

**University of Illinois Student Life 1928-1938**  
**Oral History Project**  
**Melvin McCoy – Class of '30**  
**Springfield, Illinois**  
**June 26, 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 Melvin McCoy, an alumnus from the class of 1930. We are at Mr. McCoy's home in Springfield, Illinois and the date is June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2001.**

**Can I ask you your full name and birth date?**

Melvin McCoy: Melvin Aldridge McCoy and I was born January 7<sup>th</sup>, 1908 in Brown County, that's over in the western part of the state in Versailles, Illinois.

**ES: Tell me about your family, where you grew up?**

MM: Well we grew up here literally here in Springfield. I guess we came here when I was 5 years of age, and my dad was in the state highway department, spent his life there. We had 3 boys. I was the middle boy, the oldest boy was an engineer and worked with the highway department, along with my dad. Eventually my younger brother became an engineer for the Bridge Department here of the state highway too. I didn't think I was going to go to college because I didn't care anything about engineering. I remember my older brother came home that first weekend after he'd been there at college and he said, "You ought to go," he said, "They've got a band out there, and a separate band building and they march and play." And said, "Is that right?" He said, "Yeah." When we gathered him back up to take him back to college, the family drove him over. Why I said, "Well I guess I'll try it then myself, I'm a week a late now," and I had to laugh because my mother then wrapped up my two or three shirts and pajamas in the *Sunday Journal* and that's how I went to college, and I very near missed and didn't go, to tell you the truth. So I entered a week late.

My brother had been there about a week or so to clean up his fraternity, so I had a place to go. He took me around by hand, so to speak, and registered me later. I went up to Smith Memorial Hall and registered there in music. I went out for the band and made the band. I remember that we went to Philadelphia about two weeks after I got into the band. We played Temple University out there and we had Red Grange on our team—I don't know if you've ever heard of him or not. I can remember the game that he just left them standing down in the field while he went clear through that outfit time after time. It was phenomenal to see that for anybody and for me too, to see that game. They took everybody from Champaign on that special little train that they took out there. They ran a special train out to Philadelphia.

**ES: Now this is 1925?**

MM: In 1925, yes. After they did the game, they took the whole band over to what was called then the Victor Recording Company in New Jersey. They recorded the band, Oskie-Wow-Wow,

Skinny-Wow-Wow and Hail to the Orange. We did that for two or three hours I guess, maybe until 9:30 or 10 before we even finished up there. Then we had an hour off and then we got on the train and came home. We got in here the next day. That was my first experience with—

**ES: And that was right after you got to Champaign?**

MM: Right, within two weeks. Yes, that's right.

**ES: Were the auditions very competitive? Did everybody want to be in the Illinois Band?**

MM: Yeah because see there was quite a bunch of them, just like it is now. Then we had 10,000, now we have 35 or 40,000. So we tried everybody out for the band. I guess if they couldn't play we didn't take you. That's the only way I can figure out. So that kind of launched me into the music field. Most of my classes were in Smith Memorial on the far corner. My fraternity house that my brother was in and I went into also, was on west Green, 106 West Green, which is a good long mile from my music building. I walked it every noon home and then walked it all the way back to get back to that 1:00 if I had one. Then we rehearsed with the band two times a week for sure, and many times three or four. That would be the latter part of the afternoon, like 4 to 5:30. Everyone on the campus could be in the band, even though they came from physics or engineering or anything else like that, as long as they could play and could make the band rehearsal they could be part of the band. So, that's about the gist of my schooling as far as I can think of. If you can think of any questions that you might ask, I don't know. There are things that they aren't doing now like Twilight Concerts on the campus there in front of the Auditorium.

**ES: Were those in the summer?**

MM: Yeah. And the spring before school let out. I was there one summer. We did that one summer.

**ES: Were those popular?**

MM: Oh yeah! It was kind of the thing to do. It was no problem to go down and lay on the green out there and listen to the band concert for an hour and then meander off.

**ES: What instrument did you play?**

MM: Clarinet.

**ES: Do you remember any impressions of the faculty in the music department? Did you have any favorites?**

MM: Well, I cannot think of any, of course, Dr. Harding was our director. I don't know if you've ever heard of him or not. He had a couple of assistant directors. One, as I said, was Ray Dvorak who helped put our little vaudeville band together. Then we had another assistant conductor by the name of Leo Trose who was in the band, but was also over at Urbana High

School before he came to the University. I used to go over there and teach in the high school his kids how to play in the band—how to play a clarinet or the flute, some of those things. I taught there on Saturdays.

**ES: When you were a student?**

MM: Oh yeah, when I was a student.

**ES: Did you get paid for that?**

MM: Oh yeah. Sure. I never did know how they paid for it: if they took it out of the band's fund or if the University paid for it. Probably that, I imagine. They used that for a stepping stone. They moved from there to Chicago and formed the Chose [sp?] Public Music Publishing Company, which was a big thing and still is in Chicago. So that kind of constitutes as much as I can think of now unless you can ask any questions. Then I followed along a very methodological pattern month after month. Not a lot of social activity as far as I was concerned. I played sax sometimes and an awful lot on the weekends. Not a lot, because I'd rather teach Saturday than work late, 12 or 1 o'clock at night.

**ES: Where would you play the sax?**

MM: We had a couple of dance bands there. We had one called Bradley there on Green Street which is probably the one that played the most.

**ES: This was just a group of students from the Department that would be asked to play?**

MM: Yeah, any place, could be anything. Any get-together. The job would just be for one night and then it would be something else different. The rest of the time was in my field in music. We did recitals there in the Music Hall. I'm sure they still do that now because I get program from the Music Department once a month. We participated in that maybe two or three times during the course of the year all the time I was in school there.

**ES: Do you think students were close to the faculty? Did they have a relationship with the faculty outside of the classroom?**

MM: Some, yes. Not an awful lot. I can remember that we had maybe a fall picnic with the music faculty as well. They would have a baseball game going or something like that. It was some but it was not an awful lot. You can't build up a whole closeness with the faculty because you're not there long enough with them. Everything is kind of hit the ball while you're there with them and then you hurry to the next class so it is hard to get very close. My band directors were in some of the other things I took. I suppose I studied voice and studied piano as part of my field. Both of those were women. I had other men that taught music theory. I'm thinking of one that played at the baseball game. I don't know how we got through there. My dad worked. We lived in an apartment, so eventually sent all three of us through school. We didn't go through a huge pocketbook or anything at all because my older brother was in school while I was there. That meant that two of us were coming out of the family pot so as to speak. Then after that my

other brother came on and he was up there for four years. So all three of the boys went through there to college.

**ES: Had your parents gone to college?**

MM: No. My dad hadn't.

**ES: But education was important to them?**

MM: Yeah it must have been. He saw to it that all three of us went to the University and graduated. I did education after I got through here eventually. I've spend the last 31 years here in Springfield in one of the high schools.

**ES: When you went to school did you have a career goal in mind? Did you know what you wanted to do?**

MM: Oh no. No, I had no idea. I was going to be in the music field, that was pretty sure. I hadn't got beyond that at all. I didn't know if I was going to be a teacher or just what. I was going to be something in music, I was sure.

**ES: What made you decide? Anything special?**

MM: Well, I had been interested in music. My dad bought me the clarinet when I was about a sophomore in high school. I took lessons on the horn here. Then he sent me to Chicago to the symphony director the two summers I was in high school here. When I went to college and I look back, I must have done pretty good or else I couldn't have gotten into the band I suppose, I mean I don't know. That was the field that I was particularly interested in. Engineering, I didn't think I could hack it to tell you the truth.

**ES: You were talking about the vaudeville experience? Tell me about that again, what you did.**

MM: Well, we did just a 20 or 25 minute part of the vaudeville show which could be consisted of different acts of entertainment. The bill would be like Satan Lake, well that was different, that was five shows a day there on Satan Lake on State street up in the area. Are you familiar with Chicago?

**ES: Chicago, a little bit.**

MM: It was right across the street from the Chicago theater, that one was. We played there. When they started us out with the bill we went up there and played another week—five days. They moved right on up to Milwaukee and spend a week there doing two shows a day. Then we moved up to Minneapolis. This was a route that goes all over the country just like that. You just follow along where, they'd give us the ticket and they'd book us. They'd book us at all these different theaters all the way along the line. We just kind of follow along where ever they booked us that week. They said we followed the route along Winnipeg, Calgary and Vancouver

and Seattle and come down. We did Los Angeles and San Francisco and San Francisco and Los Angeles we did twice. Then San Diego and then we started back in Salt Lake City and all the big towns in the United States at this time. When we got close to New York we would be around there for the last four months. And then we commuted to the different theaters around the town. Naso [sp?] and Jersey City and Flushing and those kind of places and go home at night and come back the next afternoon and do the show. I don't know how we did this, but it was just kind of the agreement that the last week or so of the summer we were going to stop the show, which we did, and came back. I had maybe a week's vacation and did the senior year.

**ES: What year was this? You took time off from college to do this?**

MM: It was '27. We were out '27 and part of '28. Then I came back and did half of '29 and half of '30 to graduate out.

**ES: How did this come about?**

MM: I don't know [*laughter*]. They just put it together. The fact of the matter we were going blind, we didn't know if we had anything at all. Anyway, we rehearsed the thing and had it all worked out the time and had it all put together as far as the twenty minutes were concerned. I don't remember who got us the trail at the Satan Lake theater, but they did. They booked us in for a whole Easter vacation and we did five shows a day. I guess the people who sit on top reviewed the show and bought it and sent us all the way around on the real deal.

**ES: Did the University make money on that?**

MM: Oh no. The University had nothing to do with this at all. Nothing.

**ES: The University didn't have any problem with a number of students leaving for a year and a half?**

MM: Sixteen to eighteen of us, no. Not out 10,000.

**ES: It was something the students put together themselves? Or did the faculty—**

MM: The faculty member, right.

**ES: That's really interesting. Was it done again do you know?**

MM: No, never been done since. The opportunities to do that are not there. In other words, here is a complete vaudeville circuit of entertainment all over the United States. You may know nothing about that but we played the Orpheum in Champaign and we played here and we played Peoria, we played St. Louis and Chicago. This was a sport week when we played this, we played four days in Peoria and three days here, and then we went right on to St. Louis from here.

**ES: Did you have a bus that you traveled from city to city?**

MM: No, we traveled by train at all times. We were never given such things thank goodness. RKO bought the Pullman so we traveled all night long, over night, so we finished up the show and got right on down to the train get on, and the next morning we got off and we were in the new place.

**ES: You did that for a year and a half?**

Es: Uh-huh.

**ES: Did you get the proceeds? Did you make any money off of this?**

MM: I made a salary every week and I sold enough to take me through my senior year in college.

**ES: So it was helpful in that way?**

MM: I don't think that when I started out it was more or less kind of a lark. After a week they paid the pay roll all the way down the line and they did that every other week. I sent half of it home so my dad could take it to the bank and bank it, so when I came back off of the job I had something to go to college with.

**ES: How many athletic events did you play at? Did you play at all the home football games?**

MM: Oh yes.

**ES: Was that a big time commitment?**

MM: Well, I don't know if it was a commitment but you did that. If you wanted to be in the band then you participated in what the band did. If you're not going to do that then you wouldn't be in the band.

**ES: Was it prestigious to be in the band?**

MM: I don't know if I would say that or not. I kind of felt like it was doing something. Some people just go in one door and go out the other door and never contribute anything at all. I played for two or three of those shows that were made up in the campus end. Then orchestra, we traveled for that for maybe three or four days when they took it out on the road once a year. I'm sure they did then, like for instance, St. Louis we took a little orchestra of maybe six or eight and played for the show for them. Maybe eight or ten were in the show. I don't know if they booked them through a church group or alumni or what. I'd sooner think that maybe alumni did it. Those were about the type of activities that I went through. There are not an awful lot of other things that the average student in my time could do. You follow a specific pattern five days a week. You go to school and class and eat and hurry and get right back down there. You're in the band, you drill the band. You're at the games, you're at home. They usually traveled maybe one game a year with the band.

**ES: With the football team?**

MM: Yeah, with the football team, for the games. We played for the basketball band. I nearly always played at that because I enjoyed the basketball. That was a voluntary thing so I could have got out of that if I had really wanted to because not an awful lot get to play because there's not a lot of room.

**ES: Were the sporting events well attended in the 20s?**

MM: Oh yes I should say.

**ES: Because of Red Grange, probably the football league?**

MM: That's right, oh you bet. Because of Red Grange. Not like some of them now.

**ES: What was it like to live in a fraternity?**

MM: I was a green kid when I went there to college. I don't know if I would have been able to make it in a rented room or not. I roomed with two upper classmen. I didn't do very well in rhetoric. The first time my grades came out it might have been something like six weeks. My roommates were right on me tooth and toenail. They'd read all my essays. Then I made the honor roll as a freshman. There were certain things there that I felt like my fraternity was there in my favor. If there had been someone that was interested in me, that would have been my upper classman roommate.

**ES: So you had people watching out for you?**

MM: Right, see what I was going to do. I had a couple of friends here that did not go into the fraternity. Both of them flunked out, I remember that distinctly. So for a person that's never been to college and then going to college it's kind of a big jump.

**ES: Did you feel overwhelmed by the size or had your high school been fairly big?**

MM: No, it wasn't that. I just didn't adapt real well to college and all the college activities, studies and things like that. As I say, I think being a member of my fraternity, I had an upper classman, sometimes two that checked the grades out, you know what I mean, see how you did. At 7:30 for instance, I was in the room studying most of the time. That was a rule in my fraternity.

**ES: What kinds of things did you do together socially?**

MM: Not an awful lot of things. I had a girl there. We went sometimes to the dances. We didn't have an awful lot of money, to tell you the truth though. That would be the only kinds of dating activities that I could think of that come along. We ran over night as 6:30. After the freshman year they didn't do this. There wasn't a lot of places to go to tell you the truth. Like

Tuesday night's you'd go to the library. We used to have a place on 6<sup>th</sup> and Green called Prehn's, then. You could stop there and buy a Coke or something.

START OF TAPE 1 SIDE B

**ES: You were saying that you would go to Prehn's for social activities?**

MM: Prehn's for social activity, would be on the corner of 6<sup>th</sup> and Green, that's a block off of the campus. That was kind of the place to go where you could go and drink a Coke. They didn't have liquor then.

**ES: How did that work? Did people drink on the sly?**

MM: Some I guess. I don't know. My fraternity was rather strict on that so it really wasn't there at all. It was just not there at all.

**ES: Did fraternity people and independent students socialize much? Did you have much contact?**

MM: Not an awful lot, no. It was hard to create those kind of things where you can get together. We didn't necessarily pick out a fraternity crowd. I had friends who were beside me in the band and from Smith Memorial Music Building that we were pretty close with. I'd see them during the day time at class, this and that. As far as trying to divide them I didn't think much of because you just didn't get a chance much. Like at my fraternity, I would go there to eat for my meals. Then I would walk all the way down there and then all the way back to campus. You kind of get to where you follow a routine. Going way back to 1925 is going way, way back, but going back to campus at various times, I see enough of a correlation between then and now. I don't just mean the school, but the whole campus. When the team's down, I mean way down, it's kind of hard on the school spirit. It's hard for people, the alum, last year and the year before that and the year before that. Yet, we've had so many fine sport teams, and basketball, that just were winners.

**ES: In the 20s, athletics were going pretty well?**

MM: Yes, that's right.

**ES: The teams were strong.**

MM: Right.

**MM: Did belonging to a fraternity give you a higher social status? Did people aspire to belong?**

MM: Oh, I don't think so. I really don't believe so. As I say, I valued mine because my brother got me in and I found some people who were interested in me and what I did. I liked the group of people in afterwards. It seemed like they were a good class of people.



**ES: Those is where you made your closest friends?**

MM: Yes, I believe so.

**ES: Between the fraternity and the band?**

MM: Yeah. I couldn't hardly make close friends when you had to change class because you could hardly keep track of them when you're going different places at different times. You don't get much opportunity to see those particular ones. I did better in my music school because several, quite a few of those, I went through my four years of when I was in there. When I dropped out a year, that kind of slowed up the friendship.

**ES: Did you belong to any other student organizations outside of the band and the fraternity?**

MM: I belonged what we called Mask and Bauble which was a play thing. I belonged to that and participated in that in the orchestra every time they did this. I think maybe two or three years of that. I was trying to think of anything else I would have participated in down there. That's pretty much it. In other words, my field kind of narrows me down as far as getting around is concerned.

**ES: Do you remember anything about rules on campus for students?**

MM: Not very much. You couldn't smoke on campus, that's one of the main rules as I remember.

**ES: Did a lot of students smoke?**

MM: Oh, I think so. Sure.

**ES: Could you smoke in the fraternity house?**

MM: Oh yeah, in the second and third floor. If you were in your room I guess you could. It's different now a days than it was then. People didn't necessarily frown on it at all like they do now. I was just never a smoker because I felt like it interfered with playing my musical instruments, so I just never in my life smoked. Neither did my two roommates that I remember, so I was never around that then as far as I was concerned. But down on the main floor, I guess they did, I don't believe they smoked in the rooms, they didn't on the main floor.

**ES: Did women smoke too?**

MM: Nothing like we had had, not then, no.

**ES: What were your impressions of Thomas Arkle Clark?**

MM: Well as I look back on him, he was what you would say a University fixture. He was with a higher group of people. He was a strictly the disciplinarian, so as to speak. I didn't have any dealings with him. I don't believe I was ever caught on the carpet in there with him trying to explain why I had skipped the last class or two like so many of them had done, so many different times. He kept close track of where you were and what you were doing.

**ES: Do you think the students appreciated that or resented it?**

MM: Well, it wasn't the case then of what they thought. If you came to the University, you followed out whatever they told you to do. If they told you not to smoke on the campus, then ok. They came out with a rule that you can't cut the last class before Christmas vacation and you must be back on time when school starts. You can't come back and be a day late. These were a couple type of rules that I can think of that weren't too hard to understand why. He had charge of all the disciplinary problems that he encountered, I just wouldn't know what all they were, but he was in charge of all the discipline. You followed along or you would have a problem if you didn't adapt.

**ES: Do you think that students had a favorable opinion of him?**

MM: Oh I believe so. Oh yes uh-huh. I think so.

**ES: But they may have feared him a little bit too?**

MM: Well, yes in a way. Like the disciplinarian back in high school, you remembered what the disciplinarian's name was. I kind of feared him too.

**ES: What about religion? Were students involved in the foundations on campus in the 20s?**

MM: Yes, some I believe. Not an awful lot that I know of in my group. We went to church when we could from my fraternity. Everybody went their different ways to church and that's just they way it was. Nobody tried to work real hard to convert any or all of us to go one place.

**ES: It wasn't anything required by the fraternity that you go on Sunday morning?**

MM: On no.

**ES: Do you think the moral code on campus was pretty strict? Was morality well regulated?**

MM: I believe so, yes. I just wouldn't be in a position to have much to tell on that. We never encountered the drinking problems in my fraternity while I was there. I read occasionally what they have done, which creates a problem. As I say, I don't know. I was kind of in a rut in a way because I just followed that kind of thing of where you had to be every single day and time.

**ES: Did you have any contact with the President of the University?**

MM: No. His first name was David I think.

**ES: Kinley?**

MM: Kinley, yes. White haired gentleman, superb gentlemen, that's the only thing I can think of.

**ES: Was he very visible among the student body?**

MM: No. I'm trying to think of where we would see him. Well maybe things like graduation maybe. That type of the program. I'm sure he was doing his job. He was a very variable old gentleman, we just never got acquainted with him, never.

**ES: You would have had more contact with the Dean of Students or something?**

MM: Of the faculty that I was experienced with.

**ES: I'm interested in the make up of the student body. Do you remember black students on campus when you were a student?**

MM: Do I remember students on the campus?

**ES: Black students.**

MM: Oh, I just can't remember their they're being any different than we were. They never impressed me at all, so I'm sure that they were there.

**ES: But you never had any contact with any black students while you were here.**

MM: No, no. In other words, if they weren't in my particular fields, excuse me, well that would be about the only way that I would encounter them.

**ES: What about Jewish students? Were there many Jewish students on campus?**

MM: Honestly, that I would not have known. I never noticed one, to tell you the truth, so there probably were. Actually, religiously I couldn't go very far. I don't remember anything that would impress me one way or the other.

**ES: Were there any divisions among Catholic and Protestant groups at all? Do you remember any problems?**

MM: I can't remember anything like that either. Do they have those kinds of problems on the campus now?

**ES: I don't think it's a problem. When you were in school, how aware of national events going on outside of campus in the world were you? Did you keep in touch with current events and news?**

MM: Not very much, no we didn't. I say we, but we didn't discuss these things and I didn't probably ever read the newspapers hardly at all during the week. Of course we didn't have the television. We shut the radio off at 7:30. I just didn't pay much attention to the current news and things like we do now-a-days.

**ES: Did you read the paper, the [Daily] Illini?**

MM: Yeah, we read the *Daily Illini* most of the time. It gave the news on the campus. Then we had the *Champaign News-Gazette* I believe was the other paper.

**ES: Did you have much contact with the community being from out of town?**

MM: Yeah. No, not very much. We're not foreign or against them, we just don't have much chance to adapt in a school town, college like that.

**ES: You said that you did teach at Urbana?**

MM: Urbana High School.

**ES: But that would be kind of your only—?**

MM: This would just be Saturday. This was not a regular teacher at all. I would just sell my services for a half hour at a time.

**ES: Were politics on campus strong?**

MM: I guess some yes.

**ES: Student government activities?**

MM: Running for President, yes. That didn't impress me very much at all.

**ES: You were too busy with music activities?**

MM: Yes, that was my field.

**ES: Did you go through commencement?**

MM: Oh yeah.

**ES: Was that an important day do you think for your family? Did your parents and your brother come over?**

MM: Yes, oh yes. My folks came for that. I went for my older brother's graduation. Well I think the band played during all the commencements while I was there that did.

**ES: Oh, so you attended them every year as a band member?**

MM: Yeah.

**ES: What did you do directly after you graduated? This would have been 1930. The Depression was just kind of getting going at that point.**

MM: That's right. I went into organizing school bands on the eastern part of the state. I did that for several years. Things got pretty hard so I took a job teaching school in Charleston. I guess I taught there until the Army came along in 1940. I resigned the job and sold the house and stored the furniture. I moved half the furniture here [Springfield]. We had one girl then. I had to wait here, so I played with the city band here, waiting that summer to go into the Army. Then they came along and said that all the married people with children are put into a class called 3A, which means you didn't go I guess until last minute. So I didn't have any job and I didn't go into the Army, and that's about the gist of it. That summer I was in the bank and I meet a fellow I used to know by the name of Fred Nickles. He was my principal. He was my guy who asked me what I was doing, I said, "I'm not doing nothing." So he said, "why don't you come out to the high school and lead the band. We lost our director this week." I thought, well, sure. So I went out there Thursday and I did and he said to come back Friday to the office. So I went there then for 31 years.

**ES: Where was this?**

MM: Here in Springfield. That's where I retired from.

**ES: How do you think the U of I has influenced your life?**

MM: I know that I'm much better off having gone to school, I'm just sure. Knowledge and life's values and things like that.

**ES: How did you chose the U of I? Why did your older brother go there to school?**

MM: I don't know. I guess maybe because it was just the school for engineering I guess was probably maybe the main reason and that my dad let him go there. I went there because, as I say, he told me about the band and the building and all.

**ES: Was that right out of high school? Did you go there right out of school?**

MM: Yes. After my older brother went and I went, then my younger brother went too. All three of us went through the University.

**ES: You've answered all my question. Do you have anything else you'd like to say?**

MM: I don't know if you can use any of that but that's the way as it is.

**ES: Thank you.**

[End of interview.]