CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN DIEGO

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of the University

DR. SUE EARNEST

Interviewed

by

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on

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M: This is an interview with Dr. Sue Earnest, who was a professor of Speech Pathology and Audiology at San Diego State from 1947 until 1973. She was also a student at San Diego State College from 1925 until 1928. Would you please just give me some biographical information about yourself? For instance, when and where were you born?

E: Fargo, North Dakota, and I came two months early. Therefore, I should have been born in the West. I was a preemy in a period in which they didn't know much what to do with premies; so they just put me on a pillow and kept me warm. As I work in Special Education and talk about the hazards of premies these days, I realize how fortunate I was to come out whole. (laughter)

M: Were your parents on their way across the continent?

E: Yes, and I just came suddenly, as I say, two months early. So I was born in "Windy City," Fargo, North Dakota.

M: Where were your parents on the way to?

E: They were on the way, that time, to Vancouver, where I lived at the very beginning, and then we came south. My father methodically stopped at every major city all the way down to choose the perfect place in
which to live. He almost voted for Roseland, Oregon. The roses were in bloom at the time. But thank God he came on farther south to San Diego. Then we went out in the country, that which is now called Encanto. We were a mile from the nearest transportation of any kind, more than a mile really. He thought, having lived in greener climes, that a ranch should be fairly large, and he thought God blessed us with water here. It didn't take him awfully long to find out that it was a lot of hard work and a lot of hose work to maintain any kind of a ranch. So he sort of gave up after awhile, turned very religious, and left us. (laughter) So my mother raised us alone since the time I was four, and my youngest brother was six weeks. But, may I say here, when people talk in terrible tones about a broken family, I want to hit them because our family I suppose you could call broken. We had no father, but we had such a wonderful mother, who provided father and mother care for us, that we never once knew that we were a broken home. We just had a wonderful time. (laughter)

M: How many children were there?

E: There were three. Let me just tell you a little bit about this because this also is a time that is gone that was kind of wonderful, and I get terribly nostalgic about those thirteen years in the country. We lived up on the top of a hill with a wonderful view. Every night mother would take us out, and we'd look toward Point Loma and fifty miles south across the border. When our father left, my mother, who had been a teacher and a principal, was really hard put.
There was a little later a crash while we were up there on top of that mountain. The financial crash of... Well, in 1929 we were off the mountain. In the early times, 1918, 1919, it was very hard to get along. So, my very provident mother saw to it that we had plenty of books, one of the old wind-up Victor machines, and good records. We had a great oak table around which we sat every night when we came from school. In rainy days we always carried our shoes because of course you want your shoes dry all day. (laughter) So you had those lovely, lovely experiences of gooshy mud between your toes as you walk to school. It was over a mile to school; well, I'd say it was like two miles to school, but it was lovely, lovely country. Then when we got there, we'd wash our feet under the tap outside in the schoolyard and then put on our nice dry shoes. Then the process would be reversed coming home. Mother raised all our vegetables, our chickens, and our goats. That's when I inherited the herd of sixty goats because I was the eldest, and I got to herd them more. My memories of Sundays are lovely, lovely experience of sitting in the hot sun in my bare feet with the stubble under my feet. I could read one Sunday School paper— it would take just the period of time it would be for a goat to complete maybe fifty feet of eating. Then I could get up and sit down again and read the next Sunday School story. So, I always was the first at Sunday School so I could get the beginning, the intermediate, and the advanced Sunday School papers. They hardly kept me in reading material from one Sunday to the next. (laughter) I can remember all these experiences
like when a little goat would be born and lost, and you could hear
him bleating out in the brush and you'd go out and find him, trium-
phantly bringing him back. Goat meat, roast kid, was our Sunday dish
if it wasn't roast chicken. We had a great fig tree—I'll always
love fresh figs because of that early experience—and our own citrus
trees and so forth. We were almost a completely independent family
unit living out those years with almost no dependence on any other
source of food. We made our own clothes, of course. And I don't think
any period in my life has been so satisfying as those thirteen years
up on the top of a small mountain in Encanto.

M: Where is this exactly? Would you locate it according to today.
E: Oh yes. Now 94 has cut through on the north side of what was Encanto.
So, from our mountaintop it would be maybe five blocks over to where
I could look down on 94. There used to be—I don't know if there still
are or not—radio towers near where our home was. But, when I grew
up, it was unimpaired. We always said, "Oh, we're so lucky; we have
the most beautiful view in all of San Diego." At that time there was
none of this kind of lower, lower class trash that has moved into it.
Well, I hate to say that; that sounds smug. But there's a different
type of person who has moved into the Encanto area. At that time there
were very nice middle-class people, who didn't have much money, but
they were good people. They were people one liked to have one's
children associated with.

M: What were these thirteen years? What was the period?
E: Well these were the years that mother was raising her family and
deciding to give all her attention to them. You see, she had been both a teacher and a principal in Iowa. And as dear old California has always been, it doesn't make any difference where you got your credential, when you come out here you just better get some more course work. She had little children. She couldn't get away long enough. She tried in 1918 to come here to school every day. I think this is sort of interesting what that meant, what a struggle that was. I would go with her and go to the Old Training School, which was down on Park Boulevard in the old original College, the old two-year College. First of all we'd have to walk this long, long distance to the train. It was a train then. Then we'd take the train to the city. Then we would take a streetcar out to the College. So, this whole process would take maybe two and a half to three hours. So to come and take the courses necessary to activate her credential again was just a herculean effort. But she was going along pretty well on it when the 1918 flu epidemic came along, and we almost lost her. And that's when I as the eldest just had this desperate fear because we had no relatives here, and we were alone in the world. The other two younger boys would always say, "What will we do if anything happens to mama"? I remember I used to go and listen to her breathe at night just to be sure she was still alive. It was really a traumatic period. Then happily we got through that. When I was thirteen mother said--and this kind of reminds you of the story of Mama's Bank Account--"Well now it's time to go to the city. It's time for you to really get better help with your educations."
So we went to the city, and mother went into Real Estate rather than going back into teaching.

M: Do you mean you moved to the city?

E: We moved to the city. The city then was East San Diego. At that time El Cajon was a sea of mud. It was rather a wide street then, just as it is now, but not paved. I remember we slipped and slithered. This was a period, remember, when the cars had to be cranked. East San Diego was just developing. To us now it seems to be a decadent part of the city, but at that time it was the newest part. So mother did very, very well in Real Estate. Mother was of the school of thought, which was part of that generation, that education came above everything. Mother would say—I can still hear her saying it over and over again—"They can't take it away from you. If you have an education, they can't take it away from you. You can have money, you can have houses, and they can come and take it but not your education." So she stressed that, and I think perhaps she was more thrilled than anyone in our family when I got the Ph.D. My youngest brother almost got it. He's one of those people who did everything but finally turning in the dissertation. So he really to all events and purposes got his too, though he just didn't quite get the title.

M: What are the names of your two brothers?

E: The one who's now passed away, who's just younger than I, was James. And then the other is Don. Don is now City Manager of La Mesa. He has been City Managers all over the United States. He started out in San Diego as one of the Assistant City Managers, and then he went to
Georgia, and he finally went to a large city in Florida. I can't think of it. It's one of the major cities, not Miami.

M: Orlando?

E: No. (laughter) I should know that. But anyway, he's had a lot of responsible City Manager positions. City Manager work is a highly competitive one in which the average life of a City Manager—I mean the average time he stays in one place—is two years. So that is hard on a family. Finally he decided to come back at much less money to San Diego and go into City Schools. He was in Administration, for awhile in Financial Planning, and then he went into Community College work. But now I think he's having the best time of all as La Mesa's City Manager. Well, if you've been reading the papers over the years, you know there's been a lot of dissidence, a lot of lack of agreement in that geographical area. It's been his pleasure to try to get warring factions together. He's been somewhat successful and enjoyed it a lot. So he's here, and I enjoy him very much.

M: You said you are married?

E: Oh yes. Forty-five years this month. On the twenty-first of November.

M: Do you have any children?

E: Oh yes. I have a son who is a Professor at Stanford University. He is next to the top in Computer Research. There are two parts of Computer Research in Stanford University, one mainly government funded and
the other mainly University funded. He's in the one that's being federally funded. He's an MIT and Cal Tech graduate, and he has three children. My eldest grandson is now in college. Then I have a daughter here in San Diego, who was a Speech Therapist for fourteen years and finally found the man of her choice, a very lovely person, who's a teacher in the City Schools. She found him in the Rome Airport. No, the Rome Train Station. They have a family of three, and they're much younger. The youngest is two months old. So there's that vast range between eighteen years and two months in six grandchildren.

M: And they live in this area?

E: The three youngest and their father and mother live in San Diego, in Mission Hills six blocks away.

M: Could you just tell me a little bit about the education you've received, starting with the school where you used to wash the mud off your feet?

E: (laughter) Well, I think San Diego City School education has always been respectable, but out there it was real country. It was like going to school in Julian, for instance. I was very happy with it. I thought we had excellent education. Of course at that time there were no junior high schools, so one went all nine grades in the elementary school. So when I left there at eleven and went to San Diego High School, I was at that period next to the youngest girl who had ever gone to high school. At least that's what they told me.

M: What school was this? Is it still there?
E: The Encanto Elementary School. Yes. It was something interesting. My first teaching job out of San Diego State College was there. They sent me right back there. I had to teach first graders in a great hall that was used on Saturday nights for dancing. So the first hour and a half of every Monday morning, I spent identifying the desks and getting them back in place. (laughter) But it was a good experience.

M: When you attended, was it sort of combined classes so that you could progress at your own pace?

E: Oh yes, that's why. That explains it. You see, I didn't go to school till I was seven, and I was out of there at eleven. Now the only way that I achieved this was that they had two classes in a room. I would do all the sixth grade work, and then I would hurry over and do all the seventh grade work. (laughter) So four times I skipped a grade, or let's say I did two grades in one year four times. So that's how I got out at eleven. So then when I graduated from San Diego High School, I was just barely fifteen with long curls, freckles, and I thought that babies were born in cabbages. (laughter) So mother, very wisely again—mother was the most wonderful, unusual woman—said, "No, now this is the time to see the world." Now here it was real Depression for us. It wasn't 1929 yet, remember; this was 1924. But for us, we had no money. So we bought an old Buick, and mother had cupboards placed on the side, just like you'd have in the kitchen, shallow cupboards with knives, forks, spoons and plates, and that open and closed cupboard doors. My
younger brother by this time was learning to drive very well. Mother went to the bank and she borrowed, I think it was two-thousand dollars. Now that would be maybe twenty-thousand dollars now, or more than that. But it was an enormous debt for us to go into. But she said, "This is important. You must learn about your country, and you're too young to go to college." So we got in the car, and we just started. We did a great squirrel pattern of the U.S.A. At night, we didn't have sleeping bags; we each had our own blankets and we would roll up beside the road under a tree and sleep. I remember mother at noontime and lunchtime would always go to the dairy. In every town there would be a dairy or a dairy outlet, and we would buy milk, cream, and fresh berries or fresh fruit and bread. And this was our regular luncheon. I can still taste it; it was so good. So we had one hot meal a day at night. So we lived very economically. We saw the whole U.S.A.

M: What time period was this?
E: A whole year. We took a year.
M: So the younger children were taken out of school?
E: They were taken out of school too. Now mother justified this by doing the teaching herself having been a teacher. She saw that we did some studying along the way. So then after I came to San Diego State then, not in the fall of 1924 as I should have, but in the fall of 1925 because I had taken this year off. Now, when I came to State down on Park Boulevard, it was a two-year College. By the time I graduated in 1928, it had become a four-year College. But it was still a two-year
College, and it had just come up from San Diego High School. When I was in High School, a senior in High School, the people who were in the College were in the same institution. I could see them coming up and down stairs, these "older people who were going to College." So I was in the very beginning of changing into a true two-year institution. I note in looking at this Annual for 1926 that there were just forty faculty members. There were only three hundred students, and all three hundred of us stood on the front steps, and we have a picture of this, in the old portico of the old building now no longer in existence. So things were changing very rapidly. I noticed in the next Annual in 1927, it had grown to fifty faculty. But these faculty did not have Ph.D.'s. They were simply well-trained teachers, probably with Master's Degrees in most instances. I noticed that the first cap and gowns worn by faculty, I think, came in 1928 or 1929. They didn't even use them in the ceremonies at the end of the semester.

M: My goodness. So this was in 1928 when you graduated from State?

E: Yes, I graduated with a Teaching Degree and a Four-Year College Degree. You didn't have to have your Master's then; you had only the four years.

M: Then you went on to another institution?

E: Yes, but I stopped and procreated for awhile. I taught two years, and then became pregnant, and had my first son, and then decided to stay out awhile to take care of him. Then two years later I had a daughter. I stayed out awhile with her, and then I went back to school. So except for that period of procreation, I have taught steadily from 1928 till the present.
M: Where did you get your advanced degrees?

E: Then I went to USC in 1938. There's this long period, fifteen years of teaching in the San Diego City Schools, which included doing Theatre, putting on all the shows, writing all the shows. This was a lovely, debilitating, marvelous experience of which I really gave it my all. I was exhausted all of the time, but still it was a wonderful experience. During this period of fifteen years, I was raising a family. So, in 1938, I decided to get my Master's, and I met Walter Hepner. In the meantime, before we leave them though, and before I go on to the Walter Hepners, I want to talk about the first faculty, the lovely, lovely people of the periods of the twenties: Arthur G. Peterson, Coach Peterson, and President Hardy, and Irving Outcalt.

M: All right. Could you just finish up with your education and then we'll come back to your student days here and go into depth in that.

E: All right. So then I got my Master's in four years, and of course I had to do all this on top of teaching all the time. I was raising a family, I felt, and I had a mother with me. By this time mother had had a serious illness and couldn't work anymore. So for seventeen years mother lived in our home, and I felt that I must take care of her, that I must support her. This was one of the reasons why I went back to teaching. So, it would be about 1942 I got my Master's. I didn't get my Ph.D. till 1947, and then that's when I came to San Diego State. Walter Hepner had said to me on several
occasions, "Now when you get that Doctor's, you come and ask me for a job." And I did, and he did. And I've been here ever since.

M: Alright. Can you remember your first recollection of San Diego State? I imagine it would be as a small child.

E: You mean of all of the San Diego States?

M: Right.

E: Yes. I was a very small child in 1918, since I was born in 1909, and I remember the Old Training School you see. When mother was going back to get her additional classes for her credential, to update her credential, she took me along. So there was that period in which I experienced the First Training School on Park Boulevard.

M: How many years?

E: No, this was a matter of months before mother came down with the flu and gave up. I didn't graduate from there. I just went there for awhile.

M: Could you just tell a little bit about the way the Training School was organized and about how many teachers and students there were?

E: I don't remember how many teachers there were, and I don't think it was organized so differently from the way it was on this campus. It was always known as a very permissive, creative, imaginative or imagination-provoking, school. I've heard all through the years only good things, really.

M: It would be sort of a predecessor, then, to the Campus Lab School?

E: It was the predecessor of, and I don't think the methods were so different.
M: Well, all right. Well, let's go into your student days at San Diego State.

E: How long do you want me to talk about all this stuff?

M: Oh, as long as you would like.

E: Well, I don't know how much of it is useful. But I think the thing that hits me hard about remembering the twenties is the type of person on the faculty with whom we were working. Now there was Mrs. Ada Hughes Coldwell, who was a "laidy" let me say. In all of the best sense, I don't think she had many of life's experiences. We all felt we knew more about life than she did. I remember she used to lecture us on the bunny hug, and she used to point out that this developed in the brothels of San Francisco. And so that when we danced, we must not dance too close to one another. But she always said it in such an absolutely sweet and lovely way. She was married obviously, but I never really knew whether she knew much about the facts of life. But here for instance is her message, and I can imagine in 1973 this being the message of the Dean of Women:

"Greater than stars or suns, bounding, O soul, thou journeyest forth,
To know the universe itself as a road, as many roads for traveling souls." And so she goes on. There was this great emphasis on ethics, and beauty, and the loveliness of life. We really didn't learn anything about the sordidness of life at all in that period. It was a remarkably clean time and group, and when I hear about bathtub gin and the twenties, it just makes me know that either I missed a lot or things were different here. You didn't even tell dirty jokes very much