

## ORAL HISTORY TAPE INDEX

McCue, Lillian Bueno de la Torre, 1902-  
 Spouse of George McCue, Professor of English 1935-1968  
 Writer of mystery novels and plays  
 Actress in community theater

How Lillian McCue met and married her husband, George McCue

- He claims he met her at the Fireman's Ball
- She says they met in New York "after the Feast of the Immaculate Conception"
- It was love at first sight
- They were neighbors in White Plains, New York
- It was nine years before they married on July 2, 1932
- George was a grad of CU
- First year of marriage, both were grad students at Harvard
- "Many vicissitudes" in relationship
- He taught at the Ranch School in Arizona
- She was tenured teacher in NYC school system
- They were fortunate; her income was increasing gradually each year
- When they married, she took a leave of absence; her school paid half her salary which in 1932 was \$3600

Hiring of McCue at Colorado College and arrival in Colorado Springs

- George was hired in 1935 at \$1400 a year
- He told her before marriage that he would move west, "where the sun shines"
- She had been to Colorado, visited him in the west
- Had taken summer course at CC with Prof. Daehler with whom she became very good friends
- She came to Colorado Springs with no job, but with half her salary
- In 1934 she went back to CU; George went to get MA at CU
- He was trying to get a high school teaching job
- Jobs were not plentiful in those days
- Vacancy occurred due to suicide of CC English Dept. member
- Since she knew Daehler, he immediately thought of George for the job
- CC offered George half the year at \$700; he snapped at it
- They lived on \$700 without any difficulty
- She was unable to get job in Colorado Springs, even with a masters degree and teaching experience in New York
- Sat in superintendent's office, who said "I can't hire you. Your husband has a job."
- It was the same at CC
- Only one job per family during the Depression
- Lived in attic apartment on N. Nevada first year in C. Springs
- By second year the job looked permanent

Bought cottage on High Street, half block from Hancock

- On edge of town
- Dirt roads emanated toward Kansas
- One day in the field they found 24 dead chickens beside road
- Later discovered it was a voodoo charm to induce your enemy to leave town
- There was a beautiful view; they stayed in the house for many years
- Could not afford to build, so George added a room with a fireplace as studio for her

Her early life as a writer

- Began her career as writer in 1941, during the war
- Remembers first "hit"; she went east
- Oldest brother was in publishing, great advisor to her
  - He talked about a mutual friend who had stopped writing
  - "What a shame. He showed so much promise," she said
  - Her brother replied, "Sis, if you had died at 40, people would have said the same of you."
- Her writing began at age 40

Settling into CC; memories of the English Dept.

- Early friendship with Prof. Daehler: head of dept., old time printer, very well read
- Worked together translating work by Lessing
- He was well respected, loved
- English dept consisted of Daehler, McCue, Desmond Powell, who later went to U of Arizona, and Amanda Ellis
- "I was sorry for Amanda Ellis"
  - Ellis was the victim of sex discrimination by male members of the dept
  - The three men gathered in the one English office, smoked big black cigars, excluded her
  - During war, a marine officer described how if you sat in the front row and winked at Ellis, you got A's

Recollection of President Davies

- He was a college slicker in the manner of Scott Fitzgerald
- Had been alumni agent at Princeton before coming to CC
- Chosen for his money-raising abilities
- Had a lot of bad luck
- His wife had a stroke quite young which changed her character
  - She became "shrewish and suspicious"
  - Complained to trustees that her husband was having affairs with other women
- He was extremely attractive so "it was very possibly true"

- He could not endure her complaints to the trustees
- He had nervous breakdown after the war
- Was good friend of Carol Truax; they were romantically involved

#### Lillian's friendship with Carol Truax

- Best friends
- Met at one of the first Drama Club plays, which she was directing
- Met at one of first plays at Fine Arts Center
  - Opened in 1936; Lillian was there for performance of puppet show with 6 foot puppets and Socrates, sung by famous soprano with Alexander Calder mobile in background
  - Very avant garde

#### Drama Club

- Started at least ten years earlier in Mrs. Brigham's barn
- Became member of Fine Arts Center and used stage facilities there
- They contributed money they had been saving to build a theater, used money to become members
- Ten years later Lillian headed up bitter fight to keep FAC from throwing Drama Club out
- Did five plays a year with different amateur directors, of which Carol Truax was one
- Lillian tried out first for Murder in the Cathedral, directed by Alexander Campbell
- Her first role for Carol Truax was as the old lady in wheelchair who gets murdered in Night Must Fall
- Played 39 roles over the years
- Only sang one role in music theater - Duchess of Plazatoro in Gondoliers
- "I can't really sing if I have to do it alone."

#### Ernst Lothar

- Austrian director who had been assistant to M. Reinhardt
- Brought to Colorado by Pres. Davies (c1942)
- Made him available to Drama Club because he could not be used on CC Drama faculty
  - This was because of Arthur Sharp, director of Koshare Theatre
  - Sharp had buckets of money and could not be superceded or offended
- Lothar allowed to give lectures on Drama, but put on plays for Drama Club
- Carol and Lillian supported Lothar strongly
- Lothar could not abide absence
  - Wild Duck actress Agnes Brown (later Mrs. Wallace)

- Boyce) missed rehearsal due to sickness of her child, got "dressed down" by Lothar
- She and Carol took him aside and explained that she was not being paid, was not hired, this wasn't Vienna
  - Lothar had imperious manner of a Herr Professor Geheimrat
    - Made no attempt to establish interpersonal communication
  - Colorado Springs public was somewhat oblivious to Lothar
  - He did The Women in Vienna in a "good natured" way
    - Wanted Lillian to play the cook, but she insisted on playing the countess
    - He agreed
    - She wore two inch long false eyelashes
    - Aggie Brown said "In those false eyelashes you look like the Borden Cow"
    - Aggie was an excellent actress
    - Lothar mentioned Aggie and Lillian in his autobiography

#### Arthur Sharp

- Drama was not separate from English Dept.
- Regular English faculty looked down on active drama as "not learned"
- Arthur Sharp was not "learned"; best at comedies
- College plays:
  - Play at college she remembers most vividly was a comedy of youth
  - 3 boys, 1 girl; Aggie played the girl, was delightful

#### Chief Tyree's arrival

- The person least likely to make an impression on Carol Truax
- Carol was running Music and Drama Dept. at that time
- She brought Tyree here for summer to do "El Cristo," a drama of the Penitentes in New Mexico
  - It was excellent
- At first McCue party Tyree came to, he ate a turnip in the character of a hillbilly
- He always posed as an Oklahoma hillbilly
- This did not impress Carol Truax, who was from New York, a "city girl"
- Carol thought "El Cristo" was great and hired him
- Tyree founded KRCC
- He was not "learned"
- Taught speech by bringing out students' potential; he was not into the science of speech
- Encouraged students of any ability
- Chief Tyree was very popular
- Invited people to his chicken smokes

### La Salle String Quartet

- Funded by El Pomar as year-round resident quartet
- President Davies realized that to satisfy Julie Penrose, they had to have audiences
- Carol Truax, born impresario, had already put on "Coronado Entrada" in 1936; it was a WPA project
  - WPA had created pageant, made costumes, trained horses, provided radio actors to read parts
  - It was story of Coronado's expedition into the Southwest, from Colorado to Kansas
  - It was performed everywhere he had been
  - Carol was invited to make use of all of it, cast pantomime, publicize it, sell tickets, etc.
  - Former governor of Colorado (Gov. Shoup) played Coronado
- Carol did a tremendous job, packed the Will Rogers stadium
- Davies appreciated her abilities, hired her to publicize the La Salle quartet
- Members of quartet were in residence about five years after the war
- "Some snake-in-the-grass told Julie Penrose they were all Jewish, and money just stopped coming"

### Roy Harris

- Brought in by college for several years, along with Joanna, his wife
- A conniver, working to get himself chosen head of music dept at CC
- George McCue and Roy put on radio program on music weekly in Denver
- George interviewed Roy
- George thought Roy was a wild driver
- Drove along at 75 in "Golden Boy," his car, waving both hands in the air while talking about a symphony conductor
- Later in California he was in an awful accident
- Jim Sykes, head of CC music dept., took all he could from Roy Harris
  - Went to Pres. Davies and said, "Either Harris goes or I resign"
  - Davies said, "We're sorry to lose you"
  - Sykes left and became head of music dept at Princeton
- Davies was too smart to appoint Harris head of dept at CC
- Instead, he made Carol Truax executive secretary of music dept, as he knew Carol could control Harris
  - She was wiler than he was
  - Had wonderful summers under her leadership

- Roy was very good at leading singers, good conductor, had broad conception of what voices could do
- It was a pleasure to sing his music
- Joanna, his wife, taught piano
- Lived in Catty Clark House, owned by Truax
  - House had secret passageways, zigzag staircase and beautifully panelled library with avenues built for cats
  - There was passageway to park behind library
  - Carol Truax had a free auction when she sold the house and everyone got to go through secret passages
  - "It was like a community of ants"

#### George McCue's career at CC

- Devoted pacifist, ACLU member
- Along with Lew Worner and Glenn Gray started Freedom and Authority program at CC
- George was a unique character, funniest man Lillian ever met
- It was a continual laugh being married to George and never the same laugh twice
- His papers went to his alma mater, CU
- Prof. Daehler once remarked, "It's a wonderful thing to see McCue grab an idea and run with it"
- Collection of his essays gives a good flavor of his personality
  - "Notes Washed up in a Bottle"- selected from 150 columns he wrote for Colo. Springs newspapers Sun and Weekend
- Interested in artistic and architectural scene
- Taught her a great deal about astronomy
  - George Simmons now has McCue's telescope

#### McCarthy period

- Robert Donner Sr., local red-hunter, made the college his target
- Lillian and George had joined a co-op in Boulder
- Lillian gave a talk on cooperatives which Donner branded as "socialist" in a letter to her
- Got on his black list
- Main target of Donner on faculty was Lewis Abbott
- Every year Donner presented his black list to CC president, General Gill, urging that those on the list be fired

#### Gill's efforts to bring ROTC to CC

- McCue, Holbrook and others opposed ROTC on campus
- Passed by faculty with very few dissenters
- Gill asked for a unanimous vote; only nay was from George

McCue, who stood up and said he would not vote against his principles

- Gill called McCue into his office the following Monday
  
- Gill told him, "I respect your attitude in sticking to your principles, and I do not hold it against you in any way"
- From that moment they became fast friends; often visited Gill after his retirement

#### More on McCue

- Remembered most for his love of language
- Always asked for 8:00 a.m. classes
- "You weed out the lazy ones and the bums; I only get good students at 8:00 in the morning
- Lillian taught one of his classes when he went east
- "Fantastically good class"
  - She had to give mid-term; five students turned in perfect papers
  - Max Morath and Shirley Windward were notable
  - Shirley Windward translated Beowulf at sight into Anglo Saxon verse
- George remembered for his wit
  - Students would ask, "Did Bacon write Shakespeare?"
  - He would reply, "I don't know, but if he wrote Shakespeare he didn't write Bacon"
  - He was heard to say, "I have never yet danced the can-can on top of my desk in order to hold the attention of a class, but if it should become necessary I would"
- Esteemed colleagues were Worner, Gray, Desmond Powell and Clyde Holbrook
- Freedom and Authority was planned as an interdisciplinary class for upperclassmen, to be somewhat like a seminar
  - George was most proud of this contribution
- He retired in 1962, before he was 65
  - Became good friends with Pres. Benezet, who said, "If you can't contribute what you have to contribute in seven years, might as well move on."
  - Next year, Benezet left
- George was always very well-dressed, dapper
  - Wore bow ties for years
  - Wore one that lighted up to a party
- Wonderful at parties
- Invented an institution called Ur University
  - Run for the benefit of the faculty, a club
  - Also had "spitback" parties:
  - You exchange worst gifts ever received

- Served "spitback" leftover refreshments, wore spitback clothes
- Spitback parties were often meetings of Ur University
- Meetings were satire on college faculty
- Martha Tilley played role of dean of men
- Once gave honorary degrees

#### George McCue's imagination

- Gave her unusual yearly receptions when she returned from NY trips
  - Met her with a lifesize effigy of Dr. Sam Johnson
  - Brass band welcomed her one year
  - He set up hobo jungle at railroad station with stew in tin can one year
- He made Christmas cards every year
  - Rented large stuffed raven to stand on portrait head Lillian had modeled for him, photographed it for Xmas card
  - Good at "debunking"
  - One year he sat on a department store Santa's knee for Xmas card photo
  - Once had picture taken in cap and gown on stuffed bucking horse
  - Once dressed as Santa reading police gazette to kids
  - Assisted Lillian with ideas for novels
  - Solved the mystery of Belle Guinness

#### Story of Belle Guinness

- Belle Guinness was a Norwegian farm woman in Indiana
- She advertised for husbands then took their money, killed them, and buried them in the hog lot
- Mystery was that Belle finally disappeared during a house fire
- Investigators found her false teeth in the ashes three weeks later, which satisfied coroner
- Jury convicted a man of arson but not murder
- Great mystery was what became of Belle
- Lillian went back to LaPorte to research the case
- Found photographer who had taken the 48 official pictures
- Solution related to the bridge fixing of the false teeth
- George solved the mystery by this clue

#### Lillian McCue as histo detector

- Lillian often felt almost psychic
- Her writing revealed her skill as a detective
- In the play "Goodbye Miss Lizzie Borden, there was a performance in Fall River, Massachusetts
  - Article came out in newspaper that ax was found in chimney
  - This turned out to be a hoax, as Harvard crime lab

- found no blood on ax
- Term "histo-detector" was a radio with a parrot inside in the comic strip of Freckles and his friends
  - She adopted the phrase for her work

#### Tichborn Case

- Story of lost heir who went to sea, was thought drowned but came back to claim lost inheritance
- George solved this case also
- See Return of Dr. Sam Johnson for details, under title "The Lost Heir," set back in the 18th century

#### Milady Bigamy

- Her all time favorite story
- Also in the Return of Dr. Sam Johnson
- Based on trial of Duchess of Kingston, went before House of Lords for bigamy
- She was married to two peers at once, an earl and a duke

#### Her style of writing

- Does research first on selected subject
- Presently doing story on murder of Earl of Sandwich's mistress
- Characters ferment in her brain
- Recalls Robert Heinlein's advice, "Write it to please yourself and then translate it"
  - He would not come to a party because he was writing; said "The characters are talking in my head and I have to write just as fast as I can to get it all down"
- This is the way it happens for Lillian; when characters stop talking, she stops writing but puts next steps in "fireless cooker" of the research that goes with next scene
- Involvement in theatre helps her see her stories as dramatic scenes
- There's nothing like being in your own play to teach you to write
  - You learn what is simple and clear
  - Learn not to write complicated sentences, not to put in three subordinate clauses before you come to the main clause
  - You learn to unweave things and explain them step by step when you have to speak it

#### Poetry

- Lillian published a collection entitled Stars and other Poems

- Has donated volume of unpublished poetry to library
- Started writing at age 17
- "Poems sing in my head"
- Lovely record of a sunny life
- She still sings in chorale; another tribute to sunny, singing life

Closing remarks

"How lovely to end up reminding people what a sunny and beautiful life I've had. I've had so many friends, so many creative, exciting friends; I've been involved in so much creation...The sun that shines upon a childhood can light a whole life, and that is true of me right now. I still live in the sun."