

SISTER MARY BENEDICT PHELAN, BVM

Interviewed by Sara McAlpin, BVM

March 2, 1998

Mundelein College
Oral History Archives

Sara McAlpin: Good morning. This is Sara McAlpin, BVM. I'm here with Sister Mary Benedict Phelan, and I've just learned this morning that that's the correct pronunciation of Benedict's name. We are at the BVM congregational in _____, Marion Hall, in Dubuque, Iowa. It's March 2, 1998, and, I think it's worth mentioning that it's two days before Benedict's ninety-sixth birthday. And, so, we're glad to be here for this interview, and, um, Benedict is, um, a BVM who spent several years at Mundelein, and we're going to begin with her going to Mundelein. Um, when did you go to Mundelein, Benedict?

Benedict Phelan: In March, 1934, right after I made my first vows.

SM: Were you surprised with that assignment?

BP: Oh, sure. [chuckling] We all were surprised, you know, in regards to what was going to happen to us. But, um..

SM: Given your experience, you must have been prepared for an assignment, at least in some kind of..

BP: I really didn't think about that, you know. I, I really had no idea where I was going.

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SM: And, when you went there, what, what exactly were you assigned to do? To teach and...

BP: I just remember now. I was assigned to, to, uh, sit in class with, uh Sister Mary Antonia. She was teaching education psychology and history of psychology. And, the understanding sort of was that I should be able to take over those classes, you know, eventually.

SM: Just after sitting in?

BP: Well, that's...[laughing] So, anyway, I can't remember what else I did.

SM: But it was educational psychology...

BP: And history of psychology

SM: Uh huh

BP: And I, I went to a religious... We were all assigned to, uh, a counselor, and the counselor was, uh, in charge of the religious group, you know, religious education. Now, I think I was in a, a group where we studied church history or church doctrine.

SM: Uh huh. And you mean a counselor to students?

BP: No, to, uh, a counselor to the Sisters in their classes.

SM: Oh.

BP: Now, uh, Sister Mary Regina was one of the ones... She was, um, she was counselor to the BVMs who were in that class. I mean, we would call that. We wouldn't speak with her as counselors now.

SM: Uh huh.

BP: Um at that time.

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SM: Um, and when did you actually start teaching?

BP: I think that next summer, and I can't remember when I started, but I was an English major.

SM: Oh.

BP: And whether I started teaching English that summer I don't know. I never did teach very much English although it was my major.

SM: Um hmm.

BP: And, uh

SM: But mostly, you were teaching education.

BP: Well, at, at Mundelein, and, and psychology. Um, we started a major in psychology there.

SM: Oh, you started that.

BP: Yeah.

SM: Oh. Was that, uh, let's see nineteen, early nineteen thirties, was that an, uh, uh, sort of a new major in colleges at that time?

BP: Yes, uh, uh, let's see. In nineteen thirty-four I went to Mundelein, and I jumped in mid summer, I can't remember just when. Then, the next year, the first year I was at Mundelein, I must have taught some of the classes with Sister Mary Antonia right there.

SM: Um hmm.

BP: Because she was sort of a, uh... guide.

SM: She was, I suppose you would have considered her really a mentor.

BP: That's right. Then, the next summer, _____ that I was to go

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to _____ for the summer to train. _____ Sharon _____ was getting her masters in music at _____ and she had to study another year, and I was to be her companion that summer. But then, toward the end of that summer session, we got word from Sister Mary _____ that we were to stay and study for the whole year and I was to look into the possibility of getting a doctorate. I had my masters when I entered, and, uh I can't forget that. I know that name so well.

SM: It'll come to you later.

BP: Anyway, it was like in August, and, you know, we were quite upset because (chuckling) you go for the summer and then you're told you'll be there for a year and you'll be there for the whole year. So, at the campus, we discovered that our classes...that first semester wouldn't begin until late in September, and so that would mean just keeping us there in, uh, Washington, you know?

SM: Um hmm.

BP: For all those weeks. So, it would be better for us to go home, and we were glad to do that. So we went back to, uh, Dubuque. Out to Dubuque _____ Mundelein. And then... uh, got ready for the year. And so that first year..._____

SM: And that would have been thirty-five? <PAUSE> Thirty-four.

Okay.

BP: Thirty-four that first. No thirty-five.

SM: Okay.

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BP: And at that time I became a, a _____ with my professor and, uh, I became interested in psychology. _____, and I, it just went on from there. I just continued to get more and more interested in psychology.

SM: So, you just stayed there straight on then?

BP: No.

SM: No?

BP: I was just there for that year.

SM: Uh huh.

BP: And I was to stay, I was to, uh go for the second year, and most of the courses ran in two years, every other year. And so the courses I was assigned that second year, the second year I _____ at, uh, at Mundelein, uh, I mean at _____. <Pause> Uh, as it happened, we got _____ and I uh, after Sister Mary _____ finished, I went home that summer and um, with the idea of returning, you know..

SM: Um hmm.

BP: That next year. And one of the sisters, _____, became ill, and I was asked to take her classes. Supposed to be English and education. So, that, that year I lost out on those courses that were given every other year.

SM: Oh

BP: Which was sort of difficult. But, I don't, I don't know if I went back that next summer or not. But I, I went back the next fall.

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SM: Uh huh

BP: And I was there for two years, and I, uh, did my dissertation, and I had two... Oh, that year I was home, _____, I studied German, because I realized that one of the things that you had to do when you were in a doctorate program was pass a test in French and German and I studied French in college and high school, but I had never studied German. So that year I also studied German, just by myself.

SM: Um hmm.

BP: And that was just very _____ class.

SM: Um hmm.

BP: So, that was a help. Well, then when I went back for my second year of study at _____, I was there for the next two years. With the, not in the summer. Because, uh, one of those summers, I came back for my perpetual vows.

SM: Um hmm.

BP: And, uh,

SM: So you went to Mundelein with your Masters degree.

BP: Yes.

SM: And...

BP: I got that from the University of Southern California.

SM: Uh huh. And that was a masters in what?

BP: [mumbling] _____ education.

SM: Um hmm. And then your doctoral degree was technically in what?

BP: Psychology... and education.

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SM: Educational psychology. And, um, so you received that doctorate in what year?

BP: Well, I finished my work that second year. I finished my work. Then, uh, _____, and, uh, I, I'd taken my orals. I mean I'd taken my written in the spring and I had, my dissertation had been approved in June. And then, this was September that my mother was quite ill. My father had died that year, and my mother was quite ill. And so, since she was feeling ill, I went home in August to see my mother.

SM: Um hmm.

BP: The last time I saw her.

SM: Um hmm

BP: And I came back. And I just... and I, the one reason that I had to come back to _____ is because I had to take my orals. I was supposed to take them in August, but one of the men who was on my board was ill, and so they postponed them until September. So I was just there from this final visit with my mother

SM: Hmmmm.

BP: And got the date for my orals which was to be for two weekend days. So, I had to take my orals right after my mother's death.

SM: Oh.

BP: Which was very hard

SM: Oh.

BP: And, at that time, Father Felix was, uh, he was studying at _____ too. And we were in some of the same classes, but he