

IRENE MEYER

Interviewed by Mary Alma Sullivan  
on November 18, 1998

Mundelein College  
Oral History Archives

Mary Alma Sullivan: The following is an interview with Irene Meyer, class of 1951 from Mundelein College and Professor of Psychology at the Classic Mundelein College. The date of the interview is November 18, 1998. The interviewer is Mary Alma Sullivan, BVM, Mundelein class of 1951.

So what I'll do is start off by reading those questions so that the transcriber and future historians will know what we're talking about.

Irene, what is your full name, graduating class, your major, your degree and any other academic information you feel is relevant here.

Irene Margaret Meyer: Irene Margaret Meyer. My degree was a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology with a minor in music.

MAS: Graduating class.

IM: Oh, graduating class. '51.

MAS: Can you say something about your family and social background? For example, immigrant parents, working parents, broth-

ers and sisters, war time experience, anything there that would put this in perspective.

IM: Okay. My parents both came from Germany but ... and they worked. And gosh, what should I say? Well, they inculcated in the ... you know, a very honest desire to do the right thing and to work hard and all that sort of thing. No brothers and sisters; I'm the only one.

MAS: So you were spoiled in other words. [chuckles]

IM: I wasn't spoiled! [laughs] Everybody kept saying that and it used to get me so angry.

MAS: Poor stereotype that only children have.

IM: I know. My parents were real ... they weren't real strict but you know, when they said "no" they meant no. And I remember a lot of the no lessons. And at the time, I felt bad about them. But then afterwards, I thought, "Well, gee, that was a good thing for them to have done to me."

MAS: So you actually were a first generation American and also a first generation college student.

IM: Right.

MAS: What did you ... how were your parents connected to your decision to go to college? Was that assumed? Was it possible to send you?

IM: No, it was never assumed. But they knew it was a very important, it was very important for me to go to college. And so it was okay with them. I think I should tell you though that ...

Irene Meyer Interview

see, I had been a protestant, a Lutheran, and I had gotten interested in the Catholic church before I went to Mundelein. And I actually got baptized before I went there. And so I really selected Mundelein because of it being Catholic. And I came from a public school background. And I felt, you know, very much out of it when I came to Mundelein.

MAS: Is that right? Why?

IM: Well, because I was a public school kid and a lot of the other gals were all from Catholic, most of them were from Catholic schools. So I can remember going ... we had to go into the auditorium for something. And I can remember going in there and thinking, "Well, now I've got to make friends with some of these people because I don't want to be here alone!" It was really kind of tough in the beginning. But, I mean, it wasn't because of kids; it was because of the background that I had come from.

MAS: Well, I think you've kind of answered a little bit about how you came to attend Mundelein.

IM: Yeah, well, I started attending Mundelein actually a year before because I played in the orchestra. I had come to Mundelein, you know, just to inquire about it. One of my high school teachers got me there. And we met Sister Severina and the next thing I knew, she invited me to come and play in the orchestra. And so I started playing in the orchestra.

MAS: Even before you matriculated at the college?

IM: Yeah. That whole year before.

MAS: That's interesting. It's curious because, you know, going through *The Skyscraper* issues, it's clear that you're very involved in music.

IM: Yes.

MAS: And it's curious then that you became a psychology major. Why weren't you a music major with a psychology minor?

IM: Well, I was a music major for two years. And then in second year, I took the first psych course and I got real interested in it. And I thought, "Well, you know, I'm never really going to make something I can make my living with in the music department." And so I thought, "Well, psychology can prepare me for a lot of things." So I continued on with the music but, you know, only as a minor. Because I really did like it.

MAS: It strikes me that that's a pretty heavy schedule. You know?

IM: Yeah, it was about 17, 18 hours. I think it was about 18 hours.

MAS: Yeah. There are minors and minor.

IM: Yeah.

MAS: And then psychology was not without its requirements in sciences and such.

IM: Right.

MAS: Can you recall the activities, events and/or experiences you found most satisfying in your college career?

Irene Meyer Interview

- IM: Well, I loved playing in the orchestra. That was really nice. And getting to know all the people. And playing in the performances. But even just going to the rehearsals. I enjoyed that a lot. And then I also got involved in the Sodality. I got very involved in that and I enjoyed that. I can't remember what else I did. I know I was involved in so many things.
- MAS: Well, as we go along too, you might think of something and don't hesitate to add whatever you want to add whenever it occurs to you.
- IM: Okay.
- MAS: What about your most challenging?
- IM: My most challenging ...
- MAS: experiences or activities or ...
- IM: My most challenging, I think, was anticipating the senior comps when we had to take those. Oh, God! Did I ever sweat those out! [laughing] And then when I went to take them, it wasn't so bad. But, oh, that really ... that really got me. And then, you know, I think some of the courses certainly were challenging. But I can remember that. \_\_\_\_\_ Whee!
- MAS: Were there any frustrating experiences as a student? [pause]  
Nothing that comes to mind?
- IM: No, nothing. No.
- MAS: How about most enriching? Now, that may duplicate ...
- IM: As I said, the orchestra was very important to me. And that was very enriching in terms of the types of music that we

Irene Meyer Interview

explored and how much it made me grow as a musician and all that. But, some of the classes were really great. I enjoyed all the psych classes. And let's see, which ones? I tell you, Sister Mary Ambrose's Western European History. I wasn't a very good history student but her course was just fascinating.

MAS: It's interest ...

IM: Did you ever have her?

MAS: No, I didn't. And it's interesting that I have interviewed someone and I can't tell you who it is, who said exactly the same thing.

IM: Oh, she was wonderful. And I hated history. But I used to just sit and listen to her, you know, and I stayed awake [chuckles] in class! She was so wonderful the way she would tie things together and the way she would put meanings into things. Oh, she was just a fantastic teacher.

MAS: It's wonderful for someone who's not immediately engaged by history to have a teacher like that. You know, because it opens up so much that you ...

IM: Yeah, I think I only ... it's one of the few courses I got a C in but I really felt I earned it! And I really learned a lot.

MAS: Great. Well, you've already talked a little bit about your relationship with different faculty members. Apart from the two, I think, that you mentioned -- Sister Mary Severina and Ambrose -- were there any others that you recollect as kind of being memorable, mentors or role models or just friends?

Irene Meyer Interview

IM: Well, I remember Sister Justa, she was the person that taught the course in religion the first year to those of us who hadn't had a lot of religious background. So I became friends with her and she was sort of a mentor to me throughout. Let's see. Who else?

MAS: Now if I could just follow up a minute with Justa, with that observation. There was a course on the schedule that was identified as that? Or were you counseled into that?

IM: I think we were counseled into it. Because, you know, we hadn't had much religious background and so they felt we needed some real ground work. [laughs] So, she was a great friend. Can I interrupt you for a minute? [tape turned off]

MAS: And the others? How about some psych? Anyone standing out there?

IM: Sister Mary Benedict. She was wonderful. And I used to work for her too. I worked every year at Mundelein. Oh, and one person — a person that made a great impression on me was St. Leonard. She was Director of Admissions at the time and I worked for her, and during the summers. And I'd take people on tours through Mundelein. And I would also take them on tours to Madonna del Estrada. You know, I was so enthusiastic I took them all over the place. And she was really great. And, let me see — that wasn't the question though.

MAS: Well, it was. That's fine. But, you know, any others with whom you had a particular connection as a mentor or friend or ...

Irene Meyer Interview

IM: I can remember feeling so terrible when Sister Mary St. Leonard was dying. And I wanted to see her and I ... you know, in those days, you didn't. And I just felt so awful. I can remember walking around and thinking of all the things we had done together. And how wonderful she was. It was awful.

MAS: What about students? Any ... you know, can you say something about your connection to the students? You've already said that, you know, that at the beginning you felt a little tentative.

IM: Well, I kind of ... in the beginning, I hung around with Terri ... God, what was her last name? She came from a public school too, and we got to be good friends. I can't remember her name. But then, in the music classes, there were a lot of people ... not a lot, because we weren't that big ... but there were quite a few people in there that I hung around with. You know, I'm having a terrible time remembering names now.

MAS: You're a great consolation to me.

IM: [laughs] Thank God! I can see their faces just as ... but their names ... [dog barking, tape turned off] the names of people

MAS: Yeah, except maybe four or five people that were really, you know, that I was really very close to ... I had to get out ... I made a copy of our graduating class, of the pictures, so I could ...



Irene Meyer Interview

IM: Yeah, well, I was looking for that. And I can't remember where I filed it. And I was going to go through it because I thought, "Well, gee, I'll have to know some names of people."  
[laughs] Then I couldn't find it.

MAS: Well, they may come as we go on. What did you do in the first ten years following graduation?

IM: Well, for one year, I taught at St. Aphonasius in Evanston, fourth grade. And then the following year, I entered the Community and I was in the community for

MAS: The BVM community?

IM: Yes. I was in there for sixteen years, I think.

MAS: Old enough to know better! [chuckles]

IM: Yeah.

MAS: So that kind of took care of it. During those sixteen years, did that include study? Or teaching?

IM: Yes. I taught up at St. Paul, Minnesota for a year. And that was quite an experience because we lived in a house and I think we had twenty-some nuns living in a house maybe for six or eight people. We were really crowded. But we had a wonderful spirit. They were some of the best people in the world that you could ask to work with.

MAS: Wasn't that during the time that the youngest sisters in the house had to sit on the radiators or something to eat dinner?

IM: Yes. I used to sit on the radiators; that's right. And then when we had, you know, a provincial come or something like

that, then we didn't even get to eat. He was served and then afterwards, we ...

MAS: Yes, I remember well.

IM: And in the chapel, you know, we couldn't fit in. So we'd be way out in the parlor some place. But it was a wonderful experience up there. And then, at the end of the year, Sister Mary Adoremus ...

MAS: Now that would have been what year?

IM: That would have been ... let's see ... approximately ... '52 I entered. So in about '55, something like that. At the end of that year, she said that she was going to send me to Rosary College and I was supposed to study French. So that's where I went. And then I came up to Mundelein at the end of that time. And then we got our directives for the coming year. On August 15<sup>th</sup>, wasn't it?

MAS: Right. You were supposed to have your trunk packed and ready to go.

IM: Right. And so, I got assigned to Mundelein. No. No, I didn't. I got assigned to St. Louis to get my degree. And then I went to Mundelein. Yeah, that's what happened. I just got my Master's Degree and then I taught for awhile and then I went back for my doctorate.

MAS: And where did you get that degree?

IM: St. Louis University also.

MAS: So you had your Ph.D. by approximately what year?

IM: I finished the work in '64. But, I got called back to teach and I didn't quite have the dissertation completed by then. And I was just so upset by that. I mean, I came back and I said to Sister Mary Emily, you know, it really wasn't fair because I wound up going down there, getting my degree, and working down there. I worked twenty hours a week on a fellowship. And I finished in what would have been three years. And then, I was just short of finishing up this degree and they pulled me back to teach. And I just couldn't go back there to finish it. So I let it sit for about two years.

MAS: Oh, that's unfortunate.

IM: Yeah, and then I went back that summer and finished it.

MAS: Well, now, somehow along the way, you were in music at Mundelein and then you shifted to psychology and then you went to French. What did you finally end up?

IM: Psychology.

MAS: And you went back to teach psychology?

IM: Yeah, right. Yeah.

MAS: That's quite a mixture.

IM: Yeah.

MAS: Moving on now, and again, remembering your college days, in what ways has your life been influenced by the years you spent at Mundelein College?

IM: Oh, it's been influenced in many ways. I mean, just in terms of getting me ready for my chosen field of psychology.

Irene Meyer Interview

That was wonderful. But then it prepared me in terms of looking at all kinds of issues that I hadn't thought of before. Like, you know, historical issues, language issues, and English and then my appreciation for music just kept growing. So that now, you know, I have season tickets to opera, to the Chicago Symphony, to the Chicago Symphonetta, to His Majesty's Clarks, there's another group.

MAS: You're serious, a real music goer.

IM: Yeah, I am. And I really love it. So, you know, it gets me a lot in those directions.

MAS: Can you describe in general your view of the education you received at Mundelein? And the educational environment in which you were for those four years?

IM: Well, I think for me it was fine. The classes were small. The teachers were well prepared. The kind of background it gave me, you know, I thought it was wonderful. I really did. And when I went into graduate work, I felt that I was well prepared. And I really didn't have any kind of areas in which ... well, maybe \_\_\_\_\_ on a special course in psych. I didn't have the behavioral background in that. But, I really felt I was well prepared for my graduate work.

MAS: And what about the social environment? Or the environment beyond just classes and that kind of preparation.

IM: Well, I belonged to a number of clubs. And, you know, particularly with the music majors and sodality. I really felt

Irene Meyer Interview

that was fine too. Except maybe for boys. [laughs] That was kind of ...

MAS: Boys were missing.

IM: Yeah.

MAS: Were you in any kind of leadership role during your years at Mundelein?

IM: Yeah. In the Sodality, I forget what I was. Prefect. Something. Associate Prefect or something.

MAS: Let's stick with that for just a minute. That strikes me as sort of unusual in the sense that here you are, a product of a public school, coming from a Lutheran background, a new Catholic as it were when you entered the college, and I mean, it strikes me that you must have been pretty committed to ...

IM: I was. I probably was kind of crazy [laughs] with my new found religion! I think I probably was.

MAS: What was it about the Sodality that particularly attracted you to it? I mean, it wasn't as if you were learning more, as you would in a class.

IM: No. No, I think it was just being with people who had some of the same kind of interests that I did.

MAS: If I could just stick with the Sodality for just a minute. You said something about you were ... you wanted to be with a group of people who really kind of valued the same things you valued and that kind of thing.

IM: Yeah.

MAS: What particularly did that involve?

IM: Well, just ... [chuckles] I can't believe my hands today. It was people who ... who believed and weren't afraid to acknowledge, you know, publicly that they believed. And it just was very important for me to ... to have people around me, you know, that felt that way. And I can't think of anything else.

MAS: Well, I also notice from looking at some issues of *The Skyscraper* during that period that we were in school, that you were involved with the Catholic Women.

IM: Yeah.

MAS: Was that an extension of the Sodality ... or was that something apart from ...

IM: No, it was the Catholic Women's Symphony.

MAS: Oh, the Catholic Women's Symphony.

IM: Yeah. I played in that. I played in a lot of orchestras, by the way. Yeah.

MAS: How did you find time for all that?

IM: Well, I didn't play in so many orchestras while I was at Mundelein. But, it was ... oh yes, I did. Because I remember playing for Loyola for some operas they had. And then ... then I played at a couple of the ... oh, what do you call them? Like the American Conservatory and another conservatory. They were down where the DePaul place on Jackson and Wabash.

MAS: Oh yes. Music School.

IM: And then I played at the North Park College. It wasn't a college then; it was a high school. Played for their orchestra.

And I don't know, you just start playing with one orchestra and you find out about another. And you just ...

MAS: That's great. That's great. Now, I'm going to read three statements to you and what I'd like you to do is to respond to which of the statements you think fits most your perception. Again, this is when you were in school.

It seems that: A. The Mundelein College environment during your college years supported both the Catholic religious tradition of the time and a climate of social responsibility.

B. Your religious faith was nourished but the encouragement of social responsibility was negligible.

C. You were encouraged to have a keen sense of social responsibility with little or minimal attention to strengthening the Catholic religious tradition of the time.

IM: I think for me at least it was the first one. It was both.

MAS: Can you elaborate on that? Obviously, the first part of that is your Catholic religious tradition. I think you've spoken of that in various ways very eloquently. What about the climate of social responsibility?

IM: Well, let's see. What did I get involved in as a result of ... Let me think on that. I wish I could think of ...

MAS: What area?

IM: Well, wait a minute. This was later.

MAS: The statement you feel is most accurate in your case then is that the Mundelein College during your college years supported both the Catholic religious tradition of the time and a climate

Irene Meyer Interview

of social responsibility. Now, you've already spoken to the fact that the Catholic religious tradition and where you were in your faith journey was supported. What about social responsibility, either at the time you were in school or at some later time?

IM: Well, I remember that ... you know, what we were learning in class, a lot of that I transferred over intellectually at least. Like, you know, taking care of people who didn't have anything. And being concerned about civil rights - although I didn't call it that at that time. And then later on, the results of that training were that I got involved in the civil rights movement. And I was very active in the banishing, the attempts to banish the death penalty. And that was after.

MAS: So you'd say that generally there was a foundation.

IM: Yeah. There definitely was.

MAS: And I think too at the time, you know, when you talk about social responsibility - I don't know about you but we were not as mobile. I mean I was not as mobile.

IM: No, because we didn't have cars.

MAS: We didn't have cars. And we kind of went back and forth as commuters into our own little communities.

IM: That's right. That's true.

MAS: But I know for myself that my interest in the women's movement, for example, while I couldn't articulate it during 1947 or '51, certainly had to do with the fact that you realized there were women doing those things. They were administering a col-



lege. They were teaching well in a college. They were in support services of various kinds as administrators and at a college. So, you know, it was only that I articulated that.

IM: That's true. Because, you know, I was very interested in the women's movement too although, you know, I wasn't active in any of the real groups. But I mean, the idea of women being just as good as men, and often times better, was an idea that was very dear to me. And as a matter of fact, my dissertation was on trying to fathom some of the ways that women saw themselves as persons and as they saw themselves as someone that might be desirable to men and then I also took perceptions of the men and how they perceived the women in their lives. And how they thought that might influence the way they related to the women. And I remember I'd gone to quite a few universities to do the study. And I remember a lot of the guys coming in afterwards and, "Gee! You know, these questions! I gotta talk to my girlfriend!" Or "I gotta talk to my wife because it just never occurred to me, these things never occurred to me!" And it was real refreshing to do that.

MAS: That's great. Well, let's switch now.

IM: Okay.

MAS: If you're not getting too tired.

IM: No, I'm not tired. I'm just concerned that they're going to be a nuisance.

MAS: Well, probably on the transcription I'm going to have a lot of arfs and jingles and things like that. Now I'd like to shift to your tenure as a Mundelein faculty member. How long were you at Mundelein?

IM: I think from about ...

MAS: How many years?

IM: like from '57 until '92. '92 I think it was. With three years off for the doctorate. They weren't really off because not only did I have to go down there and teach and work on my degree, but I had to maintain the chairmanship of a department up here. It was awful.

MAS: I can imagine.

IM: Yeah, it was terrible.

MAS: You were very young as a chairman then.

IM: Yeah. Because see, right after I got assigned it, I heard about the assignment to Mundelein and then right after that, they announced that Sister Mary Benedict was going to be the President of the \_\_\_\_\_. I thought, "God, who else is going to come in?!" No one else came in. I was the acting chair.

MAS: You were it. Yeah, you were it. Can you comment on the environment you experienced at Mundelein as a faculty member? Just in general.

IM: Well, I think that having Sister Justa there and ... although, you know, she was smart. She kind of kept a back seat. And I just ... I just kind of swept through the place and did my

part and accepted my role as a junior faculty member, which meant that you did a lot of the scut work around there. And I ... I just enjoyed the first couple of years there very much.

MAS: Can I assume then the remaining years were not as [laughs] full?

IM: Well, no, they were okay. Except that, you know, later on, some of the colleges got \_\_\_\_\_. I'd rather not talk about those things.

MAS: What was your most satisfying experience as a faculty member at Mundelein?

IM: Well, I think the teaching, and especially the teaching of those women that we had in the early years, the continuing ed ladies I guess we called them. Oh, it was just magnificent! And the papers they did and the oh, the care that they put into their studies. They were just a delight! And I shall always remember them. I think that was probably the

MAS: most satisfying.

IM: Yeah.

MAS: The most frustrating?

IM: The most frustrating was all the faculty meetings we had that seemed to develop into nothing for me. That was just like ... And I guess, you know, part of it was my own fault because I didn't ... I didn't get as involved in them as I should have. So, you know, I take a lot of responsibility for that too. But, so much of it seemed to be faculty members ... at least to me it

did ... faculty members who just liked to hear themselves talk.

And I had to listen to them. I got disgusted at that. [laughs]

MAS: Was there a memorable event or a memorable activity that you experienced during your years as a faculty member? Or as a department chairperson, for that matter.

IM: I'm sure there were. I can't think of them right now.

MAS: Well, let's move on. You may and if you do, just say it. Can you comment generally on the differences you observed in students, that is, students that you taught compared to the ... you recollections of your own college years? How did students ...

IM: Oh. Well, especially with the continuing ed ladies, they seemed to be so much better prepared for engaging in psychological studies because they had, you know, they had lived longer and they had a lot of experiences and they could connect the experiences to what we were studying. And it made the level at which I could take some of the studies a lot more effective. And I really thought that ... I just appreciated those women so much. Were you there at all?

MAS: Yes, oh yes. Yes, I had some in class.

IM: Oh, they were good!

MAS: And I remember the very first couple of classes in which I had the continuing ed student, they were clearly ready to speak.

IM: They were.

MAS: They clearly had something generally to speak about. I mean, every now and again, you'd run into someone that perhaps was not all together there. [chuckles] But, in general, the difficulties that those older women had with gaining understanding from the younger students who tended to be inarticulate or at least hesitant, except when they were called on, to contribute to class discussion and so on.

IM: Yeah, yeah.

MAS: And I remember some ... at least two or three of them in my recollection, suffered terribly because they couldn't understand, you know, why students were paying the money they paid to just sit there.

IM: Yeah. I found that too.

MAS: But as time went on, they ... they kind of mentored one another.

IM: That's right! They really did. They were very good at that. And, you know, they formed little groups outside of class. They were spontaneous groups. And they'd ... not study together but they'd meet together for lunch or something like that and then they'd discuss some of the stuff. And it was really very good. Oh, boy! How I missed those ladies, you know, when there just wasn't that population to grasp

MAS: any more.

IM: Yeah.

Irene Meyer Interview

MAS: Would you say that when you were a student, your classmates and yourself, obviously, were more serious students than the ones you taught? Are there any, you know, adjectives you might attach to either group that would differentiate them? I know, for example, in my own experience, while many of my classmates worked, it was often in the college itself or in a family business or something like that. And it was a minimal amount of time. Whereas certainly in later years, in the classic Mundelein, one often had the feeling that many of the students — not most maybe but many — the student life, or the academic life, took second place

IM: Oh yeah.

MAS: place to their working life.

IM: I'm not so sure it took second place but it certainly interfered with the amount that they could study. I think a lot of them wished they could have studied more but, you know, those long working hours certainly ... I had one student that sometimes she come in class and she'd just literally fall asleep. And she'd been working all night and she'd come to class. And, you know, at important times, she got herself together so that she could work with the tests and work with the papers and so on. But you could just see the terrible toll it was taking on her. And then, more recently, I'm thinking of my Loyola experience, the classes at Loyola were so large that it was hard to conduct them in the kind of style that I had been used to. And I ...

Irene Meyer Interview

there'd always be several students in each class that would be real good but the others, they just sort of came [chuckles], put their bodies down

MAS: [chuckles] If you were lucky, they came.

IM: [laughs] Yeah! That's right!. That's true. It was really different.

MAS: Now, did you notice any changes in students during your teaching years, from the beginning? From what? The fifties, late fifties, early sixties, you know, into the seventies and eighties. Did you notice any kind of evolution in the student body that took place over that time?

IM: I can't really say that I ... that much of an evolution, although in later years, it seemed like you really had to think and work like crazy to get the kids ... [End of Side A]

[Begin Side B]

IM: ... they ... they ... they ... It seemed to me that a lot of them preferred the kind of standard type of thing, you know, where you covered certain pages, took tests on it, and that kind of such. But anything else, they didn't seem to dig into. Now, I don't what the reasons for that are. If it was a change in the type of student that we got or what.

MAS: What about this whole notion of ... Remember those three statements that I read to you in connection with your own experience?

IM: M-hm.

MAS: Mundelein as an environment that supported the Catholic religious tradition and a climate of social responsibility, or a focus on one or other of those elements to the detriment of another? Was there any kind of ... for instance, you mentioned the civil rights movement and your own involvement in it. What about ...

IM: Well, I ... I think, you know, that there certainly were professors that were very interested in these various movements and did a lot, I guess, to get the kids involved. And I got the kids involved in why the emotionally disturbed are in institutions. And for quite a few years it was nice because what I did was I had a requirement in my abnormal psych course that they had to spend — I forget how much time they had — a certain amount of time every week out at Chicago State or one of the hospitals or one of the community mental health centers and just do some volunteer work. And then write papers that would relate what they were reading in class ... or not in class but, you know, readings that I had assigned in class, to their experiences and see how they ... how they found the same types of things supported or whether they found differences and things like that. And that was really going very well. Of course, it was creating impossible kinds of things!

MAS: I can imagine.



IM: I had to go over there and supervise them. [End of interview.]

Transcribed by Victoria Haas  
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