

Verna Emery Interview

Conducted by Katherine Markee on January 26, 2010



The following Interview was conducted with Verna Emery (VE), University Periodicals and Purdue Press, with the Purdue University Oral History Program. It took place on Tuesday, January 26, 2010, at her Residence in West Lafayette. The interviewer is Katherine Markee (KM), the Oral History Librarian. This is part two of the interview.

KM: Welcome, good afternoon, Verna, and I'll turn it over to you.

VE: I may have touched on some of these subjects in the earlier session, so forgive me if I repeat but I think a lot of it is new. I just wanted you to know that William J. Whalen founded the Purdue University Press in 1960. He was director of the press from its founding until his retirement in 1992 at which time the Office of Publications and the Purdue University Press split with each entity being assigned its own director. Until his retirement Bill was director of the Office of Publications as well as the Director of the Press. In addition he was a professor in the department of communications. In 1990 the Purdue University Press staff moved from Building D south campus courts to Building B south campus courts. Other than Bill, who remained in Building D, the Press staff consisted of two full-time members. Margaret Hunt, who was managing editor, and Carol MaGrew, who was production manager. At this time, some of the manuscripts were sent to free-lance editors. I believe the design of the books and their distribution remained with the Office of Publications. I had retired at the time of this physical move. Shortly after Bill's retirement in 1992 a full time director was hired and I believe others were added to the staff of Purdue University Press. In 1990, the year I retired, the budget for Purdue University Press was seventy-two thousand

dollars, which was used for production and promotion of the books. Book sales recouped most of this sum. The budget figure did not include salaries of the staff, at that time consisting of the director and two full time editors, nor did it include the cost of the office rent or upkeep. During my tenor with the Press from 1977 until 1990, Bill handled the budgeting. I, however, set the price of the published titles, and they were priced to break even. Press runs were in the low thousands. Sometimes we did a second printing and frequently the second printing would be a soft-bound edition. The manuscripts that were sent to that Press came from both within Purdue and from outside, and they were presented to the editorial board with a précis of the works contents and an estimate of the cost of production and promotion. Board members were appointed for a three year term by the University's Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs. The nine faculty members came from varied disciplines. The Press Director and the Managing Editor rounded out the Board membership. The Board members suggested at least two experts in the field of each manuscript to evaluate the work. If two favorable reports returned, the board voted to accept the work for publication. If the evaluation was split a third expert reviewed the manuscript. Over my years of tenure the Press developed a few special series. I'm listing here for your interest the series and some, not all, but some of the titles that were included. The series were initiated frequently by a member of the university staff who would submit a manuscript, and say it was accepted, then they knew colleagues at other universities that were working in the same area and they might suggest that the colleague from another university would send the

manuscript to us, which is what happened. One of the series was called *Balkan and Danubian Studies*. The first title we received was from Charles Ingrao. It was entitled *In Quest and Crisis: Emperor Joseph I and the Habsburg Monarchy*.

5:00 Then we received *Governance and Grievance: Habsburg Policy and the Italian Tyrol in the Eighteenth Century* by Miriam Levy, who was not a member of the Purdue faculty. As a matter of fact, none of the remaining ones were a member of the Purdue faculty. The third one was *The Hapsburg Empire and the Sea: Austrian Naval Policy 1797-1866* by Lawrence Sondhaus and *The Falcon and the Eagle: Montenegro and Austria-Hungary 1908-1914* and that was authored by John Treadway. It's interesting that this particular area has figured recently in political aspects. Another series that we had was *The History of Philosophy*. Two of the books in that, the first was *Radical Reflection and the Origin of the Human Sciences* by Calvin Schrag, a well-known Philosopher here on the Purdue faculty, and *David Hume: an Introduction to His Philosophical System* by Terence Penelhum. He, as far as I remember, was not a Purdue faculty member. Another series that we had, and probably the largest one, was *The Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*. Some examples of that were *The Moral Picturesque Studies in Hawthorne's Fiction* by Darrel Abel, *T.S. Eliot; The Critic as Philosopher* by Lewis Freed, *The Chaotic Vision of Sinclair Lewis* Martin Light, *The Lines of Life: Theories of Biography from 1880-1970*, that was David Novarr. *Ultimately Fiction: Design in Modern American Literary Biography* by Dennis Petrie. That's just an example. That's the largest series we have and I won't go on with that. Another series, and these books as I recall were all soft bound, was

10:00 called *Science and Society*. *Hermes Bound: The Policy and Technology of Telecommunications* by Claire McGillem and William McLauchlan, *Distant Hunger: Agriculture, Food, and Human Values* by Heather Johnson Nicholson and Ralph Nicholson, *Organized Technology: Networks and Innovation in Technical Systems* by Wesley Schrum, and *The Arguments of Agriculture* by Jan Wojcik. In addition to these scholarly series we also developed some expertise in other areas, one being regional titles. Regional titles were important to us because they helped to make us known within the state, as well as outside the state. There were three written by Robert Kriebel who had been editor of the local newspaper, *The Journal and Courier*. The first one, *Where the Saints Have Trod: The Life of Helen Gougar*-she was an early feminist-*Plain, Ol' Charlie Dean: Pioneer Hoosier Botanist* was the second title, and then *Poets, Painters, Paupers, Fools: Indiana's Stein Family*. Those three were by Robert Kriebel. Then there were two that we did by Robert Topping, who was the director for some years of the University News Service. One was *The Hovde Years* covering the years of Frederick Hovde's presidency and the *A Century and Beyond: the History of Purdue University*. In addition to regional titles we also did some trade titles. One, *Mark Twain Speaks for Himself* by Paul Fatout, a professor in the English department, and that particular work went into three printings. *My Amiable Uncle: Recollections About Booth Tarkington* by Susannah Mayberry. *The History of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad* by John Stover. *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana* by Anthony Tamburri. He was an editor and he was from our faculty, and two scholars from outside our faculty. I do want to say that

these titles, although they had general appeal, they did involve scholarship. Then during my tenure with the Press, we started a poetry series. I, in high school, had written poetry and had always been fond of poetry. I haven't written poetry beyond my high school years, however. But in 1980 we published the first book-length manuscript of poetry. It was *All That So Simple* by Neil Myers, a member of the English department. Then in 1986 the Purdue Press Editorial Board committed to publishing one poetry book a year. In 1990, the year that I retired the editorial board and the poetry series co-editors established the Verna Emery Poetry Prize, a competition with a cash reward of five hundred dollars and the publication of the winning volume. The year after I retired, in 1991, the Press received four hundred and ninety-two poetry entries. Seven members of the Purdue's Creative Writing program read the manuscript and narrowed the field to four entries which were then sent the Gerald Stern of the University of Iowa Writers Workshop, which is the oldest and most prestigious creative writing program in the United States. He judged those that were sent to him. He selected the title *Alcatraz* written by Richard Cecil who was on the faculty of Indiana University. During my time at the Press one poetry volume, entitled *Fishing With Blood* by Felda Brown-Jackson won the Great Lakes Colleges Association New Writer's Award. In addition, Donald Carter, a graphic designer in the Office of Publication, who designed all the poetry books during my tenor, won the Chicago Book Clinic Award for the design of *All That So Simple* by Neil Myers. That covers some of the books that we published. I should point out that in 1988 the annual output of the Press was six volumes. Compare that with one hundred and

twenty-five volumes by Indiana University, one hundred volumes by Illinois University Press, and thirty-one by Ohio State University Press. As you can see PUP was by far the smallest press in the Big Ten. I want to stress that in addition to our series we published in a wide variety of disciplines. I'll just mention a few. One, we'll start with Political Science, a title there was *The Political Pulpit* by Roderick Hart. There was another in that same area, of Political Science, *Meaning and Appreciation: Time and Modern Political Life* by Michael Weinstein. We published in Sociology, an example being *Black White Contact in Schools: Its Social and Academic Effects* by Martin Patchen. Then in Psychology a sample of a title is *Father, Have I Kept My Promise?: Madness As seen From Within* by Edith Weisskopf-Joelson. She was not a member of the faculty. In Economics, we had *Essays in Contemporary Fields of Economics* by George Horwich and James Quirk; they were editors of that volume. In addition to that, in Horticulture we had *Methods in Fruit Breeding* by James Moore and Jules Janick and that was a very popular work in that field. I believe, I know it had more than one printing, just how many printings, I'm not sure. Then we published in Agronomy. A sample there would be *Guar: Agronomy, Production, Industrial Use, and Nutrition* by Roy Whistler and Theodore Hymowitz. Most of our titles, however, came from our English Department, English Literature. Such samples as *Mirror on the Stage: The Pulitzer Plays as an Approach to American Drama* by Thomas Adler. *In a Dark Time: The Apocalyptic Temper in the American Novel of the Nuclear Age* by Joseph Dewey and *The David Myth in Western Literature* by Raymond-Jean Frontain and Jan Wojcik. That just about covers what I had in

15:00

mind to talk about today. I can, however, give you some titles of some of the poetry books, which might indeed be interesting. All of these poetry books came from outside the University except Neil Myers, the first one, *All That So Simple*. We had *In the Nocturnal Animal House* by Sarah Cotterill, *Do Not Peel the Birches* by Fleda Brown-Jackson, *A Season of Loss* by Jim Barnes, *The Spine* by Michael Spence, *Fishing With Blood* by Fleda Brown-Jackson, *La Plata Cantata*, another one by Jim Barnes, *Food for the Winter* by Geraldine Connolly, and *Murderer's Day* by E.M. Schorb. So that's what I had to say today.

KM: Got a couple things. Did you ever have any book signings?

VE: Oh, yes.

KM: Okay. Held on campus?

VE: Well every year we would join with other organizations to welcome the new faculty members, and we displayed our works and talked to them.

KM: This is at Purdue, on campus?

VE: This is at Purdue, yes. We did have book signings, a few, but quite frankly I can't remember, Katie, just which ones or when.

KM: It was just kind of a part of the welcome for new faculty, and to show that the Press was there, and they can visit or whatever.

VE: Exactly.

KM: What was marketing? Who would handle the marketing for the Press? The marketing people? In other words, to let the media know about the books?

VE: I did.

KM: Oh, you handled that, too. Okay. What about a book fair? Did you ever have anything like that?

VE: Not that I remember.

KM: Reimbursement for the Authors. Did they get any for the sales?

VE: They did get an honorarium. I don't know that you'd call it an honorarium, but yes, they did.

KM: Okay. How would you... did the board help you solicit authors? How did some of the manuscripts come to you?

VE: Well in the series, yes. Not necessarily as I said, not necessarily the board, but authors who had submitted a work and had been accepted would then contact their colleagues. Most of the material that came to us came unsolicited, whether it came from within the University or without. I mean, we did have a catalogue that we did annually.

KM: And you'd send that out. Campus-wide as well as external?

VE: Yes.

KM: Okay. But the Press has really grown a lot. And I think one thing that you want to mention that the original name was The Purdue Studies and then it became the Purdue University Press.

VE: That was my understanding, yes.

KM: Right. And they did some publications. One of the books is the old book about the history of engineering, which is a classic and used as a good reference source.

VE: That was before my time.

KM: Yeah. You were sort of the bridge between the author and the audience and to try and break even.

VE: Mhm.

KM: But it's really grown a lot.

VE: I don't know how many they're publishing these days. Do you know?

KM: I don't know either.

VE: I'd like to talk to the new director and find out.

KM: Right, exactly. But you just lucked out on this.

VE: Oh, I did.

KM: As you said earlier, they were just waiting for you to finish.

VE: It's what I was born to do. [Laughs]

KM: Yeah, right. Did you get to interact with quite a few of the authors?

VE: Oh, yes.

KM: Anyone that comes to mind?

20:00 **VE:** Well not at the moment, no, but I would get books from them. They would send me a copy or they would autograph my copy of the book with words that show that they appreciated what I did. I got to know some things about their family, when they had a new baby. Many of them would come to campus when they submitted their manuscript and knew it was accepted. We would go out to dinner. As a matter of fact, some of them stayed at my home overnight. Yes, I became very fond of them.

KM: How would you handle or who would handle a manuscript that was not acceptable? Did you sometimes suggest another source that they might want to use?

VE: No, as I recall we would send them a letter. I don't know that we... we may have over time made such a suggestion, but we simply returned the manuscript with a nice letter.

KM: Sometimes it's like the journal articles, you know, you revise it or something of that sort. That might help a little bit with the publication. Any other thing that you can think of?

VE: I can't think of any other thing, Katie.

KM: Okay. You might want to mention that you came across some of the articles that had talked about the Press and also the alumnus.

VE: We did get quite a bit of publicity in *Purdue Today* and in *The Journal and Courier* and in *Purdue Alumnus*. I think I mentioned earlier that even though I wasn't a member of the Press Association, there's a Scholarly Press Association. Even though we were too small to be members we were invited to their conferences and after Margaret was hired, we would go to those conferences. I remember, we went to one in Chicago and we went to one in Ohio. We went to Indiana, of course. We went to Illinois and Wisconsin, did I say Wisconsin? I was always treated very well. The IU Press was very friendly. As a matter of fact, as I recall, I visited them once and they acquainted me with their entire layout and how they functioned. As a matter of fact, I remember when I retired I received a letter for their marketing person and she was kind enough to congratulate me on my retirement.

KM: That's very nice that she remembered that. That's nice. You still keep reading your poetry? Do still like to read poetry? The books, do you see any of them?

VE: I haven't read poetry much lately.

KM: But it's nice to have those and you go through them and things of that sort.

VE: I still do a lot of reading. It's the main thing I do in retirement, as a matter of fact.

KM: That's right, you keep well-versed. In closing, I think we've pretty much covered the press, you think?

VE: I think so.

KM: Good. I want to thank you very much. This is a nice part two and it kind of puts the part one and part two together.

VE: Good, well thank you for caring about the press.

KM: My pleasure. [Laughs]

End of Part 2

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