

Hobbs, Irene

This oral history with Irene Hobbs was completed by Lola Selby on 7/21/88. Transcription was not undertaken until December 2003. Because of the deaths long before of both Selby and Hobbs, the interview was edited by Frances Lomas Feldman; no changes in text or content were undertaken, the corrections confined to grammar and some language.

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Irene Hobbs

SELBY: I am Lola Selby, interviewing Irene Hobbs. We're going to talk about some of her experiences in social work, how she got into the field and look into some of the occupations that she had when we met professionally.

The place of this interview is Irene Hobb's home and this is July 21, 1988. And now, Irene, I want to know whether you have done any other interviews about yourself and your connections any where.

HOBBS: No.

SELBY: None at all. Alright. We will start. I want to know today what were some of the circumstances leading to your entering social work, some of your earlier experiences in social work and, eventually, more about the various positions that you have held in social work.

HOBBS: The main circumstances or events that took me into social work were unemployment and a good case of hunger. I had finished my undergraduate studies with a degree in journalism and in sociology and there were no jobs to be found in journalism so I took what I could, which was a helper in a working mothers home in Dallas. I took care of the kids and kept the floors clean while mothers went to work.

SELBY: When was this, Irene?

HOBBS: That would have been about Spring of 1935, I think, or something like that. Well, after a few weeks I learned from a former college friend that she was in quote "Social Work" in Ft. Worth and she helped me to get a job in what would have been the Texas Relief Commission, I guess they called it, and our job was to determine eligibility

and administer the relief administration program that was finally financed by the federal government. I stayed there until they went out of business about January 1936. That was quite an experience for me. I wasn't yet 21 so I couldn't have the full salary of \$15 a week and I learned things that I had no idea existed. The whole idea of this kind of thing -- giving people money in the state of Texas -- was just beyond the pale. They fought taking any federal funds as long as they could; they didn't fight any more than my father did. He came down to Ft. Worth one time and he saw the long lines of people. He came into the office where I was and he said "Come on, we're going home" and I said, "Well, Papa, I'm a social worker. I'm not going anywhere. He looked at me and he said to me, "No daughter of mine is going to be a social worker." That's how they thought of it in Texas and he wasn't very much different than many others. But after a while I found myself unemployed again and was able to get a job as a cashier in a kind of a carnival -- or a State Fair, I guess it was really -- and I worked nights and went to schools days to get myself a teaching credential. Then I started teaching school and I taught for two years. But some how or other I couldn't get this idea of being a social worker out of my mind, so I decided that I would go to graduate school and I went to graduate school in Boston. I didn't go full time but I was able to finish what was approximate a year's graduate study. Then I came back to Texas and started to work for the Department of Public Welfare. While I really wasn't nearly as educated and knowledgeable as I should have been, the very fact that I had some professional training really put me in a most desirable position and I had no difficulties getting a job what so ever. Very shortly -- far before I should have -- I became an area supervisor with the Department of Public Welfare in Austin, Texas and stayed there, I guess, about a year and was transferred to Ft. Worth where I

was the training supervisor for all new staff people that were to be placed in the offices of the State Department of Public Welfare throughout the western part of the state. That was a very interesting job. I really ran a little school there and people would come in for six weeks of training, some of them had been former sheriffs, house wives, plumbers and almost most anything. This was a big field now in Texas and at last we had gotten into the swing of the public system. So after a year or so, I came to California to finish my graduate study and I went to the University of Southern California where I received my degree having done my thesis and field of work with older folks. Following graduation I went to work for Family Service as a worker downtown and in the San Fernando Valley and then in a year or so became a district Director of the agency in the San Pedro Harbor District.

SELBY: Who was the director of the agency at that time?

HOBBS: Blythe Francis was the administrator of the agency. I stayed there until about 1952 when at a luncheon one day I got to talking to a fellow about his work in the L.A. city schools. I was able to get a job with the school system, where I started as a substitute. I had a promise only of four months of work but I knew that was what I wanted to do and I decided to take my chances. I worked in the department over on the east side as a child welfare attendance worker. Very shortly I took students from the USC graduate School of Social Work. After doing that for two or three years I became area supervisor in the central district and stayed there for about 16 years without moving. Then I went to the Valley for a couple of years and retired in 1972.

SELBY: You really had quite a range of experiences in these two fields and I would be interested in knowing what you found particularly gratifying in your work as a social worker.

HOBBS: Well, the most gratifying work experience I ever had was as a supervisor and I must say I spent more years in supervision and administration than in direct service but then I was always a better basketball coach than I was a basketball player. So I guess perhaps that, why I enjoyed supervision so much.

SELBY: What did you find particularly difficult and what sort of obstacles did you find in your pursuit of social work as you knew it during your professional life?

HOBBS: Well, the hardest time of course was in the school system. The social worker in those days was basically neither fish nor fowl. You weren't on your own home territory; you were in somebody else's territory; you weren't really in but you surely were not out. So, kind of straddling there was perhaps easier for me than for most people who had never been in a classroom; when the going got tough I took advantage of the situation and never lost the fact that I had been a teacher. I know I really was always much better accepted after the statement that I had been a teacher was made. I know that in the earlier days people had difficulty working in any host agency where its primary purpose was something other than a social work purpose. It was hard for everybody who did that, but the feeling of so many in those days in education were against our constituents because the kids were not coming to school or parents were coming to school and bawling people out at school, or they were causing everybody trouble. So we weren't very much more popular than the people we were standing for -- and I started to say advocating for -- because that was really what so much of the job was. I think I learned, without knowing

the fancy term, the true meaning of the word “advocate” when I worked for the school system. Yet, it was the most exciting and happiest and hardest work experience I ever had.

SELBY: I meant to ask you also if during your social work years, have you, done any volunteer work that would be related to social work?

HOBBS: Yes, for the first several years I was on the Senior Citizen Council as chairman of the housing committee, this was in Orange County because we have a place down there and was spending so much in Orange County that I was on that council. Then in the later years, Anne Mou delivered meals on wheels to other older folks and that is one of the greatest things I’ve ever been involved with although I can certainly say it was hard work to get money for it but it served a purpose for older folks who are generally alone. If they didn’t have those meals coming to come in two times a day they’d be off to nursing home, boarding care homes, or god knows where so I do that and I let nothing interfere with my Meals on Wheels, whatever the activity is.

SELBY: That is a very important role to fill in today’s world, I think. I wonder what significant changes you have seen taken place in social work over your years here in California?

HOBBS: Well, it seems to be that there was a great change from when I first was in social work in California with the family agency. Even with the family agency, I should say, we were interested and working on programs of a social nature. We were involved in trying to get child guidance clinics going and we were trying especially in San Pedro to influence different agencies to be sure that all the different kind of services came there. That was a very wonderful work experience. At one point there I was in a community

service center where we had persons from different agencies there housed together and we were truly a family and working together with each other and in the community on behalf of the ones we worked with, a lot of it was really social programs. Now as the years went on it seems that a kind of isolation developed in a way; I guess we gave up or let go or they died out or something. Some groups in the harbor area sort of disappeared in a way and you began to see family agencies shrunk when I first went there, we had district offices in about eight or nine communities. I don't think they have over two or three during the past few years. I don't know much about it but a lot of the services began to shrink and a lot of social workers didn't seem to be so interested in working in agencies and under either public or private auspices. Even the students, before they ever got going well in their second year of study, were thinking only about getting into private practice. So I think that was a big change. There was another big change since those days: we had a pretty good union in this town of Los Angeles, and we worked on social problems as well as our own individual wages and working conditions. These interests faded and people now were interested in private practice, psychotherapy per se. Many of them were; I'm not meaning to say everybody was, but it seemed for a while there, that social work as I had known it was on the fence. In the past there may have been some lip service to private practice, but it wasn't prominent like it became. I used to work hard in NASW and we had always had active meetings going on about this, that, and the other all the time. Then we went into the state setup that didn't seem to be so potent any more. But I'm glad to say that I think from reading the NASW national paper in particular that we are again interested, although it may be more through the political arm and that is certainly the ballot way these days. We are getting back to basic interest in the homeless

and the needy kids and unemployed families and AIDS and dope programs and a lot of that kind of thing, which in a sense is putting the “social” back into the tune social work.

SELBY: In other words we are dealing again with social problems as we see them in our community.

HOBBS: Exactly, and were working on them now for a while. If you wanted to get involved in something like that you were passé and you were left over from another era, you know, and the only thing was to be working on was to get a license to be a private practitioner.

SELBY: Well, what particular problems do you see affecting social work in California today? What particular stimulation do you see? You mentioned some already but maybe you can think of some more.

HOBBS: I don't know that I could think of anything else except not only California, but for the country as a whole, must come to grips with the problems of this society. There not only problems of the poor; there problems of the whole society, and I think we not only must, but I think we are, going to go back more to a lot of these kinds of social activism. In this point in history we have to be political, but we have to be sure what are political about, or what is appropriate for us as social workers to be political about -- and that is to try to bring out better conditions and better opportunities for people.

SELBY: Do you happen to have any papers or pamphlets or other kinds of items that might be of some value to other social workers in today's world?

HOBBS: Any books and that sort of thing I gave to the School of Social Work and any things that I have written or myself helped with supervision and training of staff are all practically 20 years ago.

SELBY: You certainly have had an interesting experience in social work and you still feel related to the field in some ways and I want to thank you for your participation.

HOBBS: I would say related in many ways because I have never forgotten. Some people say “I don’t want to feel like I’m a social worker now that I retired. Not me, I am a social worker, I was a social worker, and I will be a social worker.

SELBY: Thank you, again.