we knew something about the programs going on in other places.

K: Now, you had a leadership role in this program, and in your earlier interview you made a comment that interested me a great deal about being a woman administrator in a campus with male dominance. I was wondering if you would care to elaborate on that comment.

D: Well, I've often thought about that. When you hear about harassment and some of the other issues today, I've thought back and questioned if I'd ever experienced that at Western. I think I received different treatment from different deans, depending on how much they were willing to understand about home economics programs. I often thought that the best deans I served under were from our own Western faculty because

they knew Western: Ralph Thompson from education, Fred Knapman from chemistry, Jerry Flora from biology, and Robert Monahan from geography. [Dean James Davis was helpful and supportive.] They knew something about our programs. The only other women administrators were physical education, home economics, and foreign languages. Eleanor King was chairman in foreign languages for many years. And I think we always felt we could speak up at any meetings, but I think probably that we didn't as much. Somehow we were well known on the campus. I was elected faculty-at-large to the faculty council one year. I think a lot of times maybe women administrators didn't speak up as much as we could have, because we were totally outnumbered, and because there were some very vocal men. I can't say that I felt that personally, I was never put down, not really. Which is quite something to say, I think, being so outnumbered. I felt for my department that oftentimes I had to go around kind of talking one-to-one to faculty in order to have people understand what we were doing. As a whole, I think that I had actually very good treatment. I had some failures, things I think I worked hard for but didn't achieve. Home economics moved from the basement to the top floor, we had some beautiful facilities, and, you know, that was a coup, that we got that. [The move was a successful one.)

K: How did that happen?

D: George Bartholick, the architect, told me that the best space to have is on the top floor. So I said, let's go look at it, and I said I'll take it. Nobody else seemed to see the possibilities, but that was one of our advantages. We could look around because of our training and see the possibilities in space. Even President Jarrett [was aware of what we could do in a positive way with space), (Don Ferris told me this one). We'd gotten a new space, a laboratory on the first floor in old Main and that was sort of the first we'd started going up and taking some additional space beyond the basement, and [President Jarrett) said, "Well, I must admit, when you give those home economics people a place, they really do something with it." It was attractive, and we used to have a Tiffany glass chandelier hanging at the entrance to the department. You'd walk down the basement hall in Old Main and you'd see that. You would know there was something different there. The first time that we ever tried to do anything different, was early on when I'd come on the faculty. We were going to wallpaper a hall. President Haggard came down to look it over and I had to explain to him and tell him what we were doing and why. He said, "Well, home economics is different," "that's okay, you can do that." It always amazed me that a president would have to come and check out the problem. President Haggard would sign the requisitions [the President was involved in the 50's). We were successful in 1965 when President Bunke tried to get rid of us. The whole faculty [not just home economics faculty) fought that issue. The President couldn't give me a good reason why they wanted to discontinue our department. Our enrollment was increasing, and we were an inexpensive department. We were not so successful in getting increases in salary. We did get some merit increases, all of us. I can't say that we didn't get any, we did. I had a sabbatical--once. I think I was the only one from the department that ever had a sabbatical. And there were those sorts of things where I felt we were not treated equally. As a faculty, we gave more emphasis to students and good teaching than we did to research, and that was to our disadvantage. We weren't given credit for a good counseling program, we weren't given credit for successful students. Another failure that I think,

which was part of this, was that I was never successful, and I don't think anybody ever was, any chairman following me was successful, in getting our part-time faculty either on the tenure track as part-time or in getting their salaries so we were paying them really what they were worth. Tried, on that, and tried through affirmative action but I was not successful. So there were some failures that perhaps were a little prejudice toward women, but not out in the open. I started as a chairman when one received five or ten dollars a quarter. Later it went up to fifty dollars. And that's-- you remember all those things, all the extra work that you did extra. I almost always taught "a full load and administrated, too. I think women administrators now are treated as equals [I hope).

K: The three women you mention, I'm not sure about foreign languages, but Ruth Weythman, of course, has had it all in physical education, and you two, and foreign languages ...

D: Foreign Languages had more men in it than women, even when Eleanor King Was a chair. They did have some women, but there were really more men. And she was very well thought of.

K: Maybe you could describe for me the culture of women faculty on Western's campus. What, what was that like?

D: When I came, I thought I came at a very good time, 1949. They hadn't had many new faculty for a while and they hadn't had any young ones. The faculty were mainly campus school and education, science and physical education. Since there were about a hundred faculty, we knew everybody and everybody knew us. I remember my first lunch that I went to at Edens Hall, women coming up and introducing themselves. The women were wonderful to me, supportive and they were such interesting women. My chair, Linda Countrymen, had lived at home, (she lived at home until she was 56!). Can you imagine? I can't imagine that. But she had traveled all over the world. And I remember Ruth Weythman telling about having been in Egypt, when women didn't go to Egypt. Ruth Platt, from Science, had gone to China in those early days when they pulled down the curtains on the trains as they were going through cities; foreigners were not to be seen. Well, there was a wonderful camaraderie among those women. There was such commitment because they had stayed by Western through those days of the depression when they hardly had gotten any salary. They banded together. In the early days, we used to have a women's faculty organization; I don't know why it stopped. Different women presented topics from their specialties. And I shall never forget a talk that Ruth Platt gave on the fruit fly and genetics. Marie Pabst gave a talk on geology, and Ruth Weythman talked about her doll collection from her travels all over the world. I bought a doll for her in Norway, I remember, on one of my first trips. The faculty women were so interesting, and well traveled, and many of them were scholarly women. I thought they were good role models for a young faculty member. Of course as we expanded, I think you knew the women who came, but you didn't really know them. In the eighties, I felt like there were so many faculty, both men and women that I didn't know ....

K: Do you have any idea why?

D: No, I don't know, except that we got bigger. And I think people were more concerned about themselves. It was more self-centeredness. There was greater pressure for research, greater pressure for publication, greater pressures on them as faculty members, I think that went for men as well as women. I did my doctorate while I was here, I finished in '67, so you see I'd been at Western for

seventeen years. I had taken quarters off and gone back to school. I'd been here five years when we had a low enrollment in Winter Quarter, so I was just delighted. I took the whole quarter off and went to Europe on my first trip. I remember that President Haggard didn't think that travel was such a good idea for me to do. When I came back, I was so enthusiastic, I told him all the wonderful experiences I'd had and what I'd been able to see, and what I was bringing back to my students. He said, "Well, maybe there is something to travel after all." But I think that when we came to 1965, and the president wanting to cut out the department, that there was very enthusiastic and vocal support among the women.

K: All across campus.

D: All across campus. It was vocal. That's why I said, when the department came to that position in 1993, there was not the support. Home economics was not as well known. The department had deteriorated in the number of tenured faculty

K: Your decision to go back and get your doctorate, what was behind that?

D: When President Jarrett came, I was more aware of the need for a doctorate. I returned to being the chairman when President Jarrett came in the fall. I walked into his office and I thought, hmm, hmm, I think a doctorate is necessary. I was at Michigan State studying and trying to decide, was I coming back, or was I going to stay and finish the doctorate. When I returned I began to feel the [change in the] tenor of the campus, I thought I might not want to stay at Western all the time. Michigan State had been giving their faculty in home economics five years to finish their degree or leave ... I felt the doctorate wasn't beyond me, and Michigan State was starting a new program. I liked the program because it had a lot of flexibility in it. Home Economics--home management was my major with with minors in sociology and art history. I could see the changes coming to this campus. Where we had been primarily education, and a little bit of arts and sciences, [the change was to] increase arts and sciences. So I decided if I wanted to move in the field or move out of Western, that I had better get the degree. It hadn't been required in home economics previously--a masters degree was [considered] a Terminal degree.

K: How did it affect your role here? You didn't leave Western, ...

D: No, but I went off on a lot of interviews. One Big Ten university sent a person to this campus to check me out before they invited me back. One of the things that I liked about WWU campus was the interdisciplinary aspect. I am the kind of a person who likes to know other people and not just my own faculty. I like to work with others and had a lot of good friends in many departments. I figured out that this could be a very

creative place, if you wanted to work at it. It turned out to be that for me. I'm very satisfied with my professional life at Western Washington University. And even though there were some bumps in the road for us in home economics, I still felt that it was a good place, that there were well qualified scholarly interesting people as colleagues. I liked this place to live. I liked the kind of students at WWU. I taught at Michigan State, and I liked our students better. Maybe different goals, maybe different degrees of sophistication, I don't know. I still have some Michigan State students who are in contact with me. So it isn't just that they never ever remember you again. I just totally liked ours better, working with them. Maybe it was the atmosphere that we created in our department, and on the campus. Our students, you could see them grow--and that was a wonderful thing, the best part about teaching.

K: Were there any personal costs in the decision to have such a demanding career?

D: Yes, I think for some of our faculty there were health costs. I think there was a tremendous amount of stress on us. If I can travel, I'm happy, so then I can come back refreshed. I can see in several of our former faculty, that there were some other personal problems involved like having parents that you had to live with, or care for and support financially. Bellingham was the kind of town where you could take care of some of those problems. I suppose another problem was that our salaries were not so high. And so consequently in retirement, I think starting in the 90s, that one feels a little more of that [financial] pressure. If we'd waited a few more years to retire, our finances might have been better in retirement. I came in 1949 for \$3600 a year. That was for nine months, but I only paid \$35 in rent. I had a wonderful place to live, with other faculty and staff. But I think it just depends on you and your personality. I've always believed that a faculty member in a community ought to give something to the community. So therefore I've contributed in many ways, I still do. Of course I found that made some interesting contacts in the community. Town and gown were one as far as I was concerned. So I like that.

K: Did this help the transition from being at Western to ...

D: Oh, it was easy to retire, easy to retire, and easy to retire here [444 South State Street]. Because I was of a generation from the 50's--early 50's--people are retiring now, or have. So there are people around that I know well.

[End of Side One]

[Side Two]

D: ... at Western Washington University. In my department, and working with colleagues from other departments was a very satisfying professional experience. And I don't think that I would have liked to have been anywhere else. I was at three institutions before I came here. None of them were as satisfying as Western but I stayed longer at Western. My friends, when I came to Western, gave me two years at the outset. They thought WWU was way in the boonies. For many years it was difficult for us to recruit faculty because they did think that way. Until the Seattle World's Fair, when people came out and saw this place, we didn't have any trouble recruiting at all after that. There were some times perhaps that were pretty rough, but that's sort of part of life, and you know, you go on from there, I really liked working with the students at Western, my

colleagues, and administrators. I never felt that I didn't get along with any of them, but some things I would have changed. Really, in total perspective, it was a good experience.

K: Well, that's a wonderful testimony to a career, and I want to thank you for continuing this conversation.

D: Well, it's been fun, it's always fun, to talk about one's academic life.  
[End of Side Two)

[P.S. The end of an era came for Home Economics with the sale of the collection of decorative arts on December 2-3, 1998. The chair collection of twentieth century chairs remains a part of the permanent collection at the Western Gallery.)