University of Illinois Student Life 1928-1938 Oral History Project Erma Scott Bridgewater – Class of 37 Champaign, Il March 22, 2001

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Ellen Swain: This is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois Archives. The interviewer is Ellen Swain, the narrator is Erma Bridgewater an alumna from the class of '37. We are at Mrs. Bridgewater's home in Champaign, Illinois and the date is March 22, 2001.

I wonder if we could start by just telling me what your full name is and when you were born?

EB: Erma Pauline Scott Bridgewater. I was born here in Champaign, November 24th, 1913; isn't that awful, 1913.

ES: [Laughter] And you say you were born here in town?

EB: Uh-huh, yeah.

ES: What did your father or your parents do for a living? How did they come to Champaign-Urbana?

EB: My dad was born here too. My mother came to Champaign from Shawneetown, Illinois. Her mother came here to work on campus, to cook, they found out that, well a lot of people did at that time, that there were good jobs for women cooking on campus, so that was why they came. But my Dad was born here, so. That's how I got to be here [*Laughter*].

ES: Did you have brothers or sisters?

EB: I had one brother, and my dad worked at the University as a, well he started out as a messenger from one building to another, and of course as more buildings were built, and it grew, it became mail service. It became a pretty good job. And it was primarily black men who had the job, so it was a good job for them.

ES: I see. Was he working at the University when you were in school?

EB: Yeah. I kind of feel like, that was one of the reasons, well they didn't insist that I go to the University of Illinois, I just knew that was where I was going [*laughter*]. That was, decided long before, because I just knew that was where I was going to finish school.

ES: How important was education to your parents?

EB: Very. My mother had finished high, first year of high school, and my dad had gone as far as eighth grade, and they just took it for granted that we were, my brother and I were going on. My brother didn't go quite as far as I did. He did not finish high school, but I went on through high school. Well, I wanted to go too, so, in spite of the fact that some of the counselors that I had at that time, didn't encourage me to take college preparatory courses. They said that I should take another math course, because I probably couldn't pass algebra. Well he didn't say it exactly that way, but we knew that was what he meant. At that time we took our schedules home to our parents and my parents decided that I was going to go to college, so I best take college preparatory courses, so I took them. And I passed. I got there.

ES: What high school did you attend?

EB: Champaign High School, it was, yeah Champaign High School. There was only one high school here then.

ES: Tell me how many students out of your class went to school during that time, was there a large percentage of people who went onto to college?

EB: Black?

ES: Black or white, both.

EB: I couldn't tell you exactly, I know there were just a very few of us, as black. It was difficult, a little difficult to go onto college—

[Interruption.]

ES: We were talking about how many students went on to college from Champaign High School.

EB: Oh, I really don't know number. I know there were at least three of us that were in the class that I finished with. And it was a little difficult to go because of the fact that it was hard to live the life between being in Champaign and then on campus too. And, you almost lost friends when you did go on to college. You know they were, "Who does she think she is?" And that sort of thing. They sort of distanced themselves a bit from you. But since we all attended the same churches and so forth—

ES: And you continued to do that after college?

EB: Yeah, uh-huh, yeah.

ES: I see.

EB: Yeah, that part of it, wasn't difficult.

ES: How were your parents able financially, during the 30s, to-?

EB: That was tough, my mother took in bundles of washing from some of the fraternities. You know boys would send, would gather up their clothes, shirts and so on, and there were people in the town who would wash them. So she did that, and of course my father was working at the University, and he also waited tables, out in the community. At country clubs. I did some work, I worked for, on campus, for a couple, Reverend Martin. Yeah, the name was Martin. At a church on campus. And I want to say that I got a dollar and something, I think, or something or other. And one semester they paid my tuition. At that time tuition was \$35, and when it went up \$50, we thought that was terrible [*laughter*]. But, then another semester my dad, there was a game here known as "policy", in our area, and it was a numbers game. And my dad played it one time and he won \$50, so I went to school on that one year. Now that today would be compared to lottery, it was illegal when we were doing it back then [*laughter*]. But it was gambling nevertheless. But I did go to school on that, but that was about it. It was a struggle for my parents.

ES: You said your brother didn't go onto college, did other members of your family?

EB: No.

ES: You were the first college graduate?

EB: Yeah, uh-huh.

ES: What did you hope to do with your education? What did you major in and—?

EB: I majored in sociology and I wanted to at that time, I wanted to be a, well I started out, I wanted to teach Physical Ed, and it didn't go too well. I said my knee, my legs got bigger or something or other and I decided I didn't want to be in it; didn't want to go along with that. So I went onto deciding on sociology and I wanted to be a probation officer. That was my ambition at that time. But, that is not where I ended up.

ES: What did you end up doing?

EB: Well, when I first graduated, my first job was a maid at Newman Hall. But that was for about a year, but I was determined that I would stay in Champaign, I don't know whether I was chicken or what, but I really didn't want to leave home. So, with the help of some of other people, when the city of Champaign established the department of recreation, they were looking for someone with a degree, the people that were working there at that time were working WPA; Works Progress Administration. And so I did get a job doing this. Knowing nothing at all about recreation because my degree was in sociology, they helped me along the way.

ES: Did you have any favorite professors while you were in college?

EB: Yeah, and I don't believe I remember his name, he taught algebra, and I got a B in it, and that was something for me, for math. But he was an awfully good teacher and I'm sorry that I don't remember his name. And then I had a woman teacher and I got a decent grade from her. But the one that I remember was one that caused me my most embarrassment, and I think the most embarrassing moment of my lifetime. And that was Mrs. Rapp, she was an English Literature instructor, and when we went to her class, there were two of us, two, another girl and I, her name was Barbie. At that time my name was Scott. To seat us, she had everybody stand around the wall. And she started seating us alphabetically, when she got to "B" she passed by the girl, Barbie, she got to "S," she passed by me, and she left us standing there, to the very end, and then she had us to take our seats, alphabetically. So, I was embarrassed. I was terribly embarrassed, with everybody looking at us. So, I went home and told my dad, and since he was at the University, he went, you may have heard of Mr. Lee. Mr. A. R. Lee. So, he talked to Mr. Lee. Mr. Lee went to the President, President went back to the Head of the Department, and the Head of the Department called Ms. Rapp in, and eventually she called us in. And she told us all about, lot of things that she wanted to do in her lifetime, and she wasn't able to do it, so on. Anyhow, I stayed in the class, because I needed it for graduation, and the other girl dropped it. But, she said something or other about, one of the things that she was worried about was, and this sounds silly now, she didn't know how to play a harp, and she was worried, because when she died she [laughter] went to Heaven, she wouldn't know how to play a harp.

ES: And she was telling you this?

EB: Yes [*laughter*]. And I don't know whether she made it or not. I hope she did. But those are the ones that I remember most.

ES: [*Laughter*] Uh-huh. How many black students were on campus when you were in school?

EB: You know I need to find that out because I've been asked that before and I really don't know. That was, of course I finished in '37 and there weren't too many. But there were some.

ES: Did you feel discrimination at school, well obviously with that class?

EB: Yep, uh-huh. Yeah, because the other thing, the other problem was that there was no place for us to eat on campus. There were restaurants, but we couldn't eat in them. So what I did, Pamisano, had a wagon outside, out in front of the library, and he sold candy and apples. And that was my lunch. A Mr. Good-bar and an apple, and take it into the library, to the library restroom and eat it. But, of course, that didn't last always, finally changed.

ES: What types of classes did you take, you majored in sociology? Where were some of your other classes? Were those held in University Hall?

EB: Let's see. Yeah, in the Natural History, which was, what, East of, Lincoln, and Lincoln Hall, and we had swimming in the Women's Building. That was on Wright Street. I don't think it is anymore, is it.

ES: Is that the English Building now?

EB: No, I took swimming in this building so it was on Wright Street. Huh? I'm sure that's where it was.

ES: Yeah, I think it's the English Building.

EB: Oh is that what it is?

ES: Yeah it used to be the Women's Building.

EB: Yeah, uh-huh, okay. And let's see, of course we had, I didn't go too far east, over to these buildings over that way. That's about where most of my classes were. Especially Sociology.

ES: What kind of relationship did the students and faculty have, did you know faculty outside of the classroom, or were you primarily—?

EB: No, it was more or less in and out. I remember writing a report one time that one of the instructors called me in about. But she was English History teacher, I think it was. But, no the relationship isn't anything like it is now.

ES: What do you think that the main strengths or weaknesses of your education have been a the U of I?

EB: Well I was, I wasn't especially out going, so that may have been some of the reason why I didn't know some of the instructors any better. I don't know, at the time, it seemed all right.

ES: Have you been happy with your education?

EB: Yeah.

ES: In later years?

EB: Uh-huh. Well, except that when I finished, you know, I went to work as the only person with a degree who was in charge of people who had been already working in recreation, and they were with the WPA. I learned that I had to forget that I had a degree. I always say I swallowed my degree in order to get along with them, and I did. And it

made me work hard to get them to like me, which was good for me, because I gained a lot in having to do that, and then in order to get along with people, I would say for a long time, know that I had been, or that I was a graduate of the University of Illinois. I say I swallowed it, but then I would remind myself of it every once in a while and just beam.

ES: You don't get that--

EB: Because, yeah, it was such a long time ago, and not too many people did graduate from U of I. So—

ES: What was, you've talked a little bit about it, but what was the relationship between the blacks in town and the University? How do you think that—?

EB: It was good, it was real good. It was good because, they had no place else to go. They were in the churches, they were members of the churches, they attended parties, they were included in things that went on in the community.

ES: You are talking about the black students?

EB: Black students yeah. Yeah, they were, they had, well for instance, in our church, Mr. Lee, of course, he had encouraged them to come into the church, and they sang in the choirs. And then in the Lyceum, they took part in the Sunday school. Our relationship was fine.

ES: There wasn't competition or —?

EB: No. But the thing, it changed of course when we were able to live on campus. Because before that, they had to live in the community, so it changed, began to live on campus. And the separation, even the students who lived here now, live on campus. So it's changed.

ES: What was, was Lee's role?

EB: He was, well they called, sometimes called him, Dean of Black Students, he was a clerk in the President's office. But anytime you had a problem you could go to him and he would do something about it.

ES: Did he have a lot of power on campus do you think?

EB: He did with the, yeah with President and because of his position, where he was, and he was the only one around.

ES: So if you had a problem, would you go to him rather than Maria Leonard, the Dean of Women, or did you have much dealing with her?

EB: No, not at all, uh-uh. No, I would go, yeah you're right, I would go Mr. Lee, to Mr. Lee first. And I think that was true of a lot of black students.

ES: How did the community and town view him? Or did they know him?

EB: He's, yeah, he's quite a part of the community. He was, rather high position, member of the lodge. He was well liked. Yeah.

ES: Do you remember some of the rules for students on campus?

EB: No. I don't. The rules I would remember would be with the sorority. My () town, townies, not townies, they didn't call us that then. But people who lived in town and were joining the sororities or fraternities, they made sure that we had good averages. I don't know what, they thought maybe we would drop out or what, but they made sure that we had made our grades well before they took us in. So those are the, primarily, the rules that I would remember. But as far as the rules of the University, I don't know, I don't know really. Or at least maybe I've forgotten, it's been a long time [*laughter*].

ES: What role do you think religion played on campus, were students active in churches?

EB: We were active in the churches at that time. There were, well as I said, they were in the Sunday school, and our church had Sunday school in the afternoon, and it was well attended by students. And the Baptist Church and BYPU, that was in the evenings. And we had what they called Lyceum, that they took part in. They took part in programs, they would run programs a lot too. So in fact, I remember one of them teaching me how to sing. I remember singing at church, singing a solo, and I sang it, as it was written, and this young man came to me later, told me about phrasing. So, they were active in the churches.

ES: The black University students?

EB: Yeah, uh-huh.

ES: Was the moral code pretty high? Was morality regulated?

EB: Yeah, there were things you didn't do. Then there were some things that were done I guess [*laughter*].

ES: Let's see. Did students have any contact with the President of the University? When you were in schoold did you know who the President was, or was he visible? Would have been Willard.

EB: Yeah, well I heard a lot about him, or heard about him, but I don't remember being, no.

ES: Not a lot of time?

EB: No, not the way it has become now. Or, no.

ES: How did you get involved in Alpha Kappa Alpha, that was a sorority you joined? Could you talk about that, when you joined it and why, and—?

EB: Well it was the thing to do. I don't remember how I was approached. I don't know. I know I didn't approach them because as backward as I was in those days [*laughter*] they had to come to me. And I don't remember who did. I don't remember how that exactly came about. They had a house over on Stoughton Street, and I remembered being near. But I wanted to be an AKA. And I didn't, I didn't attend there, I didn't do much with the sorority after I finished school though.

ES: Where was it located?

EB: The sorority?

ES: Uh-huh.

EB: It was on the corner of Stoughton and Goodwin.

ES: Did you live in the house?

EB: No.

ES: No?

EB: No, and well, my mother and quite a few others were members of Patroness Board, and that was the housemother and these women were active with the sorority.

ES: What kinds of things would they do?

EB: Well for instance, I remember our picture then with Marian Anderson. And then,

ES: Oh wow!

EB: Because I had a copy of it some place. But they had chaperoning, and teas to raise money.

ES: Did most of the women who lived in the house, were they from out of town?

EB: Yeah, uh-huh.

ES: So most of the local members still lived at home?

EB: Yeah, yeah, because, let's see, who else? Bernice Lee, Mr. Lee's daughter was a member and she lived at home. In fact one of the advantages of living here was that you didn't have to pay to live some place else. So, no we lived at home.

ES: Did it cost to belong to the sorority?

EB: Yeah they had fees, but not, not, uh-huh.

ES: How did the black fraternities and sororities get along with the white fraternities and sororities on campus? Did you intermingle at all?

EB: No, uh-huh. No, they were quite separated, and the parties and were separated.

ES: They weren't part of the Panhellenic or the—?

EB: Well, they were probably, but I don't think that they were that active with it. I don't remember them being that active.

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ES: I wondered if you could tell me how the black students in the fraternities and sororities were viewed by other black students?

EB: You mean students that were not members of fraternities?

ES: Right. Did belonging to Alpha Kappa Alpha elevate your status at all?

EB: Yeah.

ES: Did people aspire to be in the Greek system do you think?

EB: Yeah, yeah they did at that time. It was *it*, it was the thing. Yeah that made you more important, however, yeah it did. And then came the Delta sorority, and that was a little competition there.

ES: How many were there? How many?

EB: I think there were 3, I don't know that third one too well. But I think there were 3. And fraternities, the Alphas, and the Kappas, and the Omegas. There were 3 of them.

ES: What kinds of things did you do for fun when you were in school?

EB: I had the advantage of living in town, so I was able to attend parties or whatever, in town. But the parties on campus were fun. Usually you had Spring formals, and I remember some of the Kappa parties, they were fun [*laughter*].

ES: Now are you talking about the fraternity and sorority parties or the University parties? Did you go to any University event?

EB: I remember going my freshman year, it was one of those things, dances or parties at the beginning of the year when everybody's trying to get acquainted, and the reason I remember that was one of the white fellows came up and asked me to dance, and that was unheard of pretty much at that time. So I asked him, I said, "Is this part of a bet," because I had noticed that he was standing with a group of guys, and he said, "Oh no, no!" But when he finished dancing, and I enjoyed the dance, when he finished dancing he went back to the group, so I knew it was. But, it didn't bother me, because I liked to dance anyhow. So that part was all right. But I don't remember any, too many other things that were held on campus, that I went to.

ES: Did you have bands brought in for these events?

EB: There, my dad had orchestras during that time and before and after. He used students quite a bit to play in his orchestra; he played saxophone. And that was another one of the many things he did to make money [*laughter*]. And he also played on campus, and I used to work on campus, well, at some of those as maid and cloakroom. It's something they don't, I'm sure they don't do any—, I'm sure they don't even have parties like that do they? Where they had bands come in and, some of them were big bands too. But they played the Spring Formals, and I remember working some of them. But, as I say Dad used some of the musicians, people who could play that were on campus and that were students, and it of course helped him out a lot. Because that was the only music they had, they didn't have CDs then [*laughter*].

ES: Yeah right. How much time did you spend at the sorority house if you lived at home?

EB: Not much. It was, you know, I was walking to get where I was going at that time.

ES: How far away did you live?

EB: I lived on Ells, which is across the tracks from Abbott, do you know where the heating? Well, it was across the tracks from that, to the west. So I went across the tracks in order to go to school, when I walked to school. And sometimes in snow, and sometimes deep snow. So, I was sort of even with the south part of campus. But I didn't spend a lot of time there, especially after I was initiated. Before, during initiation I stayed there. We scared them to death, they sent us out to get something, and we got lost, and stayed so long that they got, they got scared; thought something happened to us.

ES: As part of your initiation?

EB: Yes. So they were more worried than we were?

ES: What kinds of things did they have you do?

EB: Oh silly. Go out and get, let's see what was it? We had, it was something like, oh, those treasure hunt things, we had some things we had to go out and find, get, and bring back. And, we got back and they were worried. That was fun.

ES: Were you involved in any other organizations on campus, student organizations?

EB: Uh-uh. No, sounds like I had dull life, but it really wasn't [*laughter*]. I mean I guess you have to realize that we weren't as much a part of things like that, at that time, as we are, and came to be later on. Later on there were problems, we couldn't sit any place we wanted to, and, in the theatres. We had to sit in the balcony, well, in time, students forced that issue, in the same way they did with restaurants. So it was in later years, it was not, when I was in school.

ES: Did you—

EB: And I probably wouldn't have been involved if I had been, then, because like I say I was quiet at that time. I opened up my mouth after that.

ES: Did you feel free to join those organizations or was it more that you didn't have a desire to? Like the *Daily Illini* or—

EB: Uh-uh.

ES: Did you feel like that was open to you?

EB: No. Of course, I probably wouldn't have. You just, you knew not to try some things, because you didn't want to get your feelings hurt, so you didn't try it. But as time went on, of course, we did more of it. Yelled.

ES: Who were your friends? How did you meet your friends or where did you meet your friends?

EB: Well of course I had friends here in town, and then of course, I wouldn't say that I was close buddies with anybody in particular, as I remember.

ES: So your social group was primarily from the community?

EB: Uh-huh, yep.

ES: Did you make friends with white students on campus?

EB: Uh-uh. I don't remember, as a matter of fact, I remember seeing some of the students that I saw in high school, that were in high school, who ignored me on campus.

You know, they didn't let people know that they knew me. So, no I didn't have any white friends on campus.

ES: How do you think the Depression shaped what students did socially? Did you feel financially constrained, you couldn't do certain things, couldn't go to certain things?

EB: No, not so much that. Mine was dressing. I remember when stockings, nylons were just coming out. I remember wearing stockings, if they had a hole in the heel of them, I'd peal the heel up and sew it on top of it, sew it so you couldn't see the heel in the stocking. But, it didn't seem like there was anything much different. I was thinking about that the other day, I didn't really, I didn't stop to think about those being Depression years, when I was in school. I don't know why, well, I knew it was. I remember, I took a course in Home Ec, and one of the projects I tried was to, we had to feed the family, my idea was to feed the family for a dollar a day. And I did it, but I wouldn't allow anybody else to go to the store. My dad smoked cigars, but he wasn't allowed to go to the store to get, and it helped a lot, it helped us to realize how we were spending our money too. But we, we had a store down at the corner, a grocery. They allowed us, my dad to charge groceries, so his bill came out to \$30 that month. I was real proud of that, but it didn't last [*laughter*]. Because it was close, but, I guess the times were a little hard, we had some problems, getting food and so forth, but I was still in school.

ES: Were there things that you had to do without?

EB: Well, if we hadn't had, you don't realize, you're doing without it. It made me a frugal person I'd say, because my kids talk about me, my daughter personally talks about me now, "Well mama, you can afford it, well go ahead and get it." You know I don't always do it.

ES: What kinds of clothes did you wear?

EB: Well we wore dresses, skirts, and so on. No pants.

ES: No pants?

EB: No. It would have been good in those days, it would have been cheaper. Yeah and in some cases, the same dress quite often.

ES: We talked a little bit about this, but can you say again, what kind of work you did, you said you had a job when you were a student?

EB: I worked, well there was this one couple, a minister, I cleaned their house, at least once a week, I think it was on, I'm sure it was on Saturday. Then I also helped my dad, and my dad served parties, and I would help him, serve parties and so on. So I did help some, and some of the students, other students, worked as waiters in sororities and fraternities and then of course then got their meal.

ES: That was for the meals?

EB: Uh-huh.

ES: What did some of the women do?

EB: Usually, I guess, they must have been able to be here because I don't remember them doing anything. But that was the kind of jobs that we had at that time.

ES: How did you get those jobs? Your dad's I'm sure, he gave you that one, but working for the minister?

EB: Well mother had worked for him, for them, and when I started in school, they wanted to help out, so they let me work.

ES: Can you tell me how aware of national events you were when you were in school - things going on outside of Champaign-Urbana?

EB: Well not nearly as much as I am now, of course, or as I came to be because eventually I became interested in a lot of different things, when I'm here. And outside, we didn't know as much about things that were going on. You know, maybe radio a bit. Oh, that seems awful, but, I just don't remember being that concerned about things around here.

ES: Were you aware of the Depression nationally, what was going on?

EB: No, I do remember a women saying that I knew, that said another \$20,000 gone. Well that didn't mean anything to me [*laughter*] because, whatever, that right off. But, I don't know, I just don't feel that I was that taken, that deprived with the Depression. I hadn't had a whole lot before then, so it didn't, I don't know, I got along with what I had.

ES: Did you go through Commencement ceremonies?

EB: Yeah, in, at the University?

ES: Uh-huh.

EB: Yeah and that seems funny to me now that they don't go. It was important to me, and especially important to my parents. You know they had sacrificed for all those four years and more, because it took me a while to get out, because I was sick a semester or two. And the pride that they had, you know, and the joy that they had in seeing me, being able to walk across there and get that diploma. And they just make fun, almost make fun of it, and they don't know what—. I don't think that I can quite see that. And I enjoyed seeing my children, or my children only one of them graduate, and that's my

daughter. The boys didn't, but they've gone on to...I always say they got out of the University what they needed and then took off, because they were in music, so.

ES: I see. Right after you graduated, could you find a job?

EB: Well I got this job in, at Newman Hall.

ES: Oh okay.

EB: And my mother was working there at the time. And, it, I was a, well I wouldn't say I was ashamed because, I felt like I needed to be working to help pay my parents back for what, you know, they had sacrificed. And the money was pretty good. And so I, I worked, but then when I got the other job with the Department of Recreation, of course I was happy for that.

ES: How long were you in that?

EB: I was with the city for 24 years.

ES: Oh wow!

EB: With the Urban Renewal and Community Development, Recreation and Urban Renewal and Community Development. And then I worked at the *Courier* in between those times, newspaper. But I've had pretty good work experience.

ES: Was your husband from Champaign-Urbana?

EB: He was from Tuscola. And he's upholsterer, or he learned to upholsterer. And, I often say that he would have been a very good student if he could have afforded to go to college. But he was quite talented in other things, he did this table for instance, he did a lot of work around the house here.

ES: I've asked you most of my questions. I just wonder if you could, and talk about Champaign-Urbana, and what it was like growing up here. Did you feel discrimination growing up in town?

EB: Yeah, I did. I know one of the things that I talk about was that we couldn't take swimming, swim in classes in high school. And we talked to our parents about it and they finally got us a class. They gave us a class after school. And some of the same things were still going on when my children came along, but I've been able to see change, you know here in Champaign, and I liked Champaign, and I've loved living here. And I've never wanted to leave, well one of the things that attracts most people, or me anyhow, is the University because if I want to see an opera I can go, and anything that I want. We had a very good jazz program here, once upon a time and it's going to come back I hope. But just about anything you want you can find here in Champaign. And we've had some problems, it was difficult to get some people jobs as clerks, in the stores and so on, a little

fight brought that on. So we've been able to do pretty good I would say. And there's a chance for good jobs at the University.

ES: The University was a real employer during the 30's for-

EB: Yeah, uh-huh.

ES: Did a lot of people come to town like your mother?

EB: Yeah, yeah.

ES: When did she come? What-

EB: In probably 11, 1911 or something like that. And there were others who came too of course. The men sometimes they would come husband and wife, her father had died of course. And they would live on campus, and the man would be the porter, and the wife would do the cooking, so they were pretty good jobs. And, of course, it was, it worked out real well for my grandma. She was able to raise two daughters.

ES: Well thank you is there anything else you would like to say [laughter]?

EB: No, I feel like I'm talked out.

ES: Well thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW