

**University of Illinois Student Life, 1928 – 38:
Oral History Project
Betty Ann Knight '38
Urbana, IL
January 10th, 2001**

START OF TAPE 1 SIDE A

Ellen Swain: This is an oral history interview for the University of Illinois Archives. The interviewer is Ellen Swain. The narrator is Betty Ann Knight, a U of I alumna from the class of 1938. We are at Ms. Knight's home in Urbana, Illinois and the date is January 10th, 2001.

First, what your full name and your birth date.

Betty Ann Knight: Ok, it's Betty Ann Knight, that's not on my birth certificate, but that's what I go by. And June 28, 1916. I've lived in this house for all but about the first two months of my life.

[Interruption]

ES: Okay. You were talking about that you've lived in this house.

BK: This house, in this house always. My father was a professor of Electrical Engineering.

ES: What was his name?

BK: A.R. "Buck" Knight. If you look around you'll see a lot of things where he was, he was on many things, he was on many committees at the University. It was just natural during the Depression to go to Illinois. You were lucky you could go to college. Of course, we didn't think about not going to college. I didn't realize till I started teaching how many people didn't just naturally go to college.

ES: It was always just expected in your family?

BK: Oh, yeah.

ES: Did you have brothers and sisters?

BK: I had an older brother and he and his wife and his baby boy to be were killed by a drunk. They had an 18 month old daughter who was in the back seat asleep and she is now almost 50, is a nurse down in Atlanta.

ES: How did the Depression affect your family?

BK: Well, you know, I think that the main thing that I remember, one time, was that dad said, "I'll have a job and we'll have money, we'll just not get to do things that we might want to do," you know, so we had a lot of mush and milk, which I still love. I think that's it. He had employment and we were in this house so we weren't going to be put out, like some people, from their home. I think during that time, I was trying to think, we went to Schenectady in 1936 for the summer with General Electric, so we had that trip that we could do.

ES: Did faculty members get free tuition for their children?

BK: No way, they still don't, my understanding is. Which is too bad, really, because they could go here, but they've never given them that.

ES: Did your parents have difficulty financially when you went to school?

BK: I wouldn't say so, because as I said, he had the job at the University. Of course they were cut, either 15 or 20%, their salaries were cut, everybody at the University. Can't you see that happening today? But everybody took a cut in salary at the University so they could make ends meet.

ES: Why did you chose to go to the University of Illinois?

BK: I think I explained, you were lucky if you could have gone any place. If I'd have had my choice I think I always would have like to go to USC. But that was never a question. You didn't go places like men, like you do now, I mean the kids. Like my neighbor, they just bought him a new car, they're working on it, because he goes to Cornell. He's going to drive the car back and going to sell it and make money.

ES: What was your major in college?

BK: I majored in Home Economics. First, I took it in Agriculture. I have to remember it which way. I got my BS in Ag with Home Ec. And then the next year I had not planned to teach, so the next year I went back and I got another degree in education so I could teach.

ES: Why did you chose Agriculture? What did you hope to do?

BK: Well, that was the Home Economics curriculum, was in Agriculture and in LAS, so I took that.

ES: And you wanted to teach with that. Did you have any favorite professors while you were in school?

BK: I was trying to think of that as an undergraduate. We had some wing-dings. Virginia Hoit Weaver, was a person who taught Home Management. She felt that if you were engaged then life was alright. So if you were engaged, then you got an A in her

course. And one of my friends was walking down the Broadwalk with a friend, and he was tall, it was just somebody that was in her class, and I'm telling you, she went to the top of the list because she thought she was going to marry this fellow. She never found out. She had a lot of good ideas but she was also a little touched in the head.

ES: What kind of classes did you take for that major? What kind of things did they teach you in home economics?

BK: Well you had, I'm trying to think of how many hours of chemistry I had, but lots of chemistry. And had I taken bacteriology my freshman or sophomore year I probably would have switched jobs and become microbiologist, but I didn't have that until my junior year and then you didn't change curriculum at that time.

ES: Were there many women in the sciences when you were in school?

BK: Well of course I was in a curriculum of all women, there weren't any men in that at that time. I took an Engineering course, I think I was the only woman in that and that was in lighting, home lighting and industrial lighting.

ES: How big were your class sizes?

BK: Well, of course some of them weren't that large. I suppose we had lectures, you know, big lectures in chemistry and then smaller classes.

ES: Another question I have is what were the relationships between students and faculty? Did you know the faculty well, did you go over to their homes?

BK: Of course, I was in a different position. The President of the University at that time was Willard, President Willard. Of course I knew him. Then another nice thing they had for students when Chase was President, and at Willard's too, they had, what they called, Sunday afternoon at the President's home. Of course, the faculty was all invited and the faculty's kids were there to help serve. Betsy Ross was President Willard's niece.

ES: I see. So your family knew the President fairly well? Did faculty members socialize with him?

BK: Well, I think, you know, maybe Engineering maybe more than others.

ES: I am also interested in rules both for men and women. And the Dean's of Men and Women.

BK: Well, you've heard about Dean Maria Leonard, she was something else again. I kept the hours the students had, like you had to be home by 10 on weekdays, and I kept that even though I lived at home. It was easier if you were dating if you had that hour, and then one o'clock on Friday and Saturday.

ES: What were the student's impressions of her, of Maria Leonard.

BK: If you had heard her stories, she was just a little touched. When we came back for our reunion we played some of those, you know. I don't know if you've heard, but she told us all, if you were a freshman and you had a date and you were on a crowded bus, you had to carry a pillow and we had a bus driver with the bus company that always picked up the kids after the late movie downtown and the bus would be packed. He'd yell, "Does everyone have their Saturday Evening Post?" So I think she told you not to wear red and not to wear satin, and most of us had not heard any of that until she told us not to do it.

ES: When did she tell you these things? Was it in a public arena?

BK: Yeah, it was the freshman, you met as freshman. You also wore hats and you wore gloves. I remember that as a freshman, you wore hats and gloves.

ES: Were the different rules for men and women then?

BK: Well, women had to be in and then of course the men had to go home. I don't know if they had, I don't know if Panhellenic.

ES: This was before your time at school, but do you remember Thomas Arkle Clark through your family?

BK: Yeah, we knew him.

ES: What was he like? What were your impressions of him?

BK: Well, I think he meant for everyone to obey the rules. The story they tell is that if you broke a rule and he called you in, he would say, "The train leaves at 5:55, and you're to be on it." He didn't mess around, you broke the rules, you were off of campus.

ES: What did the students think about him? What were their opinions? What was your father's opinions?

BK: Well, I think everybody respected him.

ES: Was Maria Leonard visible on campus? Did student have access to her?

BK: I would say so. Her assistant was Irene Pierson and everybody had access to her. She was terrific person. Married and lived at Allerton. Married Elmer Preve and they lived out in one of the Allerton homes.

ES: What were their roles on campus? Were they more disciplinary or why did you go to the Dean of Woman's office? Why did you deal with them?

BK: Well, let's see. See, I didn't have to deal with them. I knew that you could not have a car on campus. One person who was living at home but he backed his family car out on the street and they caught him and he had to go in and be disciplined. My father chairman of that committee and when people found out who I was they'd try and get that privilege, but of course that didn't work. I don't know whether I thought of any rules differently

ES: What role did religion play on campus? Were students actively involved in the foundations?

BK: I think, I had a friend, she said that she went to the Presbyterian church every Sunday because that was the one hour a week that she had to herself. She lived in the Davenport house which was a rooming house on Wright Street. But I think probably, probably no different than any other time.

ES: You've mentioned this, but tell me where you lived. You were at home with your folks?

BK: Right here, yep.

ES: But you also belonged to a sorority?

BK: I did my junior year and I was over there and stayed there for a couple of weeks and that was all. You couldn't study, couldn't... But I didn't join until my junior year and then I was never really active in it.

ES: What was involved in that? Did you go through rushing?

BK: Yeah, well, I kind of did rushing, but not in the common sense. Rushing as a freshman, oh, everybody would be dressed up and it would be hotter than hot and you'd have all these things on. It was very strict. Then later, of course, I was involved as an alumni in rushing, the rules sometimes are a little weird.

ES: Why did you chose to wait until your junior years to join a sorority?

BK: Well, I was involved with a person, and it just seemed better.

ES: What was the attitude towards sororities and fraternities on campus? Did Independent and Greek students get along or was there a division?

BK: Well, one of my friends was President of the Independent Woman's, she's still a friend. I don't know how much rivalry there was. I probably wouldn't have all that knowledge not living on campus. Betty Nay was president of that.

ES: What were some of the activities that the sororities participated in?

BK: Stunt shows and sings and exchanges, dinner exchanges. In a way it's hard to pinpoint back then compared to after I was home I did some, but I haven't done any lately.

ES: What kinds of things did you do for fun?

BK: Well, we had a couple of dances. There was the Park, which was a dance hall that is now above the Developmental thing on Wright Street, it was up above that. Then there was another one that was down on the corner of 6th and Green and there was another one. You had a pass and you got to go and you wore long dresses, even though you walked there and back you had to wear long dresses. Which is sort of interesting you know because nobody had one, but you had a long dress. There were dances at the Gym Annex and they had big bands, great, great bands: Sammy K and K Kaiser and Jimmy Dorsey, they were all those big bands that came to campus. I was on this, in the political party in my senior year that won. So you know, we had to the big grand parade with all of the committee members and your white lace dress and a ribbon across your chest and you were on a committee.

ES: What was that again? What committee was that?

BK: It was senior prom.

ES: What organized activities were you involved in?

BK: They had Orange and Blue Feathers, and what was the next one? Gold Feathers, I always wished I had gotten in on the Illini thing, but I never got into that. I was in the theater group, did properties and so forth. The person who later played Al Jolson in the movies, we were in a play with him. He was the man and we were the masses. That particular play was staged at the auditorium. We went to movies a lot.

ES: Were you ever in the Virginia?

BK: Yeah, the Virginia Theater, the Rialto. And then the Princess was in Urbana so you could walk there. I remember in my sophomore year, I believe it was, it was during finals, it was 10 below and we walked down to the Princess for a movie. It was like Christmas day here, we walked down right in the middle of Race Street. It was four below and there wasn't any traffic.

ES: Where did the students congregate?

BK: Hanley's, Hanley's was on Wright Street. Prehn's on Oregon and Prehn's on Green. One thing, you know, if you had a dime you could have a date. Coke was a nickel. They always said, I don't remember which way it was, but if the right elbow was on the table it was a clean joke, if the left elbow was on the table it was a dirty joke, but I don't remember which is which now, was one of the things.

ES: When did you go there? Was that an evening event?

BK: Probably more so...

ES: Like for the weekends and dating?

BK: Yeah.

ES: Was there a union where people came together?

BK: Well the Illini Union was built in 1940, yeah, yeah. There was a Union on Wright Street, but I don't even really remember that. I have a friend who lived there, in that Union, and he tells the story; they'd go down to Hanley's and whoever was working put the beer out in the back door for them. I don't remember beer being anything, since I'm allergic to all that, but that's one of the things that he talks about. Then another thing he talks about is when they were having a clinical race in Champaign, they'd come and get them and they'd pay them for so much and they'd try and get people to the polls. He graduated in '36, so that would be the Depression time. He came down here, I wish I remember how much he had when he came down here to school. Now tuition was \$35 a semester, I wish I could remember, he talks about how much money he had when he hit down here. He didn't have much and they came—

ES: Were political activities a big part of student lives? Were people campaigning for say in the '36 election?

BK: No. I don't remember. I mean like now, no I don't remember. I made the tea, and then I haven't served it.

[Interruption.]

ES: I was wondering if you could tell me how the Depression affected student life? Was it visible? Were you aware that people were having trouble staying in school?

BK: It's hard to think about that in terms of...In home ec. I know the ones there that their folks were making a sacrifice for them to be there in school. So many of them had jobs. Stanley Balbach, he might be a good person for you to interview. He had something like 16 jobs when he was in school. He is a lawyer in Urbana. They just had all kinds of jobs. The persons over at the fraternity house, I don't remember them having jobs, but then they worked in the summer and they all got summer jobs. I was just talking to Mathew in Cornell and he said he was a little late sending out letters to get a summer job now, so he could get into a law firm for the summer, so in a way he's putting himself through school, so I see the same thing. The person who has the desire and drive, I think they did it. But to put it back in the Depression time, you used to hear about all the stories about grants made and people, how they got money. I was just lucky, I wasn't touched, my family wasn't touched as much. You had a secure family and you had a secure job and you just went about doing your job as you were supposed to. I babysat.

I'd make like 25 cents for a night. Now they make \$50, or \$100 I hear about in a Chicago, \$100 if they stay so long. Did you baby sit?

ES: Uh-huh.

BK: How much did you make?

ES: Like a \$1 an hour.

BK: In Paxton?

ES: Well, earlier than that. Were faculty members affected? You said their salaries were cut. Did they have to take other jobs?

BK: No, I don't know about that. See my dad went to GE, but that was more for training to keep up with all of the newer things. Yeah, I know one who taught, he was in German, taught German, and he painted houses in the summer and there were others who had that kind of that, it depends on. That professor () painted houses every summer and he had two children, younger than I am.

ES: Did a lot of the faculty children come to the University for their schooling?

BK: I suppose they did. I don't know how many, it's not like now where you can hot foot all over the country. Elizabeth is a national merit scholar who went to many...before she decided to go to Princeton, and she has a full ride at Princeton. So how many got to do that, I have no idea. In my neighborhood, well, there is one family I know of that the girl who is my age, she worked in the Dean's Office, but her sister did too, but her older sister started college but then they were about to lose their house, so she went to work for the *Courier*. Then worked in the newspaper and never did finish college. Lets see, across the street...I'm trying to just. The one just down the street, she went here and then she went to Tulane for graduate school. It depended on how industrious you were.

ES: You were talking about the next door neighbor buying a Dictaphone. Could you talk about that again?

BK: He was in the Math Department and Dean of the Graduate school. It was quite a big affair. It had, I think what they call the horn, and it had cylinders, kind of wax cylinders. He was a person who he and my dad would have been wonderful with computers. They would have loved all of the intrecacies. Some of his work was like that. It was Dean Carmichal. He came from a family, one brother was head of Peabody and two brothers who were doctors. They were from the South. You know, if you had that drive, you could do it.

ES: What was the composition of the student body? Were Blacks on campus? Jewish students, and how did people get along?

BK: Ruffy Silverstein was in the Jewish fraternity and he was a wrestler. I think, in fact they had Shep Fields and their band for their dance. They had one big riot on campus where the girls were visiting in the fraternities houses and the police got wind of that. They called all the fraternities over and had a big snowball fight and dressed the girls up as fellows and snuck them out of the house. That happened.

ES: Did the Jewish fraternities and sororities intermingle with the rest of--?

BK: They intermingled then to help them out I know. I don't know how much they intermingled, I imagine...I went to a Jewish dance and I went to another.

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BK: See this was the local place too down on Green Street which is no more. They all met down there in the basement and had a great time. Then they had one up in downtown Champaign, but the one down on Green Street is where they went. Just another hang out. But as I say, you don't have to have a lot of money if you had a date. There were buses and you could take a cab, that was really something

ES: Were athletics important?

BK: Yeah, uh-huh. Zuppke and football and basketball was in Huff Gym. You didn't have regular seats but you got there so you almost sat in the same seat all the time. Not like the other day where they had to move the women over to Huff Gym, that caused a lot of problems. Somebody's going to write a letter about it, they're still mad, and I'm sitting all by myself, I don't know where all the people are that I came with. But I was down on the lower level at Huff and they were not () and they were upstairs in the balcony. I don't know if you went to that game or not.

ES: I didn't, but I like going to games in Huff though, it's fun. But they've outgrown it.

BK: It really was nice when the women played there. You could be right in the front row and yell and scream. They had more Illinois fans at Northwestern last night than they did Northwestern students.

ES: Did they really? Wow.

BK: That's what Dave Loane said. There weren't very many people there. I've been to Northwestern too for a game for basketball. Somebody asked me if I was going and I thought, "No," because I had intended to go up to the football game, but when it was so cold I backed out, and I'm glad I did.

ES: Were events well attended back in the 30s? Athletic events?

BK: Oh, and the dances, they were always big.

ES: What were woman's sports like?

BK: I don't know if they had any.

ES: Did you have a physical ed. requirement?

BK: I took ice skating, horseback riding, archery. In tennis it rained the whole time so I never got to learn tennis because we had to be inside. What else did I take? You had two years of that. I know the dances were always well attended, whether they were at G. Huff or the Annex. Those were always big.

ES: How often were those held?

BK: Oh, I don't know. St. Patrick's was the Engineering dance and there was Senior Prom, the Junior prom. And at a lot of them people went and just stood around the band platform and watched them play instead of dancing.

ES: Could you go without a date to a dance?

BK: I don't know. I've seen women dance together sometimes and I thought, "Oh yeah, that must be awful." I doubt it. I think you could go and sit in the balcony. You could go and pay so much to sit in the balcony and hear them play, but you probably couldn't go without a date. We're going to New Orleans and that's what we're going to do at the Mardi Gras, we're going to sit up in the balcony. I'm going the end of March. I'm going three days before they have parades. But we're not going into New Orleans, we're going to stay on the coast. I know we'll go and sit in the balcony at some of the balls, so it's still done.

ES: Just off the top of my head, I wonder what the Quad was like? I know you had trees at that point that were along the Broadwalk. But was the Quad a place where the students congregated like they do now?

BK: No, we didn't have those. If you walked after class on the grass, the policeman Pete, Pete Adams was the police man, and I tell you that he took care of it that you did cross. Like where they have concrete walks now, that was all pure grass. Then one couple was out in the cemetery and Pete Adams picked them up and took them out of the cemetery. He was the campus policeman and how he got around as much as he did, but he was always around. So that was.

ES: The students knew him by name? How did he relate to the students? Did they like him or was he authority?

BK: He was an authority, but I don't know whether anybody was afraid of him. I mean, you just knew that you better not do anything wrong. University Hall was there were the Union is. One thing we had was German measles episode. And McKinley Hospital had

all the men on one end and all the woman on the other. You'd go by and you'd know which end was what because all the fellows would be out talking to the gals through the window. That was a really big thing that happened then.

ES: When was that?

BK: Well let's see, that was probably 36.

ES: Was it a campus wide epidemic?

BK: Uh-huh. Actually I was sitting in Rhetoric class and I may have been a freshman and I put my hand up there and I had all these bumps. That's how you know you have it. So then you stay home for week and the hospital was just packed with students.

ES: Who lived out of town?

BK: Uh-huh.

ES: Were they quarantined then?

BK: I don't know whether the houses were quarantined, I don't think they quarantined the house, you just went over there until you got over it. That wouldn't be, that was during that time. I don't know if it had anything to do with the Depression or not. Everyone had to take a physical when you came.

ES: What was that like?

BK: Oh, lordy.

ES: Where was the Health Building at that—?

BK: Well, the Health Building, at that time, was on Green Street where the Electrical Engineering Building is. Everybody had to have a physical was it Dr. Ethridge or Dr. Millbrook. A doctor talked to them. One thing they told the freshman class was that a lot of you were not planned. These kids would cry, to think that their parents hadn't want them. I think we probably weren't as sophisticated as they are now, of course when they you start having intercourse when you're in first grade.

ES: Why would they tell them that?

BK: In talking to them, she just mentioned that, I don't know. I think it was part of our education.

ES: And this was for women only?

BK: I don't know whether they had them for the men or not. I doubt it.

ES: Did Maria Leonard give the freshman orientation speech every year?

BK: Yes.

ES: Did you have to do it when you were sophomore?

BK: No, I don't think so. I think just when you were a freshman. Dr. Ethridge was head of the Health Service and she talked to everybody. I don't know if it was at the same time or not, I was very blasé about the whole thing, I don't remember. I remember the kids crying, thinking that they weren't wanted in this world. And you know, we didn't have that big sex education in high school like they do now, of course they really have to start it in kindergarten I think.

ES: What about registration?

BK: Oh, I worked that. It was in the Armory. I worked registration so I could pre-register and get paid. It was in the Armory, which I don't know whether it was when you were in school or not. Or if you had pre-registration, you don't have any of that?

ES: We do it on the computer. Well, I just have a couple more questions. We kind of talked about Jewish students on campus. You don't remember many African-American students when you were in school?

BK: No. I don't remember being, see, I had them in my high school here in Urbana. Actually, the one I see now, she was in college at the same time, but I don't remember her. It would have been just (). Of course, then, see, I was never prejudice until Jesse Jackson came along. He's more prejudice. He was here in school you know.

ES: Yeah, he's an alum.

BK: No he's not, he got kicked out. In fact, he withdrew before they kicked him out. See, he copied and turned in a paper that he had copied out of a magazine. So he withdrew. Then he was always damning Illinois until his son came here. His son got his law degree here so he doesn't say as negative things like he did when he was here.

ES: Were there problems between Catholics and Protestants here on campus?

BK: No.

ES: Or are you not aware?

BK: Are there now?

ES: I'm not aware of them. You weren't involved in politics?

BK: Just politics on campus, but not national.

ES: What did you do on campus?

BK: That was the Senior Prom.

ES: Were you involved in student government?

BK: Well, not government as I read it today in the *Illini*. Probably there were some that were doing that.

ES: Were they very visible?

BK: You just get into the Home Ec Building and you were there all day. Chemistry, the hours you put in there...

ES: That's primarily where your classes were?

BK: In the Home Ec Building, the Woman's Building, the Chemistry Building. Then I took physics. I took that my senior year in high school, but I took a University class on campus. Then P.E., they didn't have the woman's gym then, that was all added. What do they call it now? Freer? No Freer is the new one. It's the English Building now. That was the Woman's Building.

ES: And that's where you had the swimming pool?

BK: Uh-huh. Of course, that's been turned in to a lounge I think. I've been over on to the campus with the museum and such, so it's hard to remember that.

ES: And when you graduated in 1938, what did you do?

BK: Then I came back in 39 and got another degree and then I taught school. Then I joined the Red Cross and then I came back and got my social work degree in 48. Then I was a social worker in the Urbana schools.

ES: Then you worked from 48 until your retirement?

BK: 1978 I retired.

ES: I know I asked you this, but when you were an undergrad, did you plan to be a teacher?

BK: Not originally, no. Actually, I was thinking more about industry at one point. Then I came back and I got my degree and I got my education courses. Dean Daniel always laughed at that, he said, "Boy that's something, you graduate and then you have to go back and get your education." And they are such stupid courses.

ES: And you did that in a year? Between 38 and 39? You were able to get a masters?

BK: Uh-huh. No, I got my degree. Then later I got a masters, a professional masters in 48. That was a two year deal.

ES: How do you think your education at U of I and your experience here influenced your later life?

BK: Well, I stayed home and stayed here. During the War, I was out in California teaching and then I went in the Red Cross and then I came home. I came home on a Friday and I talked to a friend and they said that they needed someone to work at the USO's Traveler's Aide and I went and started working on Monday and they were all going to go to graduate school so I signed up for graduate school, that's how much thought went into that. Then when I got my degree I came to Urbana and worked until I retired. So, you think of this and that. I had a chance to teach down in Carmel and they said you had to live in a teachery, and I thought that, "I cannot go and live in a teachery." I had a roommate who had lived in a teachery in Montana, and just listening to that was enough to convince me that no job was worth that. You think, "Oh, maybe I should have gone. Gone down there and played golf all the time." I called up somebody after Steve Strickler won Sunday, I called a friend up, and she said, "A Million Dollars!" She didn't know who was calling her but all she knew that Steve who had graduated from Illinois had won a million dollars. I said, "Oh a million dollars, that's what I called you about."

ES: Well, thank you. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?

BK: No.