

Dr. Carl Shafer  
An Oral History Interview  
Conducted by Milton Goldberg  
May 18, 1994

Dr. Carl Shafer was interviewed by Milton Goldberg, a member of the board of the California Social Welfare Archives, on Monday, May 18, 1994.

GOLDBERG. Why don't you start out by telling us a little bit about how you got interested in the field of social work.

SHAFER. When I got out of the service in 1945, I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I went up to UCLA when I graduated and they had a counseling service for Veterans. I went through their testing program and they recommended a number of things including my going back to graduate school to study economics, which I majored in. I wasn't interested in that. I talked about other occupational fields and one of them was social work. I was curious about what social work was all about and so they suggested that I go see Arlien Johnson at USC because UCLA didn't have a school of social work at that time. In talking to Arlien Johnson, she asked me if I would be interested in doing some volunteer work to see if I was interested in the field. She sent me to Morris Klass who was the director at LA Valley Service. I volunteered to clean out some of the old files there and got fascinated by the stories that those files told. In addition to that, I use to sit in on the student meetings. Before I knew it, I was applying to the school and that is how I started. That fall I began the first year of a graduate study.

GOLDBERG. Did you specialize at the School of Social Work in any specialty?

SHAFER. Well I was in what they called at that time psychiatric social work sequence of courses. I had my field placement in the first year at the Family Service Agency and

the second year in a mental hygiene clinic in downtown LA. Between my first and second year, I spent a summer working as a counselor at Camp Max Strauss. Ever heard of it? As a result of that experience I got very interested in working with children. When I graduated I went back east and I got a job with the Jewish Board of Guardians in Hawthorn Cedar Middle School. I worked there for two years, primarily with children and their families in an institutional setting.

I was married by then. I got married right after I graduated from USC. My wife and I decided to come back to California to raise our family. We were expecting our first child. I took a job with the State Department of Mental Hygiene.

GOLDBERG. Let me interrupt you for a minute. When you said Jewish Board of Guardians, you are speaking of a great circle of institutions in child welfare. That was a wonderful place to have had your first job. Tell us a little bit about your experience there.

SHAFER. The agency at that time was about fifty years old and had been very well established nationally and internationally as an excellent child guidance program. I was very fortunate in getting into the Hawthorn Schools because of the rich experience that that really offered me. The director at that time was a fellow named Norman Leavy. It was required that you attend seminars in addition to your regular work. I attended a seminar once a month in the downtown office, which at that time was, as I recall, 23rd Street. The people there were really excellently trained and were extremely competent individuals and were wonderful role models for me. I had excellent supervision. Newman was the Director of Clinical Services at that time. These were all people who were all quite well known in the field.

GOLDBERG. The reason I asked you about that is that I had an experience, that when it came time to reorganize the Jewish Big Brothers Association, I became the executive. I heard about the Jewish Board of Guardians as being the model agency in America for those kinds of things. I went back to the Jewish Board of Guardians and I spoke to all of their people and examined their programs and examined their Hawthorn Place and I even got some ideas about running a camp for emotionally disturbed children. I had quite a feeling about that. If I remember rightly, when you came to make an application with camp Max Straus, when I heard the word Jewish Board of Guardian, I knew that you were somebody we certainly wanted to have on the staff.

SHAFER. Well, anyway, we decided that we really wanted to live in California. My first job when I came back was with the State Department of Mental Hygiene in the Los Angeles office and that was with their-after care program. I was supervising mental patients that were on leave of absence from the state hospital. That was my first experience in working with a totally psychotic population. I worked there for a year when the opportunity came along to get a job in Pasadena at the Pasadena Family Service. I took a job part time, working in the evenings about two or three days a week, after my work with the state. John Milner was also doing some part time work there. He was the one that connected me with Elise de Fontaine who was the director there. Every time I came there, she would corner me afterwards and talk me into working there full-time. She was very persuasive and the opportunity seemed really interesting to me. I took that job. I left the State Department and I worked at what later became Foothill Family Service, for about seven years. After I had been there for about two years, Elise decided to retire. The Board appointed me as the executive

director, so I had an opportunity to work as a practitioner and then to get some administrative things done as well. I felt after about seven years, that I had gone about as far as I could go in that agency. I was frustrated by the increasing waiting list that we were developing because we were giving good service but a number of people we were unable to serve. I was thinking of moving on to perhaps a bigger job, but then that would have meant moving away from the area. There was one opening in Houston, Texas that sounded interesting, but I decided instead to resign from Family Service and go into private practice. That was a really weird thing at that time. There were not many social workers who were doing that. As a matter of fact, when I think about it, I think about it with a little bit of pain because I encountered a good deal of hostility on the part of some of the traditional social workers who felt that private practice was not social work. I was determined to demonstrate that you could be in private practice and still be a social worker. You use the same skills and the same values and the same objectives in helping people who could pay a fee. As a matter of fact, I gave a paper in 1958 at the FSAA Biennial Conference back East and that paper was later published in *Social Casework*, in which I described the differences and the similarities between my experience as a Family Service staff person and a person of private practice. As I recall, about the only difference I could identify, was that as a group my clients in private practice were a little higher socio-economically than the clients in an agency. I worked full-time in private practice and was quite successful serving a middle-class clientele, for the most part.

About 1963 when Kennedy was assassinated, that had a real impact on me. Jack Kennedy was probably two or three years older than I was at the time and I asked

myself, "Am I really doing all that I can effectively do just sitting here seeing a handful of clients day after day." I decided to go back to school and get a doctorate and perhaps go into teaching where I felt I could make a larger impact. In 1964, I enrolled in the doctoral program at USC. I graduated in 1966 and remained on the faculty until my retirement from there in 1986.

GOLDBERG. What did you teach?

SHAFER. I taught virtually every course at USC; research, I even taught a semester of community organization, and I taught social welfare policy. Primarily I taught practice. For the last years, that was essentially what I was teaching. I also taught in the doctoral program. I taught the practice course of the doctoral program.

GOLDBERG. How many years did you put in at USC all together?

SHAFER. Twenty years. I had a span of quite a professional career from working in agencies--a variety of agencies, to private practice, to teaching. At the time I was teaching, I maintained a very small private practice. I felt very strongly that it made me a better teacher. Going back for a moment, let me say something about private practice. I always felt, and still do, that if agencies were able to provide the kind of income that any professional person should be earning, private practice would not be that much of a thrill. Most of the people that I know in private practice worked in agencies as a supplement. That is one of the tragedies of our profession. It has never been recognized economically, although it is valued by our society or we would not be able to support the agencies.

GOLDBERG. Have you noticed in your whole career that you have been very much related to children's work? Have you noticed any significant changes, in terms of

practice today, in terms of community organization today, as compared to what it was when you first entered the profession many years ago?

SHAFER. I think that the change that I have noticed is that, for one thing, we know a lot more now than we did about human behavior. I think some of the techniques that are being used now are quite effective, more effective than perhaps they were back then. The principal technique that I used when working with children is what is commonly known as play therapy. I think there are techniques in play therapy now that open up the child's communication even more effectively than we had then. I have also noticed, with some concern, the movement toward the so-called case management approach to social work, where the social worker really gets more and more removed from the client directly and becomes a kind of administrative supervisor of people with lesser skills and lesser knowledge instead of that continued direct pattern. I think it is about economy. It does distress me. The other thing that distresses me is what has happened in the whole field of welfare. I can remember when people like Frances Feldman were in the welfare department and it was a very professional program, especially the child welfare part of it, where everybody had an MSW and the welfare department was sending people to USC to get degrees and giving them stipends to do it. Now you could shoot a cannon through a welfare office and not hit one MSW. That has been an unfortunate development.

GOLDBERG. How do you feel about how our culture, as far as children are concerned, today? In terms of the kinds of problems it creates for children who have had less and that sort of thing and all the things we are struggling with now, as compared to how it was way back when you first entered the profession and when you

thought a lot of good social work would have solved all of these problems. I thought they would have solved all of them. We are now all of a sudden stuck with them.

SHAFER. I think, unfortunately, although we have attempted to involve ourselves in community organizations, social work has really never been very effective as a community influence. The changes in society are primarily determined, I think, by political forces rather than by social forces. The kinds of things we are interested in accomplishing are not very popular. We haven't got a slick sell technique that politicians have. As a result a lot of our good works have been frustrated because they have just been overwhelmed by other trends in society. As far as what has happened with children, in a very subtle way, since World War II there has been a continuous erosion of the traditional family as we've known it. We now have a situation where in order to survive economically, many families have two bread winners. The father and the mother are both working all day and children at best are under the care of third person, usually not related to the child. At worst, children are left to their own devices for hours after school until parents come home. When the parents come home they are tired and exhausted from a day's work and aren't able to give the children what families used to give children in the past. Coupled with that we have this very insidious influence which tends to influence kids in very profound ways. The kinds of things they see on television become the models that they follow and build into their own life patterns. You have kids at fourteen and fifteen who are extremely sophisticated about all kinds of things in the world that they are exposed to. They haven't had the opportunity to integrate that properly so that there is a pseudo-maturity that you see in them. They are actually still small children and they haven't got a real grasp on how to

cope with this flood of information that is given to them. For example, I think it is fine to give children sex education; it is not only fine, it is important. At the same time if the child does not have the opportunity to discuss these things in meaningful ways, that information doesn't get integrated into a life pattern; instead it becomes just knowledge about how to do something.

GOLDBERG. Historically, we had a great belief and we did a lot of preventive work with children. We gave them a good environment and all that kind of thing. We ultimately would get to the point where we wouldn't have all of these problems and it looked like in this last generation, the children were kind of neglected as far as prevention was concerned. Today, we are having the proofs of that neglect and the politicians are dealing with that now in the crime bills and all that kind of thing. What is your reaction to that whole thing?

SHAFER. This sounds awfully pessimistic, but I feel as if social problems that are facing us today have really gotten away from us. They have gone beyond what we can reasonably expect to be remedied without some kind of massive, and I hate to think about the kind of intervention that may be necessary. For instance, today I was just reading in the paper that President Clinton has proposed that there be permission for police to search apartments for guns and drugs and so forth, without warrants. Well, it starts at that level because these are people who are the least politically powerful and it is an intrusion on their rights. Yet there is a side of us that says yes, but you gotta clean that out. It is really for your own protection. What good is freedom if they aren't free to go out of their own homes without being shot at? You look at that and you say, "Well that's the kind of remedies that we are coming to," and pretty soon middle-class

people and slightly upper class people are going to say, "Yes, I will opt for a little more control because I know that I am an innocent guy, so I don't mind being stopped on the street and being roused by the police." That may be the kind of thing that we will go to in order to gain some control of this problem. In terms of social work as a profession, we are handicapped I think, by the fact that we get our mandate from society and society doesn't look to us for leadership. We have to try to impose ourselves on society.

When social work has taught people to say, "Well, yes, that is all well and good." You are all bleeding hearts and mean well and you're idealistic, but that is not how reality is. We are often not acceptable in our society. I read once the term that we are the caretakers of precarious values. These are values that are widely held, but they are not strongly held. For example, we believe in the equality of every one, but we have discrimination and we have distinctions among economic classes and so forth even though we profess to be an egalitarian country when we really are not. That is just one kind of value that is honored more in the breach than as a natural plan. I'm not saying that we are going to have a solution to the problems of crime and drugs and delinquency until things get a lot worse. Then we are going to move toward other kinds of remedies.

GOLDBERG. I feel the same way. That is too bad, having gone through a whole career of social work and come to that kind of thing when we were working to prevent that kind of thing from happening. It is too bad. I remember that you were related to the community organizations. You were related to the Welfare Planning Council and the United Way and all the professional social work organizations in California, really as

a professional and in another sense as a volunteer. Share some of those experiences with us.

SHAFER. When I was working in Pasadena, I was very much involved with the Community Planning Council, which we had at that time and we had our own Community Chest. I had a great relationship with them. I was the first treasurer of the LA chapter of NASW, when NASW was first formed. I subsequently resigned from NASW when they decided to make a Bachelor's degree the requirement for professional social work. This was the first time in the history of the world that a profession has actually opted for a lowering of a higher standard. I became active in the California Society for Clinical Social Work. I served on their board of directors for a number of years and then I subsequently became the state president of that. I have also served on The National Federation of Societies for Clinical Social Work and I served on that board. I served on a number of agency boards like the Adoption Institute and the LA Family Service and a couple of those. I thought it was important as a social worker to participate fully in the volunteer kinds of activities that social work carries out. I was disappointed in the Welfare Planning Council. I felt that as an independent agency they did some wonderful work. They did some excellent studies. There were some really good people that worked in the Welfare Planning Council, I think. They had sub groups. They had a child welfare division and others. I really was very impressed at the time and still I am, as I look back on it, with the activity of that organization.

GOLDBERG. Most of your career was working in private non-profit agencies, but you undoubtedly were related to trying to affect public agencies and to help raise the

standards of public agencies. Can you share some of those experiences with me?

SHAFER. The one thing about the public agency that I did work in was the Department of Mental Hygiene and I was really impressed with the way that agency was operated and the high standards and so forth. They had an excellent staff with guys like Manny Newman, Bill Rusnack who was the district director down here; Guy Sloane was the state director. There were some other agencies that I participated in, sort of: public agendas like the Probation Department where I was a consultant for several years. I saw some excellent work being done. The thing that frustrated me about that was that it didn't make any difference if a program was really good or not. That was not a good predictor of whether it would succeed or be allowed to continue. An example of that was when I was consulting with the Probation Department about a special program they had for probation officers who were given very small caseloads; thirty kids. These were the most disturbed kids, the kids who were expected to be real problems, to see if having a small caseload would succeed in keeping these kids in the community. It was a very successful program. Instead of maintaining it, it was absorbed into the general offices of the Probation Department and eventually disappeared completely.

In my own experience at Family Service as we got better, as we gave better service, we got longer and longer waiting lists. I was unable to get additional staff. As a result, it became a very frustrating experience to me to do that. I was really impressed with the standards, with their performance, with the kind of services they offered, but continuously I saw this frustration of not having enough to do the job. We were always overworked, underpaid, and the population was underserved. Apparently that is a very extreme situation. Just this morning I was at the San Gabriel Valley meeting of the

United Way going through the process of allocating funds, and the agency is now all over southern California. United Way is an extremely strong agency; they are starving to death financially. They are cutting back on staff, cutting back on quality and having a real hard time. The kinds of things they are doing are so valuable, but the budget process and support from the public doesn't seem to want them to stabilize themselves. They are in real bad shape now. I hate to focus on these negative things, but this is the reality of what is happening now. I should say in passing that back in 1977, I went on sabbatical to Taiwan and when I was gone, one of my sons wrote to me and said that he decided to enroll in the School of Social Work at USC.

Then my wife was on an advisory group for the Los Angeles County Public Welfare department and we were just starting Protective Services. They were evaluating it for about a year and she was on the advisory group to determine whether it was a program they should keep. They decided to keep it and they asked her if she would be interested in joining the staff and so she started work in Child Protective Services for the Welfare Department and worked for them for about ten years. Then, when that program grew, again an example, where they had had small caseloads of twenty-five or thirty and they were able to do effective work, the County started to load them up with more cases. So she quit. Then she asked her if she would be willing to work in Pasadena at Huntington Hospital, and she ended up working there for about six years in the emergency room as a social worker. She has had a really great career in social work. It all came in the family, we made quite a contribution. We have three social workers. We still have one son going; our second son is now a teacher and lives up in Northern California.

As I sort of reminisce about my career in social work I see many changes that have taken place; the ones in which agencies have had to restructure themselves in order to meet the financial problems that they face; the tendency to adopt different techniques in order to accommodate that. For example, this case management approach: I think that it was traditionally primarily social work terrain. The inroads into that were the MFCCs and other professional groups that are not always as well educated and trained.

Frankly, I think if I had it to do over again today, as much as I enjoyed my experience as a social worker and my professional careers were very gratifying and fulfilling to me, I know, I would not go into social work. I am not saying that I would talk anybody else out of it. As a matter of fact there is a young woman graduating from USC this next month in the School of Social Work who is the daughter of some very good friends of ours and I have known her all of her life, you know, since she was very small. She called me up and told me that she had decided to go into social work and I was really encouraging, if that was her choice. You know it is not my role to talk her out of it. If someone else had called me, I would really be reluctant to enthusiastically endorse going into the field. I don't see the kind of future for social work that I saw when I first went into it many years ago. I saw it still as an evolving profession with very dedicated people with opportunities to do really fulfilling work with clients. If I felt my client needed to be seen fifty times, I could see him fifty times. If you had chosen a new agency you had to continue to work up to three or four years, or after you probably raise a couple of kids, you could do that, but today they are controlled by agencies who are funding agencies; you could only see the client ten times or whatever. It is really a different kind of thing, short-term therapy hoping to get over the immediate crisis and

hopefully make a go of it. If they don't come back with another crisis. That is not what I consider to be the way social work ought to be going.

GOLDBERG. You have had an interesting career in doing all kinds of things at all kinds of levels. Who are some of the people that you remember as having a great effect on you directly, but also the real leaders in the social welfare scene, public or private?

SHAFER. Well, certainly I had to start with the people that I was closest to at the School of Social Work at USC both as a student and then later as a colleague. Of course, Arlien Johnson stands out. She was the first person I ever talked to that was a professional social worker. I was impressed with her and her contribution to the field as well as an educator. She was just a wonderful woman. John Milner was really my mentor and Lola Selby, Rose Green, Elizabeth McBroon, they were all people that I am really glad having had professional contact with. Then on the national scene there was Charlie Schotland who was still in the state at that time. Vince Lou, who was the head of the Division of the Social Work Department of Mental Hygiene when I was there, and Bill Rusnack, who was my regional supervisor. They were outstanding people.

Nationally I got to know Cora Kassius and her *Social Casework*. Clark Blackburn who was the director of the Family Service of America. These were all people that I became very close with. As a matter of fact, Cora Kassius offered me a job when I was deciding to leave Foothill Family Service. I was making \$7,500 a year as a director of Family Service and one of the reasons I decided to leave there was because I couldn't afford to support my family even back in those days. She asked if I would be interested in talking to her about it and I told her that I was thinking of leaving and going to

something else. She told me about an opening on her staff if I was interested. I asked her what it paid and she told me \$8,500 a year. I told her that I couldn't afford to live in California on \$7,500 and asked her how I could live in New York on \$8,500? There were people, whose names I can't remember, who were part of the Council of Social Work Education staff who were very impressive individuals. This was when I first came into teaching and I just met them. They struck me as being really outstanding with outstanding leadership to the education of the social work profession. Their names seem to escape me at the moment, but that whole staff of the Council was very impressive to me.

GOLDBERG. Well you had a very fortunate career and it is good to see you with a rewarding career. Not too many people have rewarding careers. You also, aside from a lot of people helping you, I think you have made quite a mark and influenced a lot of other people; students, fellow workers, and people in the community. You have made the profession a better place. I think at this point we may as well just leave it at that. Thank you very much for what I found to be a very interesting interview and I think it will be very helpful for archives.

SHAFER. It is a very modest contribution that I can make and I had fun talking with you, Milt, and as a matter of fact, what I didn't mention was that you were one of the first people I talked with about a job. Just before I graduated you offered me a job and I was really tempted to take it and then this opportunity in Now York came up and I couldn't pass that up.

GOLDBERG. I was very disappointed that you didn't take it. It would have been a great experience, but I followed your career. I am aware of what you have been doing

and you have made a real contribution and it has been a great experience for all of us.

Thank you very much.