

**University of Illinois Student Life, 1928-1938:
Oral History Project
Darius Phebus '33
Champaign, IL
December 6, 2000**

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 Darius Phebus, a U of I alumnus from the class of 1933. We are at Mr. Phebus's home in Champaign, Illinois and the date is December 6, 2000.

Could I ask to you first to state your full name and your birth date?

Darius Phebus: All right, it's Darius, D-A-R-I-U-S, E., Phebus, P-H-E-B-U-S.

ES: Okay.

DP: I graduated from Pittsfield High School in, I guess it'd be about May or the summer some time, but it was in 1928, and on the middle of August, or I lived with a great aunt, for the going to high school four years there. So then, I came up here and got on a bus and came up to Champaign-Urbana and arrived about two or three o'clock. And, my mother had been working down at St. Louis, and she came up and we got us a room on California Street. And stayed there until we found other thing. But, well then, now.

ES: Why did you choose Illinois, how did you end up at the University of Illinois?

DP: Well, I, I think that it was a good school and it was rather, rather cheap to come here. The charge of coming here from you know like, the, it was only \$25 a semester.

ES: I see.

DP: And, so I had to pay \$50 for a whole year [laughter]. Well, at any rate, I got me a job, meal, a meal ticket. I found one that was over at, I forgotten over at, I think it was over on Daniel's Street, west of the campus. And they were the Jewish girls' sorority, I worked there and I think it was about couple of months or less than that, that I was in the gym over there, the old gymnasium. I wasn't very strong in things like that, but we would kind of gymnastics stuff, and they had five or six men laying down like cord wood and you just jumped over them all [laughter]. It was awful. Well at any rate I got over them, did my summerset, but my left knee came up and broke my left clavicle here. Oh man! Well at any rate, I lived—Oh well then my left arm, I'd go around like in a sling. The cook, she was a lovely women. So she had a chair sent into the coal room and so I'd go over there and I get my meals in the coal room. And so eventually, it was fairly soon, I was back washing dishes and things like that. And making salads and what not. And well, there was so much for that.

ES: Where did you live? Where did you live when you were a student?

DP: Oh, where, well okay now, I lived, I found a place to live in a clothing store, down on, just a little bit East of Sixth Street, and I was right there. So, I, it was pretty hard getting in there. They stayed open at night sometimes and things. At any rate, I was in and I was studying, and it was quite a chore. But finally, we had another fellow, he was older than me a little bit, but he was kind of a drinker, and he just got into the habit of coming in and getting in bed with me. All I had was about as wide as this card table. And, so I just left that, and went on the east side of the campus, where they were keeping boys in there, and got a place there and that was very nice, very nice. Well, so that was that.

ES: You didn't belong to a fraternity?

DP: No, I never did. I think kind of to the end, I just didn't have the money for it that's all.

ES: I see.

DP: My mother didn't either. She got a job working for a nice family, they had a boy and a girl. And--

ES: Oh she moved up with you?

DP: She moved up with me, yeah.

ES: Oh, I see, I see.

DP: And, well, let's see, I don't know what else to tell you, I was in LAS.

ES: What was your interest, what was your major?

DP: Well, major, it was a hard thing [laughter]. Well, I, well let's see, I don't remember now, what they were really. Well, of course, there was Rhetoric and the fellow that taught the Rhetoric, he committed suicide. Poor fellow, nice guy, but he committed that. Well, I'm sure that was the year, that was the first, and he was teaching English. I shouldn't have mentioned it, () I won't tell you anything more on that.

ES: What classes did you take, were you in Business, or--?

DP: Well, yeah, well I just kind of taken the subjects. And I really graduated from Law School later on. So I just kept going.

ES: How were you able to finance that during the Depression?

DP: Well, during that time I had graduated from, 1936, from Law School, and I didn't pass the first thing, but I passed the second. And then I went to see, I don't know, a law office, Goodwin. And the boss man, see they ran 12 lawyers in the thing at that time, and I went down

there and talked to the boss man, well he says, “I’ll tell you, we just don’t have any reason to have a young fellow like you, but,” he says [laughter], “If you want to, if you want to hang up your hat back in the library, well, hang it up, and we’ll see if we can find something for you [laughter].” So I did that, and I never left that at all. I retired in 1998.

ES: You practiced here in town?

DP: I practiced over there in Urbana, kiddy corner to cross from, well, it wasn’t that one. The building we were in caught fire some way and burn down, we were on the third floor of it, and the fire started on the second floor. And there was law office down there too, but there was a father and one son, and later he got another son, a nice, good firm. Well, we, this was on our, well, I don’t know, are you familiar with the--.

INTERRUPTION

ES: Okay—

DP: About the second year, I got a job working in the fire department of the University. And we had three boys in the thing and we had one room, we all slept in that room, and we had a pole to slide down and the only thing we had, well, we had to work 3 hours a day, that was the thought. And we got 35 cents an hour, each, and—

ES: How did you get that job?

DP: Well, I don’t know. Well, I think kind of my mother, in the meantime, she’d had an apartment and she was a cook in sorority which was next door to where she had a little, apartment. The apartment was in the basement, nice little room. It had a couple of beds in it.

PHONE RINGING - INTERRUPTION

DP: Tell me to go over to the, what was the street, where there was a bank that had gone broke before. That’s where I had to go to get his cigars. A quarter would buy two cigars, black, (), and I’d spend his quarter for him [laughter].

ES: This is when you worked in the law office?

DP: No, no I hadn’t gone to that yet, I was about, I think I was about four, I think, well I don’t know when I got started in the law office business, but I got into it.

ES: You were talking about the fire department.

DP: Oh the fire department, had had one en--, one apparatus, and it was an old truck, and we were supposed to have one person, at least, and hopefully, we’d be there at night much. And so that was when we mainly was to do, get down there, run across the ally, or going up the, up the road, and it was dark. And then you would have to get in the front seat, with the driver, the old, people. Just one guy, all there was, and then, we’d all, the three of us, if we were all there, we’d

have to step in, we'd have the boots. It's an interesting thing, we had boots they'd come up to your knees, then we had these duck pants, kind of yellow canvas pants, kind of like. And we'd step in them, grab our, the, the calluses, but them over our shoulder and get down there and start the truck and we'd go to the fire.

ES: Did you have many fires?

DP: Oh yeah, we had fires in the Chemistry Building quite often [laughter]

ES: Oh yeah?

DP: And then we had other things to do, you know, like in the, across the, well the, what's the name of the building, you know where the Chemistry Building was, and I think its maybe a different one, a more appropriate, more now. I had a job, we had buckets hanging all around the building. And my job was to get around there and keep water in the buckets.

ES: Oh I see.

DP: And the buckets, they were rounded and if you just laid one down it'll just fall over, and the water would all run out of it. Well, we always kind of got along, hardly anybody ever, nobody got hurt at all, the three of us.

ES: How long did you work there?

DP: I worked there about, I think worked about three years, two or three years. But, so, then after that, I went up to the, well I guess you call it, where the, people, the workers would go out they'd have to take orders for paint, or to be plumber, you know plumbers, steamfitters, to keep the steam, heating the buildings. It's all from that deal. Oh, so then I got to know, real well, the fellow that was the boss of it. And so he says, "Come up here and put things away, and I'll keep you busy." So, I went up there and did that.

ES: So you worked all through school?

DP: Huh?

ES: You had jobs all through school?

DP: No, no, I was still working at it, and I don't know if I worked in it, I think I worked in it for him, while I was in Law School. And, oh, well then in those days, people that started the school, they had to take a, well they had to take a...

DOOR BELL RINGS - INTERRUPTION

Oh hell.

Was named John Doak, D-O-A-K. He was kind of in charge of keeping the roofs on all the buildings and everything else, found it, and so that's what we were doing.

ES: Did you get employment through the National Youth Administration at all? Through FDR's programs or, was this just something you did on your own.

DP: Well no I never really heard of that before. But, I surely they didn't have it at that time did the, in '33?

ES: In the mid, in '33 maybe is a little early.

DP: Yeah, I think it must have been a little earlier.

ES: Okay.

DP: Because he retired, well he didn't retire until I'd been practicing law for a little while, 5 or so years. Then he retired, and he was, well and I'd represented him when he ought a lot to build his house, we were pretty close friends.

ES: Can I ask you about rules on campus, what kinds of things you had to--?

DP: Well, I can tell you one thing, in those days, we had Thomas Arkle Clark, was the—

ES: What were your impressions of him?

DP: Oh, my impression with him was pretty nice. You know, they didn't allow anyone to smoke on the campus, or in any of the buildings. I guess, well, I don't know about the buildings. At any rate, he was, everybody would say, "Oh that Tommy Clark [laughter] is going to get after us." Well at any rate that's about all it was.

ES: Do you remember when he died, in 1932, was there a thing?

DP: Oh was it '32?

ES: Was there a big memorial for him?

DP: Yeah, oh well, yeah they, it wasn't such a great memorial, but everybody was, everybody knew about it, and he's buried out there, north of Carle Hospital.

ES: I see.

DP: On out that way. And—

ES: Did you know anything about a spy system he had among the students; had you heard that?

DP: Well, no I never heard, no I was never caught up into any of that stuff. Well, he was pretty sharp guy, really he was.

ES: Were there different rules for the men students versus the women students?

DP: Well, well, yeah, in those days, we didn't have dormitories, that came along later. I think by that time, we just generally found a rooming house, or something like that, why work at it. Now a days, it's just a beautiful deal, everybody has a place to live and study, a better, good deal.

ES: How were the fraternities viewed by the students?

DP: Well fraternities, they're pretty much like they are now. They drank a little liquor every once in a while, I guess, maybe.

ES: Was that a problem in the 30s?

DP: Well, I can't remember that it was so much. But, other times we got, the War came along. And, people were using the alcohol pretty strong at that time. Oh, well, two years was what you had to take, so I went ahead and signed up for more years, two more years. So I was a officer then, in the field artillery.

ES: Oh.

DP: And—

ES: Two years was what you had to take for. . . ?

DP: For becoming an army officer.

ES: I see.

DP: And we'd go in the summertime, we'd go up to camp McCoy, up in Wisconsin, and shoot the guns. It was kind of nice, kind of liked that.

ES: What did you, what did you want to do with your education; did you have a goal when you went to school?

DP: Well yeah, I was going to try and be a lawyer.

ES: You were?

DP: Yeah. And so I did, and I was in for the rest of the time.

ES: How important was education to your family, was it important to your mother that you went to school?

DP: Oh, well, oh yes, she, yeah, she was wonderful.

ES: What was the student body make-up like, were there many Jewish students and Black students?

DP: Well you know I just couldn't say on that. I think there were some Black students there, mostly were white. I don't know, well I kind of failed on that. The student faculty was pretty nice people, they had work to stay in there.

ES: Did you know any—

DP: Oh there were about 8,000 people going there to school on campus there at that time, is my recollection. I went to see another lawyer, he was one of the guys like they still out passing out free—

ES: Yeah?

DP: Things, so I went in there to see him [laughter]. And he said, "Well," he said, "I just can't do it, it's just too hard to do." So I just left then. It was pretty nice.

ES: What kinds of things did you do for fun?

DP: Well, well in the place that we were, a fellow by the name of Schaffer, was one of the boys, another one was John Wright, I think it was, I forgot, but Schaffer and I were pretty close. We finally bought us an old car, an old Buick, and we would drive that up there to Wisconsin. And to our work on the Army stuff.

ES: Uh-huh.

DP: And so then when he got ready, he was from Wisconsin, I've forgotten the name of it, it'll come back to me if I have time, but at any rate, he paid me a little bit of money and drove it home, up there in Wisconsin. But then, so later on, I wasn't too long, but when the War came along, I was called, said to report to, I've forgotten just where it was now, but so I was told to go up to Rantoul and get a physical and report about 2 weeks hence, some place, I forgot about it. Well, went up there, by God, these guys would just stuck in one of my arms, it was all bloody, you know what they would do. Well, at any right it didn't kill me. About a few times, because I was supposed to go, I got sick, but by that time I was married and had a child, a boy, Joe, he still practicing law up there in the corner. So, I was sick, and I said, "My doctor doesn't know what's the matter with me." Well, all right, later on he says, "You're write us and tell us when you get well, or are able to go." So finally after about a week later, well the doctor says, well it was my father-in-law, my wife's dad, so he says, "Well my God, you've got measles!"

ES: Oh!

DP: And, and I had never had the measles before. So I got busy and wrote a letter back to them. Well, then they called back and a little while later, in June then it was, instead of going

back earlier, they said to report at a certain day out in Carolina. And I got onto that. Joe was, I think he was maybe about one year old. But, so went out there, and stayed, stayed there about 3 weeks, something like that. March, and then going to, it was kind of a nice thing really, march you know, and I have a nice sh--, well, we had had a whole division there, there was just a lot of us there. And we'd walk and, and so anyway, about 3 weeks or a month, I was then sent down to west of St. Louis.

START OF TAPE 1, SIDE B

DP: West of St. Louis, and I was attached to a artillery battalion. That we were there with the 6th infantry division, 6th red star, 6 points on it, and that is what I was with until later on. And so, the very day I got there, I had to get out, go out and stay two or three days out in the woods [laughter]. So then we stayed until Christmas, or Thanksgiving, I've kind of forgot which one it was. And then we went and did Army maneuvers, and we were stationed, well maybe you're not interested in this stuff. We had, we lived in tents, big tents, I think there was about four of us in every tent, because the tents were about as big as this room. We had our equipment, had guns, and we'd go out and we'd have to shoot them, make a study about how to aim them and what to do, which got to do that before when we were in, on the University. Well, we find it, that that was the deal, they set us up. I don't know where, how far it was, it wasn't too far out, it was about 10 miles. Everybody join up, and we'd be, at the work of aiming to hit the targets, well we did that pretty good. We had a, colonel, a cleave colonel, wasn't gold, and he was really a nice guy, he was a little bit heavy, and we'd go out and walk 20 miles a day [laughter], and he, just had to be carried, put his feet up on the desk. Well, that was great. Well at any rate, we finally did go, we passed the exams. We went in and we were going to be sent to the Philippines, or some islands, or things there. Well, so the ships, they were waiting for ships for us to go on out. And the artillery was the last to go. Well, by gosh we'd go out and barely walk around the ground, you know on our--, to be make the end, it would be hard to see us walking in the dark. So that I got, I got sick. I tell you I had a pneumonia which was virus pneumonia, and the fog would come in from the ocean, we were right on the side. Wife, and my mother, and my little boy lived at, well I forgot the name, but we lived up over somebody's garage, it was a nice, it was nice. Well, at any rate, the ships came in and, our colonel, for the outfit that I was in, they had, he put up a big row around there, he wanted them to send me out, because he wanted me to get better, to just lay there in bed, and we'd have a bed, and you could just breathe the ocean water, "That's what he needs [laughter]." Well, they didn't go out, they didn't let me go. So there was a group battalion, composed of some of the soldiers, students about it, the rest of them were from New York, we had to start teaching them how to put up the guns and how to shoot and everything else. And, then well we finally got that, and the we had to go take another thing, send us down to Texas and that was the army business to go over seas. I finally got down there and I didn't have to work on that, because I was you know, feeling still sort of sick. But, at any rate, we had to get on the trains and go down to close to New York, out on the water there, about Thanksgiving, and we started out going to France and for some reason or an other, we had to change where were going, so they sent us, instead of getting us off at France, they sent us up to Liverpool in England, and we spent about the winter there. And all of a sudden, they gave us orders to get down there and get over to France. And we did, but you know then later on, I got another set back, viral pneumonia. I tell you it was just that we had little tents, just, you'd sleep,

your own little tents. And I tell you I just perspire, I was ringing wet, by gosh I had to hang my pajamas up on the roof of the thing.

But well at any rate, I started practicing law, when I passed this second exam. And I went to work with the lawyers, pretty good, about that time they discovered oil down at Centrailia. So the boss man sent us down to see what was going on down there, and what did have he was the Texaco Company came down to his office and said, “Not getting along very well down there, we’d like to hire you as our lawyer.” Well by gosh that was pretty good, so we went down, the two of us, about the same time, and we found out a case on it, well it was so far, but we did a wonderful job on that. We just ran them out of court. Of course the man that, the main guy at the law office, that was doing it, but we was getting the witnesses and talking to them, making friends so that we could go down—So we got over that, and about another three or four years, whenever the War did get started, we went on that.

ES: Have you remained close to the University since you graduated?

DP: Yes, I always stayed close to the University, yeah. But I really practiced law.

ES: What do you think the strengths and weaknesses have been of your education at the U of I?

DP: Well, I think it was pretty good. I had to work my way through, but I got through.

ES: Were you aware of national events that were going on when you were a student?

DP: Well yeah, I voted for a Democrat the first one. That was Roosevelt, he’s the only Democrat I ever voted for [laughter]; I should’ve voted for Herbert Hoover, that was my first one. I think you had to be 21 at that time.

ES: Were other students involved in politics? Did you —

DP: In what?

ES: Were involved in, were students involved in politics on campus?

DP: Oh, well, I don’t know so much, I wasn’t in that. I was working to try and practice law. But, I think the students were pretty good, they, you know, some people wouldn’t want to be in it, give up and go home.

ES: Well, I think, do you have anything else you want to say?

DP: Well, no. Well, when we went back down over into Germany, we entered Germany with our equipment, it’s been quite a long time for me, but we were going in there, and that’s where Charlemagne, I believe it was Charlemagne, that one prosperous guy, well not prosperous, but it was quite a leader and kind of a king was buried there, and they, the Germans, moved those guys around and hide them some place, but we went on that. Well that’s about all I can say, we go to shooting at them, and they’d shoot back at us. Well, that’s, then I came back, on the German

luxury liner, wonderful ship, boy that was luxury. And we got off and, well I guess we went back to New York and it wasn't very long and we had to get on our way back home and I got home and you know about well, I think it was about the first or second, no about the 20th, before Christmas, the 20th of December, so that was that.

ES: And you were--?

DP: So I started practicing law again.

ES: Lived here since--, well thank you for talking to me.

END OF INTERVIEW.