



## Katy Barber Oral History Interview, November 12, 2015

### **Title**

“OSU in the early 1990s”

### **Date**

November 12, 2015

### **Location**

Hoffmann Hall, Portland State University.

### **Summary**

In the interview, Barber discusses her upbringing in Portland, emphasizing her educational and social experiences at Jefferson High School. She then recounts her initial entry into college, recalling the term that she spent at Reed College and the circumstances that led to her transferring to Oregon State University.

The bulk of the session is devoted to Barber's memories of her undergraduate years at OSU and campus culture at Oregon State during the early 1990s. In this, she describes her academic progression within the American Studies program, the impact that Bill Robbins and other OSU faculty made upon her, and her earliest notions about pursuing a graduate degree. She likewise reflects on the racial unrest that pervaded OSU during her years in Corvallis, and her experiences of feeling marginalized as a female student. Barber also notes her memories of the city of Corvallis and of the OSU library, her social activities, the impact on OSU of the passage of Ballot Measure 5, national events of consequence during her undergraduate years, and jobs that she held while a student.

The session concludes with thoughts on Barber's continuing collaboration with Bill Robbins, her work with the OSU Press, her scholarship as a faculty member at Portland State University, and her sense of OSU's current direction.

### **Interviewee**

Katy Barber

### **Interviewer**

Janice Dilg

### **Website**

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/barber/>

## Transcript

**Katy Barber:** I'm Katy Barber and we're in the Hoffmann Library at Portland State University in the History Department.

**Janice Dilg:** And this is Janice Dilg, oral historian for the OSU Sesquicentennial Oral History Project. Today is Thursday, November 12th, 2015. And I just learned this morning that you will be the 200th interview for the project.

**KB:** That is exciting!

**JD:** It is exciting!

**KB:** Cool, ok.

**JD:** If you would please, start by just filling in a little family background. Where you're from, your family, where you grew up.

**KB:** OK, well both of my parents were from southern California, and they moved up to Portland when I was all of two weeks old. And so the family story was that they had a VW Bug and I was in a banana box in the back. And they moved to Portland and then spent some time in Eugene and came back to Portland. I don't remember Eugene very much, but that's where my brother was born. And then I grew up in Portland, for the most part. I went to Sunnyside Elementary and Tubman Middle School and Jefferson High School.

**JD:** Talk a little about Jefferson High School, just because it's a bit of a unique high school in the history of Portland and its public school system.

**KB:** Sure, so I wanted to go to Jefferson High School because it was a magnet school and it had a really wonderful performing arts program. And so I auditioned for Jefferson for that reason. I also spent some time going to Metropolitan Learning Center when I was a sophomore. So I spent a half day at MLC and then at lunch time would take a school bus over to Jefferson and spend the rest of the day there. So that's why I went to Jefferson. Jefferson was not in my neighborhood; I was supposed to either go to Cleveland or Franklin, I was right on the line and never actually figured out which one I would have ended up at. Jefferson was, I suppose, a fairly diverse school – for Portland, it was a diverse school. And it was a really vibrant school in a lot of ways, while I was there. And it's been sad to see the direction that it's taken since I graduated.

**JD:** And one of the diverse aspects to it was the racial make-up of the school, which was quite different from most other high schools in Portland.

**KB:** Right, I think it only rivaled Roosevelt for how many African American students were going there. That was the neighborhood. The magnet school is actually a way to diversify Portland schools more generally. So there was some tension between those who were neighborhood kids and those who were bused in. The arts programs did benefit students who lived in the neighborhood, but they benefited those students less so than students who were brought in to the neighborhood specifically to participate in those programs.

**JD:** What were some of your educational experiences? What was it that you liked – subjects that you liked in school or, perhaps, inspirations to you in your high school education?

**KB:** Well, I think the biggest thing was taking a joint class – well, it was a class that was taught jointly by Linda Christiansen and Bill Bigelow. And I did that when I was a junior in high school, and that was actually life-changing for me for a number of reasons. One was because Bill Bigelow was the history teacher and Linda Christiansen was teaching English, and so the class was really an American studies class, and I ended up getting all of my degrees, after my high school experience, in American studies, in large part because I just loved that combination of thinking about literature and historicizing literature.

It was also really important because they were very interested in social justice issues. Bill actually went to South Africa and it was, of course, during the time when South Africa was still under apartheid and there was quite a bit of discussion about the divestment of different organizations in the United States from South Africa. And I was sort of appalled that he

went to South Africa, in my imagination, as a kind of tourist. Of course he was going for educational reasons and he came back filled with stories about that particular experience, but also how that experience connected to the American history story. And so that was kind of radicalized; I mean, I remember that being very very important in my intellectual thinking at the time.

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And eventually, the other thing that came out of that class, was Craig Lesley, who is a Portland author, had just published *Winterkill*. And Linda and Bill decided to use it as one of the texts in our class. So he came and visited us after we read the book, and when he came to visit us he had these 8x10 glossy photographs of the Sohappy family at the Cooks Encampment, at their Cooks Landing home. And it had just – SalmonScam was in the news because the cases were actually going to court at that point. And I just became really sort of obsessed with what was happening around fishing issues on the Columbia River, around native fishing issues on the Columbia River. In part because Lesley's book was beautiful and really moved me, and in part because I had this conception of apartheid and a teacher who is making connections between apartheid in the African American experience in history in the United States. And then I was making even more local connections, and thinking that this was really a particular site of injustice, in my own back yard. And came to recognize that civil rights wasn't about the South at all, or solely about the South, but that civil rights were about my own community. And this seemed to be a really amazing example of that, that I could see unfolding as it actually was happening.

**JD:** And from those obviously intense experiences that you were going through, did you know that you would be going to college? Was that always an expectation that you had for yourself or that your parents had for you?

**KB:** Yes, my parents always thought that I would go to college and they both were graduates from universities. Neither of them went on to complete master's programs or graduate programs, but my mom entered a graduate program in fine arts and then dropped out because a couple of her professors stated to her very clearly that there was no reason for a woman to be in that program. She would find a husband, stop painting, have kids. And she was intent on proving them wrong, so all through my childhood she had her painting time. But there was an expectation that both my brother and I would go to school, that was not even a question. At the same time, my parents really didn't know how to support us in giving us the tools that we would need once we got to university.

**JD:** What kind of tools do you mean?

**KB:** Well I think, for example, my parents had a lot of trust – my mom told me this years later – that she had a lot of trust in the school. And she believed that my public school experience would reflect hers. And she went to a public school in California, in the 1950s, where there was tons of money. I mean, she took Russian language classes as a high school student. And my school experience was very different, and part of that was because there was such a strong emphasis on performing arts. So I remember going to classes at Oregon State University not knowing how to write a five-paragraph essay, not knowing how to create an argument, or support an argument. And those were things that I had to learn as I was in class. So I had a steep learning curve. But I think that really what it was was that my parents just assumed that whatever education that we got at Jefferson would be more than adequate to get us to the next step, and then were surprised that it wasn't.

**JD:** And the next step was not a direct step for you. I know that you were awarded or qualified for some scholarships and you didn't directly go to OSU from high school.

**KB:** That's right. So I applied to a number of different schools, including Sarah Lawrence. I applied to Reed and there was another school that I applied to that right now I'm just not remembering. It was also a former women's school that my aunt had gone to, and she actually made arrangements for me to be interviewed by an alum in Portland. And my aunt, who was my aunt by marriage, was a professor in southern California in archeology, and she and my uncle, who was a Ph.D., provided me with some advice and some support as I was preparing to apply to these universities and colleges. I got a scholarship to Sarah Lawrence and it would have meant I was able to go. My parents didn't have a lot that they could contribute to my schooling, but I got a big enough scholarship that I could go to Sarah Lawrence. But that seemed so far away.

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I also got a scholarship to Reed and I could go there, but I couldn't stay in the dorms. I didn't have enough money to stay in the dorms. So I decided to go to Reed and stayed at home. [laughs] I remember my uncle saying at the time that they washed out a lot of students; that they always accepted more students than they figured would actually graduate from Reed. And he said it to me as a warning, I realized afterward. I didn't realize that at the time. But he was saying that might not be the best choice because they'll look for reasons to thin out the herd. The reason I left though was because my parents were going through a terrible divorce at the time, and staying at home just was incredibly painful.

And so that coupled with the fact that I got to Reed and felt totally like a fish out of water. One of the first classes that I took was a very small seminar course and we were asked three questions. Now can I remember all three of them? One of them was "where have you traveled outside of the country?" "Where did you go to high school?" was another one. And I can't quite remember the third, but they were all questions that signified how different I was from the other people in the room, because I had been to Canada on a single trip, because my dad wanted my grandfather, who was a gardener, to see the Butchart Gardens. That was the only place I had ever been outside the country; I didn't even need a passport for that. I went to Jefferson and I remember several of the students saying to me, wasn't I concerned about going to Jefferson? Because they knew that it was in a bad part of Portland, but they had no conception of what that meant. They were coming from cities where a bad part of town actually was serious, perhaps, I don't know.

In any case, I really felt alienated from the students and I felt alienated from my house. I had a boyfriend at the time who was at Oregon State University, and on the weekends I was driving down there. And it became really clear to me that I just needed to get out of the house, so I made arrangements to transfer to OSU. In fact, I didn't even finish the semester at Reed, I just dropped out. I talked to a couple of professors about it. One of them was my poetry professor and he told me, "look, I dropped out of Reed. I didn't turn out so bad." [laughs] Which was great advice at the time, you know, it's not going to be the worst thing that will happen to you, you will live, you will survive.

One of the things that I remember going on at OSU at the time was, I was reading the student newspaper and one of the articles was about students at OSU who were homeless and living out of their cars. And not to be too flip about it, but I thought, "I have so much more in common with these folks." It felt like a more welcoming place to me.

**JD:** And so you then did transfer, and this was 1989-90?

**KB:** Yeah it would have been '89. I started there in January of '89.

**JD:** You had been on campus so you already sort of knew your way around a bit and had some sense of the place, but now you're a student. What were some of your first impressions and how you kind of jumped in at this new university?

**KB:** Well, Don, who is now my husband, helped me out quite a bit. The first thing that I had to do was actually meet with an advisor and decide on the courses, and then go to Gill Coliseum where I stood in line to sign up for the courses. Which, of course, pre-dates the internet, how people sign up for courses now, for sure. You had to go to each of the different spots and hope that the class was still open and get somebody to sign off on it. So I did that, I signed up for all of my classes.

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And then we went over to the bookstore and Don said to me, "just buy all of the books, don't worry how much it costs," because he knew I was going to have some major sticker shock. It wasn't as though I hadn't purchased books before, because I did at Reed, but this was something entirely different. I had signed up for a science class, for example, and the textbook was a crazy amount. And I was signing up for other classes where there were lots of books that I had to buy. And in some ways it was actually kind of liberating, because it was like, "oh, I have a reason for buying all these books. It doesn't matter how much they cost, I have to do it." And then I stayed at a dorm where I didn't have a roommate, which was nice, Cauthorn Hall.

And, I mean, first impressions. It was a much bigger community but it was also a community that was immersive, because I was living at home at Reed so I was taking the bus in and I just didn't feel as connected. And I had a ready-made set of friends, because Don had been there for a quarter already and I knew a lot of the people that he knew. A lot of them

happened to be engineers, but then I went on to meet other people in my classes. I guess I remember that I enjoyed it quite a bit; it was exciting. It was exciting to be in that kind of environment.

**JD:** On the academic front, I know that you mentioned earlier that you earned your degree in American Studies, but I'm not sure if you were that focused when you started or what classes you started taking that ended up shaping that decision.

**KB:** I totally knew I was going to major in American Studies, so I sought out that program as soon as I got onto campus and declared that my major, and it was my major until I finished. And I started taking the courses that were required of that major immediately.

**JD:** And define, a little bit, what American Studies is or was when you were there.

**KB:** Well, when I was there, it was an inter-disciplinary program that included history and literature – U.S. history and U.S. literature. And then you had to take classes from a third discipline, and I chose religion. I'm not exactly sure why, except that maybe I probably looked through the catalog and thought that those classes looked particularly interesting. And I took some wonderful classes that were ethics classes, essentially, and American religious classes. And then because I decided to get a B.S., I needed to have a focus in a non-western geographic area, and I chose Africa. So I took a number of African history classes and some African literature classes to fulfill that requirement.

**JD:** Were there some particular classes that influenced you that really set you off in new intellectual areas?

**KB:** Yes. I took an African literature class, and I don't remember the professor's name, I took one class from her. And she would do these deep readings of the texts we were reading, so I would come prepared to class having read the chapters that she asked us to read in a novel, and I would feel like I understood kind of what was going on. I didn't have the internet at the time, so it wasn't like I could wiki anything. But I kind of felt like I understood what was going on and I had taken African history classes, so I had a bit of a context for it. And then she would stand up and explain, contextualize, all of the things that we had been reading that I felt like I understood, and I'd realize how little I understood. But it was so exciting to have somebody who could do that, who could open up a text like that, and explain what the allegories were, what the political context was, and so on and so forth. So that, I just remember thinking, "I want to be able to do something like that. I want to be able to take a text that isn't immediately transparent and be able to understand it."

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I took a seminar that was offered through the English department, on American Success, that I really loved. We read things like Benjamin Franklin's autobiography and talked about what success was. I took classes in the English department that were graduate/undergraduate classes, so they were split, and I really liked that. I liked being around graduate students who were very intense and interested, and they would talk a lot. And I thought that they really enriched the classes that I took.

And then, of course, I took classes from Bill Robbins in the History department. And I took every class from him that I could. I would have taken them multiple times, I think, if I could have done it and they would have counted. I took classes from all the Americanists in the History department. For some reason – I think, in part, because he was talking about my own community, the Pacific Northwest; I took western history, I took Native American history from Bill – I just loved those classes. The readings, except one of them that I still use actually, because it's a really important book. I know why he had us read it; it's terrible. Terribly written, I should say. I also loved how excited he would get about what he was doing. He was really inspiring to watch him talk. And they were traditional lecture classes which, at the time, was just perfectly suited for somebody who didn't want to talk much in class, like myself. But they were really wonderful classes.

**JD:** So you would have been on campus not long after William Appleman Williams died. He hadn't been there for a little while, but did you sort of feel his influence there at all?

**KB:** Very much so because he was important to Bill Robbins. And because the seminar room that we took the History seminars in was named the William Appleman Williams Room. And yes, so we learned quite a bit. And, in fact, I wonder if one of my African history classes was not influenced by his presence on campus, because of the way in which we talked about the colonizing and the de-colonizing of Africa. Which could have been influenced by a lot of other writers who probably also influenced Williams. But very much so in the History department and with Bill Robbins. Bill Robbins

would talk about William Appleman Williams. In fact, even though he wasn't a historian of the Pacific Northwest, I learned about his column in the *Oregonian* and the importance that he had as a public scholar in Oregon while he was there.

**JD:** When we talked before this interview, I think another professor who is still there, Mina Carson, was someone that you had mentioned as being influential in your time there.

**KB:** Yes, absolutely. She was a fairly young hire at the time and she taught these huge courses; I mean, they must have been U.S. 201 or something like that. And she integrated music, of course, and just some wonderful lively aspects into her lectures. So I really enjoyed taking classes from her. I just remember the auditorium seating; it felt like were in a huge theater. There were probably 150 students in the class that I remember, in particular, taking with her.

**JD:** And because you were an American Studies major, you had some contact with David Robinson.

**KB:** Yes, he was my advisor. And he also did the only readings and conference that I took as an undergraduate. He supervised that. He gave me a lot of advice, especially as I was thinking about graduate school. He taught the American Success course that I mentioned earlier. He was just a really very warm and helpful person, as I was trying to navigate. Because of the way that we signed up for classes, I had to meet with him every quarter and he had to sign off on my plan of study. So I really felt like I got to know him as a student, and really enjoyed and appreciated the guidance that he gave me.

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**JD:** And where, if you remember, in the point of your time at OSU as an undergraduate, did you start to formulate a plan that you were going to go on to graduate school, or what you wanted to do with what you were learning there?

**KB:** That's a good question. I'm not really sure, I don't have a moment where I can say, "then the light went on and I thought, graduate school! That's what I should do!" I think what happened – there are a couple of things. One of them was, I was pretty sure I was going to become a teacher and wanted to model myself after Linda Christiansen or Bill Bigelow. And I thought, "I want to do what they were doing." And so I knew I needed to get a teaching certificate, and I talked with David Robinson and other people about that. By the time I was a, let's say, late junior, late in my junior year, I was getting some encouragement from some of my professors – particularly Bill Robbins and David Robinson – to consider graduate school, in some kind of guise. And I thought, well, if I got an MA in American Studies, that I could get my teaching certificate afterwards and that would actually make me more competitive for the job market. So that eventually became my plan. And the American Studies program, within the Pacific Northwest – because I, very narrowly, was like, "I'm not going to leave home" – was at Washington State University. So that's where I applied to go to graduate school.

**JD:** We've been talking about all these wonderful classes and experiences that were very enriching, but I'm guessing that wasn't necessarily always the case. So we should, perhaps, address the other side of that story.

**KB:** You know, I had two classes in particular that were really awful. One of them was – I think it might have been in my first quarter that I took this class – it was a U.S. history survey, it was like the very beginning level of the survey. And the professor would come in and he would talk at us, and he was not happy. He was clearly not a happy person at this moment in his life. And he might have been an adjunct, because I don't remember him being part of the regular faculty. And then we would take these multiple choice tests, which was bizarre to me. And they were so easy. And it was frustrating because I wanted to be challenged; I wanted the college experience to be challenging and enriching. And this was not that; it was, go through the textbook, read the questions at the back, make sure you have the answer, and then you were ready for the exam. It might have been at the final – I remember it being at the end of the class the final day or during the final exam – he told us that he was getting divorced. And he was, like, really angry about it. And it was like, "Oh! That's the context of this class!" And I don't remember seeing him on campus after that but I thought, "wow, what a waste of money."

One of the things that Don and I did is we actually figured out how much each class cost us, and part of that was, as a high school student, I was not always inclined to go to class. But if I put a cost to each of the sessions at the university level, I

knew, even it was a bad class, I would go. Because I knew what the value of that class was to me. So I went to class and I really slogged through that one.

The other class that I remember that I did not like was an English class. And it was also probably within that first year, which means it was in one of the first two quarters that I was in. And in that class, I thought the professor was just misogynistic, terribly. And I had the language for that, even, because of the experiences I'd had at Jefferson with teachers who gave me that language. And I just chafed at what he was trying to get across to us; I hated that class. And the tests that he gave were very very detailed tests about the literature that we read. To the point where there would be like a quote and we had to contextualize it. Or there would be a name that we would have to identify. And I just thought, "this is ridiculous. This is not education." That was the other problem, is that Bill and Linda opened to my eyes to what engaged pedagogy looked like. And so I had the language to resist but this was an instance where I met kind of a brick wall, and my resistance didn't go very far. So I was unhappy in the class and made it known to the professor. Now that I'm a professor I think, "oh, what a troublesome student I probably was."

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And I got a D in the class, and I felt that it was entirely unfair. I had done so much work in that class and so much work that I didn't value, because it was all rote memorization, it felt like, to me. I didn't get what he was trying to teach us. It was before people put learning outcomes on their syllabi. And I just thought it was so unjust and I went to talk to professors in the English department about it and was told, basically, that this was a person who was near retirement, that I'd be able to make it up in my GPA. I felt like I was being told not to rock the boat, and these were people whose opinion I valued. And I thought, "well, what's a D?" Of course, when I went to apply for graduate school, I was like, "Oh! I have to be able to explain that D." But it's actually been quite to useful to be able to tell students since then that, as an undergraduate, I got a D in a class. [laughs] You can survive.

**JD:** You had also mentioned, when we were talking previously, about a class that, I don't know if the entire class was about the slave trade or if it was an element of a larger class that had an impactful experience for you.

**KB:** Yeah, so while I was on the OSU campus there were a lot of racial tensions around a couple of events, but also, I think, just more generally. And I took African history, I took African literature, but I also took a lot of African American classes. I was really interested in African American history and African American literature, so I took, I think - I was looking at my folders for those classes, and I think I took at least two and maybe even four courses that dealt with African American history.

**JD:** I love that you still have your files from then.

**KB:** OK, but look what I have. They're beautiful: "African American History, 364-365." And the reason that I have them is I recycled them when I went to graduate school, and I have my graduate school records. So I still have the old folders, but I don't have very much of my work and I don't have any syllabi. I really wish I had kept the syllabi. It did remind me that I took an entire class on Vonnegut, which I had forgotten.

But in any case, I was taking this class in African American history, and most of my classes were overwhelmingly white, most of the campus was overwhelmingly white. In African American history there were a good number of African American students in the class – by good number, there might have been six or seven is all. And our professor was really good at navigating that history and recognizing the difficulty of telling that history, etcetera. And she was sick – or, for some reason, couldn't go to class, maybe she had a conference, I don't know – she invited another History professor to come in and give a guest lecture, and it was awful. It was terrible in that he came in sort of like, "I know what I'm talking about and ready to profess," and there was already some tension, and he said something to the effect of, you know, "more people died in x than died in the Atlantic slave trade." I don't remember what the x is right now. But it was something that seemed to totally belie or undermine the significance, particularly the very personal significance, of the Atlantic slave trade and its decimation for people in the class. And there were a number of students who stood up and were like, "we're leaving." And they were angry and yelling, and the professor was kind of like getting flustered and also elevating the tension by declaring that he was right. And the class got up and left. That was the end of class that day. Our regular professor came back and we talked about it some, and we went on from there.

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But that was, like I said, it was part of a larger issue on campus at that time. There were some events that had happened – and I don't even remember the details of them very much, anymore – but where African American students, who were small in number, were harassed. One, in particular, where a group of frat guys did something, maybe used racial slurs against a group of black kids who were walking by. And so there were a number of times when there were some rallies in the student union building and so forth, where those kinds of things were talked about.

**JD:** Were those student-led or do you remember more details about what those rallies were like?

**KB:** Yeah, they were student-led. They were small, so, I would say maybe like thirty or forty students – and it's a pretty big university – would gather together. There was probably an African American student group that was organizing that. I wasn't affiliated with the group at all, but I went to a couple of the rallies because I was sympathetic to the problems within the racial climate on campus. And there were a series of speeches that students gave about their experiences of being African American on campus.

**JD:** Was there a sense that the administration was listening? Was addressing some of these issues? Did you notice changes that occurred throughout your tenure there?

**KB:** You know, I don't really. And it's interesting to talk about this in light of what's happened at Missouri, because it's possible for students to actually protest effectively and to remove administrators, apparently. What I remember from that time is that the racial climate was something that was written about in the student newspaper and that there was a pretty – at least it seemed to me – a fairly sizable contingent of people who were concerned with those issues on campus, but that nothing substantial came out of it. That may have been because what came out of those discussions didn't affect me directly, so I might have just been unaware of them. But it seemed like an on-going issue throughout the time that I was at OSU; that apparently, periodically, would just blow up into something because somebody was harassed specifically and it became a compelling moment. And then it would kind of die down a little bit and then it would come back. So I don't recall any significant changes.

**JD:** Do you recall the dynamic along racial issues, or otherwise, between OSU and Corvallis? Sort of what your experience was in those two inter-related communities?

**KB:** That's a good question. You know, Corvallis was a place that I understood only as a student, and I don't remember problems within the broader community, although I'm sure there were. I mean, there were problems in Portland that I specifically knew about, because I had friends in Portland who would talk to me about them or I witnessed them. But I didn't witness those things in Corvallis. Part of it was that the friends that I had at Jefferson who were African American, only two of them went to Corvallis, went to OSU. And I kept in touch with them while we were in Corvallis, but I don't remember them telling me that they had particular problems with the town.

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**JD:** What are your recollections of Corvallis more broadly, more generally? Even though you were there just as a student? Because I know you didn't live on campus the entire time, so you were out in the town a bit more.

**KB:** We had an apartment on Kings Boulevard. And the guy who owned the apartment building gave us a Tenant's Bill of Rights when we went to meet him, and looked like an old hippy slash motorcycle club member, [laughs] who was very very nice to us. The broader community; it just felt like a really small town that didn't have a lot of interesting things going on. [laughs] I hate to say it. I'd probably love going back and living there now. We spent a lot more time in Portland, or getting out of Corvallis. So, like I said, it was a place that I really engaged in as a student. So I was going to the grocery store – I remember when Cub Foods opened, that was cool because it was really cheap. I remember some of the restaurants that we would go to that were cheap. Neither Don nor I hung out at bars or anything like that, so we didn't do a lot of stuff like that. I just remember that as a period of time where I was either studying or I was driving to Portland or I was in class. My orientation was so much in the university, towards the university.

**JD:** You mentioned getting out and doing things in addition to going to Portland, what kinds of activities, outside of academics, did you engage in?



**KB:** We spent a lot of time going to the beach; just day trips. Hiking. There were trails around Corvallis that we would spend time at. Hanging out with friends. We didn't go to parties much; hardly at all. In some ways it sounds like a really narrow life, but it wasn't like I was just waiting to do stuff, I had a lot of homework. One quarter I took twenty-one credits, so I did nothing but study and cook. That was the other thing was that Don and I were living together, so I kept a budget and we went grocery shopping. We never had a washer and dryer so we always had to go wash our clothes on the weekend, which was a perfect time to study. We got together with friends to go see movies and things like that. It sounds pretty boring in retrospect, but it was a really good time. [laughs]

**JD:** Going back to a bit more of what the culture was and the university at the time, you mentioned that there was a lot of racial tension, but also that the Greek system was huge and how that influenced, perhaps, what went on and how things were viewed.

**KB:** Yeah. The Greek system was big there. I wasn't involved in it, none of my friends were. So in some ways it was sort of like there were these overlapping but distinct community or campus cultures. And the campus culture that I was involved in was a bunch of engineers and historians who were totally nerdy, talked about their work, got together sometimes and talked about their work in social settings. I never went to games, even though Don and I lived across from the stadium for a while, for like a year. We were cognizant of every single football game that was a home game because we couldn't park and it was a drag. But we never went to games. We went to one volleyball game, it was a women's volleyball game. That was Don's idea; I'm not sure why we went, but it was fun. And we weren't part of the Greek system even though it was very clear to me all the time that we were living in a place where that was important to a lot of people.

[0:45:05]

**JD:** You mentioned football, but it was kind of a time where there was a fair amount of buzz around the basketball team because Gary Payton was playing at OSU. Do you have any recollections about his time there? Just because it was so big, I'm guessing it sort of infiltrated into everything.

**KB:** Yes. Well, of course, you had to know about Gary Payton if you were on campus. And I followed his career after he left campus a little bit too, just because, well, you know, I was in a couple of situations where I saw him and could say hello to him. One party; that was exciting. It was like this brush with fame. But yeah, it was cool, but it didn't really have much relevance in my life.

**JD:** You had mentioned the misogynistic professor early on. In addition to viewing your career through race issues, were there other ways that gender played out with other professors in classes while you were at OSU?

**KB:** Yeah, I mean, I think being a woman in that kind of situation, well it's obviously unescapable. It was who I was, and a very young woman. My mom's story about being told that she was sort of wasting her professor's time when she was in a MFA program definitely resonated with me, it stuck with me. Not that I was ever told that I was wasting anybody's time, but I recognized that that was sort of the context of higher education. It had changed a lot by the time I was there, but I do recall having a professor once say that I was his best female student. And I thought, "what a weird thing to say. Why did he designate me as a female student and why couldn't I just be his best student? Or his second best student, if a male student was his best student?" So that was definitely part of it.

When I went to graduate school, my supervisor was Sue Armitage. And she's kind of a pioneer, in many ways, for women professors, female professors. And I definitely thought a lot about that while I was taking classes from her, and also in the time since then. And then my aunt, who was obviously a female professor, in archeology, she had applied for a job at Princeton, I remember, and really felt that she was qualified for it, but was passed over and had an opportunity in IT open up. So she ended up, she couldn't teach. And I only know this story from her, so I don't know that it was very clearly a case of gender discrimination, but that's how she read that experience. So while I was at OSU, those were the kinds of things that were sort of in the background for me, and certainly got triggered by the professor who thought that I was his best female student.

**JD:** I'm guessing you might have hung out at the library a fair amount, being the studious person that you were and are. Was it undergoing its transformation? Or this was just right before that, that you were on campus.

**KB:** Yeah, it underwent its transformation when I left. But it did have a computer lab. There weren't many computer labs on campus and I didn't have a computer in my room. I didn't have a computer, Don did. So I would either use his computer or I would go to the computer lab. And I loved that space; that was awesome. And it was awful. It was like a dungeon. I don't even remember any windows. It was like, terrible overhead lighting, the whirring of computers, grungy walls. A lot of the library was like that, which is probably why they replaced the building. It wasn't the first time I had been in an academic library because, of course, I'd had my Reed experience, but I'd also gone to Berkeley with my uncle, when I was sixteen I think. And he took me and showed me what an academic library looked like. And he was so excited to be there that it made me really excited to be there.

[0:50:17]

OSU's library is much bigger than Reed's, and it was exciting just to think about all the possibilities. And to be able to be like – at one point I got interested in the Klamath termination process, and OSU had all these reports that were original reports and I could just check them out! And then, of course, they also had the archive and special collections room which also – so the computer lab was on the ground floor or the basement, the archive and the special collections room was upstairs, like on the third or fourth floor. I don't even remember how many floors it had anymore. But it was equally dingy. It just felt like this little room that could close in on you; totally institutional. And amazing. I went there for a couple of different History class projects where I was doing some original research and got to go through original materials. It was so exciting to see that stuff.

**JD:** You've talked a couple of times, going to rallies, about racial tensions on campus or other issues that were going on at the time. One big one that was kind of the elephant in the room at this point in Oregon was the passage of Measure 5. And that was in 1990, so pretty much right as you were arriving. Do you have recollections of how that played out for you? Or your experiences with that on the campus?

**KB:** Well, I remember being very angry with my dad, because he admitted to me that he was going to vote for Measure 5. And it was because it was a measure that would impact education in Oregon, that I was very interested. I also read the *Oregonian*; I mean, I read it all through high school and continued to read it in college, and was keeping track of what was going on, and was really really annoyed that my dad was going to vote for it. I mean, I could vote against it, but then he just cancels my vote! And I couldn't believe he was so short-sighted about something that meant so much to me. So we had these heated conversations about that. I took art classes and I had an art teacher tell me that she would lose her job if Measure 5 passed. And I didn't know very much about it; I think she must have been an adjunct. I don't even know why Measure 5 would have affected her position, but I remember telling my dad that this was going to affect real people, and directly. More so that directly affecting my education, it was just a total downer to live in a state that gutted its own educational system. But I've lived here for a while, so now I'm used to it.

**JD:** Were there other either national or international issues that you remember infiltrating your studies or campus life in general? I know Iran-Contra was going on around this time, the Berlin Wall was coming down, Exxon Valdez spilled all that oil. Was any of that percolating into what you were involved in, or rallies you went to, or speakers? Things like that?

**KB:** The apartheid issue continued to be really important, and part of that was because of the kinds of classes I was taking and also my interest that had been sparked in high school. I remember watching the Tiananmen Square stand-off with a bunch of other kids from my dorm, in the basement of the dorm where there was a t.v. room, and feeling really affected by that. But that wasn't something, I don't even remember talking about that in classes, which is crazy. We must have, I would think. All of those things were within my consciousness, but I don't remember them being important issues on campus, necessarily.

[0:55:04]

I think what was happening on campus, at least for me, was that I was beginning to understand things like issues around environmental justice. So I was understanding, like, a broader context to put some of those global events in. But that was something that was happening because of the environment I was in rather than because I was going to talks about those issues. I was really interested in Western history and I was going to talks, like Donald Worster came to campus. And I remember going to his talk and also thinking, "well, how does environmental history fit into this?" So in some ways, that's just figuring out the discipline, but that was also the context for some of those broader issues.

**JD:** You had mentioned that you had some scholarships early on, right out of high school, but I'm not really sure – and it's still clearly a big issue for college students, is how to pay for college. How did you end up paying for OSU?

**KB:** Well, in one instance my timing was really good. There were Pell Grants that were available and I got a really good financial aid package, even for OSU. I worked every summer, but I didn't work during the school year, which is one reason why I could take as many credits as I did – I always maxed out on credits. And because of my parents' divorce, my dad paid child support for me before I left home, to my mom, and then when I left home he continued to pay, but he just paid it directly to me, which was a big help. So that helped pay for my living expenses. But really, so much was so cheap. Like getting out of the dorms was cheaper than staying in the dorms. And I budgeted out what my living expenses were and I could feed myself on very little money. Housing wasn't expensive in Corvallis. So I came out of my undergraduate experience – and this was with Reed, because I had taken out some loans at Reed – owing \$6,000 is all, from all of my undergraduate schooling. It was incredible. And that's part of what's so horrific about what's happening now is that, it would have been crazy for me not to go to school, in a way. There are so many benefits and it was so enriching, but also there were so few costs to that.

**JD:** You mentioned working in the summers, what kind of jobs did you do in the summer?

**KB:** I worked at La Panier in Portland, which was a French bakery. I did that for a couple of summers. I also did that when I was at Reed, because I had to work, if I went to Reed, during school. And then I worked at Hardwood Industries in Tualatin, piecing together cabinet facing. I was one of two women who did that, the only two women who worked on the floor, and we pieced together cabinet facing because theoretically we were good colorists. [laughs] We'd be able to match those panels; they were all oak cabinets and there's a lot of variation in the color of oak. And I spent a summer doing that, and it was awful. My dad got me the job because he worked as a salesman for Hardwood Industries, so I couldn't complain about it too much at the time. But man, that was a good reason for staying in school. Oh, that was awful. It was really awful. [laughs]

**JD:** Were there any campus traditions? Or when you got to graduation, did you go?

**KB:** No. [laughs] I'm so not a joiner and I wasn't into that pomp and circumstance. I remember taking my final final exams and what that felt like, and being sad about it. You know, there is no place more beautiful than OSU's campus in Spring. All of the rhododendrons explode; it's a gorgeous place. And I was sad to be leaving that place. But that's what I did for graduation, I took my final exams, I walked back through campus to get home, I packed, I left. I didn't go to graduation.

[1:00:26]

**JD:** When you headed off to WSU, did you feel like you were more prepared for the next stage than, perhaps, you had been from high school to your undergraduate? What did you feel like you took with you from OSU?

**KB:** I took a whole bunch of folders that I reused. [laughs] Yeah, I think so. I think I knew how to do a lot of things thanks to the professors that I had at OSU that prepared me well for graduate school. But I also understood what the institution was, what the university was. And I was going from one cow college to another cow college, and so that agricultural background, I understood that. And in fact, I remember in one of the classes that I took from Bill Robbins, after I knew that I was going to Pullman, he talked about the Morrill Act and the establishment of agricultural colleges in the Pacific Northwest. And I took my notes furiously, because he was describing Pullman and I had never been there. And I was so fascinated; I was like, "Oh, this is what it's going to be like! Rolling hills of wheat!" Yes. So yeah, I think I did leave much better equipped to go on to graduate school, for sure.

**JD:** And you've kept some connections with OSU since your graduation.

**KB:** Yes.

**JD:** Talk about those a bit, if you would.

**KB:** Well, Bill Robbins continued to be very important to me. One of the things that I took with me was his continuing mentoring. I had terrific professors at Washington State too, but I always had somebody who was outside of that program,

so in some ways I could be more vulnerable with him. And he really gave me great advice and eventually sat on my dissertation committee and, boy, went through my dissertation with a fine-toothed comb, and gave me lots of feedback that really helped my work. So I continued that relationship, and have to the present day. I see him as being a very important person in my career in terms of his mentoring and support.

And then a few years ago, I was asked to join the board of the Oregon State University Press, and so I've been doing that for several years now, in part because I can go back to campus a couple of times a year, even though I get lost all the time because I don't recognize where I am. And that library has taken me some time to get used to – it is nice! It's beautiful. So that's another connection that I continue to have with OSU.

**JD:** And what does your work on the Press advisory board entail?

**KB:** Well, we get packets of all of the books that have been proposed, or of the manuscripts, and weigh in on whether these are appropriate for the Press to publish, what kinds of advice we could give to authors for direction. That kind of thing. So I get to learn about all sorts of new works that are in progress, coming out, etcetera. And because they've been so good about publishing materials about Pacific Northwest history, it's really been a wonderful connection to have.

**JD:** You are an associate professor now at Portland State University. I'd love to ask you to just talk a bit about – thinking in this interview and talking about professors who are influential for you and now you are a professor yourself. You have a published book, *Death of Celilo Falls*, that I'm sure gets used in other classrooms at other universities around the area or around the nation. Do you reflect on that kind of circle at all? Or would you do so at the moment?

[1:05:20]

**KB:** Well it's only been recently that I've not thought of myself as junior faculty, so in some ways, sort of mentally, I've thought more about following in the footsteps. And I guess, to a certain degree, your question is still about following in the footsteps, about contributing to student life and to the history of the region in the same way that the people who were so important to me at OSU have. I think that people like Bill Robbins and David Robinson and many others who worked with me at OSU – I was thinking about this – that they were people, most of whom came from outside of the area, and worked with a student like myself who came in and really didn't know what she was doing but had some potential, and gave me lots of support. And I hope that I do that with students too, who come into PSU and they recognize the infrastructure, the physical infrastructure, but maybe all the other things are less transparent for them, including, like, how to even write academically. Or what does it mean to have enough evidence for your argument? Those kinds of things. So I hope that I'm paying back some of the riches that I received by taking students who have potential and saying, "yes, this is how you do it. Here's some examples." And spending time with them.

**JD:** And you're still, obviously, actively doing your own research work. I wanted to give you an opportunity to talk a little about the projects that you're engaged in at present.

**KB:** Yeah, so I'm working on a couple of different things. One of them is that I've been working on a project for a long time with the Chinook Nation that is a public history project and academic as well, that includes oral histories of elders and a website that narrates and interprets Chinook history, and is also a community-based history project where I've been working in collaboration. It's one of the places where I actually get to bring in students to the historic process in some very direct ways, and into the community itself. So that's been a lot of fun.

I'm working on a public history textbook with a colleague of mine, and I'm excited about that, about putting down into words some of my teaching practices and some of the things that I've learned in the thirteen years, or whatever it's been, of working as a public historian and as an academic historian. And then I'm working on a project that's connected to *Death of Celilo Falls*, my dissertation project, which looks at women's activism and leadership roles around the period of the building of The Dalles Dam on the mid-Columbia River. And so it looks at white and Native women, and how they helped to shape and change the direction of some of the conversations that were happening around the building of The Dalles Dam and other dams on the Columbia River.

**JD:** To just kind of look back one more time, do you have any advice or thoughts that you might give to current OSU students?

**KB:** It's hard to imagine what advice I would impart, since I think the educational experience is so different now. At least, it appears to be - maybe it's not that different at OSU. At PSU, students are often juggling so many things – more so than I ever considered juggling – while they're trying to finish up degrees.

Any college campus is a wonderful incubator of ideas. My advice would be to go to more lectures, to go to more talks. I did some of that when I was at OSU, oftentimes because professors would encourage me. And that was so enriching, to be able to go to listen to renowned historians who came to visit campus. Or to go to portions of conferences that happened to be at OSU or close by. And that kind of opportunity is available at universities and not elsewhere as much. So take advantage of that.

[1:10:45]

**JD:** You clearly are still involved with OSU to a certain degree. Final thoughts on your time there and what the university meant to you? Or even, where you think, perhaps, the university is going; what the future might hold for OSU?

**KB:** What was important about that university is that it was public and accessible. So that gets back to that sort of personal response to a place like Reed. I don't mean to denigrate Reed at all, but it was not a place that, I felt, welcomed me. It was a place that made me feel difference acutely. And OSU is not a place like that, even though the professors at OSU and Reed could be indistinguishable, right? I worked with people who were incredibly bright, incredible scholars, at OSU. But somehow it didn't feel rarified. It felt like I could walk into their offices and talk with them, and that it was ok that I was slowly developing into a thoughtful, perhaps intellectual, person. And I don't know what the future holds for higher ed in Oregon. I hope that the space for public institutions that are highly accessible to all of the students of Oregon remains. I hope that that aspect remains.

**JD:** I don't have any more specific questions for you, so if there is something that you've wanted to talk about or comment on that I haven't asked you about, I want to give you the opportunity to do that.

**KB:** I don't think so.

**JD:** Well I would say, on behalf of the project, thank you so much for taking the time to contribute your recollections.

**KB:** Oh well, thank you for the invitation to.

**JD:** Great.

[1:13:09]