

Interview with John Milner

This interview with Professor Milner was conducted by Professor Elizabeth McBroom, as part of the Annual Spring Forum of California Social Work Archives on April 13, 1987 in the Arlien Johnson Social Work Library of the USC School of Social Work Library. Thirty-seven people were in the audience.

MCBROOM: John, you came to Los Angeles to live and work for the first time in 1946, fresh out of the Army. In some ways it seems like only yesterday, but we know that it has been enough time for two generations of children to be born and grow to maturity. I wonder if you would start by telling us something about how the city looked when you arrived here in 1946.

MILNER: You have to have a long memory for that. I remember first coming on the campus, Arlien Johnson had wired me when I was in the Army asking if I would join the faculty and I was very unsure if I wanted to teach. So one of the first places I came to was the campus once I was out of the Army. I felt like I had really stepped back in time in a way. It was very quiescent, a passive kind of campus - it did not seem to me to have been much affected by World War II. The main buildings at that time were all on Child's Way. There was also a hot dog stand, a Phelps-Turkel store that had a different name at that time, and a maltshop. The only buildings which were off Child's Way were the gymnasium and one or two other buildings including the Von KleinSmid building.

The faculty met with me the first day at the only eating place, which was a table in the corner of the big banquet hall behind Elizabeth Von KleinSmid Hall.

The thing I remember particularly was the elegance of the administration building where Dr. Von KleinSmid, who was the president of the university at that time, had his offices. They were furnished in French antiques that were gifts of the Adams family. Many art objects were in the hallway including Oriental objects that were very valuable. These were not destroyed in any way despite all of the traffic in the building. The rooms were formally outfitted and it was a place where Arlien Johnson, who was then the Dean of the School of Social Work, loved to hold teas. That was the main entertainment in

those days – coming to a tea party even in spite of a lot of complaints from agencies that this was not the most exciting entertainment. I remember Arlien always worried that Dick Medhurst and I would ‘spike’ the punch to liven up the place--and I am not saying that we did not. If we wanted to entertain there, we could ask the secretary of the president, Dr. Von KleinSmid, who was really an elegant man – I think the last of the Victorians. He would arrive each morning with his morning coat on, his gray trousers and a homberg hat. A chauffeur would bring him to the door and he would come in – so if we wanted to entertain we approached his secretary. If we behaved ourselves during the year, she would bring out the best china and silver, which had been left to the University by wealthy families; so we were treated in style.

This was the atmosphere of the university at that time: I could see crowds of Army personnel coming. Within a very short time, we would be a campus composed of many, many veterans. There was some preparation for this: for example, the moving to the campus of temporary buildings to be used as classrooms. I knew that the whole atmosphere of the School of Social Work would change – not only our school, but also schools throughout the University. For example, there was a policy that there could be no smoking in any building on the campus. A year later you could hardly see in the classrooms because they were filled with veterans who were smoking. When I first came to USC, the students were almost all women students; within a year or so we had over 51% male students in the School of Social Work.

Within the community itself, I observed practices that would seem very dated today. For example, at California Children’s Home Society, which was on Adams Avenue in an old colonial house, babies were kept in cribs for many months before adoption ever took place. They were studied in every possible way; the policy of the staff was to hold the children until they could ‘scientifically’ match them to adoptive parents. There were pictures pasted all over the walls of pictures and parents and if they could find some that looked alike that was one factor for placing the child with that particular family. The adoption process was a very slow one. At a later time, the Adoption Committee of the Welfare Council here worked to change policy so that adoptions were stepped up a

great deal. The adoption rolls of children were very limited at the time. This is just one example of agency practice – children's institutions were in most ways dated.

The most progressive institution of the time was Vista Del Mar, which was the first institution in the country to adopt the 'cottage system' for children. Donald Pitts, who is here today, has brought three pictures of McKinley Home. McKinley Home was still housed then out in the Valley with four large dormitories and a large number of children living in each building, I think 60 or so. They stayed there until it was converted into a shopping center and McKinley built new quarters on the eastside of the city.

Practices within institutions were quite dated: the Catholic orphanage was still in existence, almost a medieval type of orphanage. There were programs that were limited in scope, like Jewish Big Brothers, which eventually expanded a great deal. We also started to see the beginnings of what we now have of agencies expanding their programs and really starting to develop services that were currently needed for veterans. One was the Veterans Psychiatric Clinic where I used to volunteer.

MCBROOM: John, everybody in this room, I think, knows that you taught here in the School of Social Work for 31 years and that you were a great teacher. Let 's talk today about some of your extracurricular activities during these years. I think very early, you went out on a statewide 'barnstorming' tour with the California Youth Authority. Can you tell us a little about that adventure?

MILNER: The School at that time had a very special interest in the field of corrections. This is something that I believe has been lost in recent years. We tended to have students placed in correction agencies such as probation and some of the institutional programs which, I believe, were good learning opportunities for youngsters. The California Youth Authority was established and headed by Heman Stark. Karl Holton also participated in the Youth Authority although he was the Chief of the County Probation Department here in Los Angeles. He was very loyal to social workers and a

close friend of the School of Social Work and, particularly, Ruby Inlow. He was most helpful to us in the placement of our students.

I was asked to go with a driver and be taken to every Youth Authority facility in the state and conduct training sessions. It was quite an experience. I was not taken to every facility; they avoided the ones that dealt with girls. There was a great prejudice against any of the programs that dealt with girls, and it would take a long time for the girls' programs to develop.

You saw great irregularity in the kinds of program throughout the state; some were very progressive. Some of the county institutions that were correctional institutions were highly progressive. There was one in Riverside County that was started by a man who was half American Indian, who had been an alcoholic at one time. He was a highly creative man, who started a program where the youngsters themselves were responsible for building the entire correction institution: it was a ranch at the foot of the mountains. The very fact that they were responsible for creating their own community, made it a progressive program. They did not hire social workers; the people who lived with the youngsters were all tradesmen: carpenters, electricians, farmers, and so forth. The man who headed this ranch had many innovative ideas that I thought were adaptable to other places. It was difficult to get these ideas put into effect in our state institutions because they adhered to previously established policies, which dictated their operational procedures. I think that in California we have had a number of highly creative programs which dealt with problems of this sort and often the best learning out of them has never transferred to general practice.

MCBROOM: I think that early on, you were identified with the Delinquency Control Institute (DCI) here on campus and also DCI's operations in Arizona and Hawaii. Can you speak about your involvement with DCI?

MILNER: Yes, I taught with the Delinquency Control project. I think I started teaching in the second year of the program. It was a program that was financed in part by

Hollywood Park and our university. People like Frances Feldman and Dan Pursuit were some of the early organizers of the program; Norris Class and I were teachers in the program.

It was a program that still continues on this campus, in which they bring in police who work with juveniles. These participants came from all over the world, although they were largely from the States; they also came from any number of foreign countries. During the several years that I taught, I was responsible for several courses in human development. The interesting thing was the resistance from policeman to the type of material that I was teaching. If I had not had some experience from teaching in the military, I think I would have probably left the first day. They did not want to believe the types of things I was saying and often wanted me to prove this or to prove that. Interestingly, at the end of each session when the students evaluated their courses, the two people who received the highest evaluation were Norris Class and I--over many of the teachers who were high ranking police officers, and so forth, from the participant's own departments.

An interesting thing, too, was that many of the participants came to us personally requesting help with their own children, or family problems of different kinds. One of the officers who protested the most and who, at a later date, became a chief of police in a Bay-area city, was lividly opposed to social workers. When his daughter was killed some time later in an auto accident, however, he came to us for help. Since that time he has been a loyal supporter of social work.

MCBROOM: You have done a great deal in the study, evaluation, and consultation of children's agencies. Can you tell us about going out to the Queen's Trust in Hawaii and what happened there?

MILNER: In Hawaii they were eager to have different training programs, Norrie (Class) and I had gone out several times to do different things. These programs have usually been sponsored by the McAnnay Fund there or the Queen's Trust in Hawaii, I think you

are referring to a study sponsored by the McAnnay Fund of a project established by some prominent businessmen on the big island. It was a project working with delinquent boys – the Citizenship Training Group. It was a highly creative program, which they wanted me to come over and evaluate so that they could then present to the legislature an attempt to implement it on a statewide basis. I spent my whole Christmas vacation in 1963 or 1964 over there doing the study.

I think that some of you here know that it is hard to work in Hawaii. They want you to be entertained the whole time; however, I did get the study out in two weeks. In this study they were largely working with kids who lived in the backwoods parts of the island, who were relatively primitive in many kinds of ways. The program largely consisted of socially introducing the kids and their families to new kinds of experiences, which would socialize them. I was given an interpreter because almost all of the interviews were in Pidgin English. Often, after I had interviewed a family or the youngsters, they would give me a gift – I would leave with a big gunnysack of pineapples. I always had to kiss all the ladies before I left, so it was an enjoyable experience.

MCBROOM: Then you went out to Phoenix to participate in a big study there with Wayne McMillen and got somewhat into the girls' institutions and had kind of an interesting experience at the Convent of the Good Shepherd?

MILNER: The Phoenix community asked for a general community study to be made to reorganize their social services; this study was to be headed by Dr. Wayne Macmillen from the University of Chicago. I was asked to participate in the study; Blythe Francis from Family Service here, was also on the study team. We were brought to Phoenix to spend a number of days looking into the practices and structures of institutions there and subsequently write a report to be presented to the leadership in Phoenix.

The one instance you refer to, is the time I was sent out to study the Convent of the Good Shepherd, which is located beyond the city limits of Phoenix. It was an institution that cared for delinquent girls. Arizona did not have a state institution; rather, the state

had contracted with this Catholic agency to do this. I had to go there by taxi and, once there, dismissed the taxi. The convent had these huge walls and a gate, where I went up to ring the bell. I waited and waited until I could hear footsteps echoing on the tile floor inside. A little door opened and a face peeked out; I then explained why I was there. I was sure that all preparations for my coming had been made through channels but they had not been and I was not allowed in. There I was stranded in the country, so I had to hitchhike back to Phoenix feeling a bit miffed because our time was limited.

I discussed the situation with Dr. McMillen and we went to the high officials of the Church. I was told to return the next day and when I did the gates were opened to me so that I would be given an opportunity to learn about the program. The sisters gave me a big chicken lunch; however, they were not allowed to be seated with me by tradition. I therefore sat at this huge table with all of them standing and waiting on me - it compensated for the day before. They wanted to put their best foot forward and, as we walked through the dormitories where the girls lived, you could see some of the crucifixes had been banged up and that some things were broken. The sisters would always explain such sights by remarking that there had been an earth tremor or something else had happened, but I had worked in residential treatment and I know what kids can do to buildings and to the furnishings.

MCBROOM: A big effort that occurred during this era was the War on Poverty. One of the programs that was initiated then and proved to be a success which carries on to this day, is the Head Start program. John, you had a role to play in starting up Head Start in Los Angeles?

MILNER: Yes, our School of Social Work inherited this responsibility from the School of Education. The university had been asked to do the Head Start training programs in this area. They initially asked the School of Education to do it, but their Dean did not approve of Head Start. President Topping, however, wanted it to be done on our campus, so he then came to our School to ask if we would administer the training programs. I was assigned the responsibility of heading the Head Start training. I

needed to get teachers from various disciplines to participate in the training and that necessitated my dealing with the Dean of Education and trying to appease him. I must say that he finally gave me the names of two excellent teachers who participated. We held sessions for a period of about two years to train Head Start people. Some of our graduates became active in Head Start programs at a later time. I found it to be an invaluable experience; I often met with Head Start people in succeeding years.

MCBROOM: Jo Yelder has made her mark at Head Start, and the whole push now is to enlarge upon Head Start. One of the things that has happened is that we have really come into the age of electronics. Would you say something about the aid which electronic devices have provided to the field of social work?

MILNER: I was an innovator using these devices a few years ago, but today I cannot operate any thing that has been made recently. I think I had one of the first tape recorders in Los Angeles; it was an enormous machine that was very hard to carry. I felt that it had a value in teaching practice courses particularly. I remember taking it, in 1947 or 1948, to a meeting that was held at the Family Service Agency in Los Angeles, to demonstrate the use of tapes and to discuss some of the ethical responsibilities in taping. I upset one of the social workers there who said that I was not ethical to use a machine like this. She said that I should be run out of the profession and, upon completing this pronouncement, got up and marched out of the meeting. Since then I have used both audio and videotapes and found them to be very valuable teaching aids. I do think that sometimes, however, they are overly used and I think that it is awfully important to use these judiciously.

In the past two years, I have made four training films for the Department of Public Welfare. Each one was an hour-long film that was then transferred to audiotapes; I think more of this kind of thing needs to be done by social workers. I would like to see more of this type of work done in the commercial field, where our work can be critically interpreted.

I remember that a number of years ago Melvin Wald, who was a screenwriter, asked me to collaborate with him to work on dialogue for a film that Ida Lupino was producing and acting in. The movie, which featured a new star named Melba Powers, was about this woman who, working in a factory, had been raped on her way home from work. The story dealt with her handling her emotional needs following this incident. I worked carefully with him preparing dialogue that I thought was appropriate by our professional judgment. The screenplay was submitted to the Hays Office; their response was that the dialogue could be used as it was but that it was not right for a social worker to be saying these things - it would have to be a minister instead. The leading male character that was to have been a social worker, was changed to a minister. So they made him a chaplain who had just been discharged from the Navy however, his character did not wear a clerical outfit, but a Navy uniform as the leading man. I think this is a testament to the attitude held by so many in the general community about social workers. We really do not have the right in many ways to make statements and judgments about life and have them portrayed on film realistically.

MCBROOM: Do you think this attitude has changed at all since then?

MILNER: Yes, but I do not see many social workers portrayed well on film. George C. Scott, for example, was making a television series but the group which killed that series, I am told, was the social workers. So many social workers had written in to complain about the way in which cases were handled, thus denying any right to dramatic license for the behaviors demonstrated, this despite the fact that the writers of the program had used advice from professional social workers while it was being produced. I felt that it was unfortunate to have had the series canceled; every profession needs to allow some dramatic rights to writers; otherwise a series would never be entertaining.

MCBROOM: When school was out for the summer, John, you would usually go to New Orleans where you maintained a dual career at Tulane University. Tell us about some of your experiences at Tulane.

MILNER: To spend time in the South when you have been raised in the West is always a great learning experience. At Tulane University, I always had students from almost every southern state in the summer. Many came from eastern states as well, because Tulane had always had an exceptionally successful summer program in social work. Norris Class was a fellow teacher at Tulane and we were there together teaching for 18 summers. Dr. Pollack from the University of Pennsylvania then, and Bryn Mawr at present, was also with us, so we became sort of a trilogy team of teaching there. In the morning we did our serious work and at night we went to the jazz sessions. This was one of the pleasures of going to New Orleans.

The one thing that I remember particularly is that the first year I was there I recognized that there were no black students in any of the classes. I made inquiries and found that they just did not admit black students to Tulane. The following year I was asked to give a public lecture where the general community would be invited. I called one of our black graduates from USC, who lived and worked in New Orleans, to ask her if she was coming. She replied, "I am sorry that I cannot." I further inquired as to why she could not. She informed me that she could not come onto campus and into the building where the lecture would be held. I subsequently went to the Dean to say that I would not give the lecture if that were the case. The Dean informed me that the school was trying to make changes legally, but the money which had been given for the buildings originally stipulated that there would be no blacks allowed to enter those buildings; therefore, this had to be legally changed. He subsequently moved me to a different place for the lecture, which I gave, and our graduate came with some friends who sat in the back row of the auditorium where I spoke.

Interestingly, the following year, there were at least six or seven black students in my class. At the end of the first class session when I came out, there were several reporters waiting, including one from the London Times. They asked me if they could interview some of my students as they were among the first black students to be accepted into Tulane University. I asked the students if they would be willing to be interviewed and they indicated that they were; shortly after an article appeared in the

“Picayune” in New Orleans. Within two or three years, whenever you went into the Student Union there, you would see black and white students socializing much as they do on our campus. It was a part of history to see that.

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