

Interviewee: Janice Lauer Rice [L]
Interviewer: Amy Charron [C]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

[sounds of other interviews happening in the background]

C: My name is Amy Charron, and I'm at The University of Texas at Austin. And would you mind introducing yourself for the recording?

L: Yes, I'm Janice Lauer Rice, and I'm retired. But I was the founder of the Purdue graduate program in rhetoric and composition for many years and had also about 13 summer rhetoric seminars. And so that's who I am. [chuckles]

C: Excellent.

L: And I have my husband sitting next to me here. [laughs]

C: That's awesome. And I bet this isn't his first RSA either, is it?

L's Husband: I think it's the second one.

C: Second one? Okay, very cool.

L: The second one, yeah.

L's Husband: I go to her computer science conferences every once in a while.

C: Neat! That's good. So tell us about when you first joined RSA. When was that?

L: When it began, whenever that was.

[C and L laugh]

L: Yes, the first one in ['68]—fifty years ago. This is the anniversary, so that's why we came back. Because they wanted to hear from me about the beginning. That's largely why I came. And secondly, but probably more importantly, to see so many former students and friends I came. Because I am now 85 years old, and I'm not probably going to attend too many more. [chuckles]

C: I get it. So how did you first learn about the organization? I know that you've been around since the inception. But can you talk about some of the ideas that might have been stirring around or how even the organization came to be?

L: Well, I think the development of RSA came through much talking. After the [initial] meeting, there were some meetings at the 4Cs¹ for the English group that carried forward RSA to ratify it and to establish it and all of those things. And I was present for those as well. But the actual having of the Rhetoric Society came with some—a group started to get to know each other and felt that there was some compatibility, that we should have something to represent what seemed to be the beginning of a field. And people I knew, people like Dick Young and Ross Winterowd and Ed Corbett and George Yoos, all those people were friends. And we were meeting sometimes at the 4Cs, but we wanted to have a society. So we were part of helping boost that. And we wanted also to be connected with communication because communication was the field that continued rhetoric all along. Of course, rhetoric was a subject all along. They had continued it; English had not. And we were the English group, and we wanted to get with the communication people and have a relationship there. And so this first meeting, the meeting 50 years ago, was the grand start. I think that first meeting was to see how many people we really had, who was interested. People were meeting here and there, but to have it come together was important. And so that was a real effort. [chuckles] Our Rhetoric Society first meeting was rather informal. We had a lot of just people talking to each other and so forth. Some speech. So that was part of our thinking, and I'm going to be in this next panel, the first 25 years,² and so I want to say that the appearance of rhetoric, its entry back into English, was very—went on for some time and through various personal experiences. And mine was, as I will say later, I started teaching in the 1950s. I had never heard of rhetoric. The education system didn't include rhetoric, and so I was teaching composition and literature, and I went to St. Louis University to get a master's, and I took two courses from a Jesuit called Walter Ong.

[07:28]

C: I've heard of him. [laughs]

L: If you've heard of him, you know that he was one of the inspirations. He had just completed, a few years before that, his dissertation on Peter Ramus at Harvard. And of course Ramus was the one that shrunk rhetoric, took out invention from it and committed rhetoric to style. And that's sort of a reduction there, but you know that, and so I learned of all that, and I became interested in rhetoric. So then I tried to read on my own, and I got some suggestions from Walter Ong and was doing that. My next move that led to something was that I then moved to the University of Michigan and applied for a doctorate, and I had an interview with Warner Rice, who was then the long-time chair of the English department at Michigan. He said what was I interested in studying, and I said, "Rhetoric."

C: [chuckles]

¹ Conference on College Composition and Communication.

² I.e., session F15 at the 2018 RSA conference: "The RSA Fellows Remember: 50 Years in Retrospect, the First 25 Years."

L: And he was quite surprised, but he said, “Well, interestingly this department used to be called the department of rhetoric.”

C: Neat.

L: Anyway. “But it is not now,” he said. “But I will help you put together a curriculum of courses and so forth so that you can get your doctorate, but you can end up having a dissertation about rhetoric.” Which is what I did. That was the dissertation on invention. So that was another move toward, down the road of, rhetoric. And then after that—let’s see. So while I was studying at Michigan, I did attend a conference at 4Cs, and I was looking for something about rhetoric and found really very little. No, I found probably nothing until I hit this one panel, and it had something to do with rhetoric.

[11:12]

C: What panel was that?

L: Well—

C: You’re getting to it?

L: Yeah! I’m coming to it. I couldn’t tell you the title of it now, but it was three people on it—Richard Young, Pete Becker, and Jim Moffett. I went to the panel, and it was wonderful. I went and introduced myself, and the four of us went off to have a coffee, and we sat for quite some time talking about rhetoric, so that was very exciting. It gave me a sense that there were really some people that were doing rhetoric.

C: That’s great.

L: And so at that point, we are coming close to the Rhetoric Society. I had been interested in how there was a critical mass of people that were interested in how—there was a critical mass of people to support starting a society like this. So this was beginning to unfold for me up until then, and then the Rhetoric Society brought many people together—and from communication as well—so that happened. And the last thing about the notion of critical mass I’d like to add here—because in each of the cases that I just talked about, they came unexpectedly—and this last thing came unexpectedly: Shortly, a year or so, after the first meeting of the society, I got a phone call from Barbara Hamilton, who taught at Oakland University in Michigan, and I was at the University of Detroit. And she said she wanted to study rhetoric, and she wanted to go to USC³ where Ross Winterowd was starting the first rhetoric program. And Ross was a friend of mine. So anyway, she said she couldn’t because of family—raising her family. So I said I would look into it. And I thought, “What is there in the Midwest for people to learn about rhetoric?” Which was nothing. So I got the idea of having a rhetoric seminar in the summer that would get graduate credit and would have faculty that were beginning to do good research in rhetoric at it to teach, and I asked Ross

³ University of Southern California.

Winterowd to direct with me. I got the university to authorize it. [both chuckle] No small thing. So that we had the first rhetoric seminar. Ross and I wondered if we would have anybody, especially in Detroit for two weeks, and we had 61 people.

[15:52]

C: Wow!

L: And wonderful people like Louise Phelps and many others. So subsequent to that, there ended up being 13 summers of rhetoric seminars and I think 12,264—or something like that—people coming to it. And these people came from the US, all over the US. All different levels of people. And we had people from Canada, which was very interesting. East Canada and some center. And so we had the first summer seminar. I think that that's what I would like to say, because I believe these people were very helpful to the Rhetoric Society. Because they came to be enriched and to enrich and to create that part of that mass, critical mass of people in rhetoric.

C: That's neat. It sounds like it merged organically and kind of just came about rather than somebody trying to form it with their own intention.

L: Right! It came because of a phone call from a woman calling, you know, to learn about rhetoric.

C: Well, relatedly, I know that you have mentioned a few key people that you have worked with in the field, but I want you to maybe tell us a little bit about that idea of personal relationships, or that idea of, you know, knowing people and talking to people. What are some of the maybe prominent memories you have? You mentioned one about the Cs conference that you went to, but—

L: Yes. There was one group of us that—well, at the 4Cs is where it continued, between major sessions—but we had a table that had dinner every time. It was Ross Winterowd, and Ed Corbett, and Dick Young, and myself, and George and Mary Yoos. And we really enjoyed getting together and having that dinner for rhetoricians at the 4Cs. That was a nice set of personal relationships. And then some of the people that came to the seminars became friends, like Louise, and we had Jim Kinneavy [inaudible]. Anyway, wonderful people that I caught up with and met between meetings and at meetings. But Dick and I remained very good friends over the years, and Rich Enos became my good friend.⁴ Yeah, I see him over there.

C: [chuckles]

[20:24]

L: And [chuckles] so that was—and Ed Corbett, of course, was a good friend. So it was a very nice group of people. In the early times, we had a professor from Michigan State

⁴ The initiative's interview with Richard Enos was being conducted simultaneously.

named Gordon Roman. Gordon Roman was one of the teachers of the first rhetoric seminar. I had just sort of local people as professors there. Dick Young and Gordon Roman came from Michigan State. And he became a friend, as did, you know, so many. Then in 1980, I was hired by Purdue to start one of the first rhetoric programs. Dick Young was at Carnegie Mellon, and of course Ross Winterowd. So I moved from Detroit to there and started the rhetoric program there. Starting a program is no small task. [laughs]

C: I believe it.

L: I'm in the midst of writing a book [laughs] that I can't get to very often. But writing a book about the setting of that program and what it entailed, including building the library.

C: Wow, yeah.

L: Things that you wouldn't think of exactly, and of course creating the courses and working to bring people as faculty. And one of the needs was that I wanted to have as one of the basic ideals of it—I can say, a main stage for it—I wanted everyone who came there to leave the program with being able, to some extent, to do research and read research in different kinds of discourse about rhetoric. So one of the things was historical and contemporary work and theory-building. And the hardest, for several reasons, was empirical research on writing. And we really didn't have anybody there in the English department. Someone—

[In background, Richard Enos's interview concludes. Enos and interviewer Heather Palmer mention Lauer's presence. Lauer pauses and laughs after hearing her name mentioned.]

C: [to Enos and Palmer] She's right here!

Enos: How are you?

L: I'm giving away my soul!

[general laughter]

L: I'll see you at the next one!

Enos: Alright, I'll see you.

[conversation continues in background]

C: Alright, so you were talking about empirical research in writing?

L: Yeah, that there was a gentleman—a professor in science who was doing interesting work, and so I contacted him, and he offered to team-teach a course with me. Bill Asher

was his name. And so anyway, he just offered to do that as an extra in his own list of things. And he brought the knowledge in empirical work and I brought the works in rhetoric that were being done empirically, and we made a nice course—I think—for students.

C: That's neat.

[25:28]

L: He stayed there and taught that course with me for I think about three or four years, and then we hired Patricia Sullivan, who was Dick's student at Carnegie Mellon, and she's still there and she heads the program there now. She did since I left. Anyway, so that was the beginning of getting those courses. We also had a pedagogical—we didn't want to have rhetoric identified with pedagogy only, but it was, you know, partially. But it was research of different kinds, inquiry, so that they left—and those that came early on, we've had excellent students for years and years—but they spread across that inquiry platform and used various kinds of inquiry for dissertations. But if they didn't use it, at least they could read it, and be favorable toward it and see what it was contributing—each of the inquiries. Anyway, so that was another aspect of the beginning of the program that had to be done.

C: That's so neat.

L: We had new faculty. We had Muriel Harris there with the writing lab, and we had very good faculty. A number of years later, we hired Jim Berlin to be there, and he was a great asset for us. And others in the department I could name, but I didn't come prepared to! [laughs]

C: That's okay! How have you seen this society itself change over these many, many years that you've been a part?

[28:31]

L: Well I think that—I just came from a meeting of the fellows, and I think both communication and English have come together well. Communication had been keeping the history and research on the history alive—like Rich Enos, and then he came over to be in English also. But anyway, so there was more intertwining, but that took some time for people to get to know each other and to be interested in the research of the other. So I think that's happening. We have, of course—in size it's grown a lot, and the leadership has been very good all the way along. And it's so set up that leadership will have people from communication and from English incoming, so that there's always that kind of mixture that's so important here. And communication, at least at Purdue, has been—I've been retired for a while, so I'm not really up to date—but has gone in the direction of empirical research and has not had much in history. More recently, they had lost a couple good historians to retirement and not replaced. So

there, it's not as much as otherwise. Ed Schiappa had come—I don't know if you know Ed Schiappa. He's in communication, a historian. He had been hired, and he found out we were hungry for history, [chuckles] so he came over to us and did some teaching, and I usually invited him as I was teaching the historical part to give some lectures in my class. So that has changed there. But I believe that we have to anchor this idea of all the modes of inquiry. We have five required courses that do that. So he would come over and do the historical part, and he loved to come over to us. [laughs] He would come to the 4Cs, and he said, "I just love coming."

C: I mean, we're a fun group, right? [laughs]

L: Yeah! So he said, "I like to come over because there's nothing much going for me." But anyway, that's just at Purdue. He's long gone from there. He's in the East Coast.

C: Nice. Alright, I have two more related questions, if you have just a few more minutes.

L: Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

C: What do you expect or hope for in the future of this organization? It can be both an expectation that you may not necessarily hope, as well as, you know, a hope or wish for the organization?

L: Yeah. Well, I think that it could have a little bit more political work done for us. Not too much, but— [chuckles]

C: [laughs]

L: —it could offer some discussions along those lines or branch out there. I think there is some effort to have more local, sort of social meetings of small groups of people. Because we have this large group. The only other way would be at the local universities, but when people have retired and gone on, they don't necessarily want to connect that way. But socially. We do have some things in summer, and we are trying to get some more financial support. And that is very helpful to move us into various directions. I think in some parts of the US in some universities, rhetoric has yet to break through and be acceptable, especially, and unfortunately, by literature in English departments. I was just talking to someone, actually, who was having trouble with it, who is doing rhetoric through education and the English folks are kind of haughty.

C: [laughs] I've seen it.

[36:26]

L: Haughty but also they're going down, and so this is sad.

C: Right.

L: So I hope that that is worked out better in places. Some places it has, and some it hasn't.

C: Right. Well, in one last related question—I think this is a good segue from what you've just said. So what kind of advice or course of action would you recommend for those of us who are new in the field and maybe this is our first or second RSA? What kinds of things should we be looking to do in order to get RSA to continue on to this place that you're talking about?

L: I don't know. The panels that are available depend on the people who send in to be on panels and suggest the panels. This is a very large convention with a lot of varied and interesting panels. I think that getting oneself, for younger people in the organization, getting them to assume positions of leadership is important—very important. Volunteering, even donating. [laughs] All of which are, you know, necessary for keeping an organization going well. So I think we have, or RSA has made great strides, but I think its powers are not extending out enough and that could be done as it grows and the younger people take it to all different places and use it in different ways. So I think your generation is the hope of the organization. This, what you're doing, is a very good thing. I don't know where these are going, but they could be available. They're trying to capture some history—

C: Right.

L: —and some of the ideals that people had, and also see that they could use the power of the organization who knows where? [laughs] So that's the future.

C: Right. And it's interesting that the organization was not—the organization didn't come first. It was these people, like you said, that collectivity that came out. And I think that's so neat.

L: Yeah. Uh huh.

C: Well, that's all I have. Is there anything else that you wanted to say that you didn't get to?

L: No. You were a great interviewer because I came in cold!

C: That was so good. Thank you so much, Janice!