

**University of Illinois Student Life, 1928 – 38:
Oral History Project
Junette Peile James – Class of '35
Champaign, Illinois
March 15, 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 Junette Peile James, an alumna of class of 1935. We are at Mrs. James's home in Champaign, Illinois, and the date is March 15, 2001.

Could I ask you first to state your name and birth date?

Junette James: Okay, my name is Junette Peile James, that's my maiden name. My birthday is December the 15th, 1913. So that makes me 87 years old.

ES: My birth day is December 14th.

JJ: Is that right? Well that's interesting.

ES: I wondered if you would start out by talking about your childhood? Where you grew up and who your parents were.

JJ: Ok, let's see. I grew up and my parents were Joseph Peile and his wife was Lina Rathmussen Peile. They lived on a farm about a half a mile from the town of Newark, Illinois. That's a little town about half way between Ottawa and Aurora, if you know where those two towns are. We were poor farmers: anybody who was a farmer in those days was poor [*laughter*]. Our town had a three year high school – it was a small high school. Maybe about 40 in all three years. In order to graduate to go on to college or any place like that we had to have four years of high school. So that meant that we had to go to another town for our fourth year of high school. My folks couldn't afford for me to have a car to drive back and forth to go to another school, so they got the idea, and many of them were doing that, of working for someone in this other town as a babysitter or doing jobs around the house for your board and room, so I did that my fourth year of high school and so I graduated from Samanah Community High School, which was another town near there. Then when it came to thinking about going to college, the county was giving scholarship exams for high school graduates. I took that, my teachers encouraged me to take that, and I got the highest grade and the one who got the highest grade in the county got a four year scholarship to the University of Illinois. At that time, tuition was \$65 a semester. Now that's not much today, but in those days \$65 for four years, twice a year, meant something.

So I got the scholarship, and we came down here and talked to the Dean of Women about getting a job so that I could work. I got a job, it was in a little restaurant, it was right across from where the middle school is there now on the corner of Green and I

don't know what that other street is. But anyhow, there were two of us girls who worked there. We prepared the food, we made bar-bar-que sandwiches and did the dishes. We didn't have paper plates, we used dishes. So that's how I started out working in Champaign here. Then I started going to the University with my scholarship and well, I guess that's about it.

ES: Did you have brothers and sisters?

JJ: Yeah, I had a brother and a sister.

ES: Did they go to school?

JJ: They went to high school but I don't think either of them went to college.

ES: How important was education to your parents?

JJ: It was terribly important to my mother. My mother had a brother that had got to go to college and he had done real well. My mother, back in those days, they didn't believe in women going to college, or doing much of anything, so she never got to go to college so that's why I think she wanted me to be able to go to college, so that was that.

ES: Did any of your high school classmates go? You said you won the top scholarship. Were you the only one from your class that went to school?

JJ: I was the only one from my town that went. There were a few others, there weren't many others who took it. We went to the county seat in Yorkville, that's where the exam was given. It was all day. You started at 9 o'clock and you had questions and answers to write until noon and then you got an hour off for noon and then you had the same thing in the afternoon. So it was kind of a grueling exam and I never thought that I was going to get it. There was one boy who was taking it and he was supposed to be pretty bright, but I guess I got a higher grade than he did.

ES: Once you got to school what did you major in? What were your interests?

JJ: I wasn't in the College of Education, I transferred to that, and then I majored in mathematics. I had foreign language. We had to have 16 hours to be able to teach a subject in high school. And so I had, Math was my major, but I could also teach History and languages. I had Latin and French and German. That was my schedule.

ES: Did you always want to be a teacher? Did you go to school thinking you would do that?

JJ: No, I didn't always want to be a teacher, no. It just happened that the scholarship opened up and I got these jobs and that was it.

ES: Was that a requirement of your scholarship that you go into education?

JJ: No, I don't think so. I think I could have taken anything. But, it didn't pay for any lab courses, and they were extra. Although I was interested in science courses, I didn't take them because I couldn't afford them.

ES: What were other women on campus taking? Were there a lot of, were women taking science classes?

JJ: Oh, I think there were some of them. A lot of them were taking English. I don't know what other subject they were taking. There weren't too many in the Math courses. Of course, I took language. I took quite a bit of German, I really enjoyed that, so I took that. Then when I graduated, I graduated in three and a half years, I graduated in February. One of the teachers had encouraged me to go into graduate school. I hadn't registered, I guess it was about a month into graduate school. Then a man came down to the University and talked to the different people down there and he needed a teacher, he was a principal of a school in northern Illinois. He needed a teacher because a teacher he had was getting married and she had resigned. And so they called me in to interview me and I got the job so I stopped going to school and went out there to teach. And my salary to be a teacher, with a four year, or a University graduate, was \$100 a month. When you had nothing, that looked like heaven. That was back in '35 when money was tight.

ES: How did your family get along when you were at the University? When did you enter the University, what year did you enter the University?

JJ: Let's see, 31.

ES: Was your family greatly affected at that point by the Depression?

JJ: Oh yes, by the Depression, yes, yes. A lot of the farmers had bought farms and they were losing them, they couldn't make the payments on them. My dad was one of them, he lost his farm.

ES: What did he do?

JJ: Well, we moved to town and he got a job working around town doing things and that's how he survived.

ES: So they really couldn't help you financially when you were in school at all?

JJ: No, no, that's right.

ES: Do you remember some of your professors when you were in school?

JJ: Oh yes, I got to know some of them pretty well. My German instructor, I had the same instructor for about four courses, and I really liked him and I liked language. I don't know, I just enjoyed it. I'm not German and the first professor I had was head of

the Department, his name was Aaron I think it was, but he was a very friendly, fatherly kind of person. He was interested in names. If he knew your name he could pretty much tell from what section of Germany you ancestors came from but my name puzzled him. One day after class he called me and said he wanted to talk to me and he wanted to know where my ancestors came from! Well, as it was, they were Norwegian, not German. From the way Peile was spelled it looked German, but it isn't, it was taken from the land area that my father's parents came from in Norway. But he could, if he knew a person's name, he could tell the area. He was that versed of Germany, in the names that he could tell what section they came from. I liked him a lot too and then I had another German instructor that I liked, he was a younger fellow, and I liked him a lot too.

Then there was another fellow, he was a French instructor. I used to think he was kind of screwy, but he was a nice guy I guess. [Laughter] I had a history instructor, she lectured a lot, and you'd go to these lecture sections and you'd have to take notes, and she expected you to remember them or study your notes so that when you had your exam that's what your work would be on.

ES: What was the relationship between students and faculty? Did you know them outside of class at all or did you ever go to their homes?

JJ: I don't think that I ever went to their homes, but I knew them. If I met them on the street, they would know me. That type of relationship. I don't think I ever went to any of their homes. I know one instructor always encouraged his students to get to know them because he said, "After you graduate, and you go away, the people you've been with in school are away too, and when you come back there is nobody that you know except your professors." So he encouraged you to become acquainted with your professors.

ES: What do you think the main strengths of your academic education at the U of I were? Were there any weaknesses?

JJ: Any what?

ES: Any weaknesses in your education, or particular strengthes? How do you feel about your education?

JJ: I took a practice teaching course and my practice teaching critic was Miles Hartley who gave money for these gardens at the University. That's was very interesting to me. He was very interesting to have as a critic teacher. He said when he was going to school he was undecided as to whether he would major in music, or I don't remember it was math or education, probably math. But, he finally decided he wasn't going to major in music because he didn't think he could stand listening to students striking the wrong notes. But I had him and remembered him quite well.

ES: I have one more question about classes. How big were they? How big were the class sizes?

JJ: Oh, about 30 I would think, average, like that. And, you couldn't always get them arranged for your convenience. I had a swimming class which I took at the Woman's Building, that's where the swimming pool was at that time. Then, just right the next hour I had a math class down in the math building. I don't know whether it's math or law now, but it's that building right down there. So whenever I would come in, I would always come in late to that math class, from swimming, and my hair would be wet. One day the instructor asked me why I was always coming in late. So I just told him that I got there as fast as I could, but I had swimming and I had to get dressed afterwards, and my hair was wet and everything. And he said, "Anybody ought to know better than to take a class right after a swimming class because you need time to be prepared for the next class."

When you registered, that's another day. Then registration, it sure changed a lot than it used to be. Anyway, when you registered, you couldn't get anything. They would just shove you into a class. If they had a class that was already full or that was $\frac{3}{4}$ filled, you couldn't get into it. But if they had another class where maybe the teaching wasn't so popular and didn't have very many, then that's the class they'd put you in. You had no choice as to the time or anything, you just got shoved in there and that was it. Oh that registration day used to be a horrible day. All day long you'd run around trying to get the classes that you wanted and you couldn't get them so you'd have to go back again and try to change it. They've finally changed that now. I know that when my boys were there they would pre-register or something so they didn't have to go through that business that we did.

ES: Where was that held?

JJ: I believe it was held either in the Library or the Armory. I believe it was the Armory. It was all set up, they had tables and people that would write your name down and scratch your name off and things like that. It was a horrible thing to go through every semester you'd have to register.

ES: I wonder if you would talk about the rules on campus for students. Were there things you weren't allowed to do?

JJ: Oh yes, I'm sure that they were. They were much stricter than they are now, that's for sure. One thing, a lot of the students couldn't have cars. You had to live within a certain distance of the campus and need transportation before you could have a car on the campus. And I don't remember now, but you couldn't miss a class before vacation. Like, if you had Thanksgiving vacation coming up and your last class was on Monday at 11 o'clock, you had to be there. If you cut that class and went home early, then you had to be there. I think you could flunk that class if you did something like that. You couldn't skip a class before a vacation.

ES: Did they take attendance at classes?

JJ: Well, they must have. I know you sure couldn't cut a class before a vacation. If nothing else, they would take attendance that day. I really don't remember, but I suspect that they did – they would have ways of knowing who was there.

ES: Do you remember Maria Leonard?

JJ: Do I what?

ES: Do you remember Maria Leonard, the Dean of Women?

JJ: Oh yes, uh-huh.

ES: What impressions did you have of her when you were a student?

JJ: Well, she was way up there. I didn't see her a whole lot. She had an assistant, her name was Irene Pierson, that was the one that I talked to. She was very pleasant and nice and nice looking. Maria Leonard was a bit, well, standoffish or something. She didn't want to be bothered too much by the students. It was Irene Pierson that was our contact if we needed anything from that office.

ES: How did students view her? Did they view her positively?

JJ: Oh yeah. Irene Pierson?

ES: Or both.

JJ: Well, Irene Pierson was very well liked. We just thought of Maria Leonard as someone up above us and we better not do anything that she didn't like. We were more distant from her. Or she was more distant, maybe she held herself a little away from us.

ES: Do you remember Thomas Arkle Clark?

JJ: Yeah.

ES: Do you have any impression of him? He died in 1932 so he wouldn't have been there long.

JJ: Did he die, I don't remember when he died. You see, I graduated from high school in 1931 so I wouldn't have been there long in that year. I do remember there was a lot of talk about him, but I don't remember any of the actual gossip about him.

ES: He was pretty well accepted? Pretty well liked?

JJ: At the time, yes, I think so.

ES: How would you characterize the moral code on campus?

JJ: It was strict, it really was. You didn't have the drinking parties or anything like that that they have now. Yeah, it was very strict.

ES: Were there different rules for men and women?

JJ: I don't know about that, I really don't know. I've never thought of that in that matter anyway.

ES: Do you have a sense about how important religion was to students?

JJ: Yes, that was one thing that, see I lived off campus and when I was working I worked off campus for about three years. And so many of the churches would have, they would have groups. I belonged to the Lutheran Student Association. They had a minister and his family who lived on John Street right near the campus. That was our social life. My social life anyway because I lived off campus so I didn't have access to the activities that the sororities or the group houses would have.

Now the last year I lived on campus, I got a job. At that time the state came out with something to help students, we could get jobs. You said you had a couple of girls helping you. I did something similar to that. I had a professor doing research for a book and we had all the registration blanks of the combinations that people were taking. The teachers in high schools, small high schools especially, maybe one teacher would teach a course in history, and maybe they'd teach a course in English and maybe they would teach a course in math and we went through all of that data and found out how many students or prospective teachers were taking a certain combination. So that it would help the student coming in say, well when you get a job they might want a math teacher and a science teacher, but they won't want a math teacher and a history teacher, see they won't want that combination. So it helped them chose the subjects that they could be teachers in. I worked in that. I made...I don't know, it is a ridiculous amount of money in these days, to me it was wonderful. There was another girl that I worked with. She lived in the same house that I lived in that same year and we got paid in cash and that was a great big treat to me. So I got a taste of campus life that last year. I got to live on campus and find out what the other kids were doing.

ES: Where did you live during your school years?

JJ: Well, one year I worked, well actually it was like a babysitter. I took care of the kids and then if the parents wanted to go out at night or something then I'd just take care of the kids so I just lived there with them. It was way out on West Springfield and they bought me a bus ticket that was good for a month I think. Every month they'd have to get me a new ticket. So I'd commute to campus that way. But that was—

ES: Did they feed you as well?

JJ: Yeah, you worked for your board and room, that was it.

ES: So then you lived there a year and then you moved somewhere else?

JJ: Yeah, usually that's about what would happen. The first three years I lived off campus like that. Then the last year as I got this other job then I could live on campus. And at that time it was an organized house, it wasn't a sorority, but it was a organized house. We had some of the life similar to a sorority. We could go to some of the things that the kids on campus did. I got to a few football games and thoroughly enjoyed seeing the Chief at the games. I noticed in my *Illio* at one of the football games they had a picture of the Chief standing on the field, and we enjoyed that. We really enjoyed seeing the Chief dancing around on the field and it made us feel that he was a very important person and we felt that our school was important because our school was called the Illini school. By the way, I saw another school that also had a similar tradition of Indians, but I can't think what it was, what it is now. But to people my age and at my time, we can't understand what all this hullabaloo about the Chief is about. So we certainly did feel it, it was a thrill to assemble and dance around in his costume.

ES: Were athletic events well attended? Were they important to students?

JJ: Not as much as they are today. Of course I don't know, but I assume that most of the students go to the games today. Those were tough days, you came there to get an education and you didn't come there to flunk out. A lot of the students didn't go to the games, they didn't have the time to go, they needed the time to study.

ES: You started talking about this a little bit. I wonder if you could talk a little more about what kinds of things you did for fun when you weren't studying?

JJ: Well, one of the things is that I would go to this Lutheran Student Association. They would have, well, like a party, every Friday night. A group of kids would come there and somebody would sing or play the piano. We usually had refreshments. I think it was funded by the Church. They wanted to keep the young people within their church. I know the Methodists still do that today, they have quite an active student group. And I don't know about the other places. And, occasionally, I got to go to a few games. Maybe some student wasn't using their tickets, they had to study, so they weren't going to use it. Maybe they would give it to a friend and the friend would ask me, or something like that. I enjoyed going to those, but I didn't go to a lot of those. I went to a few of them.

ES: Were they expensive? Were the tickets expensive?

JJ: Yes! Well, to me they were. Considering I was a poor country girl who didn't have any money. They were expensive, yes.

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JJ: Well the Holman's Groups system was organized for girls that didn't live on the campus, either they were townpeople or they were working for their room and board around town, and they would have no connection with other students and no real

connections with campus life unless they had something like that. They would meet, anywhere from once a week to once a month. This gave you a change to get acquainted with other people and do things with them.

ES: Did they have events too? Did they have parties? Or just kind of a weekend meeting?

JJ: Well, they didn't have boy and girl parties, if that's what you mean, but they had these weekly meetings, which were practically parties with other girls.

ES: What were your feelings about the sorority and fraternity system on campus?

JJ: Oh, we had no objections to them, we just realized that they had more money than we did and we didn't have the money to live like that, like that they did. Our impression of them was that they had a lot of parties and the sororities would have parties and invite the fraternities over and meet people in that order and we didn't have those meetings and we just accepted that we didn't.

ES: Did you have much contact with fraternity and sorority students?

JJ: No. I had one girl friend that I was pretty close to that belonged sorority. She was from Pennsylvania and when you pay out of state tuition that's more expensive too. So I really feel that her family probably did have money but it just happened we happened to sit by each other in a German class and we just happened to become friends that way.

ES: Where did you meet most of your friends?

JJ: I think in the Lutheran Student Association. One of the things we would do as a group, we would walk downtown from the campus area, usually from around Green Street. There was Prehn's on Green and Prehn's on Oregon and we would meet as a group and we would walk down to the Church. We went to the England's Lutheran Church, which isn't there anymore. It was on the corner of. . . .oh what is that street? Probably Randolph and Springfield or Randolph and Green, through there, but it's not there any more. There's a high tower building, there's lots of offices in it. They built that building there. But that was where I got most of my friends, in the Lutheran Student Association.

ES: What did you do on dates? Where did you go? Or that kind of thing?

JJ: We would go to a basketball game or a football game. Sometimes we'd go out for a coke. Prehn's on Green was quite popular. Kids would meet there or just get together there. Nothing very expensive.

ES: Did you eat out much?

JJ: My last year I did, yeah, because they didn't serve meals where I stayed. I had to eat out the last year.

ES: Tell me again where you lived your last year. What was the name of it?

JJ: Acacia. It was on California Street, not too far from the campus, maybe a block or two. It was a big house, I don't know whether it's still there or not.

ES: How did you come to live there? How did you chose that?

JJ: Well, I guess I knew a friend who was living there. That was the most important thing. There was a girl from my home town that was going to the University the same time I did. We came down here, you know, after vacation, on trips home we'd go together. Maybe one parent would drive and then the next time the other parents would drive. We were close friends all through the University and that helped too.

ES: Were you involved in any organizations?

JJ: Was I what?

ES: Were you involved in any organizations other than the Lutheran group? Were you in sports at all or do any intramural sports?

JJ: I don't think so, that was about it.

ES: Did they have a requirement for women in athletics or physical education?

JJ: I don't think they had women's basketball teams or anything like they do now. We had had a woman's basketball team in our high school one year, but the townspeople didn't exactly think that's what women should be doing. *[Laughter]* It's an entirely different life now.

ES: How do you think the Depression shaped what students did on campus? How aware of the Depression were you when you were in school?

JJ: Oh, we were very aware of it. I remember one swimming class that we had one day. Our swimming teacher came to class and she held up two pennies and said, "This is all the money that I've got in my purse." She had put her check from her salary and the bank had closed and she couldn't get any money out. Honestly, I don't know what people did at that time and got another check and managed to go some other place with it. I'm sure their University checks were good. Most of the banks, well one bank didn't close, but most of the other banks did close. They just closed and you couldn't cash a check and couldn't get any money out at all. Oh we were very much aware of it. That's why the students didn't, the type of entertainment they had didn't cost them a whole lot. Anybody that lived in those days would be aware of it.

ES: Did you ever go hungry or go without things that you needed?

JJ: I was never really hungry and I think I always had, well, clothes or something like that. You never had any luxuries or any extras.

ES: Were you able to buy your textbooks?

JJ: Yeah, we bought the textbooks, we had to do that. At that time there was one bookstore on campus where you could buy used textbooks, you didn't have to buy new, and that would help out. I don't know whether they still do or not anymore. A place where you felt so acquainted with and felt so at home for four years, and then one day you're gone and you don't know what's going on over there.

ES: I think you may have mentioned this too, but I just wanted to make sure, how did you get the jobs that you had? You said the first job you got through the Dean of Women.

JJ: Yeah, all of the jobs I did.

ES: Is that generally how students found employment?

JJ: Yes, they would register with the University and the Dean of Women, usually it was this Irene Pierson that we worked with. Then they would get the names and I supposed they would use their judgement as to who would fit into what job. So we got different jobs that way.

ES: Did you have a sense of what the diversity on campus? What extent were there minority students on campus when you were there?

JJ: At that time we were not aware that there ever were minority students. We were not aware that there were foreign students or Indian students or all these different things that they seem to have problems with now. We were just glad that we could go to class and get an education, that's what we came there for and that's what we worked for. And with those conditions, if you graduated, you really had worked to get an education.

ES: You don't remember black students in your classes?

JJ: There were very few of them.

ES: What about Jewish students?

JJ: That again was not a problem. No problem at all with the Jewish students. They were just different than my people in my town. I came from an area that was pretty solid Norwegian settlement. In fact most of the people were Norwegians in the town, and we knew they were different. We also knew we were probably different than some of them too. We could be considered different. That was not a problem. There was never any

problems between any other groups: Japanese, Chinese, or Jewish or anything. They had just as much right to be there than anybody else.

ES: There wasn't a problem between Catholic students and Protestant students?

JJ: I don't think so. No. Again, we knew that there was a Catholic church and they did things differently than we did, but there was no problem, but there was nothing that went on between them, harassment or anything like that. There was one church, I don't know whether it was Catholic or not, and they had a group that met together like the Lutheran Student Association. I know some of those people. They seemed to enjoy their group just as we did.

ES: How aware were you of national events going on? Presidential elections? Did students keep in touch with what was going on outside Champaign-Urbana?

JJ: Well yes, we knew. Like when Roosevelt was running for election, or something like that. I had a boyfriend who thought the world would come to an end if he got elected, but it didn't! Some students were more interested in politics than others. But again, it wasn't a fighting situation or anything like that.

ES: Was there an active group on campus that was political? The student government group, was it strong?

JJ: Well, it wasn't real strong – it could have been. At least, I had no connection with it, they never contacted me in any way.

ES: What was the political makeup of the campus? Were there more Republicans than Democrats?

JJ: Well, I believe there were more Republicans. But again there wasn't any fighting words except a few that took their politics pretty seriously, but most people didn't. Most of us, it was out studies that came first thing.

ES: Do you remember any radical groups among the faculty or the students?

JJ: No, no I don't. I really don't.

ES: Something else I wanted to ask was about the Presidents. Did you have an impression of the President of the University?

JJ: Yeah uh-huh, no, no I didn't.

ES: Didn't have much contact?

JJ: No. The only contact we had with the people were with the Dean of Women and, Clark, of course, the Dean of Men. We had no contact with the President. He didn't affect us in our lives in any way that we knew or thought about.

ES: Was the Dean of Women fairly visible? Did she speak at groups?

JJ: Yes, she was visible. Yes, she was. Especially this Irene Pierson, who was Assistant Dean, she was more so.

ES: She had more contact with the every day problems?

JJ: Yes, uh-huh.

ES: Did you go to commencement? Did you go through commencement ceremonies?

JJ: Well I didn't because, see I graduated in February and then I started graduate school and then a month later I got a job. So I did not come back for commencement. It was mailed to me, my diploma was mailed to me through the mail.

ES: Was graduating from college a big deal for your family?

JJ: Oh, it was a big deal, it meant a lot to them. Uh-huh.

ES: Then you said you went to graduate school. How were you able to do that?

JJ: Well, I had graduated from the University and I had full credits. One of my instructors, in fact he was head of the department in German, and he convinced me to go into graduate work in German, although my major had been math. I did like German so I thought at the time that I would do that, and I started. I had all the privileges of the graduate students at the University. At the library it seemed like I had my little cubby hole that I could go in and that was my place to study and all that.

ES: How were you able to pay to go to grad school? Did your scholarship run out?

JJ: I don't believe so. I think it was for four years and see my four years were still included in there. I had no recollection of having to pay or get some money for that.

ES: Then you said you got a job and started teaching?

JJ: Yeah. It's been a long time ago [*laughter*].

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

JJ: Oh, I think it has influenced it tremendously. I mean, if I hadn't have been able to go to the University I would have just been a country girl that would have married a country boy and I would have been that all my life. With this I was able to branch out a lot.

ES: Is there anything else you'd like to say?

JJ: No. I've got two sons and they both went to the University of Illinois and graduated. They got Ph.D.'s from Rice University in Houston, Texas. So I think it has influenced my being a mother too. It has influenced what they have done.

ES: You pushed education when they were little? That was important?

JJ: Yes, that was important. I was always right there to see if they got their grades and if they needed any help and so forth. Yes, I do think it has influenced it a lot.

ES: Well, Thank you.

JJ: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW