

University of Illinois Student Life 1928-1938
Oral History Project
Jean Lattan – Class of '32
Lombard, Illinois
May 5, 2001

START OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

Ellen Swain: This is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois Archives. The interviewer is Ellen Swain, the narrator is Jean Lattan, an alumnus from the class of 1932. We are at Mr. Lattan's home in Lombard, Illinois and the date is May 5, 2001.

Okay could I ask you full name, what your name is.

Jean Lattan: Jean, J-E-A-N, Edward, Lattan, L-A-T-T-A-N.

ES: And tell me where you grew up and what your family was like, that kind of thing.

JT: Where did I grow up? Right in this area.

Mrs. Lattan: Oak Park, you know in Oak Park there.

JT: Well, Oak Park is right, and then after I got married, I was high-jacked into the western area.

Mrs. Lattan: [*laughter*] Well, we had been married quite a while before we moved out here.

ES: What did your parents do?

JT: My parents. My mother was a homemaker. My father was a painter and decorator, that is, he had his own company. But then that went bust in the 20s, early 20s, and he got a job with Ryerson. I think that was the name it was, at a real estate company. And he was in charge of decorating to the client's wishes all of the offices in the city.

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah, now that the () Building and all the big old buildings downtown.

ES: I see. Did you have brothers and sisters too?

JT: None, ic bininer.

ES: Why did you choose to go to the University of Illinois, or how did that come about?

JT: Well, I guess it was because they offered my a scholarship of something like that, and besides which I couldn't afford to go anywhere else. That is so far as home, I'm trying to say it right, food and lodging is concerned, so that's where I went.

ES: Did other students in your high school class go away to college then?

Mrs. Lattan: Oh yeah.

JT: Oh yeah, there certainly were, but I couldn't name a one right now.

ES: Why did you decide to go to school, was it important to your parents that you go to college?

JT: Well, I guess it was, it was important to me actually. My father was a decorating contractor; my mother was a homemaker and a teacher, and it was just bred in me, had to go to school [*laughter*], so I did.

ES: Had they gone to college, your parents?

JT: Had my college, had my folks? No.

Mrs. Lattan: Your ma did for teaching.

JT: My mother did out at Sherman, whatever it is in Elgin. She went there for a while, she didn't graduate, as usual, in those days, you had to earn your money, so she had to go to work. But, my father, he, he used to say he went to Wheaton College, he walked in the front door and out that back. That's it.

ES: What did you hope to do? Well, tell me what year you started school in.

JT: What year?

ES: Uh-huh.

Mrs. Lattan: At the University.

ES: At the University of Illinois. What year did you enter the school?

JT: Oh at the University? '20, no '31.

Mrs. Lattan: '27 honey.

JT: Huh?

Mrs. Lattan: '27.

JT: That's when I graduated from high school.

Mrs. Lattan: Yes, and then you went onto college.

ES: You went to college, right after high school?

JT: Yeah, I guess, I guess I did. Hell, that's too far back, anyhow, excuse my French.

Mrs. Lattan: And I think part of it, that he is forgetting, is that he was ROTC, he was doing student colonel at Illinois.

JT: Vos Soctor.

Mrs. Lattan: I know what helped you through college was your ROTC.

JT: I can't understand a word she's saying.

ES: She said you were in ROTC and that helped you finance your—?

JT: Yeah, I guess.

ES: But you had taken an Accounting Scholarship, is that right, you had gotten a scholarship, and academic scholarship to go to school?

JT: No, not that I know of.

Mrs. Lattan: I didn't think that was right.

JT: I don't think so.

ES: How were you able to go to school, did you parents have to sacrifice to get you there?

JT: [*Laughter*] Yeah, they probably did, but I had an uncle who was willing to subsidize it, he since died, well long since, but anyway, I paid him back. That was way back, like in 1930, '31. I don't know, anyhow. You're not getting much out of me are you?

ES: No, no. Tell me what you wanted to do with your degree, what did you major in?

JT: Oh, that's a good question.

Mrs. Lattan: Engineering honey, you're an engineer.

JT: I was an Engineering student, and I suppose I majored in mathematics. Like calculus and junk like that there, that I never use [*laughter*].

ES: What did you want to do with that degree? Did you want to be an engineer when you went to school, you knew ahead of time?

JT: I sure did, yes sir, that's what I wanted. Never made it.

Mrs. Lattan: Yes you did, good heavens. He does not realize what he has done with his life, you would not believe all the stuff—

JT: What is she talking about?

Mrs. Lattan: All the things that you've done with your life dear.

JT: My bunions.

Mrs. Lattan: No, the things he says [*laughter*], he's just hysterical. Honey are you sure your hearing aid is turned on right.

JT: Well, I hope so, I don't hear what you're saying backwards.

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

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah he did, I'm trying to think of some.

JT: It's so long ago, I can't remember.

ES: Sure, sure.

JT: The Math tea—, the Math Professor, what was his name. Well, anyway, that's the only one have any recollection of, and now I can't even remember his name, that's old age.

ES: Do you remember Thomas Arkle Clark, the Dean of Men?

JT: Oh do I ever.

ES: What do you remember about him?

JT: Well, I remember everybody was horrified if they got called to his office [*laughter*]. Thought they were going to get, pardon the expression, castrated. But he was very good. He was a very capable man. He was very good to me, so I have only good words to say about Thomas Arkle. He was all right.

ES: Did you have any contact with him? Did you know him personally?

JT: Oh, I guess you might say so. I had dinner with him and stuff like that.

ES: Why was that?

JT: But I, I didn't know before I went to college—

Mrs. Lattan: That was probably because of his being student colonel.

ES: Oh, I see.

JT: What did she say?

ES: She said you were student colonel.

JT: Yes I was.

ES: And did you know him through that, as a student—?

JT: No, well I suppose maybe you might say so, the people I knew through that were Army men. One of them was Colonel Weeks, W-E-E-K-S. He was a great guy, he was a regular army man, but there was a sign at that time to the University and he was okay.

ES: How did you get involved in that?

JT: Oh, I guess I just wanted to be a military man, I didn't have much chance, but I thought I'd try it.

ES: Uh-huh.

JT: Yeah, so there has it. I just did it on my own. My mother was horrified. My father said, "Go, go, go!" So [laughter]—

ES: What kinds of things did you do on campus with that, as in the military?

JT: Not much with that I guess. I got involved in the, oh God, I don't even remember.

Mrs. Lattan: Ma Wan Da He has a—

JT: What did she say?

ES: Oh you were in Ma Wan Da?

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah.

JT: Oh I made Ma Wan Da, yeah. Got a plaque hanging in my bedroom.

ES: Yeah?

JT: Miniature type. Yes I, well you got to be a member of Sachem or Ma Wan Da for what you did the previous year. If you had been active in things, why you'd get nominated for Sachem or later on for Ma Wan Da. So I must have known the right people, I made Ma Wan Da, I didn't make Sachem. That was generally made by fraternity people, fraternity men, but Ma Wan Da was wide open.

ES: Were you in a fraternity?

JT: No.

ES: No? Why was that?

JT: Why wasn't I, couldn't afford one. At least, I didn't think I could. I had a lot of offers, but I had to turn them all down because I was working while I was going to school.

ES: What did you do, where did you work?

JT: [*Laughter*] Waited fraternities.

ES: Did you?

Mrs. Lattan: Waiter, waited tables.

JT: What did she say?

ES: You waited tables.

JT: Yes, that I did. That's what I did.

Mrs. Lattan: Kids are waitresses, waiters or waitresses around here, they come in with their nice big trays, you know, and everything, except they line the plates up on their arms and [*laughter*].

JT: I don't know what she's talking about. Probably no good, but—.

Mrs. Lattan: No, no, I was just telling her about when our waiters and waitresses come in with all their food on trays and the plates on the big trays and you used to tell them about you had to carry it stacked up on arm.

JT: Oh, one in your hand, next, next, that's about as far as it went.

ES: Where did you live on campus?

JT: Where did I live?

ES: Did you live in boarding house, or—?

JT: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. The first place I lived was on. . . terrible, so we'll forget that one. But I lived in a boarding house on, geeze, isn't that awful. What the hell? That is terrible. Well, anyway it was on, what's the street just west of the campus.

ES: First Street, Neil, it doesn't matter.

JT: Well I was near, it was on the north, right across from the baseball field.

ES: Oh—

JT: Gotcha! But anyway—

ES: Springfield?

JT: Yeah, something like that. Now what.

ES: That's where you lived.

JT: Well, I lived in a number of places, the first place I lived was on, oh brother, can't remember that.

Mrs. Lattan: I can't help you with that because I wasn't—

JT: The second one was in Urbana, on Goodwin, is there such a street?

ES: Uh-huh.

JT: Yeah.

ES: Were a lot of people in the fraternities and sororities?

JT: Oh yeah.

ES: How important was that, how were they looked upon?

JT: Oh very favorably. Yeah, the fact that I made student colonel without belonging to one was an exception.

ES: Is that right?

Mrs. Lattan: He was what they called an independent. That's what they called them.

ES: Uh-huh. Did the independents and the fraternity students get along? Did they socialize?

JT: Oh yeah, no problem. None what so ever, not with me and the people I associated with, we got along fine.

ES: Where did you meet your friends?

JT: Well, in class mostly [*laughter*]. Yeah.

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah, he was Glee Club too.

ES: Oh you were in the Glee Club?

JT: Oh yes in the chorus. I, in fact, I even sang solos with the Glee Club [*laughter*].

Mrs. Lattan: That was another way he earned part of his money was singing at the Catholic Church.

JT: What did you say?

ES: You sang at the Catholic Church for money, to earn money?

JT: Well, yeah, I did and I sang at a Baptist Church, I was impartial.

Mrs. Lattan: [*Laughter*] We happen to be Episcopalians, so—

ES: [*Laughter*] What about rules on campus, do you remember some of the rules for students when you were there, about smoking or drinking?

JT: No I really don't, since I didn't do much of the first, I mean none of the first—smoke. And very little of the latter, but I never got in touch with that side of stuff. I was, I was kind of a pain in the ass if you'll excuse me.

Mrs. Lattan: [*Laughter*] Don't say things like that.

JT: Well I guess everybody thought I was stuck up or something, I really wasn't.

ES: What kinds of things did you do for fun when you had free time?

JT: Oh, damn little. Really you didn't. I had a girl in Champaign at the corner of, pardon me, Goodwin, yeah. Excuse me, something else, and that's what I did for fun. Very nice girl, I'm talking about Anita.

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah, yeah.

ES: Did you go to dances or—?

JT: Did I? Yeah my first year, I did go to some dances, sorority dances, why? Because our next door neighbor's daughter in Oak Park was in a sorority and I guess she had foolishly promised my mother she would get me out, so she would take me to dances, and I ultimately learned how to move one foot. I wasn't very good at it anyway.

Mrs. Lattan: [*Laughter*] Oh well he got pretty good at it later on.

JT: What did she say?

ES: She thought you were pretty good at it.

JT: Oh she—

Mrs. Lattan: Later on I said [*laughter*].

JT: Well, she's damn good at it. She taught me most everything I know.

ES: [*Laughter*] What about sports, were sports important?

JT: Sports. They were.

INTERRUPTION [*COUGH*]

ES: I was going to ask you about sports, whether you attended sporting events, were there a lot of students involved in that?

JT: Oh at the University of Illinois yeah. I attended most every baseball game, basketball game.

Mrs. Lattan: What about football?

JT: Eh? Yeah, I guess I attended them too.

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah, well while we were going together we went to the games.

JT: I didn't. I didn't play, I was a little shrimp, still am. So I didn't get involved in sports personally, but I enjoyed them.

ES: Did students go to the sporting activities, was that—?

JT: Oh yeah, yeah they did, very definitely.

ES: Tell me, you were in school during the very earliest part of the Depression, how did it affect student life on campus?

JT: Well, I don't really think it did. It must have probably. In my own case, I got a job waiting tables, and that's they only way it affected me and a lot of other blokes did the same thing. But, bottom large, I think it kept a lot of kids from going to college actually. So—

ES: Did most students work when they were in school?

JT: Quite a few did, quite a few did. Yeah.

ES: Do you remember the Stock Market Crash in 1929, that happened while you were in school?

JT: Yeah, I remember. I had an uncle who'd send me a little money every once in a while, when that happened, why that was the end of anything from him. Poor guy, he shot himself. I'm talking about Uncle Lynn.

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah.

JT: Well, those were the days I guess [*laughter*]. Anyway, I'm still here.

ES: [*Laughter*] Do you remember any black students on campus? Were there black students who went to school when you were there?

JT: Yeah there were, but I can't point any out to you. Funny, I should be able to, but I can't.

ES: Do you know how they got along, were you aware of any kind of discrimination or—? What about Jewish students, were there Jewish students on campus?

JT: Oh quit a few. Yeah, quite a few. And they got along with everybody and everybody got along with them.

ES: When you were in school how aware of national events going on were you? In the world, did you keep in touch with what was going on off, in national events?

JT: I did, I think most of my fellow classmates did. We were all aware of what was going on.

ES: Were students involved in politics at all?

JT: Not in anything other than class politics, I don't think they were. I could be wrong, probably am wrong, but anyhow.

ES: Was there a strong student government activities?

JT: If there was I didn't know it.

ES: You weren't in it? Did you go through Commencement?

JT: Did I what?

ES: Did you go through Commencement, graduation ceremony?

JT: Yes I did.

ES: Was that a big event for your family? Did your parents come down?

JT: My mother and father were there, yeah. I think it was a great deal for my mother, who was the brilliant one in the family, who went to Elgin Academy. And she was quite excited that I

graduated from Illinois. But my father, he could care less. He was a business man, painting and decorating.

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah, you told her that.

JT: What did she say?

ES: She was agreeing with you.

JT: She better be.

ES: [Laughter] What did you do after graduation, did you have a hard time finding a job?

JT: No, I did not because while I was in college, every summer I worked for the village, painting fire hydrants and stuff like that. And the guy that sponsored me was still there, and so I got a job no problem.

ES: And what were you doing?

JT: Well, odd jobs mainly, but a little bit of decorating. [Laughter] Isn't that awful, I can't even remember what I did.

ES: Did students have a hard time finding jobs when you graduated, '32?

JT: Yeah, yeah. Yeah they did. I was considered fortunate, and I guess I was. But anyhow.

Mrs. Lattan: Well then you got in to the engineering end of it at Taylor Fort.

JT: What did she say?

ES: How did you get into Engineering?

JT: Oh I studied in courses that are involved in Engineering, Mathematics, Applied Mechanics, Theoretical and Applied I should say. And stuff like that there [laughter].

ES: And that's later, later you into that for your career?

JT: Yeah.

ES: You went into Engineering?

JT: Yeah right. Yeah, I did. I got a Bachelor of Science in Engineering. That was my degree. I guess I was kind of a pain in the ass to most of my colleagues.

Mrs. Lattan: No you weren't.

JT: Because I got something to do when I graduated and in those days very few people did.

ES: What did they do when they couldn't find a job, did they—?

JT: Well, swept streets, odd jobs.

ES: Odd jobs.

JT: Menial type things you know. I shouldn't say derogatorily.

Mrs. Lattan: Yeah, he got his job with Taylor Forge almost right away.

JT: I don't know what she's saying.

ES: She said you got a job with Taylor Forge right away.

JT: Yes I did, my next door neighbor, who's, well his, my next door neighbor was a same age as I but he had a brother 4 years older, who was very smart and he got a big job right away. So, when Dave, Dave, what was his name?

Mrs. Lattan: ()

JT: Huh?

Mrs. Lattan: Tale, Taleder McNair you're talking about.

JT: Well anyway, when they got my age, they managed to get me a job, so I never really was without a job.

Mrs. Lattan: And you worked for that company until they were taken over by Golf Western. And then he became Vice President of Golf Western.

ES: I see.

JT: I can't hear a word she's saying.

ES: She said you were Vice President of Golf Western.

Mrs. Lattan: In charge of ().

JT: I was Vice President, in charge of—

Mrs. Lattan: Quality control.

JT: Quality insurance. But that didn't last long, I quit [*laughter*].

ES: And then he retired.

Mrs. Lattan: Well it was funny he started to retire you know at 65, and then because, you see he chaired most of the national committees to do with () and all that stuff. Anyway, he said, well he worked until he was 67 and then he did all the consulting work until he was 70, and said, "Now I quit!" [*Laughter*].

JT: Well, I have no idea what she said.

ES: I'll ask you one more thing, you said you originally were going to graduate in '31?

Mrs. Lattan: No, in '32.

JT: No.

Mrs. Lattan: In '31 yeah. Yeah because I was starting college in '32.

JT: Didn't have enough money to go for one semester, which put me over, so I didn't graduate until '32.

ES: You had to stay home and work?

JT: I missed one semester otherwise, I made it in '31, but missing that one semester as I remember, and I have a lousy memory.

ES: But it was because you didn't have enough money to, what did you do, you went home and earned enough money to come?

JT: Yeah, had a good friend in Oak Park wasn't it?

Mrs. Lattan: Well, yeah.

JT: I'm talking about, oh you know who I'm talking about, well anyway, he was very good to me, always managed to get me something to do. So I never was broke, close to it, who am I talking about?

Mrs. Lattan: I don't know, which one you're talking about now I guess.

JT: Oh that's terrible, but anyway, it wouldn't mean anything to you I don't suppose, but he was a good friend, kept me alive. Was a great life.

ES: Well thank you, do you have any other, anything else you'd like to say about your years at Illinois.

JT: [*Laughter*] Well, I miss them. I really do. I—

Mrs. Lattan: Would like to be a young man again.

JT: I had a good time when I was there, I became student colonel, which gave me all kinds of prerogatives.

ES: What kinds of of things did you do in that position as student colonel?

JT: Led the parades [*laughter*]. That's about all.

ES: Did it make you a prominent figure on—

Mrs. Lattan: Yes.

JT: Yeah it did that. BMOC, Big man on the campus.

ES: Yeah.

JT: Oh brother!

ES: Well, thank you.

JT: Well you're entirely welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW.