

University of Illinois at Springfield

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## **Lin Ezell Memoir**

### **Ezell, Lin**

Interview and memoir  
digital audio file, 36 min., 12 pp.

UIS Alumni Sage Society

Ezell, currently the Director of the National Museum of the Marine Corps, attended Sangamon State University in 1974 and earned a master's degree in literature but had almost as many credits in history, citing experiences with professors Howard Moon, Ed Ezell, and Cullom Davis. Ezell was a student worker in Brookens library as a cataloger with memories of the paper card file.

Interview by Mary Caroline Mitchell, 2010

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Narrator: Lin Ezell  
Date: November 11, 2010  
Place: Springfield, IL  
Interviewer: Mary Caroline Mitchell

Q. This is November 11<sup>th</sup>, very appropriately Veteran's Day for you.

A. Yes.

Q. And we're sitting in Brookens Library in the conference room and this is Lin Ezell and this is Mary Caroline Mitchell. Lin, would you tell us a little bit about your degree date and what degree you got if you can remember?

A. Yeah, the degree date is 1974 and it was in literature as they called it then. Don't know if you still call it literature or if you've renamed it, and I was a student here for longer than the usual two years. Back in the early 1970s most of us were a little unstructured if you will.

Q. Ok. Just to begin the interview so that it is recorded for the Archives, could you tell us where you live currently and just a brief synopsis of what you've been doing career wise.

A. Sure. I live in the Washington, DC area, southern Maryland, and I'm the Director of the National Museum of the Marine Corps, which is northern Virginia, near the Marine Corps base Quantico off I-95.

I joined the staff there in the summer of 2005 after having spent twenty-one years at the Smithsonian's National Air and Space Museum. And the first ten years out of college after I left Sangamon State, I worked as an historian for NASA first at the Johnson Space and then a few other places before I ended up in Washington.

Q. Great. Ok so let's go back to the 1970s, and where did you go to college before you entered Sangamon State?

A. I spent my first two years at Illinois State, first of family to go to college. And the only way that was going to happen was if I had a scholarship, and I had a merit scholastic scholarship, a teacher's scholarship so I went to a state school. And Illinois State was back then kind of known as a teacher's college, and that's where I headed for the ambition to be a teacher, didn't happen obviously.

Q. Did you have kind of a traditional first two years in college living in the dorm and all?

A. I did and I grew up in a farming community, fewer than a hundred of us in my graduating class in high school. And of course Illinois State was just huge and I never felt at home in that mega-university environment or at least it seemed that way to me. I never got to know any of

my professors. I was always a student id number, classes were in auditoriums. And I did ok, worked hard scholastically but never fit in.

And when I decided that that was just not going to be desirable for senior, junior/senior classes, I started looking for someplace else to go. Found Sangamon State; that was the right fit at the right time, right location. It all meshed nicely.

Q. So what year did you get information about Sangamon State?

A. It was the summer after my sophomore year, so 1969-1970, 1970-1971, so it would have been the summer of 1971. Back then it didn't take too long to be able to apply and get into school. I think it was just a matter of filling out an application and showing up here. They were looking for students. It was a pretty unstructured time.

Q. How did you find out about Sangamon State since it had just really opened in 1970?

A. Well there was a catalog; I don't even remember where I found it. I think I found it at a library, not on campus, not at Illinois State, someplace else – a public library, maybe Canton Public Library. But I found the catalog, loved what I read, the sense of community involvement, small classes. It just sounded like it's where I should be.

Q. Do you remember where you went to enroll or did you mail it in?

A. There were like pre-engineered butler buildings here, and I just showed up with probably the tear sheet out of the catalog and started the process. It wasn't hard.

Q. Did you have to declare your major when you entered?

A. Oh, you're asking to reach too far back with minutiae. I don't remember. But I had been an English major at Illinois State, so I imagine I just stayed in the same vein. And I still thought teaching was where I was heading. I didn't know any better. But during that first year here, I was placed not so much a being a student teacher but getting experience in the classroom.

And after the first experience, I knew this was not for me. And at the same time, I was being exposed to all kinds of new ideas and new possibilities by being here. So unfortunately that meant the scholarship went by the wayside, which meant that I had to get a full-time job. And I had been a student employee here with the library – catalog, filing cataloging cards, remember cataloging cards?

Q. Yep.

A. And the cataloging, the chief cataloger helped me interview and get a job at Lincoln Land's library. So I became a full time employee at Lincoln Land, part time student here, and I still kept

the part-time student job. But it was not that uncommon for students to hold a couple of jobs to make ends meet and pay tuition and make it all work.

Q. Where were your classes located? And was it 1971 when you first started?

A. Yeah, I was here when they first started in 1971, 1972, 1973, and 1974. Our classes were in and again these were the pre-engineered buildings, and there was these grassy knolls that connected them. I thought it was just fantastic that on a nice day, the instructor would just take you out on the grass. and you would have class in the sunshine and the grass. It was so different. And again, just what I needed

Q. How would you describe your fellow students? Were they similar in age to you?

A. There were some older but not younger. I mean I was at the youthful end of the spectrum then. But there weren't any, there weren't any fifty-year-olds or sixty-year-olds. It was twenty-somethings, and I don't remember really anybody that was much older than thirty maybe in the classes.

Q. What did you like about the curriculum that you were presented with because you said you found it attractive?

A. It was, it didn't look and read like any other college catalogs. Although we did maybe some of the same readings, things had a different perspective, a different spin on them. And I became extremely more captivated by all of my history classes, and that's absolutely where my interests went and my career after college went.

But I remember the English classes too, the literature classes too. But everybody emphasized the fact that you needed to think, and you needed to be creative and be critical. Probably above all be critical, be a critical thinker, be a critical listener, be a part of the process and not just a recipient of knowledge. That was when I reflect back what made the biggest difference after I graduated.

Q. Did you find it easier academically than Illinois State or harder?

A. Oh, harder. I mean your first two years in college especially in a big school like that, you're just in the mill. And I don't what the junior and senior classes were like, certainly they were smaller. And I assume that you got to that stage where you became a critical thinker there, too. But it was so obvious here that the instructors wanted you to think outside the box, wanted you to think differently. And because the classes were so small and students were...

Q. What would be the average size of your class?

A. Oh, twenty would have been huge, a dozen to twenty.

Q. What did the students dress like?

A. Jeans, jeans, t-shirts and sneakers.

Q. What about the faculty?

A. Jeans, t-shirts and sneakers (laughter). And of course you think that is way cool when all you've known is suits and ties and stuffiness. So oh, absolutely and they weren't much older than us or it didn't seem anyway. I don't remember, I mean Dennis Camp and Cullom Davis and Ed Ezell and Howard Moon, they all were looking back they were in their thirties.

So yeah, they were young; they dressed like us. They went and drank beer with us. In the evening it wasn't unusual for a final project to end up, there was a tavern somewhere down here. I don't remember where, but it was kind of like to the south and the west of campus.

Q. Crow's Mill.

A. And that was not only a hang out but classes would go there either as a treat or that may be where we had a final discussion. So that was, that was fun.

Q. So when you first arrived here, were you surprised that it was all temporary buildings or what were you expecting?

A. Well when I came to enroll, they made it clear but that was ok. I mean when you come from someplace like Illinois State or the main campus at the U of I, it's all these towers and concrete and huge auditoriums, and it's not warm. I imagine you can make it personable somehow, but I wasn't getting any of that as a freshman or sophomore.

It was all these big buildings on the prairie; the wind blew like hell through the buildings. Here it was kind of a grassy oasis. I didn't mind the fact that they were metal buildings. I think the only cafeteria we had was a room with vending machines and maybe they sold sandwiches. Yeah, I think they sold sandwiches.

Q. Were you here in the daytime for classes?

A. Because Lincoln Land knew I was a student here, I got a lot of latitude on my hours. And they were open almost 24/7, so they needed staff all the time. So they were real flexible with me and so I attended I don't remember, yeah, they were evening classes sure. They were but I had a mix of them, probably about fifty/fifty.

Q. You mentioned you were here for awhile. What was your course load usually per semester?

A. Only that first semester did I have a full load, the four or five or whatever a regular load would be. After I started working full time, I went to about three classes was a lot working full

time. And I think shy of one semester, maybe I had two or three classes left, I got an opportunity to travel and I left campus for a year.

Gallivanted about on my adventures and then came back and finished that last, so I could have graduated maybe six months sooner than I did but went off and had an adventure, youthful indiscretion (laughter).

Q. What was your most memorable class or some of the classes that have had impact on you?

A. I remember a class about colonial history where we for the first time or I for the first time got exposed to the idea of America as a colonial power. And the things that we were doing scattered all over the globe, which I know a lot better a lot more about now because the Marines were part of that so I've kind of gone full circle in that knowledge.

But I can remember that epiphany of sitting in that classroom thinking, "We were the bad guys." We were perceived as the colonial power, as the going to other countries for economic gain, totally new concept for me. And I kind of think that might have been Homer Butler's class, but I don't know for sure; I can't remember.

But that was just one of those "aha" moments as a young student. And historic preservation classes, Ed Ezell taught those and that was wonderful. It was just, I just ate it up, couldn't get enough of that. Howard Moon was another history professor that exposed you to some of the darker side of history.

Again the readings they had us do, the thinking, the papers – all new territory. You get such a whitewash of history in secondary school and the survey classes where you just don't scratch the surface. And these professors all started digging way deep, drew us in with them.

Q. Was the pedagogical style different than you'd experienced at ISU or how did it differ?

A. There was so much more discussion. The classes were small, the instructors expected you to participate. It wasn't, you weren't just feeding back to an instructor something that you had read. I can remember we were assigned to read "The Pentagon Papers" and of course Vietnam coming to an end during this time affected the student body.

I remember a young Marine who came back as a student and his last assignment had been stuffing bodies into body bags. And here you know most of us in class are innocents. We have not been exposed to any of this and he was like us two or three years previous and then so changed by his experiences in Vietnam. And of course it rocked the whole country apart.

One of the things that was happening at Illinois State and just about every big campus was that you had, there were never any major demonstrations there but there were minor mixes with the university police. And it was not volatile but there was an undercurrent of discontent that

you didn't talk about. You wore the peace symbols; you outwardly took on the affectations of the period, but we never really seriously discussed it.

Here you discussed it. Not only did you get exposed to the history of the period, understood what the French had done before in this country, what the Americans were doing now; you came to understand the politics. But the instructors really made you think about it, and then you had these discussions with them. Six weeks ago I was in the jungle stuffing bodies of the guys I knew who couldn't make it home.

Q. Beside discussions you mentioned experiential learning. What kinds of, did you have internships? You mentioned going to a school when you were studying teaching, but did you have other experiences?

A. Yes, historic preservation group, there's a living farm, living history work. We went out and measured buildings, dug into archival records, assembled files, markings, historic preservation projects. There was a, that was our kind of our first hands-on archival, archeological experiences for most of us. I mean it was absolutely fun; I was a sponge. I just loved it, was like, "aha, this is for me." So it was good.

Q. What about your literature? You talked a lot about history but you ended up majoring in literature.

A. Well that was just kind of because that was the road I was down and rather than... well I think almost had as many credits in history as I did in English.

Q. That was what I wondered.

A. But that was the degree I started down, so that was the degree I finished.

Q. What types of literature were your specialties? Or did you take classes in?

A. There was a lot of poetry; Russian, there were several Russian literature and poetry classes. And I had been, I had had a Russian minor when I was at Illinois State, and there were two or three instructors here who had an interest in Russian.

So I ended up with some Russian history classes, Howard Moon, a couple of Russian literature classes, something else Russian. So there was a little mix of that that I got exposed to here. But the literature classes I'm pretty much blanking on. They might have taught "The Pentagon Papers" as an English class. And again there was a lot of freewheeling with the classes.

I think to tell you the truth some of them just kind of got made up and, "Ok, this is what we are going to do." Because we could; we were small, you know you don't plan on a class on "The Pentagon Papers" a year ahead of time; it wasn't published. So they were very flexible and perceptive of what was important to the students and to the greater American society.

Q. How were you evaluated?

A. Oh it was real loosey-goosey. I think it was like pass/fail or something. It wasn't very structured. And people feared that that would be a disservice to obviously the students when we went out to try to get our first jobs. I didn't, it had an impact on me. I hope it didn't have a negative impact on others.

Q. What do you remember about anything happening on campus besides going to classes?

A. No, that's all we were there for. We were there to read, absorb, sponge, talk. But we were not there to play basketball or have clubs or, it was not that kind of period of time. There was a war being on, kids our age were being killed. How can you go play chess or think that it's you know a big deal to have a declamation contest or play soccer when people were getting shot at, when race was important, when the war was so important?

It seemed to us and maybe it was just a sense of self-importance that there were much bigger fish to fry, much bigger ideas to grapple with than setting up social networks and clubs. It wasn't on our agenda. In fact, we were anti-that. We took pride in being from an atypical university.

Q. What about outside lecturers coming to campus? Do you remember any of that?

A. I don't. I don't remember. I don't. It seems to me that there were guest speakers, but I don't remember big names. There might have been some. The library was another big part of my life. One because I worked there, got to know and there were a lot of students who worked there, probably still the same.

But it was especially labor intensive again because of the cataloging, and it was all a manual system. So it took a lot of us little, most of us were females, filing cards and tracking down anomalies, and the cataloging. And we would sit at tables right near the entrances, the entrance to the library to do our filing so you got to see everybody who came in and out.

Of course we could gossip and talk about everybody, and everybody saw us as they came in. So there was always a lot of... if there was a social hub, it was the library. But it was a different kind of socializing.

Q. Could you share the person at the library who hired you and you worked with?

A. I just asked Jane [Dean of Brookens Library Jane Treadwell] if she could come help me come up with her name. And she said there's an attendee at the board meeting who was from the original staff, so she's got to help me come up with that name.

I can see her. I think I can remember how many syllables in the last name but... and everybody was on first name basis back then, too. I hope she remembers who she is. But she was the chief cataloger and a big personality, so I'm hoping that this person will remember her.

Q. Was there, did you feel a good library here as a new school or did you feel there were deficiencies in it?

A. I thought it was good, but I wasn't evaluating it in that kind of qualitative way. Everything I needed I found.

Q. Did you live near the campus or in town?

A. In town, an apartment above the garage apartment.

Q. Did you have any sense of what Springfield thought of the campus as a student? Did you get a feeling?

A. I don't think they took it seriously. I mean it was it was small; it was a start up. If the organization came in contact with the students, I think it was a positive experience. And but there were little pockets of positive experience, but I don't think we were making much of a statement or an impression at that time in a big way. We were so small.

But because there was this emphasis on becoming part of the fabric of the community, making a difference, getting involved in the public good, there were lots of little opportunities for good things to happen. So I have to hope that that's snowballed and became a good, a much bigger good thing.

Q. So if you had to say which, would you describe some of your faculty and who has left an impression on you?

A. Well I have to tell you a story about marrying my professor after I left. Ed Ezell lost his wife during the time he was teaching here. She committed suicide, and it was very hard for him. And he told me later that he kept his sanity by diving into his classes and that that was the great positive part of his life.

And he just exuded "can do," positive, wonderful attitudes. He was funny; he was attractive. He connected with the students, very popular professor. And we got married years later, but he was the one who went off to have an adventure and he needed... he went off to Southeast Asia and found himself surrounded people he didn't trust and who didn't understand American culture. And he said, "I need an office assistant. Do you want to come do it?" And I said, "Well sure, why not?" (laughter) So that was... he obviously made the biggest impression on me because I married him.

But Howard Moon, he and I kept in touch for a long time. He was another history professor. Dennis Camp, I have good favorable impressions, but I don't think I can articulate details about him. Cullom Davis, big personality obviously; everybody connected with him. And only after I left did I realize what a big name he was in his field. Same way with Howard and Ed; they in the history of technology and the history of military, military history, they are big names. But we didn't appreciate it or realize it at the time.

Q. What about people that were fellow students that you met here? Did you form friendships?

A. No, I think it because I literally took the last exam, went to my apartment, loaded up everything that was dear to me in my MG Midget because it was pretty small, small number of things and headed to Houston.

So I kept up with Karl and Linda Keldermans for awhile. He was the carillonneur and his dad and then he was the carillonneur, so we kept up for a long time. But I can't remember staying in touch with anybody else. We just scattered. And again remember the times, it was a very unsettling time and people just scattered.

Q. What about commencement or graduation?

A. No. Didn't go to one, don't even know if there was one, probably was something. But I had that job waiting for me, so I literally took the last exam, headed out of town.

Q. Where did you go?

A. To Houston.

Q. What was your job there?

A. The junior historian on a, let me back up. NASA, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, has always believed that they owed the public the inside story on their projects. The public pays for NASA and it either succeeds or fails in usually a pretty spectacular manner.

So the project manager has at his discretion funds to use for a history. And they hired me as the junior historian again I had that Russian language background and a lot of history. And I spent two or three years following the Apollo Soyuz Test Project team around and then wrote about it, collected.

Q. How did you get that job?

A. Well, Ed Ezell had gone onto NASA by then, and he was the one that kind of shoved the opportunity in front of me again. And then we hooked up in Houston.

Q. So do you think your other students had similar success?

A. I don't know.

Q. You don't know?

A. I don't know. I've just lost track of everybody. We weren't social in that way. We had more important problems and issues of the day, and we didn't keep up. It would be easier now with all of the electronic ways to network and keep in touch. You had to work at it harder back then and we didn't.

Q. You mentioned Homer Butler; he was Dean of Students. So there must have... how did you encounter him as a faculty member?

A. I think so, but I can't remember enough.

Q. Ok. So as you reflect on your experience, it's more reflecting of the period of time that you went to a college as well.

A. Probably.

Q. What has stuck with you or what kind of an impact do you think? You've mentioned several things, but what would be the greatest impact do you think of this type of education on your career?

A. Being encouraged to think critically.

Q. Have you had people think, "What is Sangamon State University?" when you've applied for jobs?

A. Oh, sure. The standard and a new... how did I used to describe it? One of the, were there three or two? There was the one in Chicago and this one, maybe was just the two; one of two new schools in Illinois to take advantage of the many community college students who wanted to go on to school. But yeah I usually did have to describe it to someone.

Q. You mentioned you were the first generation. Were your parents disappointed that you didn't walk across the stage or did they ever say anything to you about it?

A. Oh well they were terrified when I left school for almost a year that I wouldn't graduate, that I had gone so far and they were horrified. But they, I think they were so pleased I got a job. Yeah, that was more important than a cap and gown sort of thing.

And I doubt seriously if anybody did a cap and gown kind of graduation in 1974. Maybe but I would be surprised. I bet you they didn't do it the year before and the year before that. We'll have to ask somebody that question.

Q. Is there anything that I haven't covered that you have thought about, stepping onto campus that you would like to have someone know about related to your experience.

A. The only thing, we've talked at alumni council meetings or whatever the advisory group is called, that I have sat in on a few times. The old timers from the 1970s because we were so proud of being like an anti-university or so atypical that what we see today look typical. You know there are dormitories and there is sport and there is all the infrastructure that you would expect at a traditional university.

And hoping that some piece of what made us special lives on is... was important; there might have been only two or three of us who felt that way and yet you move on. But what made us special I think was this commitment to public service, emphasis on weaving the students into the fabric of the community. That continues and that was certainly something we were very proud of then. But the thought in the 1970s that there would be sports teams here, it is pretty funny.

Q. Well thank you very much, Lin. And tomorrow Lin will be given the University of Illinois Alumni Association Alumni Achievement Award. So there must have been something that rubbed off from this university that has caused her great success. Thank you.

A. Thank you.

36 minutes 35 seconds

End of Interview