

**June Dobervich**  
**Narrator**

**Jim Baccus**  
**Interviewer**

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**Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project**

**JB:** This is Jim Baccus and I'm visiting today with June Dobervich, and the date is February the 24<sup>th</sup>, 1988. June, it's been a pleasure to see you and I'm glad we have an opportunity to visit for a few moments here about your career, and it's been a full one.

**JD:** Oh...getting to be longer every day. [Chuckles]

**JB:** Just to start with, tell me something about where you were born and where you were raised.

**JD:** Sure.

**JB:** Your primary...

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** ...years.

**JD:** Well, I was born in Minnesota, and was in Minnesota my first six years. My father was W.G. Probstfield, one of R.M. Probstfield's numerous children. And we lived on a farm north of Moorhead until I was about six. And at that time we moved to Fargo and I have really been a Fargo or North Dakota resident ever since, although my ties with Minnesota are pretty close.

**JB:** Now the name R.M. Probstfield would be your grandfather.

**JD:** That's my grandfather.

**JB:** A remarkable personage, of course. And one that figures very deeply indeed into Upper Midwest history. Was he interested...? I know he was interested in politics; he was interested in local government. Was he interested in what you and I might call drama? Was he interested in...?

**JD:** No...

**JB:** ...any of that sort of thing?

**JD:** And no, I think that...[coughs] Excuse me. That probably came from the other side of my family. My maternal grandmother, I think, was kind of an actress. Mmmm-hmmm. Not a real actress, but she liked that kind of thing. Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** And did you go to Central High and...?

**JD:** Yes, I did. Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** Were you active, interested...? I'm assuming you *were* interested in theater.

**JD:** In high school.

**JB:** In...in Central High.

**JD:** Yes, and in the literary societies. And I guess I was a fine arts person all the way along. [Chuckles] History and mathematics, or I mean, science and mathematics, no. Hmmm-mmmm.

**JB:** During your time, who was the coach, or who was the head of the speech department or the theater department at Central High?

**JD:** At Fargo High? Well, numerous people, it depended on the play. I recall a Mr. Schrader[sp?] that directed us in some plays. Hmmm, I suspect some of the English teachers, Miss Rush[sp?]. . .hmmm...Dagmar Karstens[sp?]. . .I'm not just sure. But I'm sure all of these people who were in the English department...there was really no drama department as such at that time.

**JB:** Well, you decided then to go to what was then the [North Dakota] Agricultural College, now the NDSU—North Dakota State University.

**JD:** Well, I was planning to. But just when I was going to be a freshman, they had a little problem out there, as you recall, in 1937. So my father decided he didn't want me to go to college and not get credits, you know, and neither did I. I didn't want that either. So I went to the University of Minnesota for my first two years. And then came back to NDSU as a junior in 1939.

**JB:** I should say for the record that the accreditation of the Agricultural College was very much in question.

**JD:** That's right.

**JB:** Because of some politicizing of the Board of Higher Education.

**JD:** That's right.

**JB:** And as a result of all that, largely because of student demonstrations, there was a North Dakota...a State Commission on Education commissioned, which in a way has drawn academia,

you know, out of politics. Well, when you got there into University of Minnesota, you certainly found that to be an interesting theater center.

**JD:** Yes, I did, but a...a very large place. And I was at that time majoring in home economics, so I was at the farm campus [in St. Paul]. And although we would take the trolley into the main campus [in Minneapolis], we're kind of out of the way. I did *not* get involved in theater at the University of Minnesota. I wish that I had. But I've always, of course, been interested in *attending* theater and being *around* it. So you know, I did as much of that kind of thing as possible, but I lived with a family way out in St. Paul, and I was not conveniently enough located to get to be a part of the volunteer group that always hangs around a theater. I missed those two years very much.

**JB:** When you got to North Dakota State University as an upperclassman, it must have been a real thrill to see that much theater going on.

**JD:** Yes.

**JB:** That much excitement.

**JD:** Yes, it was a small school at that time you know, really, fifteen hundred. And I...and the reason I can remember that is because I remember that when I was going to the University of Minnesota it was fifteen thousand! [Chuckles] And somehow that has stuck in my mind. So it was quite a difference for me coming from a school of fifteen thousand to fifteen hundred, but ever so much more friendly and congenial. And hmmm...Mr. Arvold had known all my sisters—and I don't know that my brother was ever that active, but my sisters had been in Edwin Booth Society—and so he kind of...right away, the first course I took, kind of, I think, took me under his wing. And the next two years of my undergraduate work I was in the theater all the time.

**JB:** There was...I certainly remember that there was a *lot* of the theatrical interest. I wanted to talk to you about the Lincoln Log Cabin, too. But first, let's talk a little bit about Alfred G. Arvold. I considered...and I'm...I think many people do, consider him in many ways a great beginner and launcher of the Little Country Theatre movement, if not formally, certainly up in this part of the world.

**JD:** Yes, he was. And I think that this is why he had ties to theater people all over the country. In California with Gilmore Brown, in New York, with the players club there, he...his reach out toward people who were interested in theater...and particularly, Little Country Theatre, the community aspect of it, I think, was something that he was pretty near the beginnings or foundings of.

**JB:** Mr. Arvold had the idea...he wasn't interested primarily in what you and I might call commercial theater or the New York theater. He wanted people to have a method of self-expression.

**JD:** Right.

**JB:** And did he not speak often of that?

**JD:** Mmmm.

**JB:** And isn't it true that many an undergraduate who [chuckles] would be frozen at standing up and...or even being at the head of the class for a moment would, over the period of years as an undergraduate, would get more competent.

**JD:** Oh, absolutely. [Clears throat] He expected the impossible, really, many times. We all thought he expected the impossible. And somehow we were able to give him the impossible. I...I don't quite know how to put that perhaps in a different way. I don't want anybody to misunderstand what I'm saying, but I know that as far as I'm concerned, he many times asked me to do things that I thought, I have never done this before, I can't possibly do it! Forget it! But I never *said* that, of course. *I did it*. I somehow got the impetus to go ahead and *do* most anything he asked. And I think this was true of all of the students who worked under him. He was...he...he just expected positive things from you and he got them.

**JB:** Do you have any recollections of...? You know, he was very...it seemed to me he was interested in kind of taking the theater to the out-of-doors. And he would have...

**JD:** [Chuckles] Mmmm-hmmm. Yes.

**JB:** He would have pageants.

**JD:** That's right.

**JB:** And he would have other kind of events, taking them some distance away from the campus.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** Ah, getting local people, farmers...

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm, all over North Dakota. Remember Fort Ransom? There were all kinds of places where he took the theater and got groups of people together. [Coughs] Excuse me. Thousands of people in a place where you'd wonder where all these people came from, and particularly in that day, when transportation was not quite as good as it is today. He was a remarkable man.

**JB:** He had the ability I know...As an undergraduate I was staggered by the fact that he could lift the phone and talk to an impresario in New York City and say, "Look, I want...I want the Ballets Russes here."

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** Or, “I want a couple of Metropolitan Opera stars.” Or, “I want this and that.” And he *got* them!

**JD:** Absolutely amazing. I think of Paul Robeson, I think of the Trapp Family Singers, people of such magnitude at that time. That I think if you had nothing to do with the theater or the debate group or anything of that, he simply gave you a foundation in the fine arts, which many people going to much larger universities and colleges could not have gotten. We were *very* lucky indeed.

**JB:** Now I wanted to ask you about the Lincoln Log Cabin, as part of the area in which you worked, the Little Country Theatre when it was once located in what’s now Old Main. And then upstairs, a remarkable little place that really...

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** It appears was the handiwork of Mr. Arvold.

**JD:** Yes. Well, as you know, Old Main is the oldest building on campus. And the Little Country Theatre was located on the second floor of Old Main. There were other...there were classrooms on that floor, there was a lecture room, there was what we called the green room [coughs] where there were displays and where people could come after a performance. There was the library which housed all of that wonderful collection of plays and readings that he mailed out to rural communities, and which was another great service to the communities of North Dakota. And I’m sure many of the people who are of my age and older remember that very well. Then his office, as you recall, was in the tower behind the stage.

And then the Lincoln Log Cabin, which is the top floor of Old Main, was the place where all the activities for the theater went on and it was also the home of the Lincoln Debaters. And debate teams were...were pretty tough in those days that came from NDSU. We had some *good* debaters. But we worked up there. We had our costume rooms, we had our...a place, a makeup room. Two very large rooms that were faced with log slabbing, and that’s how it got its name, the Lincoln Log Cabin. And those two rooms there, although they were very large, were used for very formal, fancy party occasions also.

So when we built sets up in the Lincoln Log Cabin, the floor...floors were well protected with canvases. And after the play was over...if we did it twice...generally, in those days, we didn’t have a *run* like they do now. But if say we did it two times, alright, but after the play was over, *we cleaned up everything*. We didn’t just throw our costumes and run to celebrate. That place had to be left *immaculately*. And although we griped and complained as students up there, I really, thoroughly believe that the discipline that I learned [chuckles] perhaps a little late, my mother might not be very happy to hear this! [Laughing] But I think I learned to be neat from Mr. Arvold! In terms of picking up after myself, you know. It was a...well, most of the experiences I got there were very positive ones, really. [Chuckles]

**JB:** Well, now a *new* Little Country Theatre was built by one of the graduates.

**JD:** Yes.

**JB:** Who's charity...

**JD:** Yes. Reuben Askanase.

**JB:** And so that appeared to be the death of the Lincoln Log Cabin.

**JD:** Well, from this standpoint, the Lincoln Log Cabin had been used primarily, yes, as workshops, a stage, a stage shop, as is now located in the rear of the stage of the Little Country Theatre that is located now in Askanase Hall. But we didn't have that kind of thing there, you see. It was, in a sense, pretty primitive. And all those tools had to be put away afterwards so that no one could see them. There were lots of little cubbyholes up there where we could put things. And now, of course, it's much more convenient for the people who are now on the staff. They have the...they really have the workshops to do the things they need to do and...

**JB:** Yes. There is a green room for the new theater.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** But you are attempting...certainly, you're taking the leadership on reviving or rebuilding the Lincoln Log Cabin.

**JD:** Well, we say it's restoring, because we hope to put it back into the condition that it was in. I...going back to that time when I graduated from...or was graduated from NDSU in 1941, I went out and did a couple of years, you might say, basic secondary teaching; doing the plays, teaching English, a few classes in home ec. [economics]. And second year I was out, I had a call one day, a long distance call from Mr. Arvold and he said, "June, how would like to go to the Pasadena Playhouse next summer?" And I...I hardly knew what the Pasadena Playhouse was. [Chuckles] Well, I did and I didn't, you know. But I didn't think it was for the likes of me. I thought stars were born there. And some of them were! This is true. But I was amazed when he said to me, "Well," he said, "I've got you a scholarship out there. You can go to the classes, take part in the plays, and you'll work out your scholarship in the costume room in the Pasadena Playhouse." Well, that was a *big* thrill.

And I worked under really big names out there, and some of which I just don't recall. A Mrs. Proudfoot Fairfax, something or other. She had worked in the Pasadena Playhouse from its inception, I think, in 1920s. And I guess she retired when it retired. [Chuckles] I guess it's been brought back now recently also. But in those days, it was going along pretty well. This would have been 1943. And the summer that I was there they did a Tarkington Festival, all of Booth Tarkington's plays. And there were perhaps...oh, perhaps thirty to forty people in the summer session that summer who took classes under the regular staff and helped to produce main stage productions. I worked with John Carradine. And when he went on stage I said, "Your pistols, Mr. Carradine!" [Chuckles] And you know, there were lots of little thrills. Having...eating with

some of these girls who at that time their names were nothing and then later I read about them in movie magazines. And it was quite a thrill for a young girl from Fargo, North Dakota. It was a very interesting interlude.

**JB:** You said you were graduated then from NDSU with teaching accreditations. And you taught then you said for a couple of years.

**JD:** Yes.

**JB:** Where did...where were they?

**JD:** Ellendale, North Dakota and Starbuck, Minnesota. And then I went from Starbuck the summer after that to the Pasadena Playhouse. And his intent then was for me to come back and be an assistant in the department the following year. And I was there three years.

**JB:** And you were an associate of Connie West, Miss Constance West?

**JD:** Yes.

**JB:** As well as the surrounding...

**JD:** Connie and I worked together the last...I believe the last year that I was there we worked together and then she...or...or...and let me see. No, I think Connie was at Fargo High School. And by that time they had a kind of a speech teacher who kind of coordinated all of that and Connie was that person. And when I...I was leaving because my husband was in the service and I was going to join him in the service and so what happened then is, is that Connie came on, just followed me at NDSU.

**JB:** You always had, I think, a nice ability for direction. You were not, I guess, an actress. You didn't have too much...of that.

**JD:** I didn't do too many roles. But I did some in high school.

**JB:** Yes.

**JD:** And in college.

**JB:** But my...

**JD:** But my love was directing.

**JB:** Yes. And you, I suppose, as an undergraduate, you know, you...there were class plays.  
[Chuckles]

**JD:** Oh, yes.

**JB:** That required some direction.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** And then you certainly directed as a staff member for Mr. Arvold.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** And you have...you've maintained that interest through the years, formally or informally. In various ways you have...you have been a dependable director.

**JD:** Mmmm.

**JB:** You became a director on the board of the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre.

**JD:** Well, I'll tell you how that happened, Jim. I had had Bev Halbeisen, now Blanich, as a student, and then she acted in some of the plays that I directed out there. And she was through with school and beginning to think about starting her dance studio. And I was at home with several children. And we would talk a good deal. And we would say, "Well now, what do adults do after they're through with school? When they're through with high school and college, what...? You know, where can we continue to do these kinds of things that we like to do?"

Now Bev was the actress. I was never really an actress. I did a few parts, but I...I don't claim that. But we talked and talked, and finally one night we just had called everyone in Fargo that we could think of that was interested in theater: some people older than ourselves, some perhaps younger, some our age. And we got together at Halbeisens' house. And that, that first meeting was really the beginning of the Community Theatre. From there we went on to Plymouth Congregational Church, which was my church on North Broadway. And we must have had, oh, a group of thirty-five to fifty people who came. And one of the people who came became our great leader and we *always* deferred to him, Aubrey Hook, who was our first Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre president. And he had come or had done a stint of work down in Omaha, and had worked very hard in that theater, and so we always used to kid around. We'd say, "Well, as Aubrey says, "In Omaha, we did it this way!" [Laughs] And so, in a sense, it became kind of a...well, it was a...there were some wonderful years there.

Well, this group of people that met at the church decided...ah...I think we *need* a community theater. And so as of that time it was born. We had a board of directors. But you know, we didn't have any money, of course. That didn't seem to daunt us in those days. Nowadays you seem to have to have so much of it. But there was a fellow there named Harold Bangert, a lawyer in Fargo. And I remember that Harold signed for a hundred dollars under his signature from one of the local banks, and that was what we had to produce a play, a hundred dollars, and that play was *My Sister Eileen*. And it was a wonderful play. We got a fellow from the University of Minnesota, just had graduated, and not had any experience really except undergraduate direction, very highly recommended, name of Marvin Hannibal. And he was with us, I think, for three or



four or five seasons, I've kind of forgotten now, the years have melted together. But he did wonderful plays, and we got off to a *tremendous* start. Not that the theater hasn't had its problems from time to time through the last forty-one years. But back then, forty-one years ago, we were very successful in starting a *really*...starting very strongly.

I recall that you were president of the community theater, but I don't recall the years, Jim.

**JB:** I think I followed Mr. Hooker. I followed Donald Bishop.

**JD:** Yes, I believe that's right. Donald Bishop.

**JB:** I believe he was second or the third...

**JD:** Yes, I think you were the third.

**JB:** Ah...probably the third.

**JD:** Yes.

**JB:** And the theater offered many different kind of activities for people back in the scenes as well as on the stage. And I recall that you did many different things on behalf of the community theater for a long time.

**JD:** Mmmm.

**JB:** And that certainly involved a number of things. The theater went ahead under Barbara Oliver and her husband.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** Moved into that portion of the Park District, which is not far from the swimming pool today, at least a portion of it.

**JD:** It's that...it's the...yes.

**JB:** Yes.

**JD:** The outside edges of it still remain...

**JB:** It was...

**JD:** ...where we had our first workshop.

**JB:** It was the entrance to a very large amphitheater almost.

**JD:** Arena. It was...an ice skating arena.

**JB:** A kind of an arena.

**JD:** Wasn't it? Yes.

**JB:** And when the war broke out, this arena was moved to Hector Airport to accommodate some kind of war emergency.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** The shell was left there.

**JD:** Yes.

**JB:** And the theater at one time used it.

**JD:** Rented that, mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** The theater also, before it successfully got its own theater...well, used...gymnasiums...

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** Used old churches.

**JD:** Weld hall, Moorhead State.

**JB:** And suffered along through the many years.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. When we first started, I believe that a term was four years, and you could succeed yourself for one term. And so I believe I was on the board originally for the first eight years of its life. Then I got pretty involved with children and teaching and all that domestic thing, all those domestic things. And so I really didn't get back to board status until I think probably in the 1970s when I did another four-year stint just shortly before I retired.

**JB:** I can't recall when you were not active in some way with...I'm thinking of *Attic Visited*...or *Erratic Revisited*. I'm thinking of small ways in which you were one of the guiding lights of some kind of theatrical venture in Fargo-Moorhead.

**JD:** Well, I think probably you're right, because...hmmm...you know, I've always been so terribly interested in the theater. That's my part of the fine arts area, certainly. But I think the Fargo-Moorhead Community Theatre is the biggest because it's been the longest association, and it gave me a chance to work very closely when I had the time, not to when I didn't have the time.

And you know, I just was thinking when you asked me about it...that you could recall that I did a lot of things. I can remember standing...those were the days when we ironed a lot; there wasn't all that polyester. And I would have that phone on my neck and I would go to bed and I have an aching neck because I had just spent the whole day trying to get volunteers for every aspect of production that you can imagine. [Chuckles] And then when they came down and pounded in the nails, I would just get out there and say, "Oh, thank you! You have no idea how much *I* appreciate this!" As if they were doing it personally for me! Because that's the way you got those volunteers to come back! [Laughing] You know.

**JB:** [Chuckles] Well, you got back into teaching and you became a faculty member at South High in Fargo.

**JD:** Yes.

**JB:** Was that the only high school that you were associated with, I mean as a...?

**JD:** In Fargo.

**JB:** In Fargo.

**JD:** Hmm...yes.

**JB:** Yes.

**JD:** I took my master's degree in counseling/guidance at SU, and went back into secondary work at the counseling level in that position in 1967, and was there about...I was there about fifteen years. Fifteen, seventeen maybe, I'm not quite sure. But I had gotten, by that time, to a place where I really didn't want to have to work all day and then go back and rehearse all evening. And it was about that time that I reinstated my interest in...which never died, of course, but went back on the board of the Community Theatre so that I was actively working with the theater even though I was teaching at South High. So...

**JB:** You were so busy counseling and then teaching that you didn't have too much opportunity for the high school theatrical effort.

**JD:** I guess I didn't have the energy, Jim. But ah...you have...sometimes you have to pick and choose what you can do at any given time in your life. And...

**JB:** Now you've seen great change in the local regional theater.

**JD:** Oh! [Laughs]

**JB:** [Laughing] I'll tell you, in Fargo-Moorhead!

**JD:** It's amazing! When they put that addition on to the original theater and I went up there and walked through and I looked at those rooms where they apply their makeup, I just couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe that this *all* came from that little place up above the arena as you described it, forty-one years ago. I was talking to Bruce Van Blerkom today, and I said to him, "You know, we had a hundred dollars for our first production. What do you figure a production costs you nowadays, Bruce?" "Well," he said, "Probably between five and ten thousand depending on the production and what it is." Then I said, "And of course you're not...you're just counting in production costs now, you're not counting in building maintenance, that whole big staff that can..." In the old days, there was just the director and the rest of us. Nowadays, they must have seven or eight regular people over there. Ah...grown tremendously. It's been really heartening to see how it has grown.

**JB:** The three campuses have, I think, marvelous theatrical ventures. And it's...and there have been through the years some independent efforts. I'm thinking of one in the Bison Hotel at one time.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** And I'm thinking of other where...where the theater urge was...got an itch.

**JD:** Mmmm-hmmm. Mmmm-hmmm.

**JB:** And you have also continued through the years to watch and to attend theaters around the country.

**JD:** Yes, wherever I am. This winter we've just gotten back from Arizona. Saw an interesting play, *On the Verge*. I should have looked up the author's name. But a...a kind of far out thing. *Wonderful* set. The Arizona Professional Players. Then we saw some little theater. We go every year to the Phoenix Little Theatre and see a couple of productions there. Hmmm. I was so thrilled last spring to go to New York and to be able to see *Les Miserables*, which is...I never...I never could conceive how it could be made into a musical, but it was...it was fantastic. No, my feelings about theater continue, and I am very fortunate in that my sister Evelyn with whom I live is equally ardent about theater and we see it at every opportunity that we get.

**JB:** June, you have certainly left a mark in regional theater locally, academic and otherwise. And you're to be commended for it. It's been a pleasure to visit with you today.

**JD:** Well, thank you, Jim.

**JB:** I have been visiting with June Dobervich and I wish her well in her theater interests. This is Jim Baccus saying goodbye.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Trembl  
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