

Lola Selby
An Oral History Interview
Conducted by John Milner
September 21, 1989

MILNER. Lola, you began your career in social work during the Depression years and I think you started in California. Is that correct?

SELBY. That's correct. I always say that I stumbled into social work because I finished training to be a teacher of English or social science in high school or in college and by the time I got my degree to teach and had the proper papers, the Depression was well along the way and I didn't get a job. So as I say, I stumbled into social work my odd connection.

MILNER. That's pretty true of all of us who have been in it for a long time. What year was your first job in 1934?

SELBY. I think it was 1934.

MILNER. And you were working for the State Relief Administration in Los Angeles County.

SELBY. Yes, I had been asked to. I had been to a business college, I thought if I could get some business training, maybe I could get a job and I had learned to use a dictaphone. One time when one of my friends, who was in social work, called and asked if I would like to come over and substitute for one of the dictaphone operators, I thought that would be a very good experience, so I did that for two weeks. Then the management discovered I had a master's degree, which entitled me to become a social worker, which I had never considered. That was when I started.

MILNER. What were your first responsibilities?

SELBY. The State Relief Administration was dealing with families and single persons

who were absolutely without any funding or resources because of the depression.

MILNER. Yes.

SELBY. I did, at first, some initial interviews about the basic material we needed as far as I knew from the people who came into apply, and then a social worker took it up from there.

MILNER. And afterward you realized you needed some specialized education in social work and you came to the University of Southern California School.

SELBY. Yes, I did that part-time while I was working. I would take night classes and it took me a long time to finish my first year, which was when we got a certificate for a year of training.

MILNER. Can you describe what the school was like that was in 1944? What was the school like then?

SELBY. Well the school, I really did not get much of a sense from the school, I just was taking night classes for the most part and they were sort of courses that would give you some beginning understanding of what you would do as a social worker.

MILNER. The school was part of the School of Sociology at that time.

SELBY. That's right, it was.

MILNER. And who was dean then?

SELBY. You know, I can't remember.

MILNER. Was it Dr. Bogardus.

SELBY. Yes, it was Bogardus, that's right. And it was interesting to know that later it was he who encouraged the school to set up a training program that would become a masters of social work.

MILNER: And that's when they approached Arlien Johnson?

SELBY: That's right.

MILNER. They asked her to be the Dean and she wouldn't come unless it was a professional school.

SELBY. Yes.

MILNER. To separate itself from sociology, that's right.

SELBY. And he really encouraged her in that and so when she did come she took over as head of the graduate school.

MILNER. I see. How many students, do you have any idea of how many students there were in school at that time?

SELBY. No, I really couldn't remember that kind of figure.

MILNER. It's a long time.

SELBY. It's a long time ago. But it seemed like 20 at the time. I'm sure not as many as we know since.

MILNER. And then after that training, you went to work for Traveler's Aid?

SELBY. Yes, that was a wonderful experience for me. The war had broken out, World War II, and the USO Traveler's Aid was one of the agencies that dealt with newcomers. People were coming to Los Angeles County because some members of the family were in the army, navy or something out here, or it might have been people who were moving and trying to find jobs. There was plenty of opportunity to deal with those people, so I joined Traveler's Aid, started out at the bottom and ended up some years later with a national job, and a regional job. I got to travel, not only around California, but when I was in the national job, I lived in San Antonio, Texas and traveled all around that part of

the world. The travel job was as interesting and enlightening as working with an agency could be.

MILNER. When you were in the Los Angeles office, where was that located at the time?

SELBY. Let me see if I could remember that. Well, when I first started, I was working in an office that was sort of south Los Angeles. I can't remember that exact address; then I was asked to start in an office in the Harbor area and it was in a place that was near San Pedro. That's where I established an office and got to know what it was like as an organization. And of course it expanded beyond that eventually when I got to traveling.

MILNER. Mostly it was dealing with the families of service men.

SELBY. A great amount of it was, but also in some instances with service men. And so you were very, very conscious, in fact, that there was a war going on because of the population you dealt with.

MILNER. The same time when they were removing the Japanese into camps?

SELBY. Yes, that happened during that period, which I felt very bad about because I had Japanese friends from my high school days and college days and I hated to see them shoved off because they were not considered citizens.

MILNER. One of the sad events in American history I think.

SELBY. Absolutely!

MILNER. Following your work with Travelers Aid you decided to take more work in school and you went to the University of Chicago.

SELBY. To get my second-year masters in social work. I accumulated a year in social

work, but I thought if I was going to stay in the field I needed to get my masters, so I went to the University of Chicago and then, because I had quite a range of experience, I was asked to come to the School of Social Work at the University of Iowa, and that's in Iowa City. I was invited to come on the faculty there. They were just starting a school and so I got to teach and practice casework in those days. Also I supervised students.

MILNER. The University of Iowa School, was that a brand new school at the time?

SELBY. A brand new school at the time. Wayne Vesey was the dean at the time.

MILNER. And that's located in which city in Iowa?

SELBY. Iowa City. That was a great experience because we got to see the beginnings of the school; aside from that, my job allowed my going around to different places so it was a very good experience.

MILNER. Yes.

SELBY. And I enjoyed working with students.

MILNER. Yes. So you had real experience in rural casework as well as urban and big city casework. And the University of Chicago: what was the school like at that time?

SELBY. It was one of the top schools in the country at that time. Such people as Helen Pearlman and number of others who were well trained in social work in that day were on the faculty and it was very stimulating. Yet it had been one of the first schools, like the New York School, who set up a school of social work that came to have national attention and I couldn't have chosen a better place to go to school at that point in time.

MILNER. Were the Abbots still in charge at that time?

SELBY. No, they were retired but the next generation of teachers were expanding and

spending more time defining social work as a profession and, also, in concentrating more on what was involved in practice in terms of techniques and skills.

MILNER. The Dean then was Helen Wright?

SELBY. Yes, that's right. She was the one. And she was a good organizer and seemed to get along with faculty well.

MILNER: What was your fieldwork there?

SELBY. Let me think if I can remember that. We had students in a variety of agencies. Isn't that strange I can't think of the specific names of them. You know it would be the variety you would find in any large city. I found that I enjoyed teaching very much and so I decided if I were going to remain in the teaching field I really should get some advanced training in social work. The University of Chicago had what they called a Third- Year Certificate and so I applied for that. After I had taught four years at Iowa and had that year in Chicago they invited me, through a scholarship, to teach there one year as a career teacher. It was at the end of that period I was invited to come to the School of Social Work at USC to be on the faculty there. I came to USC in 1955.

MILNER. After you came to USC did you get back to Chicago for a period of time?

SELBY. No, I had been on the Chicago faculty for that year, just before I came to USC.

MILNER. So you had a teaching fellowship there?

SELBY. Yes, a teaching fellowship. I didn't go back to Chicago or any other school.

I stayed in Los Angeles and worked in the University of Southern California.

MILNER. What were your impressions of USC school when you first came?

SELBY. Well, I had taken courses in my first year from such people as Norris Class and Dean Arlien Johnson and so I had some knowledge of the faculty at that time.

When I got back in 1955 there were many more faculty members, so I made friends with them and it was a bigger school and I got the idea it was a much more expanded School of Social Work.

MILNER. What were the courses you taught?

SELBY. For the most part in the beginning, I taught casework. I taught an occasional course on behavior but I also did a lot of work with students. We had much direct contact with our students in those days: students in field work, students who were not only beginners, but maybe in their second year, or were in graduate school working on a doctorate and I had a lot of contact with students who were in such positions. I not only supervised some of them, but if they were in field work, in those days we had much more contact personally with the students that we were responsible for in various agencies where they were working; there was much more communication between the school and the people who were working with students in the various agencies and so that at least part of my job was contact with the agencies students were in.

MILNER. Where was the school located on the campus at that time?

SELBY. On the third floor of the old Administration Building?

MILNER. The old Administration Building?

SELBY. The old Administration Building and there was no way to get up there but to walk up three floors. I remember the first time I arrived there I was in a room with four other teachers; we didn't have separate rooms or separate offices in those days.

MILNER. I remember well! Can you describe a little what the general campus was like at USC then?

SELBY. Well, it was much more like what it had been in the beginning although one or

two of the first buildings had either been moved or torn down and there was what now included the Administration Building and other buildings built at that time. They were already up there then with Hoover Street on one side of Doheny Library on one side and the Administration Building on the other end. Other buildings along the way represented the main buildings of the University.

MILNER. The campus wasn't closed off from traffic and so forth?

SELBY. No, the street wasn't closed off then. It was a through street and so it was already even then a busy campus because the traffic went through and there was increasing number of students at the University.

MILNER. Can you remember the animal we had on campus at that time that represented the football team?

SELBY. I had forgotten that one.

MILNER. Old Tire Biter, the airdale dog.

SELBY. I had forgotten about that.

MILNER. The dog was in front of the School of Social Work and he would bite the tires on cars as they went by. You had a great deal to do with fieldwork as well as class room teaching. Can you talk a little about the agencies, what they were like when you first started?

SELBY. Well, I'm trying to remember what particular agencies I would be involved with: probably, for the most part, family agencies and public agencies, maybe one or two clinical agencies. Again, in those days we had much more direct contact with whoever was supervising students in the agency so we made visits to the agency as well as inviting the supervisors to events on campus. And I think there was a closer feeling in

those days between the agencies and the School than has existed in the more recent years.

MILNER. So that all the teaching faculty carried some field work responsibility.

SELBY. That was the way it was in the early beginnings of my experience, then that tapered off in time.

MILNER. That advising program had a value!

SELBY. Yes, and I know that I've had students from those earlier days that I have seen since, who have made comments to the effect that it was a close association with me and other faculty members that kept them there; otherwise they might as well dropped out because it was difficult and not necessarily all they expected. They felt very positive about that; they had some very close connections with certain members of the faculty.

MILNER. Wasn't it in the 1960s that we started to get a much large number of students from a minority groups, and in particular the Chicano or Mexican-American students. I think you had a leading part in developing services for them.

SELBY. Yes, I was asked to teach a class off campus in East Los Angeles where the majority of clients were of Mexican background or Latino background and that was a wonderful experience. I taught over there two or three years and students were to be assigned included Chicano students, but also other students who were interested in that idea of how it would be to work in a particular kind of neighborhood with a particular kind of culture. We had actually a variety of students in the class who would come from various backgrounds and the life experiences that dominated the class these people who had lived and worked in the eastside of LA, which at that time were the Mexicans.

We would have meetings at different agencies; we made a lot of field trips to see what else was there besides a particular agency. We really kept in touch with what was going on there and what resources were available in that area. And the students seemed to be enjoying their work.

MILNER. What was your opinion of the Chicano students coming into school in general? Did you feel they matched up to the students that we'd been having in the school?

SELBY. Well, I think many of them did and many of them chose to come to SC because they realized some things were going on there that would interest them in terms of their own community. They were very inclined to seek out what would be expected of them in a professional role in their community so they could make use of their ties to that community and that sort of thing. I had the feeling that they were positive about their experience.

MILNER. Yes, while you were teaching at the School you served on any number of university committees and I wondered if you have anything to say about that?

SELBY. Well, I think that it is important for faculty members in any graduate school, very much absorbed in their business, to have some contact with other parts of the University. For instance, because we were a graduate school, we never had undergraduate students and so we didn't have very much contact with all the teaching that goes on at USC in the undergraduate area. I might say that after I retired, I joined the Retired Faculty Association because I wanted more contact which I hadn't had with faculty members from all other parts of the University. It was quite a satisfaction for me to be in touch with them now. But, anyway, I was glad if I was chosen for one of the

general University committees, to be a part of them for a while, because it gave me a little broader view of the University than I would have just being in the School of Social Work.

MILNER. Those assignments: you were in the University Senate for several years and on the University Publications Committee, and those were important assignments.

SELBY. Yes, I always enjoyed the assignments that I got; it broadened my own experience as well as giving me a chance to contribute something.

MILNER. And in addition to serving the larger University you also served a number of agencies in the community, being a board member on what particular agencies?

SELBY. Well, one of them has been the Family Service in Los Angeles and I'm trying to remember some of the others but I probably served longest on committees with Family Service. But I did have contact with others too.

MILNER. Yes, I remember your being on the board of the Los Angeles Psychiatric Services.

SELBY. That's right. One of the children agencies I kept in contact with, and all of that sort of broadens the views of faculty members.

MILNER. Now being an Anglophile, I wondered what particularly connected you with Great Britain?

SELBY. Oh, it was a wonderful experience I received a Fulbright teaching award in 1961-62 and I was sent to the University of Leicester in England and it was a valuable experience for me, and I think I probably contributed something to them. They had had a program in social work, but the year I was asked to come over, they were starting a graduate program and I think they wanted somebody from the USA. Incidentally, at

that point and time Dame Eileen Youngusband was the leader of social work in Britain and had the most voice and the most influence; she was very interested in what was going on in the United States during that time, and I'm sure it was she who had some influence in getting me to come to the University of Leicester because I had been on a faculty of an undergraduate school and had even had the experience of being in one in Iowa that was just starting. Though in my position there I did teach a class or two, I was more of advisor and helper in the organization of the graduate school.

MILNER. And you were there how long?

SELBY. One year, 1961-62. Then in 1965 Eileen Youngusband invited me or had me invited to teach for six months in the National Institute of Social Work which they were just starting in London. This was for people who had gotten into social work without graduate education, a chance for them to get a little bit better educational experience for the kinds of jobs that there were going to be built.

MILNER. Yes, you frequently visit them now.

SELBY. Oh, I still do. I go ever few years and I have many friends from those days who are still good friends. Some of them come over to visit me in California, and I see them in national meetings and so on. It is a very very gratifying experience.

MILNER. What might be some of the contrasts between that you observe between British social work and American social work?

SELBY. Well, when they were starting, when they were setting up their program, I think they were trying to model it somehow on the US model. However, the ways of working in Britain can be a little more formal than we have here, and certainly there was an emphasis on study and reading and all that kind of thing as well as opportunities for

them to have. But I wouldn't say there are many major differences, but just a little more formality in their ways of doing things.

MILNER. Is there only one professional school in England?

SELBY. Oh, there are many now. And Leicester wasn't the first one by many means.

MILNER. Oh, it wasn't? I misunderstood that.

SELBY. A few other schools started in London particularly.

MILNER. Are there requirements to have a four-year degree before you go into graduate school?

SELBY. Yes its very similar to our situation.

MILNER. Now, you retired from the School of Social Work in USC in 1973 and I know you have been active since that time in many ways. Would you like to tell us a little about what you do in your retirement?

SELBY. Well, actually even though I was officially retired at age 65--because that's what happened in those days, 65 and out you go--nevertheless the University allowed various departments to let the retiree teach a class or two for a few years later. So I was still allowed to teach and part of my experience in the East Los Angeles area extended into my post-retirement days. I was still allowed also to have contact with graduate and doctoral students. For three or four years, actually, I was connected in one way or another directly with the students, almost until 1980. Since then I have kept in touch. I go over to the pool, they send me mail to let me know what's going on at this point and, when there are any special events, I'm likely to get over there to attend as are other retired faculty members. I also have been quite active several years now in a committee that is called the Heritage Committee (California Social Welfare

Archives). It's a committee that is working to accumulate materials about the development of social work as a profession in California. And at USC we take care of the materials that are from Southern California. Berkeley does a similar thing with materials from the northern part. That committee has been very interesting because we have accumulated some excellent materials from retired social workers, retired faculty members, and we contact various agencies to see if they have material they think that would add to our collection that would be historical.

MILNER. That's the California Social Welfare Archives Program.

SELBY. That's right. And it's been a very interesting group and its still quite active. The people who started with it on the organization have stayed on since then but we are trying to get a lot of the more recent faculty people, retirees and people in various agencies who are still working in the agencies. We think it is important to get more of them involved in this particular program.

MILNER. You've had a long career in social work and an interesting one certainly. Is there anything else you like tell us about your experience that we might not have covered.

SELBY. Well, I think we have covered all of the different aspects of my social work experience but I would like to say that I have certainly never regretted stumbling into social work, that it has been for me a very interesting a stimulating experience and with a wide range of different kinds of experience. It is connected with the way the world is in any given point in time and still there is plenty to do.

MILNER. You have any advice to give to today's practitioners or to social workers of the future?

SELBY. Well, I just now thought of something else that was part of my experience that is terribly important for social work and for our School. When I first got on the faculty in 1955, the traditional courses were casework and group work and history courses and things like that. We, as a faculty, began to think that social workers out in the field really had to do a variety of tasks, wherever they were. They were not only counseling individuals, but at that time beginning to work with families and that, in any event, to work in agencies or with individuals or with families, one needed to have a wide range of experience to deal with these kinds of situations and problems. So we began to think very seriously about building what we called a generic program for the School, and instead of teaching casework separately, and group work separately and all that, we put these various practice fields together in our course and it was a generic course for a long time, for a whole two years. But later, at least in the first year, it was that way. And I think that is a very important thing for a school to support because I think if we get too specialized and just learn one little piece we are really being social workers or were not having the kind of experience and background to help us be more just a counselor and I think a social worker needs to be more than a counselor. There are all kinds of organizational needs in the field of social work which require a wide range of experience and knowledge and its just more, its a better deal I think when the students come out of the School of Social Work with exposure to a range of things which social workers do or can do in a wide world.

MILNER. Are you optimistic about the future of social work in America? SELBY. I'm not so sure right now. The national support that we used to get in social work seems to be reducing the money that is required. In social work agencies and organizations it is

harder to come by, and I think that for a while we were becoming much more respected as a profession. But if we become too specialized, we won't be seen with the same kind of respect as social workers have been in the recent past and it would be harder to work with a variety of organizations we need to deal with.

MILNER. Anything else?

SELBY. I can't think of anything else right now. I just know that I'm glad that I had the experience. I look back on it with pleasure and interest and I like to keep in touch with what is going on right now.

MILNER. Hope you will, and thank you.

SELBY. You're welcome.