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## **Nancy Chapin Memoir**

### **Chapin, Nancy**

Interview and memoir

Digital Audio File, 20 min., 9 pp.

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Chapin discusses attending Sangamon State University in the very beginning when grades were pass/fail or students awarded their own grades, when classes were held at the Leland Hotel in downtown Springfield, and how she took CLEP tests to earn a Master's degree in psychology without earning an undergrad degree or having taken any clinical psychology courses.

Interview by Janice Spears, 2010

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Narrator: Nancy Chapin  
Date: March 11, 2010  
Place: Springfield, Illinois  
Interviewer: Janice Spears

Q. I'm interviewing Nancy Chapin today, Thursday, March 11, 2010, one of the early students at Sangamon State University. And Nancy, I would like to ask you first of all prior to attending SSU, what was the extent if any of your post-secondary education?

A. I'd gone one year to Smith College. I'd take a couple of summer classes at Harvard and I had taken... I had gone to Illinois... to MacMurray for about three-quarters of a year.

Q. What goals or circumstances prompted you to apply to SSU?

A. Simply because I really felt like I wanted to finish out an education and because it's always fun to go to classes.

Q. Ok. What years did you attend?

A. I'm not real sure. I think I started with... I think I started in about 1969 and my diploma says 1973, but I think I finished in 1972.

Q. And what degree or degrees did you receive? And if so, in what field?

A. I'm one of the rare, rare people who have a master's degree and no bachelor's degree. And my master's degree is in psychology, and I have never taken a clinical psychology course.

Q. Well how do you explain that you don't have a bachelor's degree? What did SSU allow you to do?

A. I took CLEP test, and I heard about it from a fellow student who was older than I was. She had started at Lincoln Land and heard about the CLEP test. She took it and suddenly found herself at SSU, and she had managed to skip about a year there. And so I thought, "Well, that was a fun idea because I wasn't quite sure where I was with my credits." So I took the CLEP test, and they suddenly told me I was working on a master's degree.

Q. Were you surprised?

A. Yes.

Q. What did your family or friends think of all this?

A. There was a joke here at home that that those were the years when they didn't have a mother because I got involved.

Q. Describe in detail your initial impression of the campus and your classes.

A. If we start out with the basis that I have, that I happen to have been at all private schools up until that time in my life and I had not been in any institution since the 1950s. Suddenly there I was in that wild and woolly period at Sangamon State University. I found it the wildest place in the world. The first course I took was John Miller's, Games People Play. I had absolutely no idea what the subject was or what department it was because they didn't have departments. And the room was, I'd forgotten they had a name for it, one of those rooms with the three foot steps up.

Q. The Pit.

A. You lounged on steps and you had these huge Folger coffee cans where people's cigarette butts were, and people brought their dogs into class. And it was the most unbelievable thing that had ever happened to me (laughter). I could not believe it.

Q. Well, what was that class about?

A. Well, Games People Play. It was actually a study of transactional analysis, but it took me some time to... I'd never heard of transactional analysis either and gradually... you really didn't kind of learn it. The book said it, but it was all approached as a fun and games kind of thing. It was a solid psychological theory.

Q. Did your impressions change in the course of your studies? And if so, how?

A. Not particularly. Intellectually, it was a great eye opener. I mean, the world had changed wildly since the 1950s when I was in school. Basically, my interests were philosophical and the whole existential movement, all of that and phenomenology and all of that was a whole new world to me that I had never heard of before. The wild kind of thinking was all new, so intellectually it was quite stimulating to me.

Q. Identify and describe two or three of the most memorable professors, good or bad, that you took.

A. I can't really describe, I can describe classes that astounded me. There were several ex-priests at the university at that point teaching. And I took two or three courses from one of them, and I was floored by what went on in class. I was floored by the attitude that people had to determine their own grades because nobody knew what you'd learned. And the attitude, the idea that people I could hear not being able to even speak the King's English were trying to write at college level. I was really quite floored by it all.

Q. Did you take any of the pass fails?

A. Yes, I think I took some as pass fails. There didn't seem any reason why not to.

Q. You didn't seem a little suspicious of that, a little leery since in the past you'd been tied to grades?

A. No, because it was obvious that was not an important thing there. When there were also classes where you were told to just put down the grade you think you should have and pass it forward, I mean that really does it.

Q. Did you know President Spencer?

A. I met him a few times. I did not know, I knew his wife better than I knew him.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. I thought Bob Spencer was wonderful and his ideas were wonderful. They just were not in sync with the times. The wild and woolly times were counterproductive to him achieving what he really wanted to achieve. I think his ideals were great. We still maintain a few of them. We have the large library; I was told that we have a larger part of our budget go to the library than any other institution of our type. And it's all because of Bob Spencer because he felt that that was terribly important. So we do have some things we fight for.

Q. In SSU's early years, university week was a special feature of the curriculum. Did you enroll in or attend events for any university week?

A. I don't remember. I have no idea. I have no recollection of university week.

Q. And do you know why you may not because as a parent those were usually held during the Christmas break for your children at school?

A. I'm sure I didn't do anything about university week. I was not a student per se out there extra time. I spent extra time talking to people because I was so floored at all the concepts that were coming my way. However, I wasn't there for...

Q. Buckminster Fuller, when he came?

A. No, no I think I wasn't. I just didn't go to extra things because that wasn't where we were at with three small children at home.

Q. Did you have a favorite classroom on campus or downtown? If so, describe it.

A. A favorite classroom? I'm not sure what that means.

Q. Well, some classes met at a tavern, at Crow's Mill School.

A. I never was in a class that met at Crow's Mill School. I liked the ones in the Leland Hotel. I mean, I liked that as a venue.

Q. Uh-huh.

A. I remember the brown bag lunch classes, which were kind of a fun thing. They were normally another kind of subject thrown type of thing. But I don't have any feeling of a favorite classroom, I guess probably because I didn't meet at Crows Mill School.

Q. Have you stayed in touch with any students, staff members, or professors that you knew at that time? And mention any special acquaintances.

A. I had one friend from school in my time out there, Jane Saxl. Her husband was here with Bureau of the Budget, and he went on to become the Director of Mental Health in the State of Maine. And I kept track with Jane, Jane's dead now, but I visited her several times. My children visited her when they were in school in the east. They were a marvelous family that I saw. But by and large, there wasn't anybody else that I particularly met at Sangamon State, knew only through Sangamon State, and kept track with because I really went to classes and other than discussions with people, came home.

Q. Did you have any of your friends attending with you?

A. Uh-uh, no.

Q. Were any campus practices, for example pass fail grading, casual attire, unstructured class discussion, unusual course topics, that impressed you strongly? If so, please elaborate.

A. It all impressed me strongly. They were absolutely wild men. I couldn't understand them. I have to say that while... I will say that Sangamon State challenged me intellectually. It did not challenge me academically. It made no effort to challenge me academically, but it was a marvelous intellectual experience because it was a whole new world.

Q. Did you or any other students have a favorite off campus meeting place?

A. No because I came home.

Q. In recent years, how often do you visit the campus and why?

A. I'm probably out there two or three times a month, everything from concerts and programs to alumni things to whatever.

Q. What alumni things are you involved with?

A. Not much at the moment, but the lunch and learn, now patchwork series has been great. That 's about all.

Q. The SAGE?

A. Yes.

Q. What project did you work on in SAGE?

A. I worked on the lunch and learn project at SAGE. And the current budget I think has made much activity there kind of minimal, hasn't it?

Q. Right. But didn't you work on the old farmhouse there by the campus?

A. Yes, but that was part of a SAGE project. I did that because of SAGE, we did it. We did a couple of meetings, a couple of lunch 'n learn type of meetings there at the farmhouse because I was connected with that and with the historical world in town, and so I put those together.

Q. Did you bring an old outhouse out there to the farmhouse?

A. Oh that's very sad, yes. Our old outhouse went out there and it was lovely. Sadly they didn't do much with it and a big wind came and smashed it like a pancake. It's gone now, I think. It was a two and a half seater.

Q. And a half?

A. Uh-huh, I guess mommy and daddy and little one (laughter).

Q. In retrospect, what was the value of the education you received?

A. I think it was an interesting transition into a new world. I was married and was on the farm and not really involved in the changing attitudes. I think I was immersed in it in a hurry, and I think that was probably the greatest benefit. I mean, sure, there were classes that were fun. There were ideas that I got that were great and I can't pin point them per se. There was a sociology class I took from the... I can't think of his name, an Indian professor who was simply, he was superb. Nandi?

Q. Yes, Proshanti Nandi.

A. Yes, he was wonderful. He was probably the best professor I had out there.

Q. He was one of my favorites, too, and I stay in touch with him.

A. I've seen him a couple of times recently; I didn't see him for years.

Q. I thought he was brilliant.

A. Yes, and he had a very nice manner, but I thought he was one of the best I came across.

Q. Now this last question is very similar to the one I just asked you. In retrospect how, if at all, did your experiences at SSU influence your career and your personal life?

A. I think if we hadn't had a university finally come to Springfield and I couldn't have at least completed an undergraduate degree, I would have ultimately been very disappointed. I'm sure it added to my self-confidence. I have no regrets about dropping out of college to get married because that was appropriate at the time, but I needed to have that degree for me.

Q. Well, did you know the people who are involved in the early fund raising and organizing of the university that were from this community? Who did you know?

A. I knew Mary Jane Masters and George Hoffman, and they were probably as involved as anyone in that activity. And my father had told me, I mean for years I'd heard that... my father had been part of an effort to bring a four year institution.

Q. You might want to mention who your father is and what he did.

A. Well, my father was Robert Lanphier and he worked at Sangamo, and he had been part of the Springfield community. He had worked for years to get a four-year institution. A community of this size needed, isn't going to be complete with just the junior college, which was then the only institution here. All the efforts had always fallen through in the past, so I was aware and I think many of us were aware of the effort to bring Sangamon State here and applauded it and pushed it all the way.

Q. Did your father live to see that?

A. Yes. Well, he wasn't living here then, but he was certainly alive.

Q. Are there any other comments you'd like to make for the Archives at UIS?

A. Oh perhaps I ought to clarify that while Sangamon State was a shocking experience to my narrow background and it really was a shocking experience I think to most anyone who had not kind of grown into it because it was a change over the way education was handled earlier, it's become a marvelous institution and a marvelous part of this community.

We're very pleased; there may have been some growing pains but those same growing pains were going on all over the country. I think we were more extreme with some of them than some other places, except we all heard about the riots at Berkely and all the other.

Q. Shootings at Kent.

A. The avant-garde schools and so forth, but we did have... we had a whole... we had perhaps an overabundance of professors who were in essence draft dodgers more than educationally oriented. We had it and it was the changing social time, which was hard to put all together but the outcome in the long run, 40 years later, has been wonderful.

Q. Thank you and that concludes our interview.

End Interview One

Begin Interview Two

Q. Tell me about what happened when you were close to graduation.

A. Well I suddenly realized that all the courses I'd taken, most of which were philosophy courses or history courses, there was no philosophy department and there was... I can't remember whether there was an organized history department or not. But anyway, they all cross-indexed into psychology and so I said, "Ok, I'm going after a psychology degree although I'd never taken a clinical psychology course in my life."

And the psychology department suddenly realized that they had these people who didn't have any background in psychology graduating with psychology degrees. So they put in a course for those who had never taken clinical psychology, and they had six weeks of behavior psychology. They had six weeks of stats and six weeks of clinical methods. They were taught by three different professors and we had the first one, six weeks of behavior psych. And then you took the test on that and you put that book away. And then you had six weeks of stats and you took a test on that, you put that book away. And you had your six weeks of whatever and then you were going to have an exam for the semester that was going to cover all three.

And that suddenly was worrying because I hadn't remembered any of those six week classes after I'd once put the book away. But it turned out that when the exam was scheduled, it turned out to be the same time that I, as president of the Family Service Center, which was then the largest social agency in the county, had scheduled an interview with a new executive director that was coming to town for that purpose. So I went to the head of the department and asked if I could change my exam time to another time. And he just looked at me and said, "Oh, there's no reason for you to take that. Why don't you just skip it? You're all right." So that was the only serious exam situation I ever ran into.

Q. It really makes me wonder what kinds of jobs the people graduating from that psychology program were able to get since they did not have a lot of psychology classes.

A. I don't know. But I think that if they start out in a... in a basic job and many psychology jobs tend to take one theory or another and even though they weren't versed in that theory, they might be on the job training if they had any background at all. I don't know because I never went for a psychology job (laughter).

Q. That concludes part two of my interview with Nancy Chapin.

20 minutes 23 seconds

End of Interview