

Susan Fiksdal
Interviewed by Nancy Taylor
The Evergreen State College oral history project
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Part 1
Final

Taylor: I think we're on. This is Nancy Taylor. I'm at Susan Fiksdal's house in Olympia. It's March 12, 2019. Let's start with your life before the college, things what you want to say about your growing up and your parents, and the fact that the college was opening in your backyard.

Fiksdal: Yes, I'm from Olympia. Well, I started my elementary school in Seattle, but my father was the administrator for Bert Cole, who was the Department of Natural Resources Commissioner. When he got that job, we moved here and built a house out on Cooper Point.

Both my parents had bachelor's degrees. They were very involved in the community, and all their friends were very involved in the community. They were starting everything. One of my mother's friends founded Head Start. One of her other friends started the Farmers Market. They were also active Democrats, so that was another way that they knew people, and through their church as well. They called themselves volunteers, but in fact, they were activists in the community. My mother developed the certification for childcare workers and helped found the Childcare Action Council. My father was a "state democrat" and president of the senior lobby.

There was never any question about whether we would go to college. It seemed to us that it was just the next step. The only difficulty I had was I was the oldest of four, and my mother didn't work, so we had, I guess, limited income. Well, I felt we had limited income because I worked at the library, after school and on weekends, to have some spending money, and even to buy myself some clothes and shoes and things. I really knew the Dewey Decimal System. [laughing]

I wanted to go to college at Willamette, which is in Salem, Oregon. I went for a visit there and I was just enthralled. But we just couldn't afford it, so I went to Western—which was, at that time, Western Washington State College—in Bellingham. It's now a university. I went there because they didn't have sororities or fraternities, and I just didn't want to deal with all that. It was also small, 5,000 students at the time.

When I was there, I was taking French, because I enjoyed it. One day, we had to declare a major—I guess it's at the end of your sophomore year—so I just added up, if I kept taking French, what

would happen. I realized I would have a degree in French if I only just continued to take five credits a quarter. And I did like biology, so I had to really think about whether I wanted to do that instead. But I decided on French.

Then I decided that if I was going to do French, I had to go abroad. Western at the time didn't have any exchange program or anything. We had these French professors—men—who came to the college to teach. All my faculty were men. They gave me some ideas of places I might want to go. So, I devised my own year abroad and applied to three universities.

Taylor: This was in the '60s?

Fiksdal: This was in '67-68 is when I did that. So I went for the summer first to two programs in Pau, which is near the Pyrenees, and in Tours, which has the best accent.

Then I went to Aix en Provence for the school year. What I did, I enrolled in this program—well, I tested into it—where people could come from all over the world—of course, most were from the former French colonies—to get a certificate. With the certificate, you could teach French anywhere in the world. The French system is so different. They wait until the end of the year to test you, so you have no tests whatsoever until the end of the year, and then you either pass or fail. This was extremely scary to me.

What happened was I, for the first time ever, about three months into my study suddenly began to love studying. I loved everything about it. We were doing this civilization program, so there was history and literature and linguistics. We learned phonetics. We learned political science. We learned everything in French.

Taylor: And this was in Aix en Provence?

Fiksdal: In Aix en Provence. It was a branch of the University of Marseille. The professors teaching us were some of the greatest researchers. Just a few years later, they became very famous, like Georges Duby, an amazing medieval French historian. They wanted to teach foreigners because they believed that they should spread French culture everywhere in the world.

It was the '60s, and it was just like here. There was great foment in the educational system. May '68, I was in France. I wasn't in Paris, but this big student revolution was going on everywhere. I have lots of stories about that.

The one thing that I really remember, and it was so surprising because life was very hierarchical in France. Well, I think here, too, really, in a lot of ways. We just don't recognize it. But I went to some

of the demonstrations, and there were people on the outside looking in at the square. The square was all paved, and there were students and workers talking to each other—not arguing—talking about what they wanted, and what they saw in the future, and what was necessary for France. And then people on the outside just looking at it and sort of wondering. You could catch little phrases.

Taylor: This was in the farmer’s market in Aix?

Fiksdal: No, just one of the squares. They had a lot of squares, and a lot of fountains. There’s thermal water there.

That, to me, was a huge breakthrough, and all the students said so, too. They had never talked to workers. They were in a different social classes. That didn’t happen here in the States, but I think in other countries, it did happen as well, because there were huge issues that all connected. So, in Europe, on the whole, students were pigeonholed at age 15 into which track they were going to go in. They had no choice in the matter. It was done by the schools—the teachers and the principals—and they often decided by the social class of the parents. Some kids were tracked into college-prep classes—they’d go to the lycée—and others were tracked into technical, what was called collège, so they would learn a trade. People felt that needed to change. Students wanted to have a choice in what they wanted to try to do.

After that wonderful year abroad, I came back a changed person. I had made a lot of friends in French. I had a new vision of the world. When I came back, there was finally a female professor of French. They said I had to take one class with her to make sure I really had learned something.

Taylor: This was at Western?

Fiksdal: This was at Western. Well, I had passed that certificate, so to me, I clearly was ready to teach French anywhere because they had told me I could. I brought the certificate and she acknowledged [it]. She’s French, so she knew that it had great value, but she said, “They want you to take this class.” Of course, I was the best in the class. I knew so much more, not just about the language. It wasn’t just that I was fluent, and it wasn’t just that I had an excellent accent. And it wasn’t just that I knew the little excerpts they were reading, I’d read the books. I had this feeling that I had really made the right choice. I came back and I was ready to do whatever.

Taylor: It’s interesting that 1968 is a common thread through all the new faculty, all the faculty that were hired that year. I’ve talked with David Paulsen, and he in 1968 was in Berlin, and remembered protests. I was in Berkeley and remember the protests. That is a common experience that all the new faculty in 1970 had.

Fiksdal: I was really thrilled that I had been abroad. All that the students did in Bellingham was stop the freeway. They had done a few things like that, but the movement wasn't as deep, it didn't seem to me, as it had been in France. Of course, in the aftermath, things improved everywhere, I think, educationally, and all these new colleges were formed and that sort of thing.

Taylor: But Paris was really at the center.

Fiksdal: Yeah. It was quite amazing to go to Paris and see the graffiti that people had put up. When I returned to Western, I had so many credits—because I had done the summer and the year abroad—that I graduated one quarter early. Then I was sort of waiting. Well, I had to wait until spring to figure out what I would do next. Because what they had told us at Western was when you're a senior and you're ready to graduate, all these people will come to campus, and they will find you. In other words, they will notify you about possible job opportunities and you won't have to do anything. We were told that year after year after year.

So, I graduate early, and I figure that's fine, I'll just go back in the spring and I'll wait for something to come to me. Sure enough, I get a little postcard and it says the CIA wants to interview me. [chuckles] At the time, I was friends with people who were doing drugs, they were listening to music that nobody understood, they had long hair. They were hippies, and everybody was paranoid, especially about the CIA, and paranoid about the government. Everybody was against the Vietnam War. I was, too, of course. That was my generation, and that was my friends, my family, my cousins, my boyfriend needing to go off to Vietnam to a war that we didn't understand, and no one could prove to us that it was important.

That was a very tough time, a very big time in our lives, and I didn't want to interview with the CIA. I'm sorry, in a lot of ways, that I didn't because I think there were lots of interesting jobs, and I may have had a completely different life, living abroad and doing amazing things.

Taylor: But it wasn't your identity. That's not where you belonged.

Fiksdal: No, I didn't feel like I did, and I didn't know anything about the organization either. I didn't bother to find out. But anyway, that was the only card I got. Everybody was angry because they got one card or no cards.

Taylor: So it was a promise that wasn't kept.

Fiksdal: Things had really changed in the economy, or something happened but I never bothered to check what it was.

Taylor: 1969.

Fiksdal: Yeah, 1969. I really didn't know what to do. I, of course, checked the community college here in town, SPSCC. It had a different name, but I can't quite remember what it was. They didn't need a French teacher at the time, and I really did only have my bachelor's degree, so I thought, well, then, I'll go to graduate school in French. My advisor, the French woman professor—who was head of the French Department also—told me the very best school was Middlebury in Vermont, so I applied there and got accepted.

 Their program is quite wonderful. You spend the summer in Middlebury, Vermont, in the heat and humidity. Then, if you do well, you go to France. At the time I went, we went to the Sorbonne. It was like, wow! [laughing]

Taylor: One year later, after Aix, you were back in France.

Fiksdal: I was back in France. Graduate school was harder, of course. The summer was particularly scary because we had to do very well. I just wanted to learn, so I took philosophy among other topics. They had amazing professors from France who came and taught us. I don't think I had taken philosophy. That was just a new opening, and, of course, literature.

Taylor: Were you in the regular Sorbonne?

Fiksdal: We were in the Sorbonne, not for all our classes because we rebelled. You're sitting in this amphitheater. It's not giant like in the States, but an amphitheater. Your professor is kind of far down there.

 What happens first is this person in a blue—they always wore this blue duster thing that buttoned—these men—and they would come in and kind of arrange the podium and dust it. They were subservient people, but everyone in France wore those coats if they were sort of the custodians. They could give you directions, but they were a low-level person that was just everywhere in France in the public institutions.

 Then the professor would walk in with his yellowing notes, put them down, and read. It was so boring. I remember our theater prof wanted only to talk about a playwright, Henri de Montherlant. He told us, "Oh, you know, we'll talk about some other playwrights, but this was my friend." None of us wanted to hear about Montherlant—I'm talking about the French students and the Americans—because the French students told us that he had worked for Vichy. They didn't want to hear about a

collaborator. It might not have anything to do with his art, but that doesn't matter. They took a political stand.

He just droned on, and all our teachers were like that. A few were more exciting, but not many. So, we rebelled, and we told the director of our program that he would have to teach us or get someone to teach us modern theater. We wanted to know the latest. We wanted to read Beckett.

Taylor: This was the Middlebury students that got together?

Fiksdal: Yes, we got together.

Taylor: You weren't joined by the French students?

Fiksdal: No, because we were separate in that way.

Taylor: But actually, that had its advantages, because you got a better education than just being invisible in the Sorbonne.

Fiksdal: Yes, because we were invisible in the Sorbonne. We were scared to death to ask questions. The professor would call on a student, and then they would say something, and then the professor would say something like "Can you elaborate on that?" [laughing] That was the scariest. When you've never had an education where someone asked you to speak, and then suddenly you were supposed to speak and speak well and in French.

Of course, the young men were mostly in control of that class and would talk and needle the professor or ask questions and say funny things sometimes, and we would understand a lot of that, not all of it. But I did learn a lot from those students. I learned how you ask a question, and how you respond to the professor. That was a new level of French that I hadn't known before.

Taylor: In terms of being a woman in the situation, did you make connections about what was going on with women? This was 1969-70. It was beginning to be an issue in the United States, but I think maybe in France, too, where women were starting to assert themselves?

Fiksdal: Well, something like five women were starting to assert themselves. France has never been a feminist hotbed, and still isn't. Of course, I read Simone de Beauvoir and I was enthralled by her work.

Taylor: But you were conscious. The women consciousness-raising era started about then.

Fiksdal: All my life, I was conscious, let's just say. [laughing] Like I said, in college I never had female professors. In France, I didn't have female professors. I had one for one quarter in my senior year in French, and that was in French. I didn't learn to teach by having models of women teach me. I was ambitious, and I was in love with learning.

One of the other things I did in Paris to consider my future is that I went to the American Embassy, and I talked to a cultural attaché there. It was an informational interview. I wanted to know what kinds of jobs might be open to me when I graduated, because I wanted to stay in France. Or, if I went home, maybe I could figure out another place to go by using French, because there were all the colonies and France. I knew Paris would be a plum and I wouldn't get that job for a long time. But I just thought I'd ask.

He asked about my undergraduate work, my high school. Because I was in Middlebury in the summer, I had learned a lot about East Coast people who were at Middlebury. They had gone to prep schools, they were wealthy, they had already been to France 12 times in their lives. It was another world that I had entered by going to Middlebury. Even though at the graduate level, it was supposedly open to everyone. There were two students from California and me. Everyone else was from these prep schools and ivy league colleges in the Northeast, and they had had completely different lives.

So, when the cultural attaché started asking me some questions, like "Okay, Reeves (my maiden name). I can't quite place that." I said, "Well, I'm from the state of Washington, and I grew up in Olympia, Washington." He didn't memorize his capitals, clearly. [laughter] I said, "It's near Seattle." I hadn't gone to a prep school; I hadn't gone to a prestigious undergraduate program. I didn't have a prestigious family name.

He said, "What would you like to do? What is your goal?" I said, "I would like to be an ambassador." Mainly because I had absolutely no idea what all the roles were. The Internet wasn't around. I mean, who would know all this stuff? He basically said, "Ambassadors come from certain kinds of family who generally are in the Northeast or around there, and who have names that everyone recognizes."

Taylor: And that's not you.

Fiksdal: Yeah, basically. He didn't say that wasn't me, but he basically told me that I was some hick that would never, ever get an ambassadorship. I said, "Well, then, if I can't get some sort of prestigious job like that, what else could I do for the government?" He said, "You could be a bilingual secretary." I got so angry. I was so angry that I could only be a secretary that I just stood up and said, "Thank you. Good-bye." I just ended the interview. The Foreign Service might have been an interesting place to work, but I was not willing to find out any more about it because of this person who spoke to me in this way.

Needless to say, I graduate and everything is fine. I come home on a student ship, which was an amazing adventure, where people had spent the year abroad in a whole variety of places.

Taylor: Holland America Line?

Fiksdal: Yes!

Taylor: I was on the same kind of ship.

Fiksdal: It was cheaper to go on these ships than to fly home.

Taylor: That's right.

Fiksdal: I never had so much fun in my talking to people, and everyone had these rich experiences. People were teaching pidgin and creole from various colonies. We had a fabulous library. There were events. I don't remember everything that went on. It was an Italian crew, and so we had incredible food, and they served us five times a day, which was great because we were all starving all the time. That was wonderful.

Getting back to New York, I had a friend, so I stayed with her. I just felt very worldly. Finally, of course, I had to come home. I come home to Olympia, which was just this tiny town I'd always wanted to leave, but what could I do? I moved in with my folks because I had no job and no job prospects.

Taylor: This was 1970?

Fiksdal: Yeah, this is 1970. One of the first things my parents told me was that they were building a college just down the road. It was three miles away. And I thought, really? [laughing] Once again, I just thought this is perfect for me.

Why did I think that? Honestly, I didn't know what to do, and with French, basically you teach. That's the job. My parents had both been teachers. I had sworn I never would be because they had been. I was just this rebellious soul.

Taylor: There's so much irony in all of this.

Fiksdal: Yes. I didn't know much more than that. They told me that they had helped the college come to Olympia, and I said, "What do you mean?" Like I said, they were in all these activist groups, and my mother in the League of Women Voters—which was very powerful at the time—and my father in the Legislature, his job with DNR was legislatively focused. He knew everyone, and they were always trying to get bills passed.

He heard that there was going to be a new prison and there was going to be a new college. He joined a group that really pushed for putting the college in Olympia, unlike a lot of other people who wanted the college elsewhere. He told me that the main other location was Walla Walla, but that could

have been towards the end, the last two locations in play. Because we know that at first, they wanted a college in Southwest Washington, and maybe that became kind of the rallying cry.

At any rate, he and his group and my mother and her group got the college to be in Olympia and the prison to Walla Walla. That was fine, because it gives jobs to each place. But, of course, it's more prestigious to have a college. In the state capital, everyone thought that was a good idea finally. My father's name is on the plaque at the entrance to Daniel Evans Library, there on the right. My mother didn't get her name there because it was the early '70s and the movement for women's liberation picked up a couple of years after that. I'm saying that's the cause, but it really was. Women just weren't as important.

Let's stop for a minute.

Taylor: Okay.