

**University of Illinois Student Life, 1928-38**  
**Oral History Project**  
**James Vaky – Class of 1933**  
**Champaign, Illinois**  
**May 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 James Vaky, an alumnus from the class of 1933. We are Mr. Vaky's home in Champaign, Illinois and the date is May 22, 2001.**

**Can could I ask you your full name and birth date?**

James Vaky: My name James Russell Vaky, my mother named me after her favorite poet James Russell Lowell, and I was born November 3, 1911.

**ES: Tell me a little bit about growing up. Where were you from and what did your parents do?**

JV: Well I was born in Champaign when it was a city of about 12,000, and of course had remained here while I had four years of high school, four years of college and during my high school days when I was a freshman. I did work every Saturday in my father's confectionery on Main Street, downtown Champaign.

**ES: Did you have brothers and sisters?**

JV: I have an older brother, an older sister, who are both deceased at this time. And of course the three of us attended the University of Illinois.

**ES: Had your parents attended college?**

JV: Pardon.

**ES: Did your parents attend college?**

JV: Both of my parents are from abroad. My father was born in Sparta, Greece; my mother was born in Hanover, Germany. Now my mother emigrated from Hanover with her mother in 1874 when my mother was one year old, she was born in 1873. They came to Champaign County and lived near Dewey, and I was very pleased when we celebrated the sesquicentennial of the state of Illinois in 1983, you know, Illinois was a state in 1833. [Illinois became a state on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1818.] I was pleased that the Genealogical Society of Urbana gave me this script, stating that my maternal grandparents were pioneer settlers of Champaign County. Now in order to get that certificate they had to be landowners, you know, before 1883. And unfortunately some of my friends, their grandparents had come over even earlier than mine, but they weren't eligible for this script from the Genealogical Society because their grandparents were not landowners. Now

it was just be accident that we determined of course that my grandparents actually owned ( ) because it had always been the story in our family, well, you know, Thomas and Anna girls owned a farm, it had just been in talk, we had never had anything in writing, so I went over to the Urbana Archives one day, and I told them, I said, “Well, we understand my grandparents were landowners, but we have no papers of any kind.” She said, “Well, I’ll check,” and she wanted the full name of my grandfather, and believe it or not on microfilm, there it was. I thought, well here’s this little library in Urbana and you know, and they’ve got the record, that we didn’t have even in our family. We didn’t have anything like that. So I was very pleased with the Archives over there.

**ES: It’s a very good Archives.**

JV: Uh-huh. So then of course my dad, he came over with a younger brother. My father was 14 when he came across. They emigrated to Boston, where he worked for 14 years during which time he went to night school and also attended the Boston School of Candy Making. Then it’s hard to believe how he ended out here in the cornfields, but he had heard that there’s chance to start business on your own in the Midwest. He heard this through some Greek friends. So he came to Champaign one year, I don’t know, the Viners, I don’t know how familiar you are with Champaign history, but you know the Viners. Well Viners is on the national historic registered places. It’s established in 1899, I beg your pardon, 1898. My father joined Viners in 1899 for one year when he was a manager, then he was very ambitious so he heard about this excellent location at the corner of Main, Neil, and Church, and he then established his own confectionery, which he managed for 49 years. He was very successful. He made his own ice cream and his own candy, and did all the bookkeeping and so forth. So it was a very successful business until of course when World War II came on. Then you had all the rationing you know. It’s hardly able to stay in business because you couldn’t get chocolate, you couldn’t get various supplies.

**ES: So your parents met here in Champaign?**

JV: My mother was briefly, you’ve heard of Chatauqua?

**ES: Uh-huh.**

JV: My mother was briefly with Chatauqua, and as I told you, my brother, I beg your pardon, my father resided in Boston for 14 years. So around about 1900 they did meet exactly the details of the meeting, I don’t know whether he attended one of the Chatauqua meetings and heard her. She was an elocutionist, if you know what, in those days. Anyway, let’s say it was 1900. Well then when he came to this area my mother incidentally, due to the strict upbringing that she had had...my grandparents felt that it was really sinful for my mother to be up on a stage. My mother had met George Vaky, my father, and then in 1904 we have the day, they were married in a little town south of here. You’ve heard of Tuscola?

**ES: Uh-huh.**

JV: They were married in Tuscola. Why? Well, because my father was so ambitious, he owned about three different businesses, and he saw it was too for him, he owned the Tuscola Candy

Kitchen, and he also owned Three Main Street, which was called The Frat. For 23 years it was called The Frat, F-R-A-T. Then in 1923, believe it or not, the students objected to the name “frat,” which as you know simply shortening of fraternity. And how do I know? Well, I was in high school then, and I went to my father’s store after school, and because I had heard rumors to the fact maybe he’s going to change the name. So I asked my father, I said, “Why in the world are you changing the name?” And then he told me what I’ve told you about the students, and I thought, and I’ve often thought later, I thought, well they had no control over him, he could’ve, but anyway, it was changed in 23 to Vaky’s. So from Vaky’s, from then on, for the next 48 years it was known as Vaky’s Confectionery. And as I say he was highly successful. The sad part of the course it is, that neither my brother, well I’ll take that back, my brother made a very sincere effort to enter the business, you know. He took the proper courses, Ice Cream Making at the University of Illinois, also Hotel Management, and for one year he did his best, you know to adapt to circumstances that at the store because remember my dad had built that up from scratch and it was a one man, you know, he did the bookkeeping as I say. He’d had his hand in everything and my brother was trying to introduce new methods of bookkeeping, also of checking on stock, because he explained to my father, he said, “You know you are losing several 100 dollars a week, from the store room here,” because he said, “When employees go to the storeroom and take something out, there’s no record made of it.” My father was so good-hearted and tolerant and broad-minded, they came to a partings of the ways. My brother gave it a full year and of course his degree was in Commerce, so then he did ( ) he was with Dupont Dinumore’s, a large company, but my father, as I say again, was such a good-hearted man he knew my brother loved airplanes, and wanted to be a pilot. So my brother financed, remember we’re talking about early times, my brother graduated in ’28, we’re talking about ’29, we’re getting towards the Depression years. So then my father financed my brother’s training at Glen Ellyn, that’s near Chicago. This was very rare, that’s where they train pilots. I do remember one day, the whole family, mother and father and my sister and brother, went up and we went to visit my brother and all of us went up in an old Ford plane. You had to sit along the sides like the Army planes you know. And I’ve often thought later, I thought, oh well, if anything happened, we’d all gone, you know [laughter].

I have very emotional ties with Champaign, of course, because I had close friends, my closest friends were my Jewish Russian neighbors. I’ve often told people I said, “You know, you think of Champaign in those early, as being a small town,” but I said, “as far as my upbringing, it was very cosmopolitan.” I said, “My closest friends were Russian-Jews, and then across the street were the Stred’s who had emigrated from England.” Of course we had the Irish you know. My father always had, well they call them colored men, colored help. Today the colored people are becoming aware of their history and, one of them told me, he said, “You know we know that your father is one of the first business men to employ colored people.” You know, it just was not done. They either were rag pickers or did menial, you know. But, my father, had for instance, one of the young colored fellows would drive the truck, do the deliveries, because my dad was far advanced. I mean confectioneries did not have delivery systems. We did. Started out with horse and wagon, that was succeeded by Model-T Ford, and that was succeeded by Chevrolet, and of course this has all been in the local papers. I mean, we used to have an *Urbana Courier*, a second paper, and I have a leather scrapbooks you know. In one of those scrapbooks, I have the picture of the horse drawn delivery wagon, standing in front of our confectionery on Main Street in Champaign.

**ES: Well tell me, how did you and your siblings end up at the University? Did your parents think education was important?**

JV: Oh well yes, I mean there's quite a discussion about that because naturally all three of us wanted to go away to school, you know. But of course we couldn't. We couldn't disagree with my father's assessment when he said, "This is a major university," which is true, you know, even then. It was, you know, the University of Illinois even in the 20s was the major—and so of course, it is true, it wasn't so much the financial cost. He was able to take care of that, but we had to agree with him. Yes, it's an outstanding school. So then, all three of us had private lessons. I had nine years of private piano. My sister had 11. My brother had two because he hated it, he quit. But, the interesting thing about that is, my teacher, of course, the rumor among my teacher, and her sister, and her mother, was that, she and her family had started in school in the ( ) University of Illinois. I mean you know this was just talk. For all these years, and it was not until three years ago when I made a gift to the University of Illinois School of Music, that the secretary there then said to me, "Well do you have a history of the University of Illinois School of Music." I said, "I certainly don't but I would very much like one." Well, she said, "Excuse me," she went out to another room with this history of the School of Music. Then when I was home, I started reading it and sure enough here are the names of my teacher's parents, 1895. Then of course I had to do some arithmetic, because of course I started studying with them in 1919, when I was eight years old. So I thought, now let's see 1895, I was trying to figure out the parents, and of course it worked out perfectly, because in 1895 I think the Fosters, now their name in this History, which I have in there, the Fosters were very dissatisfied because of course, music in those days was considered a ( ) even more so than now, and so the result was, they felt they were underpaid. This is in the history, and so they left and established this private studio on West Green, which was in their home, where I went for nine years and they were wonderful in that. They were the kind of teachers, they were not interested, they never watched the clock you know. Now sometimes I didn't appreciate that. I was in grade school, and it would be getting dark, you know. I'd be at the piano, and I knew it was time for me to leave. Charlie, they called my teacher believe it or not Charlie, her name is Alesia. She was known as Charlie because, and the story was, well her father had always wanted a boy, so what he had got was two girls, because my teacher had an older sister, who taught cello and violin. All the members of the family taught. Mrs. Foster taught my sister and the two daughters taught us as I said. And Mr. Foster taught violin.

**ES: I see, well tell me, you entered the University in 1929?**

JV: I entered in 1929. I majored in music, and that's related in some ways to my piano teacher. The Foster's, my teachers, were violently opposed to public school music of any kind. Now, I should tell you why I finally did stop studying with my teacher. I drove my bike one afternoon, this was in 1928, to my teacher to take my lesson. I put my lesson on the piano there, and I was just sitting there, and my teacher, Alesia said to me, "Russell, do you play in the school orchestra?" I said, "Yes." "I'm sorry Russell we can't continue." Now I was 15 then, and I didn't appreciate that all. You know, and I didn't say anything. I just kept my mouth shut, and got my music, went out and got on my bike and rode home, and of course, told my mother right away. "Oh," she said, "that's ridiculous." I said, "what makes no sense is I didn't play the piano in the orchestra, I played the clarinet." You know it didn't, in any form of public. Remember

their parents had this unfortunate experience of the University of Illinois, which I guess they called public music. But anyway in order to enter the School of Music then I had to engage in another teacher. So, I took lessons with the intent of passing the exam, you know, because you have to pass certain selections. So the well-known teacher on the campus, oh he taught several generations of faculty people, their children. It was Lester van Tress, that's a well-known name for about 40 years on the campus. Lester van Tress graduated from the University of Illinois in about '26, and I studied with him and he was excellent. And of course he understood pretty well that it would only be for that period proceeding September, you know, when I would have to take the exams, and since he had majored in music, he knew exactly selections that I knew, Bach and Beethoven, certain ones that I should be able to play.

So I entered the School of Music, and, in those years you were permitted to select your professor, now this is so unusual. So I had Jacob van den Burg, now that's Dutch, not German. Van den Burg, he spells it Jacob and then same van, V-A-N, then small d, den, D-E-N, then capital b, Van den Burg. Why did I disliked him? Because I had heard him play, and I liked very much his touch in what he played, and I was very pleased, of course, with my relationship with him. The only problem though is, I began hearing all these upper-classmen, you know, on the stage, began hearing them, and I'm thinking to myself, Oh man, I'll never be able to play that! The result was I myself, just decided I'm going to transfer to Liberal Arts. I'll never forget when I had to tell the, he was very angry, I'm talking about van den Burg, he was very angry. "Why you do that?" because you know he was, has Germany. And I said, "Well," I said, "I plan to teach." So I made a mistake there in some ways, but I did teach. I'm very pleased that I took the required number of hours in the School of Education at that time. Now at that time, you were only required to have 14 hours, but I had more, I don't know what I was thinking, but anyway the result was of course, that later, when I went to California, and when I had this photocopy of my entire college record, they accepted that in lieu of California teaching certificate and I thought to myself, I'm glad I went to a major University, and not just some little college that no one had ever heard of you know. So yeah, they appreciated that very much.

**ES: Who were your favorite professors do you think?**

JV: Well, I like the head of the Department, Dr. Aron. I liked him very much. You know, in those days, there was a very formal relationship, it isn't like it is now. And of course, all of us wore tie, shirt, suit, you know, you were, it was very formal. It's hard to say, I liked Bruce Weirick, he taught Contemporary Poetry. The problem there was, he had, you might say an auditorium, it was in the new Commerce Building, and there were about 200 of us, so you couldn't have much of a relationship. However, I had smaller classes. It's hard to say, I mean, it was such a formal relationship.

**ES: I see, you didn't do things with faculty outside the classroom, go over to their house or—?**

JV: Oh no, heavens, no, no. Well, you're bringing up something that indirectly I was talking with a classmate and I didn't appreciate what I heard because he was telling me about Bruce Weirick belonged to the same fraternity as this student did. And this student was saying, "Oh man, did we have a good time at the fireplace." And then later, when I was alone I thought to myself, well, you know, I'm not, I wasn't in that, however, of course in that particular class. I did receive the Poetry prize, and I appreciated that. I have often told people, I said, "You are

now sitting on front porch,” which is about five blocks from here, in one May afternoon, and I saw this car approaching, I recognized the car because, this was in 1929, I recognized the car, it was huge pale green car and I knew it belonged to Gueretta Busey, the Busey family, you know. I knew it belonged to her, because when I used to walk in Urbana, I would go by the Busey home. And it would be, well the garage door, it would be the car, anyway, it was coming toward me. Well as it neared our house it slowed down and stopped, and then of all things. Here William Maxwell, who was the fiction editor of the New Yorker for 42 years, he gets out because he was driving, and Gueretta was sitting close to, they were close friends you know. He lived at the Busey home, did you know that?

**ES: I didn't, but I should have.**

JV: Oh, yeah, he lived at the Busey home, while, for the few years that he started getting his doctorate you know?

**ES: Oh I see, after he was an undergraduate?**

JV: Oh yeah. Now if I remember correctly he was not an undergraduate here at all. My understanding is he came from the University of Chicago. Then he was working for his doctorate here, and it's Gueretta, and I don't know why people pronounce it Gueretta, but anyhow, Gueretta Busey told him, “Oh you need to be in New York you know, with your talent and you critical—,” so at her urging, he did go on, and he stayed a New Yorker all those years. He died about a year and a half ago, so you know, '91. I forget now why, I got a brief, I think it was two sentences, I mean a letter, I know why, I had told this anecdote that I've just told you to one of the persons who work on the alumni magazine. And she said to me, “Well why in the world don't you write William Maxwell and tell him,” I forget the reason for it, but whatever it is, I acted on her suggestion. And he did reply, it was typed. I thought, well I'm not the only who doesn't have a word [processor]. It was on an old-fashioned typewriter, you know. And later he did mention that, that he like his typewriter, and I use a Royal Typewriter.

**ES: So tell me, they came in the car, she—**

JV: And then he drove it home, they parked, that was on Columbia Avenue, over here. Our home, my sister and I were born, as you know people in those days they were born at home. My sister at 208 Columbia, a little modest house still stands there and it's exactly as when we lived there, except they've added on in the rear. But the front door is the same, so we were both born there at 208. And then when I was in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, which was 1920, when I was nine years old, our house on the corner 212 was being constructed, it took about a year. In those days you did every—you didn't get prefabs, everything all had to made. Anyway, we moved to our home in 1921 and then our home there was, let's see that was our home until 1972, when my, now my mother died in '69, so I had come back here from Washington while she had this battle with cancer. She died in '69, and I remained with, we had a housekeeper, I remained there until '72. Could have been '71, when I moved to an apartment. That house was so old, and I had never had an experience of living in an apartment, and I liked it very much. I moved to an apartment on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor, on Prairie, it's one of the early apartment buildings like this one; it was a, now it was older than this one. By older, I mean maybe two or three years older. Then my sister of

course married in '31, January 1, '31 my sister married a Law graduate of the University of Illinois.

**ES: Now I wanted to ask you, you said William Maxwell and Gueretta Busey came, did they give you the Poetry—**

JV: Oh I didn't tell you, well the Poetry prize, book was Stephan Vincent Benet's poem, "John Brown's Body," which I was just very impressed. Now remember that Maxwell was just a student grader in those days. What impressed me was, and I still kept my papers, were his written comments. You know, some graders don't even bother to make, but I appreciated it and thought, he really has read this paper. And he said to me that my critical answer—excuse me—

INTERRUPTION [*phone ringing*]

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JV: You know, I knew he was, and of course I have four or five of his books. His first one was, They Came Like Swallows, then he has one, The Folded Leaf, then he has one, The Chateau, that's a Maurice novel. Then he did a wonderful children's story that was illustrated where you, he has all the constellations come to life, and you see the twins and the, and I'm so sorry that I gave that to a friend. She also knew him, and I often wonder if she still has it. She's 91 now, and living in Indiana, I beg your pardon, living in Kentucky. And she and her granddaughter are going to be stopping by in November and they'll come to see me.

**ES: So you knew Maxwell as a kind of a teacher?**

JV: I knew him, well, the only other time I saw him out of the class was when we were both in the O—, we call them the Old Man's Gym. You know the Old Man's Gym, and we were both exercising. I remember I was on the rowing machine. And I was going like this and everything, and I remember he made some kind of a comment to me, and I had made a silly remark. I said something about, "There's no incentive," or I don't know what it was, and I thought later, now why in the dickens did you say that? No, but that's the only other time. He was busy I guess thinking of his future. And then of course Gueretta, I would see them sometimes at one of the plays. It always surprised me Gueretta, do you know her, or about her, her physical appearance or anything? Well see she had long, long, long hair, of which she was very proud, and it was all wrapped around like this you know? And she used no make-up and it's so strange to see her in intermission puffing away. Because remember the time women didn't smoke, unless they were, you know, low class. Yeah, at intermission, and I thought, oh man this doesn't go at all with your appearance, you know, with her braids and everything. But anyway, she herself was a fine poet and she wrote one novel. You know some people have one novel in them, the name of it was The Windbreak. And the only holding is at the Urbana, which still has a copy of it; I read it of course. And I often thought, I thought, well why didn't you continue. Of course a lot of it is sort of autobiographical you know because it's, it's about Urbana and the farms, and the windbreak of course is what you have on the farms, the windbreak.

**ES: I see. Well this kind of moves into something else I'm interested in. Could you talk about rules on campus? You said people didn't, women didn't smoke?**

JV: Well, now on campus there was quite a controversy about the wife of the President of the University, and I'm not going to quote who is was. Well yes I will because I think I remember now, Chase.

**ES: Uh-huh.**

JV: The Chases came from New York and of course we all wondered, well why did you ever come out here then. And Mrs. Chase obviously smoked. This was reported directly or indirectly in the alumni magazine, and then you had complaints, letters from mothers of students saying, that's such a horrible example for the wife of the President to be seen smoking, you know or something. So they weren't here, I think, probably two years. Reason I know is, I didn't appreciate the fact that the Chases had one son who was in my English History calss. He was, well obviously he was favored by the instructor, but anyway, in those days, the thing unusual about him, he was into dancing. You didn't have male dancers then. Now it's very common. But I believe he went with a group, the earliest male dancer, you know, was the famous, Ted Shawn, S-H-A-W-N, Ted Shawn. He married Ruth St. Dennis, so you have the Dennis-Shawn dancers. See this is probably long before your—now the Dennis-Shawn dancers came to Champaign here, to the Virginia Theatre. I saw them, and that would have been in, the Virginia was built in 1921. I'm contributing to the funds to restore it. But, so—

**ES: So the son of—**

JV: Thus far you wondered about the campus. Remember, I often wonder how the blacks survived. I do remember this. I felt sorry, we had a colored, we called them colored students in my English class who sat over here, and here I am, and I remember, and this is not very complimentary of me, but I remember thinking to myself, well I'm going to when we leave here, I'm going to walk with him. We're going to our next class. I remember as I was walking along, thinking, well look at us, because it just wasn't done, it wasn't done. You didn't see a white with a black, you know. And I know he appreciated it, but I even noticed the instructor, I thought, somehow can be the irony, but maybe this person was inferior. But, oh no, it's very strict on the campus. We dressed...I mean, tie and shirt or sweater. And I can remember, oh my sister, they dressed like they were going to a bridge party you know. Of course, I missed that. I mean, it's so depressing to go on the campus and see young women, you know, in ragged dirty blue jeans and then so many times, I don't care I guess that blue jeans are all right, but I have to tell you that many times I wonder how often do they shower, or I mean sometimes their hair looks messy. I mean, and then I think, well I guess they certainly want us to know, we're not sex ob—we have no desire to be sex objects. You know, they don't make themselves attractive. My sister used to, all of them, they all used make-up, and a certain amount I think is very nice. I mean you can over do it. My sister used make-up into her marriage. She was married in '31, but I'd say she used it for about 20 years. She was married around 47 years; she died in '97, horrible death of cancer. All my people died of cancer.

**ES: Were there dating rules?**

JV: Pardon.

**ES: Were there dating rules?**

JV: Well, oh yeah, for instance, I know the one young lady that I knew, we'd gone somewhere in the eveing. I was permitted to come inside and stand in the front hall because of course the mother, what you call it? The chaperone, the mother was there. Oh yeah, I'm sure there were strict rules. Remember I didn't live on campus, but there were all sorts of rules, in those days. Of course you didn't have the drinking to the extent you do in these days when sometimes they pass out and you can die from you know.

**ES: What do you remember about Thomas Arkle Clark?**

JV: Well, I never had occasion, except that he always had his little column in the *Daily Illini*, you know. And then I've always admired the hall portrait of him over in the Illini Union Building. I'm assuming it's still there, because I don't go and check, but it's as far as I know on the south wall of the large room there where they have other faculty people. See, with Thomas Arkle Clark, you probably would have had occasion to see him if you maybe you were an out of town student and got in trouble or something like that, but I had no personal recollection. Now of course in the band, I like Ray Dvorak, he was our director because I was in the first regiment, then later I briefly played in the concert band, you had the first and second regiment bands and concert band. Of course the concert band was under Harding, A. Harding, who was a brilliant...he did these fine arrangements of classical pieces for the bands you know. And now of course we have that nice museum on the campus, the Sousa Museum because he was close friend with Sousa. Ray Dvorak was very nice, in fact he was the type that was more of a comradery between him and the students, it's more like it is today and he's the one that devised many of these formations that they did at you know, which was unusual in that day. It was just beginning to spell out words and designs and so forth, and he was a whiz at that.

**ES: Did you go to the athletic events and play?**

JV: We played at all the football games. When we practiced at the Contemporary Building, little green, wooden building, which is of course has now been replaced by the Band Building, we had the privilege of playing under the great composer Percy Granger. . . .Percy Granger, and his wife came, and they had a grand piano, and she played and I was playing the clarinet, so I could see, so I was right next to her. It was such a privilege to play in the Percy Granger under John Phillips Sousa. Now Harding told us, he said, "Now," he said, "When Sousa is standing on the podium," he said, "He's had a stroke," so he said, "It will just be mechanical," he said, "So be prepared," he said, "The beat will just be mechanical he could only do certain—" told us things like that. Then of course that's why we've had the wonderful Sousa memorabilia, because of the friendship, so that's wonderful to have—it's nice to play. And then Harding was ahead of his times. In 1928, we played the Pine's Arone and I think, and I think it had just been, let's say publisher composed that year, I mean it was a first, we played the Pine's Arone. Now of course, you have the Fountain's Arone. Then also, we played under Edwin Frankin Vogman, he was known for having the million dollar band because all the instruments were gold plated, you know

in New Yorkers, he was from New York. They were all gold plated. I played the clarinet, of course. I had played in four years in high school, under our director McKiney. In high school those of us who were in the band, we had to be there at eight o'clock, in other words it was our own time, not school time. We played from eight until nine and then we went to class, so in some ways you made a sacrifice you know. You had to be there.

**ES: Now at U of I, what kind of time commitment was the band?**

JV: I wouldn't want to be quoted. I honestly don't remember, but you know it would be a minimum of three times a week, but now whether it was an afternoon. Seems to me it was in the afternoon, you know, that we, let's say maybe at four o'clock. Maybe after most classes, of course, what you had to do is, you knew when the band practiced, therefore you arranged your schedule accordingly, I can remember that. But—

**ES: Was it competitive to get in?**

JV: Well you had an audition, now how competitive I don't know how many people tried out for first or second clarinet. I was not very good at the clarinet. I played second clarinet. Then I had a friend, he played the percussion, he played the big drum, and played the cymbals. What people don't realize is, when you're standing there, you're standing like this, you're doing nothing, but you've got to be counting. It's mathematically precise. You're got to count out all the rests, you have to know the precise second when you go. And heaven help you if you come in at the wrong, you know what I mean at all?

**ES: Yeah.**

JV: People, some don't. I thought to myself, oh I could never play the cymbals, because you know those crashing cymbals, heaven help you if you come in on the wrong beat. You know you go like that, and you go like that and then you hold them so they reverberate for a while. But he was so good that he made the concert band. Harding was very nice. He invited me to an audition, the idea was you know, if he was pleased with my playing, I would be appointed, probably, to the concert band. We never got to the end of that because I doubt very much if I would have been asked to join the concert band, but I can't remember the details. His secretary had said that he would be out of the office and I never—anyway that was nearing to be a senior, and I thought, well I don't think I would have made it. But getting back to my music, now while I left the School of Music, I have really, I felt, and people have told me, I made use of what little talent I had in music. Because for seven years, for '39 to '46, I did play. When I say I played professionally that simply means, that whenever I played I was paid, doesn't mean I was necessarily good. But, I had a wonderful situation in Los Angeles when I taught at Paige Military Academy. That's where I think I've mentioned to you that they accepted my background here at the University because I did not have a California teacher's certificate. Anyway, when I was at Paige, I also accompanied voice students from the Principle's Studios of Los Angeles, from John Campbell, from Helen Shafer, from Mimi Campanela. One student that I accompanied, now when I say student, well she was around 30 years old or so, you know. She did sing professionally, she said to me one time, she said, "When I take my lesson next week," she said, "Would you like to come along." She said, "Dennis Day's going to be there." Now I

don't know if you know you had on the TV this comedian, Jack Benny. Jack Benny's program had every once in a while would have Dennis Day. He's a tenor, he would sing, so if your familiar. So anyway, I was thrilled that I got to accompany two of them. Then of course when we're talking about World War II. I was with the Red Cross entertainment unit because I had had a problem with my heart. I was taking Digitalis. Then when they told me I didn't need the Digitalis, the doctor said, "we need to have you in the entertainment unit which goes around to all the military hospitals entertaining." We had singers, we had dancers you know. I played for Classical Spanish dancers, I played for vocalists for instrumentalists, and then I played solo. So I was really busy. We're talking actually, as I told you, those seven years. Then I also played for the Church of Mental and Spiritual Science, which met in Santa Monica. Santa Monica, you know, is close to there. It has a wonderful ten foot grand that I played. They met in the Santa Monica Women's Club Building. I suppose it's still there.

**ES: So you were really able to use what you learned?**

JV: Oh my yes, I've used my music. I've also been organist. I was organist here, I should say that I returned back here in the 50s to study pipe organ. Now I had had pipe organ as a minor, when I first entered the school, but I came back and I studied under Paul Pettinger, he was a well known organist here. He's deceased now. And yes, I played. I substituted on the campus. I played at the Wesley Memorial Foundation organ, then I played University Baptist one summer. And then I played in Champaign at the First Baptist Church, which of course now is simply a parking lot. I mean, they've moved to south Champaign, almost near Savoy.

**ES: When you were in school were you able to meet Sousa? You played under him.**

JV: All we did is they stood in line, and as I told you, he didn't really use that hand, you know. I think I said about five or six words, and he probably said the same. The concert was played in the old, the auditorium. You'd be surprised how crowded it was, if you look at the auditorium you have, you have Follienger. It's not, there's not very much when you have several 100 people on there. But it was the thrill, it was wonderful to have that privilege.

**ES: Was Harding close to his students? Did you form a relationship with him or—?**

JV: Well no see, when you have 100 or so, you know a band, you have about 100, 125 or so, unless you're working in the band department, with the music or something, I don't think that very many had a very close relationship. But I'm sure, of the 100, I'm sure there were at least a dozen or more, that probably had intimate contact with him.

**ES: Uh-huh.**

JV: Uh-huh. Yeah.

**ES: Tell me, what kinds of things did you do for fun when you were in school?**

JV: Well, I was a very serious type. I was very much aware all my four years that I was not having what we call a normal social life. Now I excused it because of course I was comparing

myself with my sister who was so, you know, she belonged to her sorority, and of course she was beautiful. She was beautiful person, and always having dates and going out the Military Ball and this and that. I guess I would have to say, I was a loner, as far as I can see. The only pleasure I got is when I would get a fine mark from the professor, or for instance when my paper that I wrote was read by this professor because of course certain papers were selected that he thought were worthy of being read. Then in back of me was William Maxwell sitting in back of, so probably what happened was Maxwell recommended to him that well Vaky's paper, why don't you read it? So that's the only thing that kept me going were—also remember I was majoring in German. I like very much my German professors. I did have Professor Brooks. Sometimes after this seminar that we had Faust, we spent a whole year on Faust, because we did both parts, the *Ersten Teilen* and they call it the *Sweidern*, two parts to Faust. This is during the Depression years of course, 19—just going into the Depression. I remember he accompanied me, sort of surprised me. He would walk with me, we met of course in the upper, oh way up in the library, up in the eaves, I forget what they call that, that's where the German library was. So he asked me several questions. He said, "Well," he said, "How are you getting along now?"

The reason he was asking me this question is, we're talking about the early days of FDR who introduced, you know, remember that in '29 you had the Crash and all the suicides in New York, you know. And, you had all these restrictions when you were in business, and of course, we had to collect all kinds of taxes and keep a record of them. And it was very hard to stay in business, in that World War II. See my father died, I have to get this, my father died in '44, and remember World War II V-day was a whole, a year later '45, because I was in California then teaching. So, it was very difficult to keep your doors open during those last few years because everything was rationed of course, cream and butter and sugar and all these things, but—you constantly heard from Washington be patriotic. This was to the little business man, and keep your doors open, don't be a hailer. So I remember we had waitresses. The reason I was here then, I had to return from California because of my father's illness, and subsequent death, so I remained here long enough to see that the store, and I wanted return, and in '44 the store then, of course, was for sale. Well, how can you sell under the conditions of that time because remember World War II had not ended and you had all this rationing. Not only that, my father had a year to year lease on this building, and buyers coming down from Chicago, you know. When they heard that, they'd just out the door, because no one was going to buy a business that maybe, you don't know, you'd be there the next year. If any ( ) of course at a great lost, sold to a man willing to take a chance, from New York, I beg your pardon, from Chicago, he had a wonderful personality. He didn't know a soul here in Champaign. He went around to the different Greeks, and first thing you know, he had around full of a \$1,000 that he could put as a down payment. He was a very fine looking gentlemen, and of course he's a family man. First thing he did, he had his whole family then working for him, which saved all that salary right there you see, so he was very successful.

START OF TAPE 2 SIDE A

**ES: I wanted to ask you about the Depression and how that affected your family when you were in school, how were they able to keep you in college during that time?**

JV: Well that's a good question. Now remember, the beginning of the Depression, which we call 1929. That's when you start having the Stock Market Crash, was our best year in business

you know, and then suddenly from then on it was very difficult. Remember we were living at home. My brother graduated in '28, he was in New York, first in Chicago and then in New York. So there were only two of us. Actually, during the Depression, my sister married in '31, leaving what? Just leaving me at home, because of course I was still in college. Other than the fact that we had all these rules and regulations that FDR, remember he started the NRA, the National Recovery Act. The NRA, then you had these alphabetical organizations, you had the CCC, the Civilian Conservation Corps., wonderful things that Roosevelt did, and so then as I told you, yes the volume of business went down, but actually you know other than the fact that you didn't have the luxuries or didn't for instance, I didn't have maybe new clothes as often as I would like things like that. Then also I do remember this, they were selling bonds that you bought bonds. My mother bought a lot, they called them victory bonds. When we did need some money, I do remember there was a time, and my mother surprised my father, because he was unaware of what she had done. She went to the post office and was able to cash in these, he wondered when. Then also I should say this, my mother took in, we had a huge, this 10 room house. She took in a couple of roomers, one was a clerk, a lady who worked in Lewis' Department Store, and the other lady. Let's see, the other lady worked in a stationary office supplies store, so that helped, you know. And then you know, I'm still, of course, going to school, but you know I wasn't paid anything when I worked in the store, so that helped. In fact, when it came time to sell the store, when the auditor came in, he was looking at the books and he said, "I don't see your name anywhere here." You know I had a record of all the employees in the—I said, "No," I said. "Well," he said, "You should have been paying yourself," he said. "You don't have anything now from Social Security or, you know." So even though it was sort of late in the day, I did write myself a check for \$35 every week. And then after that, as I said, I was very careful to, but the Depression years were, I'd say...well I graduated in '33, that was supposed to be, definitely a Depression year, you know. I wanted a teaching job. I drove around to all the country schools, because my idea was I wanted to be a country schoolteacher. My mother had gone to country school here. And a nice friend of the family told me once, he said, "You know the farmers are on the Board," and he said, "They just don't want to see a young man, when they know there are young girls in the class." You know they want a woman teacher. So anyway that was the excuse and then the way. I was still working in our store. Then in '38 I had my first, I taught English and Coral Music in Kentucky, in Harlen, Kentucky. It's in the mountains of Kentucky. And do you know we spoke a different language, those poor kids there. They had certain terms they used, certain colloquialisms, and I had mine. But after about three or four months we understood each other, but that was wonderful. That was my first teaching experience, of course I had had practice teaching here, but I mean this a big—

**ES: Right.**

JV: Uh-huh.

**ES: Were you aware of other students, what their situations were, whether they were struggling financially? Were students dropping out of school and—?**

JV: There were in my classes, I can remember that. Let's see, there were two classes, and I remember that four people dropped out of one class, out of the other class there were two, that when I inquired, they said, "Well, he had to return home because he couldn't get a job locally

here.” I mean to you know, they just weren’t jobs. You would think there would have been. There were so many to apply for whatever little job there was. Now as far as our store, we cut down and we didn’t deliver for a period of time. You had to save gas, and of course gas was cheaper then, but then anyway we cut down on that.

**ES: Wow. Did students have outside jobs?**

JV: Outside what?

**ES: Did they have jobs while they were in school?**

JV: Oh—

**ES: The students on campus?**

JV: Have what?

**ES: Have extra jobs for money, did they do—?**

JV: Oh yes, see that I said, there were a lot of you know. Then a lot of them, well I guess that’s still true now, worked in fraternities and sororities and got all their meals you know? They still do that I know, don’t they?

**ES: Not too much.**

JV: Well see that was very common then, you knew you could, that was very common, that was a good—and then also, I didn’t know. Some of them said that they were able to tutor. We didn’t have all of the schools that we have now. But some of them were able to tutor students that were failing in grade schools. There was some kind of a set up where they contacted the principal of the grade school to find out, and so I imagine they got around. They got along that way. But I know in the band, the band in my section, out of the clarinets, which let’s see there were around 14 of us including first, second , and third clarinet. There were just two people who weren’t able to continue. Somebody said it was because they had to return home to help their folks I guess. But I don’t know, when you, I’d be anxious to know, when you interview students, well I mean, would they all be, they wouldn’t be as old as I am, would they?

**ES: Yeah, uh-huh.**

JV: Well then I would be interested to know what, well, I didn’t realize I know I’ve lost so many people along the way and all before I was over 85. So many of them died, so, well—

**ES: I’ll ask you two more questions.**

JV: Okay.

**ES: One of them, and you already kind of talked about, but were you aware of discrimination on campus, in regard to black students or Jewish students?**

JV: Well let me tell you, now your into something. I was very much aware, of course, that I was an independent. Now I was rushed, you know in those years, some students committed suicide if they didn't make a certain sorority. Oh this is a very serious matter! The wife of the President of the University of Wisconsin has written a wonderful article about the horrible aspects of what is called rushing in those years. Now my sister, you talk about discrimination, as I say she was a beautiful young lady and so forth. She was of course rushed to the various sororities. Then there was this one sorority, well I'll name it, Gamma Phi Beta, was considering my sister. Then there was this private session, when they go over the young ladies names, and how do we know this? Because a wonderful family friend was present at this time and later told my mother, not my sister. But in other words, they were having discussion and about those the girls that were rushing. My sister's name came up, this English teacher from Champaign High, whom I had later, this English teacher made the comment that, they said, "Oh yes Al was a very beautiful girl, but you know her father owns a confectionery. He's a Greek." That was the end of that. You think for a minute my sister's...no they wanted someone who's father was a doctor, you know what I mean. This is Gamma Phi Beta. Thank heavens my sister didn't get that directly. Later she got it indirectly, and she's so sensitive I mean. It just hurt her terribly but of course she was in another sorority, had a wonder social life in Alpha Delta Theta, one of her close friends was Dr. Louise Dunbar, who taught American Colonial History. And I met Dr. Dunbar, she ordered ice cream from me, I used to deliver, but that's what you called discrimination. I noticed it.

Remember you have Champaign, and you have people coming from Europe. My father from Greece, my mother Germany. On my report card at ( ) school, I'll never forget, on the back of it, we don't know to this day why this was, it said, "Mother: place of birth, Father: place of birth," well that had all been filled out. Well, you know how kids are, they were all ( ) and they would look mine and say, "Well, why are your mother from Germany, your father," you know I didn't know how to answer that. I was very sensitive and it really hurt my feelings. It immediately meant, well you're different. You're different. In many ways affected me for probably for more so than I realize. But makes you feel, well you are different, and then of course my mother's friends, neighbors would be talking. Something would come up, the word you used then was, "Oh he's a foreigner." This is a popular term used, "He's a foreigner!" You know. And so and I didn't really know how to, and I was little then, I was seven and eight and 9, and I didn't know really how to, why, I didn't, it was never explained to me, you know, but there was discrimination as I say.

We always had what we called, our so-called society was Southwest Champaign, we delivered. I delivered ice cream to the so-called society people, Mrs. BF Harris and the Dobbins and you know, there was a definite caste system in this little town, there still is. Well look at your realtors. You know if you're a professional person, what do they do? Right away they figure you'd be more at home in an area where other professional people are, which of course makes sense, but it's nice to integrate. I liked to live here, in what I call the downtown, you know. I know the neighbors above me, but I don't really know the others because the people in the University come and go, and since these are condos, people can move in and I don't know who they are and never meet them. But you know in co-op, when I lived in a co-op, you have to appear before the board, and you're questioned. Well, like this young lady, I don't know who

she is, she came off the elevator when you and I, and she had a little dog, I don't know who she is, or where she lives except she lives on one of the upper floors here.

**ES: Did you say you rushed a fraternity?**

JV: I was rushed to Pi Kappa Alpha. I knew a member of that fraternity. Not only did I know a member, I told you Lester Van Tress coached me to enter, he was a member of that fraternity. He was there the evening that I was there, and things seemed to go along pretty well and everything. And then I was talking with some fellows, some upper classmen and everything, and what happened is, they'd been looking at our high school annual, you know we have these annuals. And it is true, I resembled one of the outstanding athletes, or he resembled me, put it either way you want to put it. And as time went on, it dawned on me, and then we were all embarrassed, because of course they had thought they were rushing this athlete. Instead, here I am going into the School of Music and all. So that was the end of that. So that was experience, and then I was asked to go to an, and I thought no, and I thought you know that really did it for me, because I thought, well heck, I'm no athlete, but I'm going to go into the School of Music, and Lester Van Tress is very nice. He was talking to me that evening, but then he had other things to do and I think he really sort of regretted that I didn't become a member. But I never tried after that. I'm very proud now to be a life member of the Phi Mu Alpha, that's the, well, the music fraternity, and the way I was admitted there was, I had returned to the University in the 50s to study pipe organ. That's when I was admitted to this fraternity, to which well Leopold Strakovsky, Pablucas Sales, you name them, all. So I'm very pleased that I had enough talent, because our initiation, I played a couple of short Manet tunes, then I had to accompany another fellow who was becoming a member. That was part of our initiation, you know. So, I'm very pleased that I was able to do that. Then of course, I've been writing poetry. I started writing poetry in the 4<sup>th</sup> grade, and I'm kind of disappointed my book that just came out about three weeks ago...I'm trying to plug it. I just took a copy to the library in Mahomet, 10 miles away from here. I just did that for sentimental reasons because my first book came out in '72, and I took it.

INTERRUPTION [*phone ringing*]

END OF INTERVIEW.