

Reinhold Utke
Narrator

Bob MacLeod
Interviewer

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Heritage Education Commission Oral History Project
Location?

BM: ...1925 to 1950, an Oral History Project supported by the Moorhead State University Foundation. This is an oral history interview with Reinhold Utke, April 12, 1983, interviewer, Bob McLeod.

Reinie, tell us when you came to the university?

RU: Quite a few years ago, in 1935.

BM: How long were you here?

RU: I was here, hmmm, four years. Hmmm...actually, about three and three quarters. I started in mid-year, and picked up the balance of my credits during summer school, so...but I graduated in 1939.

BM: 1939.

RU: Mmmm-hmmm.

BM: And what...ah, what were your majors?

RU: Well, at that time we could spread out a bit more, I believe, than you can now. I had a major in social studies, a major in music, a minor in French, and a minor in English.

BM: You pretty well ran the gamut there. Ah, why did you come to Moorhead State Teacher's College [MSTC], as it was known then?

RU: Well, perhaps it'd be helpful to have me provide a bit of a setting from...about my birthplace and about my early education to give you...give you that answer. Hmmm. I was...I went to school at Enderlin, North Dakota, at the high school there. Prior to my attendance there, I was at...in a country school. And our family was interested in music quite a bit at that time, and our superintendent at Enderlin knew that, and encouraged me to continue my training in music. And he had heard of Dan Preston, who was a prominent faculty member here at Moorhead State

who had developed an Amphion Chorus, which had world renown at that time. It was, of course, made up of male individuals, about eighty-five, and they...well, actually, toured the country quite extensively. I know they went to New York and Chicago. And at that time, that was quite a feat, to be able to move out into the musical circles like that. So essentially, that was the initial thing that attracted me to Moorhead State.

BM: Was there any problem coming from Enderlin or the rural areas in going to college during that time?

RU: Oh, there were a number of problems. Hmm. First of all, that was in the 1930s. And some people refer to them as the dirty thirties. And...hmm...I know it was a time when money was very scarce. That was one of the problems. But having come from a rural background, probably that was the biggest hurdle that I had to...leap over. My parents...my dad was born in Germany, and my mother was born in Wisconsin, but both of them had attended no more than about fourth grade in the public schools. And they were...their livelihood was...you know, it was farm-oriented.

Hmm. They knew the farm life quite well, but they couldn't quite understand that here a kid from the rural area of North Dakota would want to go to college. And that presented a bit of a problem, because they...they had lots of work to do. It was just before the mechanized era, you know, of big tractors and big combines, and the children were very important in the farm economy. And so there was a bit of problem there. There was...there was some tension in that respect.

Of course, they weren't able to help me financially, so I had to kind of strike out on my own, and scratch away, and just do what I could to get enough money to at least take care of the tuition. I had a...quite a reserve, of course. I did...I was very frugal, and I came with fifty-five dollars in my total assets at that time, so that was the...That was the setting for my beginning college at Moorhead State, which incidentally, was not at the regular time, this was the...I started in the winter quarter, which really made another problem for me, but it was one that I met and I handled.

BM: What were the tuition rates at that time, do you remember?

RU: Yeah. Seventeen dollars a quarter for a regular load of maybe fifteen units, sixteen units.

BM: Seventeen dollars a quarter for a full load.

RU: Mmmm-hmmm.

BM: Incidentally, right now our tuition is seventeen dollars and thirty-five cents for one quarter hour, for one hour. And the Legislature is talking about raising that to twenty-four dollars.

RU: Yeah. Well, I might just add in that connection that low cost tuition certainly made the difference in my having a college education. My parents had sort of groomed me for the

ministry. You know how that goes. Ah...and that, of course, would have meant going to St. Olaf, or Concordia, or some college like that, which would have been fine, but there was no way that we could have found money to pay for any higher tuition than this. So I am sure that that low tuition at that time made it possible for me to attend college, which I very much wanted to do.

BM: During that period when you came here, what did you have to eat? What...? And just...well, I guess I'd leave it there. What did you eat? [Chuckles]

RU: Well, I knew that as I came here, I'd have to do most of my own cooking, and scratching to get whatever I could to sustain myself. Hmm. Only recently have I again started to eat oatmeal.

BM: [Chuckles]

RU: Because that was my mainstay for many, many years when I was in school here. And there were a lot of other kids who had a similar diet. But oatmeal had a lot of energy, it was cheap, and we could prepare it on a little gas burner, or rented someplace...a lot of us did our own cooking. So, number one, oatmeal, number two, tomato soup, and...ah...the variation was not very great. I'm sure our diet was not very balanced, but we took what we needed, and what we could afford, and what would provide us with energy to take care of the job that we had.

BM: Where did you live when you were going to school here?

RU: 407 Eleventh Street. Hmm. Mrs. Walker had a room in her house. She was a widow. And I can recall coming up here to Dr. [C.P.] Lura and he says, "Well, there's a room up there, and you can get it for five dollars a month." And, hmm, I was happy to have that, because it was a good place.

BM: Did you prepare food then in the room?

RU: No. I had to...I made arrangements with one of our...one of my classmates to go across the street, down in the basement of the house across the street. And I paid a little rent for that privilege and that service. I can't remember...probably, two, three dollars a month for that.

BM: Well, so...for all three meals a day then, you'd go across the street, cook your oatmeal, and eat your tomato soup?

RU: Essentially, that was it, yes.

BM: [Chuckles] Okay. What kind of clothing did the students wear at that time?

RU: Well...anything that would keep them warm that was inexpensive and serviceable. Hmm. Most of us had sweatshirts. And this wasn't only the men; the gals had that, too. And...ah...there wasn't much...much variety. It was pretty basic gray, and denims, or very, very utilitarian type of clothing.

BM: Were there times when you might have a dress up affair?

RU: Yes, for social events.

BM: What kind of social events would you attend?

RU: Oh, we had great ones then. Hmmm. You see, we were all pretty much living close to the belt, but we did try to have about four or five functions a year that would allow us to get out of our...our mundane role. And we'd have...especially the fraternities and sororities...we might talk about that, too, a little bit. But they had, I believe, class type of social events.

Probably would rent one of the rooms at the Armory and have a band come in. And these guys and gals would have formal dancing, that is, then they'd have a formal program. You'd sign up Mary, and her dance would be number one and number two, and for someone else, and...and they had their best attire at that time. Ah...it was really something that all the kids looked forward to, because that was such a contrast to the ordinary, everyday activity in life. And then after that, of course, it was...Hmmm...a highlight...one...another highlight of it was...would be to go out, and perhaps go to a restaurant, and even spend up to fifty cents for a snack, or coffee, or whatever we had at that time.

BM: You mentioned the fraternities and sororities. Could you tell me a little more about them?

RU: Yeah. I think, hmmm, one of the things that set the faculty apart at that time was their close identification with the fraternities and sororities. Ah, they really spent a lot of time developing quality there. They were...they were non-directive type of people, but their presence was always felt, and their counsel was certainly important, and it was one of the things that has...really gave kids an opportunity to develop closer contacts, closer friendships. I know in my own case, the people that I knew in the fraternity I was at...was in, were the ones that really...continue to be my friends. And we saw each other, and we...we still see each other, a number of us do. So I think that was a special type of an experience that most people enjoyed at that time.

BM: How many fraternities and sororities did we have on campus at that time?

RU: Oh, boy. About only two men's fraternities, that is, social fraternities, the [Old Order of] Owls and the AES [Alpha Epsilon Sigma].

BM: Mmmm-hmmm.

RU: Hmmm. There were some musical fraternities. There were about four or five girls fraternities, social fraternities, but there were a lot of other organizations at that time that...ah, in addition to the social groups, like geography club, and math club, and, oh, dramatics club, and the...and the journalistic group. I forget all the titles at this moment. But there were outlets for them, for most people at that time, in addition to the athletic activities and the musical groups that existed at that time.

BM: Which fraternity did you belong to?

RU: I belonged to the AES.

BM: The AES. Where did they hold their meetings?

RU: Well...[Chuckles] We held our meetings in classrooms and in homes until we had permission to build a room downstairs under McLain. And we...we did that all ourselves. Hmm, built...as I recall, we built up a brick wall, and gave the interior a treatment of some kind, and yeah, we had our...all of our meetings down there. And that was with the...this full support of the administration and the faculty advisors. And we were pretty important, we had our own place!

BM: [Chuckles] Oh, you did.

RU: Yeah. [Chuckles]

BM: You mentioned the faculty being close to the fraternity. Who was the fraternity advisor at that time?

RU: Well, Byron Murray was one who was, of course, active in many areas. Schwendeman[sp?] the...hmmm...geography teacher. There were others, but those...and Christianson, hmmm, Arnold Christiansen[sp?]. Hmm, I believe that's his first name. [Transcriber's note: Is he possibly referring to Paul J. Christiansen?] He was the...he was in the education department and director of the band, so he served in many capacities. He wore a lot of hats.

BM: Now these people would participate then in the fraternity meetings and functions of various sorts?

RU: They would...exactly, as advisors. And they were genuinely interested, and I think helped attract even a better quality of students, because of those extra activities that were present.

BM: During this period, you mentioned that you came without much money, fifty-five dollars. How did you support yourself when you were here?

RU: There were three...three sets of initials that I recall. MSTC, NYA, and CCC. Oh. [Chuckles] Moorhead State Teacher's College at that time, of course, they...they had something to offer for me in a general sense, but NYA was National Youth Administration, which provided work for people who couldn't hack it themselves, and that was one of the programs that I was identified with. And I did work as a custodian assistant over at Weld Hall.

BM: Was that in the NYA program?

RU: That was in the NYA program.

BM: Mmmm-hmmm.

RU: And then I can recall...well, I mentioned CCC, because my brother, who didn't go to high school but did go to this...what was it...the Civil Conservation Corps? Or Civilian Conservation Corps.

BM: Civilian, right. Mmmm-hmmm.

RU: At that time was a program that...a general program in the nation that helped people to...hmmm...gain some experience and have employment on a limited basis. Well, anyway, I can recall one time approaching new semester time, and I didn't have enough money to pay that seventeen dollars. I had about eight dollars, but I didn't know how I'd come up with the rest. But about the day before payment was necessary, I found...got a letter in the mail—and the only time I ever got some financial support from the outside—was my brother in the CCC sent me ten dollars. And that kept me on the road, and I was able to continue school.

BM: You mentioned that you received some general help from MSTC. And I was wondering what that would be?

RU: Ah, well...what I mean by that was they provided me an opportunity to go to school. I had a chance to...hmmm...through Dan Preston, I was able to...hmmm...be encouraged to find a spot that I could probably afford. And of course through the many counseling assists that I had from people like...oh, like Dan Preston, but particularly Dr. Lura, he was the Dean of Men at that time, and hmmm...he was just a super guy and a super teacher.

Ah...I can recall one particular time when I was down. Probably about the time...just about a day or so before my brother sent those ten dollars, because I was really...oh, pressed for ways to solve my problems. And I can recall going into him and I said, "I'm really kind of low today. I don't know which way to turn. I might have to drop out of school. It sure would help if my parents would at least give me moral support, and encourage me in my quest here. But I...I am just kind of on my own, and I'm kind of down in the mouth today."

And he reminded me, he says, "Well, remember, don't be too hard on your parents. They have gone to fourth grade. Here you are in...at a college. They just don't comprehend. And don't be critical of them if they don't comprehend what you're about to...you know...what you're trying to do. They don't...they don't understand, so just...just put your emphasis on some other place, because they can't help you, and they...and I'm sure if they understood, they would. But for right now, you have to kind of work this out for yourself." And you know, that was a great bit of counseling for me, because I didn't feel sorry for myself anymore. I just went at the job and...and I made it!

BM: Now, you...you mentioned...hmmm...your parents and Enderlin. When you'd go back home to Enderlin...well, first of all, how often did you manage to go back home?

RU: Not very often, because my jobs here were often Saturdays when the rooms had to be cleaned. Sometimes there were conventions here in the buildings, and then Weld Hall was used for that purpose, and that meant in the afternoon we'd have to get the place ready for Monday morning. And then the last two years I was fortunate enough to get a real big paying job at...at that time. I sang...hmmm...oh, I sang fairly well, I suppose, at least well enough to be hired by one of the churches in Fargo. And would you believe it? I got five dollars a Sunday for that, for singing there. Then that really...hmmm...made me wealthy enough so that I could occasionally eat at the dorm or have a snack downtown.

BM: Do you remember what it cost to eat at the dorm then?

RU: No, I don't.

BM: When...when you would go back to Enderlin, how would you travel to get there?

RU: Oh, by bus.

BM: Would it go...what...through Wahpeton? Or was there a bus straight...?

RU: No, through Casselton, and Kindred, and that area.

BM: Mmmm-hmmm. When you got back there, hmmm, what was the reaction of the townspeople about somebody going to college? I'd imagine there weren't that many going to college.

RU: No, there weren't. I...probably, I was sort of a maverick. I don't think anybody from that area went to college, at least, to Minnesota. There were a few who had gone to...oh, to Valley City and to Ellendale, but I was kind of breaking a tradition there. And I guess they were kind of happy, they were proud that here's somebody who is kind of...even against maybe family wishes, has done this because he wanted to...wanted to get more education.

BM: Mmmm-hmmm. Well, you've mentioned Dr. Lura and some of the other faculty of this period. Hmmm. Would you care to chat a little about some of the faculty members and their impact on you and on the school?

RU: Yeah. There...as I look back, one of the first adjectives, I suppose I'd recall, would be that they were a caring bunch. They just cared a lot about the pupils, their students. Of course, that wasn't so difficult then. There were only about five hundred, and they knew everybody. We...I knew everybody and...and here, all the students, and all the faculty at that time. But I think in addition to being caring, they were...hmmm...very competent, they were knowledgeable people, and they were kind of...well, they had a sense of humor, and related well to people. They were no...there wasn't any nonsense. There was a business atmosphere, and there was a job to be done, so I think all of their characteristics were very good to get...to have me feel good about my experience here at Moorhead State.

BM: Would you care to mention some of them specifically?

RU: Sure.

BM: And...and their impact?

RU: Well, I mentioned Dr. Lura.

BM: Mmmm-hmmm.

RU: And I think because my...he met my particular needs, perhaps, as well as anybody. I...I must think of him about number one. Ah, Dan Preston, of course, he was one who reached out in the community with his Amphion Chorus and his directing of church choirs, and through him I got a chance to get acquainted with community people, and what the community was like. I sang in several church choirs in the community because he directed them. He was a man of great care, great humor. Ah, all of these teachers had a...a capacity that I think is commendable, that they were...they were personal, but they had the ability to establish a distance between themselves and students that I think was always proper, which worked out very favorably.

And there was Dr. Murray, of course, who was a quiet individual who's...identifies so strongly with Moorhead State even today. But also involved themselves in the community very actively. I can remember taking my French from Virginia Fitzmaurice, and her...and then she married Mr. Grantham. She was just like a kind of a mother hen. [Chuckles] These kids who took French just...could go to her with almost any problem or pleasure, and she would have time to listen.

There was Flora Frick, who provided a new...a different dimension. Hmmm. She had all the...all of...men...and all the...and they had women in her classes. And she was direct, and sometimes kind of startled the kids. I know that she used to refer to them when they gave her some stupid answers, she'd say, "Well, you..." She used the word *infants*. And like some of the kids didn't know quite how to handle that, but Flora Frick had a profound impact on these people.

I mentioned Christiansen, who was in the education department. He had a doctoral degree in education, but he conducted the band. Ah...wasn't as specialized then as...as it is now. Ah, but I...and he was also closely identified with the fraternities, and some of the other groups. [Alex] "Sliv" Nemzek, of course, was a great person who attracted a lot of people, and provided a lot of color for our college. Hmmm...those are some of the people that I recall with great pleasure and pride, but I...I felt good about all of them, really, they were just a great bunch of people.

BM: Ah, earlier, you were talking a little about Caswell Ballard. Do you remember much about him?

RU: Yeah. I'm sure most people mentioned him. He was a rather...a formal type of teacher who taught biology. Ah...unlike any of the others, he would have his recitation sessions. Hmmm...consist of direct questions by him, and in response, people would stand, and he would...kind of grill them. He'd...and it...it was interesting. Sometimes, some of the kids tried to

fake it, and he would lead them on the...in that...in that path that they had started. And, ah, he was very clever, hmmm, he made...he sobered people in a hurry in their discussions in his class. He was a respected person, maybe feared a bit, but he knew his business.

BM: It's interesting, the people that you've just been talking about, five of them have buildings named after them.

RU: Mmmm-hmmm.

BM: Ballard, Frick, Murray, Grantham, and Nemzek. And Dr. Lura, not too long ago, retired as the president of Minot State out in North Dakota.

RU: Exactly. Mmmm-hmmm.

BM: One of the things that happened, I believe it was once a week, was...during your period here, was called Chapel Hour. Could you elaborate on Chapel Hour for us?

RU: Well, I think the one single most important contribution of chapel was not perhaps the inspiration from the messages, or the profound utterances of speakers there, but it was the feeling of security that we had when we went over there. Ah...I think we must recall that forty years ago, you know, we were...most of us were from the rural country, we came with a lot of trepidation. We didn't have many outside experiences before we went to college. Most of us came from small high schools.

Ah...while some people sputtered about it, it nevertheless was a time when people got together, the whole student body came. Hmmm. Attendance was taken. But there was a feeling, an indirect feeling that these people do care, and...hmmm...I...at least in retrospect, I have a very positive feeling about that. [Chuckles] It was a...it just helped me bridge that gap that I had, stepping from the rural environment here to a rather fast moving college situation. [Chuckles]

BM: Now Chapel Hour and messages would infer to someone today things of a religious nature. Ah, were these religious messages at that time?

RU: At some times. At certain times in the season, like holidays, but for the most part, they started with a reading of Scripture and a...but then they were usually secular messages, ah, speeches. Maybe somebody was visiting in the community, or had visited the college. Hmmm. That, or they were local...the local business people, leaders, clergymen, and so on, who addressed the student body at that time.

BM: Who was the president of the college at that time?

RU: MacLean.

BM: Did he participate in these Chapel Hours?

RU: Oh, yes. He was there every time. He read the Scripture.

BM: Oh, he did?

RU: He was...he was the boss.

BM: [Chuckles] Oh, I see.

RU: He presided.

BM: [Chuckles] Alright. Ah, you mentioned some of the student organizations. You talked a little about social functions, and so on, but what type of music organizations did we have on campus at that time?

RU: Hmmm, essentially, three. The band, the choir, and a ladies group called Euterpe. Hmmm, Maude Wenck had the Euterpe group, she was in the music department. Dan Preston had the choir. And the choir sang for chapel, incidentally, or every time at least sang responses and [unclear], and so on. And then the band played...not very often. [Chuckles] They paraded at Homecoming time and played for football games. Ah, I think I'd like to comment about the quality of the musical groups at that time. It's...it's...if I might. This is subjective analysis, of course...

BM: [Chuckles]

RU: But I can't help but feel that...that the people who directed these groups at that time should have had about double the salary, because they really...[Chuckles] They really had...oh, subs all the way through. The kids, you know, like myself who came here, we had an interest in things, in music, and art, and athletics, and so on, but we didn't have much finesse or experience. And I'm sure that this must have been very trying for some of the music leaders, and the...and Sliv Nemzek, and some of the coaches to try to put a group out in front of the public [chuckles] with the type of talent that we had. I am sure that today there are a number of high schools that could equal or surpass the quality of performance that we had at that time. At least it...as we assembled in the fall, it was pretty raw.

BM: Could you describe graduation in 1939 for us?

RU: It was a formal event. It was one that was a...really a highlight. It was respected. The kids looked forward to it with great anticipation. I can remember we...we had, long before graduation time, of course, we planned our announcements. We'd send out formal announcements. We had rings, and we invited a certain number of people, important people to attend our graduation exercises. I'm sure a lot of these are similar today. But there was a formality then that was...was just a little bit different than it is today.

BM: How...how...what kind of activities took place? Like did you...? Was there a baccalaureate at that time, or did the graduation start in the morning? Was there a parade for graduation?

RU: Well, there was baccalaureate, and the graduation was in the daytime, and that's a few years ago. I can't remember all the details.

BM: [Chuckles]

RU: But I know it was a pleasant experience for me, even though it was a hot one. It was a hot day, as they usually are in June at that time.

BM: How many people graduated in your class, do you remember?

RU: No, I don't. I think it was about a hundred and forty-five.

BM: I suppose it was in Weld Hall?

RU: Yeah. Right.

BM: Mmmm-hmmm. Well, since you graduated in 1939, Reinie, what kind of contacts have you had with Moorhead State?

RU: Well, I've been a member of the alumni association; I've tried to be in touch there. I've been in contact a number of times with the development department. Hmmm. Probably my most...frequently though, I've been in touch with the education department, because I was in education, and I was happy to have been a part of the...that process. When I suppose we always had about ten or fifteen students who were going into education, who were student teachers at our school where I was, and so I spent a lot of time with the kids, and tried to give them some assists in their effort to become good teachers. And in that process, of course, I met a lot of the men and ladies from the education department. So I always kept in contact with the university all the time every year.

BM: I know you were a principal at Moorhead North for many years. What other schools were you in after you left Moorhead State?

RU: Well, my first job was at Ulen, Minnesota. And I got that job because I took part in an operetta. And hmmm, the superintendent was looking around...maybe even I could say he was on the prowl for [chuckles] for somebody who could teach music and about fourteen other subjects. Well, he was in attendance that one night of one of the performances and...and wouldn't you know, I got a job offer. And I think I got \$115...I know I got \$115 dollars, and I think that was the second highest paying job at that time. And if I might just add what I taught...

BM: Well, let me ask about the \$115, is it per month?

RU: Per month, yes.

BM: Okay. What did you teach?

RU: Well, I had my broad majors and minors, and I suppose that helped with certification there, but...ah...at that time they didn't just limit it to the areas of certification. I can remember...well, I had a social studies major, but I sure didn't have commercial law as one of my courses that I...in college. That was one of the courses I taught. And I taught economic geography. I taught general business. I taught two classes in English. I was the junior high school principal. I had all the vocal classes, and then the band. And of course that meant if you were going to have a band, you have to give individual lessons, and group lessons, and that meant starting at eight o'clock in the morning and going right on until six o'clock at night. And then in the evening we'd go home kind of tired, but I was younger then, and I could handle it a bit better. But I can remember doing a lot of study, especially on things like commercial law, or some of the things that I hadn't had before. [Chuckles] But those were the days of teaching at that time.

BM: Where did you go after you were at Ulen?

RU: I went to Bemidji. Then the war came along. And, hmmm...and then that...I was interrupted...my education was interrupted then for a while. And then I started in again, and then I took my advanced work in counseling and administration. I had a degree in both areas. And then a job opened up here in Moorhead, and I thought, well, my memories of Moorhead are pretty good. And my wife has...was a graduate from this college, university. I knew the area pretty well. So we both agreed that this might be a good spot to come back to, and the job was offered to us. And we did, we came back, and we've been ever since. And we're pleased with that decision.

BM: Alrighty. We're...ah...we've gone through your career at Moorhead State pretty well. You know, this is an oral history project, and people in the future down the line will be listening to this and trying to put together pieces of various kinds. Is there any particular thing you'd like to leave with these people fifteen, twenty, or thirty years down the road?

RU: I think the example of being exemplary educators or models, you know, by the faculty when I was here, is probably the most important single...lesson that I observed, or learned, or the one that I appreciate most. I know we're...hmmm...we're...we have moved into mechanized businesses, and some people call dehumanized activities. But more and more I appreciate and I also feel that in the future...ah...the people who are concerned about their fellow man and about their coworkers are still going to be the happiest people. Because it's that human element that really, really helps *me* to enjoy my life more completely. And I think that...that will never change. And I hope that as they look forward to their careers that they will keep in mind that that aspect of their work has to be fostered, and perpetuated, and considered. Because unless there is job satisfaction, there isn't...you know, that life isn't as full as it could be. And it...mine has been a great, full life, and I have enjoyed it. And I think Moorhead State has contributed a lot to that.

BM: You...ah, you have described the Moorhead State faculty during your period here as caring and competent. And I know when you had an opportunity to build your own faculty at North, you did the same thing. I want to thank you for coming in today.

RU: It's been my pleasure.

[End of interview]

Transcription by Marilyn Olson-Treml
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