

Honora Wilson
An Oral History Interview Conducted by
Maurice Hamovitch
March 1995

This is March 1995. This is Maurice Hamovitch and I am talking with Honora Wilson as part of an oral history for the California Social Welfare Archives, as well as for the 75th anniversary of the USC School of Social Work. Honora has prepared some material, which she will read. We will take it from there.

WILSON. This material that I prepared is a little bit about myself personally and then how I happened to go to the USC School of Social Work. I was born in New York City and I moved with my parents to Los Angeles in 1913. I have lived here all my life with the exception of ten years when I lived in Cincinnati. That was from 1937-1947, when I returned to Los Angeles and have been here ever since. I entered the University of California, Berkeley in the fall of 1927. I was seventeen years old. My mother, who herself was a graduate of USC, was the first woman to graduate from the USC School of Pharmacy. My mother insisted that I must have a profession so that I could support myself if anything happened to my husband. Being a teacher was considered appropriate.

While at Berkeley I met a young woman, a college graduate, who lived in Alameda with her parents. This was a very interesting family. They were Austrian Jews and her father had a successful plumbing business. Josephine Feldhammer, who had a bachelor's from Berkeley, taught English at night school in Berkeley and usually visited me at night because I was living in a boarding house. On her way home from teaching school she would come and see me.

Her father was president of the Jewish community in Alameda. He had secured for her the job of social worker for the poor Jewish people. She was the first social worker I ever in my life met or knew. Well that' not true. I had volunteered during the summer at Jewish Family Service.

HAMOVITCH. The Jewish Family Service in Los Angeles?

WILSON. Yes. Josephine Feldhammer was maybe four or five years older than I but she was very protective of me and she right away insisted that I become a social worker and she never let go. She was kind and firm and knew everybody in the Jewish Community of Alameda and every poor family. She kept on telling me that I should not pay attention to becoming a teacher because the most important profession was a social worker. When I graduated from college I returned to Los Angeles and I spent the summer months driving around applying for a job teaching. I drove all over Southern California. This was the depth of the Depression. I interviewed every head of every school from Santa Monica to Santa Barbara to San Diego and they just said they had no jobs. They weren't even sure they were going to be able to pay the teachers they had.

HAMOVITCH. What year was this?

WILSON. This was 1931. So, I decided with my parents that I would go to graduate school because there was nothing else to do. I had never worked so the thought of getting a job as a waitress or working commercially never occurred to me. I came from that kind of family. My family would have gone into the firing squad like many other families did if I worked in a restaurant. They considered that very humiliating. That was just the culture. USC was familiar to me because

my mother went to the School of Pharmacy when she was an adult and I went to my mother's college graduation. USC really was great.

In the fall I decided to go to USC and to get graduate training and I decided I would take graduate training in the School of Education and also in the School of Social Work. That was typical of my personality. I wanted to make it safe one way or the other. This was the fall of 1931. I don't remember very much but I had this picture in my mind of this large room with the large tables where you registered. I went over to the School of Education and I registered there and then I went over to the School of Social Work and Dr. Erle Young was sitting at the table. I talked to him briefly and he started to take my registration and he asked me where I was before. I said, "I went over to the School of Education." He was a wonderful, magnificent gentleman, you know, and he said, "You gotta make up your mind—one thing or another. You gotta be either a school teacher or a social worker." Well, incidentally I made some notes about that. His wife, Pauline Young was also a Ph.D.—a social worker and she had done great research on the Russian Immigrants and I knew about that. I had known that group and I have known them ever since and one of my closest friends is married to one. Her husband comes from that whole Russian group and he was born and raised in Boyle Heights. Her dissertation, as you know, is a masterpiece. This Pauline Young. Did you know them?

HAMOVITCH. Yes, I came in 1949 and they were still around and we used Pauline Young's book as a text in research.

WILSON. Anyway I made some notes about what that was about, that study that she did. Well Dr. Young was a wonderful man. I had a class with him and he just was warm and friendly. I will always remember him. He knew how to live economically better than anybody I ever knew. He taught me a lot of things about how to shop and never to eat cold cereals because they didn't have any food value. This was sixty years ago and I still remember. He said I could become a social worker and go to both schools, which I did. I didn't stay much longer than six months. I just was a natural for the School of Social Work and I wasn't interested in the School of Education. How I got into the School of Social Work is when Erle Young told me to make up my mind one way or another. I had learned how to manage myself in order to get what I wanted, so I started crying. I could see myself.

I was twenty-one years old and I weighted 93 pounds and there I was crying. Erle Young said "Okay, okay you can be a social worker." He couldn't take it. I was assigned to....well, the Welfare Department was called the Bureau of Indigent Relief. Genevieve Kelly, who was also a graduate of the School of Social work, was at the district where the students were. She supervised all of the social work students for the county. Dr. Bogardus was the chairman of the Department of Sociology. He was a great man, although I didn't have very much to do with him. Dr. Vincent was a professor in the Department of Sociology. I had a class with him. This school taught sociology and was an offshoot of the Department of Sociology. I had a course in sociological theory with Dr. Vincent. He was really very nice to me. All the students that were in the Welfare

Department were in this county's district. Dr. Bessie McClanahan was our casework teacher and she was a warm, friendly, remarkable person. Everything was sort of informal and we used to have various group discussions and meetings at night at various people's homes, sometimes at mine and sometimes at other students' homes.

HAMOVITCH. How many students were there in the school at that time? How large were your classes?

WILSON. There were about ten or twelve. We were phenomenal because this was the depth of the Depression and very shortly the money disappeared. I was active in an organization known as the social workers committee or something like that. It was a group of liberal social workers who were concerned about what they were seeing, so I was very active in that. I worked for two years for Los Angeles County, from 1932-1934. I was a bright young woman so I would stand up and make speeches and I became well known. I would go to luncheon meetings and so forth and Frieda Mohr was the executive of Jewish Family Service. Frieda Mohr was also a certificate graduate from the USC School of Social Work. All those years she was very devoted to the school and was close to the faculty and she was the executive director of Jewish Family Service. She also was unusual in terms that she at least had one year of graduate education. Most executives worked themselves up the hard way. She was always standing on her feet and talking.

About 1934 there began to be all kinds of jobs opening up for people in the social work field. You could go work as a Travelers Aid, which had a big

program. You could go work for the state Emergency Relief Administration or you could work for private agencies. I was getting all kinds of offers and so was everybody else, especially those of us who were graduates of a graduate program like USC. My whole professional experience has been that I never had any trouble getting a job because I was always ahead of the pack by having professional training. I didn't come into social work by apprenticeship. I came with a ticket.

Frieda Mohr called me up one day and said that she wanted to offer me a job. I thought that was great. It would pay \$150 a month and I had been making \$100.00 a month. \$150 a month was a lot of money. I thought that was interesting. Again I didn't have to go looking for a job. The people who were going to work for the state agency were in administration; George Nickel was a pioneer working for the great consumer credit organization. He made a brilliant career. I was interested in Frieda Mohr's offer. She invited me to go down to the Federation and meet Mr. Lipsitch. Mr. Lipsitch was the executive of the Jewish Federation of Los Angeles and that was pretty big. They had Jewish Family Service; they had some of the centers, nothing like later though, and they had the Jewish Orphans Home. Mr. Joe Bonaparke was an executive and a famous person in those days, in the children's field. I went down to 610 Temple Street; it is long gone now. It was the building that the Jewish Federation owned and it was the community building. I was interviewed by Frieda Mohr and her boss, Mr. Lipsitch. It was a very casual interview so that they could look me over. She told him that I was a smart little girl and that I had a certificate. Nobody else in her

office had gone to a graduate school of social work. So we had a casual conversation and he asked me where I was born or something and I said, "Where all the Jews are born, in New York City." I never forgot that because I thought oh, gosh I always put my foot in it. He said, "Well I wasn't born in New York City." I thought oh God; here I said the wrong thing. Frieda Mohr hired me and I was her pigeon, there was no question about that, and her baby. She certainly was the most important person, even more than Bessie McClanahan, in my life. We had a long and very interesting relationship. I was brought in to Jewish Family Services as the social worker with a professional ticket. Everybody else that she had on her staff had come in by hook or by crook and I was the caseworker and I worked there until 1936.

Somehow or another, I don't know how I learned about the psychiatric schools of social work. I applied to Smith and I applied to the New York School. Scholarships came from both of them and I didn't know psychiatric social work any more than I knew anything else. The scholarship came from Smith first and so I hied myself off to Smith. Smith had a very interesting plan because it is a little teeny town in North Hampton. They had the Smith Plan which was that you must spend the two summers at Smith and then they would find you an agency where you lived in the community. I borrowed money from the Jewish Federation. My mother was very nice, it was very difficult for her in the depression, and she let me go. I sat up all night on the train. I went to Smith and I am a very high strung and tense person, I was then and I still am. I was scared to death. All these social workers from the East who knew Washington and New

York, and knew something about psychoanalysis, which I had never heard.

There was nothing psychiatric at USC. As far as I could find out it was sociological and here they had the Washington Group and the New York Group, even in 1936 there were strong psychoanalytic influences. I had diarrhea practically that whole summer just from sheer nervousness.

Because I had come from the Family Service Field, most of the students were sent to mental hospitals, but they decided to send me to Cincinnati, Ohio. Family Service of Cincinnati was one of the strong good family agencies in those years. There were the New York agencies and the Jewish Board of Guardians and Family Services and United Charities. Family agencies had developed a critical counseling program in contrast to the old fashion programs that they had because public welfare had come in with basic financial assistance.

They assigned me to Cincinnati, Ohio and I didn't go home because I didn't have any money to go home. I stayed with my relatives in New York and that is a long story; I won't go into it. I went to Cincinnati and I became a student at Family Service of Cincinnati. Of course, that is where I met the whole psychoanalytic field and so forth and so on. I did very well there. I lived on \$55 a month and I rented a room with a family and I had a wonderful time. I met a lot of people and that was the greatest period for me. That is how I met my husband. My husband's best friend's wife was my supervisor so that's how I met my husband. Then I finished my work and Family Service of Cincinnati asked me to stay with them. I was caught in a dilemma because Frieda Mohr had supported me and helped me get the loan to go to get additional graduate training and I was

obligated to return to her. Family Service told me it was all right and that they would hold the job and I could come back any time I wanted. I came home and there were all kinds of problems and difficulties. By this time my family had lost everything. There were all kinds of personal family problems and so forth. I felt that the staff at Family Service, they took me out one by one and said don't go around talking psychiatric stuff around here; you know, nobody will like you and nobody will want you. I wasn't interested in becoming a pioneer and dealing with all the resistance. Family Service of Cincinnati kept on going.

HAMOVITCH. This is an interview with Honora Wilson and we are talking about her employment experiences.

WILSON. I told my mother that I was only half-baked and I had been a student for a year and I had work experience like they had in the East. They were simply not advanced enough here in Los Angeles. With the professional education I had gotten I needed work experience with the proper supervision. You always want to have good supervision. So anyway my mother was upset and it was very difficult for her because by this time my family had been wiped out and they were dependent upon me. Anyway, I told Frieda Mohr, who never forgave me, that I had to leave her and go back to Cincinnati, Ohio and I did. I returned to Cincinnati and there I met my supervisor's husband's best friend and I began dating him. I married him and I stayed in Cincinnati until my husband died of acute leukemia. They didn't know how to do anything then, but they couldn't diagnose it anyway. So I stayed there until 1947 and I would come back once or twice for conferences. When I returned to Los Angeles and I could always get a

job in a family agency, they always wanted me because I had worked in very distinguished agencies. The great family agencies were United Charities of Chicago, the CSS of New York, St. Louis Family Service, and Cincinnati Family Service. By this time I had leadership of the Family Service Bureau. My professional life had been split. Half of it was in family agencies and the rest of it was in medical, which was another group of long ago family service that I wasn't part of.

I went back and I went to a conference and I was interviewed by an executive of Family Services in Los Angeles and I got offered a job. I returned to Los Angeles with a job in my hand working for Family Services in Los Angeles and I got offered a job. I was the district director of the three southeast districts of Family Service. I worked with Blythe Francis who was the executive of Family Service. I stayed there for a couple of years, that's all, because it was a very serious financial problem. The social workers in Los Angeles who worked with Jewish agencies got better paid than any other social workers because with the Community Chest and what else was going on, the social worker salaries were kept low in the non Jewish agencies. The Jewish social workers were all unionized so they got a supplement from the federation money. I was trying to raise a child by myself and it was too hard, so I was trying to get a job working for one of the Jewish agencies. I figured that was where I ought to go. Family Service of Los Angeles was wonderful to me and liked me very much and I liked them, but my whole goal was to make more money. I got a job working for the

Jewish Committee of Personal Service and Gateways and that was where I did all my apprenticeship and I was assistant director.

This leads me to the City of Hope. The City of Hope provided me a rare opportunity. I came accidentally, but at a critical time for me and the hospital. I had gone to Smith, received a Master's degree there and returned to Los Angeles. I was assistant to the executor of Gateways, the Jewish Committee for Personal Service. Mr. Carter was President of the City of Hope. He was a distinguished citizen in the Jewish Community and a multi-millionaire. The City of Hope had had difficulty with the director of social work and they had fired him cold. The Board of the City of Hope then was very different than it is now. It was composed primarily of lower class Jewish men who had worked themselves up and had become millionaires. Many of them were in the shoe business. They were wonderful people. Mr. Shulman's son was one of the most distinguished American children's psychiatrists. His father used to always say to me "from a shoemaker comes a psychiatrist." They had this trouble with the previous director who said to them "If you fire me, I will see to it that no professional social worker will ever walk the floors of the City of Hope again."

This was in the days of liberal and communist stuff. That's all you had to do, was hear these men who were working class men and moved up and became millionaires. They weren't going to let a little snot-nosed social worker take them on. Mr. Carter was the president of the City of Hope and also president of the Gateway's Hospital and the Jewish Committee for Personal Service. He went to the executive and said "I don't care what you do, but you get

the best qualified, credentialed social worker for us, 'cause this guy said he would fix it so they couldn't." So he didn't like me very much, but had to do what Mr. Carter said, so he came to me and said "Honora, they need a social worker over there at the City of Hope." I said "Well, what does that have to do with me?" He told me he wanted me to go over there and apply. I said "Look, I don't know anything about working in a hospital. I have never worked in a hospital. It is a tuberculosis hospital, I have a little boy." He said "You don't have to take the job, you don't have to at all, but Mr. Carter said I should send some applicants over there. You know how it is when you have a president, you have to do what he tells you to do." I told him that I would go and apply anyway.

They owned the building on 8th and Hill Street, they still do. I went down there and there was this little teeny man uncomfortable as heck, sitting in this great big office. I knew when I sat there that I was thinking I am fancy, I went to Smith, I am this fancy psychiatric social worker and you can count them on one hand in Los Angeles in 1936. I had this wonderful education and this guy doesn't even know how to interview me. He didn't ask me where I went to school, what my education is, what I had done, he just sat there and talked. I got pissed, literally. I was annoyed because I came down here and I don't know what happened. I knew he was so uncomfortable, he didn't know what to ask me. He was just talking about the weather. For some reason I decided I was going to get this guy to eat out of my hands. So I said "Why don't you tell me about yourself." He didn't know how to talk to me. So he told me that he was a pharmacist and he had a chain of restaurants in San Francisco and that he really was a lay

president and they asked him to come down and do some things with them he really didn't know how to do them. I told him that was very funny because my mother was a pharmacist. If I had said that my mother was his sister, he couldn't have got more excited. He came around the chair and said "Come here, I want to tell you something. You ask for whatever you want and you will get it. They are dying to hire you. Whatever you want, you can have. Your mother is a pharmacist and I am a pharmacist, the job is yours right here, right now."

I went out and I said, "Well, there are certain rules." It happened that I knew a social worker from Cincinnati, who had been hired to do an organization job. I said that I couldn't go away to the TB Hospital unless I found out something about her. I called her up long distance and she said, "Oh, it would be marvelous. You mean to tell me that you are going to go work with the City of Hope and they are going to have a professional social worker like you. We will stand by you, from New York to Los Angeles. We will do everything there is for you." I said, "I don't know. I don't want my son to get TB. Do you think I should go work for that place, that City of Hope?" She said, "We will be so proud of you." She practically sold me. I felt that was the low down. She said "Go and I will do everything I can to help you." So I went out to the hospital and I met Dr. Rogers, the medical director, and he said, "Look I am going to tell you something. They are all on pin and needles. They are so worried that you won't take the job. You can have anything you want, but I am just telling you how they are. Mr. Carter is just pacing in another part of the hospital to be sure that you accept the job." I made a deal, even though I could have had more. I got a budget for three

social workers. I got an expense account for myself that I had for over ten years. I got paid \$865, which is a lot of money for those days. They paid for my car and my mileage. Everything I could think of they gave me. They said it was okay. He said, "When are you going to grow up, Honora? You always look for somebody to supervise you. This is an opportunity for you to be an individual. You don't want to grow up and be an executive and do what is hard. You are long past having a supervisor to protect you. Grow up and become an executive." So I agreed.

I came to the City of Hope. I had two professions in social work. They were wonderful to me because the board was composed mostly of Russian Jewish working men who became millionaires. They had this great empathy for people and I knew, culturally, that background. I came from that kind of a family and they loved that in me. They had an admissions committee because it was an old fashioned TB hospital. The admissions committee was a committee of the board, and they reviewed all of the cases. The doctors had nothing to do with it. They took whatever they gave them. They reviewed all the applicants to the hospital and decided who should come back and it was a free hospital. I said that was ridiculous, that this was a hospital. They don't treat people; doctors do. I asked him to do something about and he told me he couldn't. He said, "That has been here for a long time. They founded this hospital and I can't take it away from them." I said, "Let me tell you something; if I come here I am going to change that. I don't believe in that. I think that the decision of who should be treated by this hospital is a medical decision." The first person I hired, was a

very darling young girl. She had worked in the County Hospital and was working then for another agency and was very pretty and very bright and had a Master's from the University Chicago School of Social Work. I didn't hire anybody who didn't have the right ticket. She was post-polio and she wore a brace and she was a beautiful girl. Anybody that looked at her and then saw that brace just would melt. She came out and I hired her and we were the girls. Once a month this committee met. In the first place there was me and there was Shirley who was so pretty and wore this brace. There were these elderly Jewish men who just loved us. We would tell the case stories and they would just melt. They all loved us. Mr. Carl owned Carl's Shoe Store, a multi-millionaire and he was the chairman of the Social Service Committee. The whole board envied them because they could hear all these stories and be with the girls, that's us. I could have had diamond rings and anything I wanted because they had me with my Master's degree and.....

HAMOVITCH. Is this Shirley Waters?

WILSON. Yes. This was a great job for her. She went from there to Children's Hospital. She would have been stuck I don't know where. When we were the girls who sang there wasn't any question. We could have anything we wanted. We got raises. We didn't get more than we were supposed to get. I made Shirley assistant director to me. We became a team. I told Dr. Rogers that I had to get rid of the review of who comes into the hospital. We met once a month, usually at Mr. Carl's house and I have never forgotten the first night we were there he went into the administration and got my background and he introduced

me as if I was the Queen of England with my background. He was so dear, a wonderful man. They had great respect and everybody on the board was so envious of them because they had the two girls, the two pretty girls, and they learned all the stuff from us about the patients. I came at a very particular time when they were in the process of change and tuberculosis was dying out because drugs had been discovered. They had hired Dr. Howard Bierman, who was instrumental in developing a child cancer program and they developed a parent participation program. Eventually, in less than two years time, I got rid of that committee, but I had another committee. The medical director never went to a board meeting, but I did. I got so much power in that hospital. The circumstances of how I got the job and what happened in my personality, it was amazing. I thought well, we ought to have a research program. If we are going to be a good social work department we ought to have a good research program. So I knew that you wrote the drafts. That was an exciting time because I always remember when the site team came out everybody was hiding. We didn't know whether or not they were going to like us and I was dancing around. Then we got the grant.

HAMOVITCH. Your reference to that research project. I remember Dr. Bierman calling me into this office to tell me about you and your role in the hospital. He was very praiseworthy. He said "she is a tough cookie and she makes us do things that wouldn't do on our own. She is our conscience and she holds us to it and we love her for it." It made me feel so good because I wasn't used to

hospital directors liking their social work directors. That wasn't the way most of them operated. The respect that you got from your long time leader still held.

WILSON. That is interesting because that goes back to USC. The fundraisers had to raise money. They said there's one place where we could get the names of all the relatives and this was a free hospital and we sold ourselves on that basis. They had to get money by hook or crook. They said that if they got a hold of a social worker they would get all the names of all the relatives. I said "over my dead body. The records are confidential. I don't care where you want to raise money, but you can't get the names of relatives." They knew this because they went to Howard Bierman. It was no sweat off his brow by keeping the records. There never was any violation of social work records. There weren't any other records involved except for whom to call if you are in trouble, but nothing else. There is no way that they could get the data that I had. The administration for some reason could not get the names because the social work department could not violate confidentiality. It goes right back to USC. I had no ambivalence about this. They knew nothing could make me do that. It would be like I don't know what. I had a wonderful time there. I was there ten years. No director of social work ever had the kind of power I did. This grew out of that whole early experience of losing their director and the whole emotional involvement and the history and all the rest of it. I went to board meetings and I had my own committee. The medical director never had anything to do with it. They didn't want doctors to tell them what to do. I came to them and said "This is a Jewish Hospital and people stay here for months and months of time in those

times and you don't have a Rabbi here. We need to have a Rabbi here." If I said we gotta have something they would say okay what? They said, "You want to have a Rabbi?" I said "Yes, it's a Jewish hospital and these people stay here for months. They ought to have some kind of religious Jewish experience with that." I used to have passover sedans for everybody. He said "You want a Rabbi, you can have a Rabbi, but you have to have one agreement with us that he won't go near the kitchen." Those Russian Jews were not religious. They didn't want to be bothered with that because they had a Mexican man who was the cook. They didn't want the Rabbi in there. There was the Rabbi of the Foothill Jewish community and I said to him: "You can have this job, but you cannot go near this kitchen." He said, "I don't want to go near the kitchen. So we had a Rabbi. Only years later, Cedars finally gave themselves a Rabbi. Of course they have a psychiatric Rabbi now, they have a whole psychiatric department. This is non-profit. That is how we kept the Rabbi there. That was a wonderful experience. It was right for me to leave. I left because I got to be fifty years old and all I had was my salary. They didn't have a retirement program. They said "Don't worry, we'll take care of you." This was not enough for me. In the first place, if you were a girl in the hospital, you were being propositioned everyday all the time anyway. I could not run the risk of having to sit on somebody's lap or begging. I warned them that I would stay ten years. I went back to the Jewish Federation and they were behind me. They decided they had to give me a community organization job. I become executive for the Jewish Information Services for the agency. I stayed with them for two years. I went all over the United States and

viewed all the programs for the elderly. Then I went to Rancho because I wanted to work for a public agency because they were the ones that had the good retirement programs. Do you have a good one at USC?

HAMOVITCH. Yes.

WILSON. That worked out okay. I couldn't sit around waiting for the City of Hope. The City of Hope had unions for lower workers and they had retirements and social security. I got social security at the City of Hope. Then I went to Rancho and that was great. I was there for almost fifteen years.

I worked at Rancho for twelve years, I think. I went there in 1962. That was in my early days. That worked out very well. Rancho was wonderful. I became a medical social worker.

HAMOVITCH. I knew this was going to be interesting. Your story, both personal and professional, in terms of the history of social work in this community. I really appreciate this. I think what you demonstrated was what the power of a truly professional social worker with convictions and a strong ego can accomplish. When you think about how poor so many social work departments and hospitals are and have been. These really stand out. It is not just a question of the time or the period, but yourself and the Jewish Family Service. Shirley Waters; what she learned from you and she applied it to Orthopedic Hospital. There is Jean Young at Cedars. More recently we have June Simmons and Huntington Hospital, who has done a terrific job.

WILSON. She is not there any more.

HAMOVITCH. She is head of the VNA now.

WILSON. She is really a tough person.

HAMOVITCH. All of you have that characteristic in common as far as I am concerned. It is great. Thank you very much.

ABSTRACT:

Honora Wilson was one of a generation of strong woman administrators of social work agencies who pioneered during the post World War II through the 1960's. Her particular contribution was with the City of Hope Medical Center, in Duarte, CA. She was able to convince the lay board who makes decisions on admissibility to the hospital to transform this responsibility to the professional medical staff. The Board would receive advice from Ms. Wilson and her assistant with regard to the social needs of the patients. She was seen as the social conscience of the hospital, and was involved in pushing innovation programs, such as moral accommodations on the premises to enable parents to spend time with their hospitalized children being treated for leukemia. Parents were also permitted to assist in the nursing care of the children. This was a first.