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Sharon Carlson Part 2: An Expert on Historic WMU

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https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/east_campus_oral_histories/12

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Professor Emerita Dr. Sharon Carlson

Thursday, August 25 at 3:15 PM

Continuation Interview at the Zhang Legacy and Collections Center

Cassie: Today is Thursday, August 25. It's about 03:15 PM. This is Cassie Kotrch here with Dr. Sharon Carlson. This is a continuation of our last interview as well. And I think today we were focusing more on when you were working here at WMU and then also working actually in East Hall and on East Campus.

Sharon: Sure.

Cassie: So probably starting with how did you start working at WMU and how did you start working on East Campus?

Sharon: Well, I started working at WMU in 1985. I think my first day of employment was... it was January 12, 1985. I'd been a student employee on Western's campus for about a year and a half. I worked in an office in Ellsworth Hall called the Center for Women's Services. And I think I mentioned a little bit about my brief and unfortunate first marriage. And being 22 years old at the time, you think money can solve all problems.

And I thought, well, if I get full-time employment and I have benefits, that's going to take care of a whole lot of stuff. And the only thing I've ever really claimed to do well at all is typing. And at that point, you filled out an application, and if you were going for a secretarial kind of slot, which I was, you took a typing test. And I did really well on that. I think I actually only had one interview, and it was the end of 1984, and it was for a position in the College of Education in Sangren Hall. It was the Office of Admissions Advisement and Field Placement. So all of the advising went on in that office and then the placements for people who were doing their intern teaching.

So I basically interviewed, I think I knew before Christmas that I had the job and that I would be starting on the 12th. So I was there for a year and I decided, well... and I don't think I ever thought that starting there in '85, that I would be a full-time employee of the university until 2020.

But I did think I would be around for a while. I saw the advantages of the tuition discount. It was actually not as good then as it is now. It was 75%, but I still thought I was getting a deal, and tuition, relatively speaking, wasn't as expensive then either.

So I was there for a year. I moved over to the Graduate College in 1986. I had a position of Academic Auditor, and basically, you processed admissions applications for graduate programs that were coming in. You looked at the programs that were completed by the

advisors, and then at the time of graduation, you looked at their transcripts, you looked at the program, and you made sure everything lined up.

And I did that for about a year and a half, and that was in the administration building at that point. The Graduate College was in the administration building. After I was there for a year and a half, and that was when I actually finished my bachelor's degree. I finished that in 1987.

That's the odd thing, too, because it took me six years. And back in the 80s, the plan then was four years, or certainly no more than five years. You get in, you get done, but I'd been taking some classes and working, but six years later I finished my degree.

And then I decided, well, as long as I've got this great tuition benefit, I might as well hang around for a master's degree. My undergraduate degree, I started in pre-business, which I talked a little bit about last time, but I switched over to political science with an emphasis in public administration. I had minors in, at that point, it was called women's studies, but you know, it was gender studies. And then I had a minor in religion, and I may have mentioned the religion minor, that I just knew a bunch of people, and they were fun classes. So I thought, well, I think a general purpose degree would be the right thing to do.

And so I decided I would enroll in the Master's of Public Administration Degree, which I did, and then I got a job. I moved over to a grant-funded position in the College of Health and Human Services, and it was with a program called the specialty program in Alcohol and Drug Abuse. SPADA is the acronym. They had gotten a large contract from the state of Michigan to work on certifying substance abuse counselors and providing programming so the counselors could meet their certification. At that time, the certification, I would say it was an in-career certification. You needed to have so much education, but you also needed to have so many years of experience. You needed so many contact hours working with clients or patients. You had to take exams, you had to do something. It was called the case presentation method, where you would essentially take a case client that you had counseled and talk about what your approach was and how it all worked out.

And I was there for four years, and that was in Ellsworth Hall, third floor, eighth wing of Ellsworth Hall. From a standpoint of on campus, it was a nice place to be. There was a parking ramp, which I understand is targeted to be demolished, but I always liked the fact I could park there in the winter, and I would come out and my car would be clean. And you were right next to the Bernhard Center. You weren't that far away from the administration building, so it was a really nice location. Rooms were a little bit odd. They were old residence hall rooms. I mean, they literally still had the closets, which were nice, because if you needed to do a quick office clean, you could throw all your crap in the closet.

But it was kind of fun because people would come by and Ellsworth had been a male residence hall, so they were every now and again, at least a couple of times a year, somebody would be by to see their old room. (laughs)

Cassie: That's funny!

Sharon: Yeah, so I was there for four years. That was really a good growth period. I worked on my master's in public administration, had it almost all finished, and I guess, yeah, that's like 1987 to '91. During that time, I divorced my first husband. And I think at that point I knew if I could find the right opportunity and the university, it might be worth my while to see what was out there.

I had applied for some other jobs outside of the university, but in any case, the position came open, it was John's position, the University Archives Curator. And Western, at that point, and I think they still have a system in place where, I think now you can determine when you're posting a job, whether you want it to be internal first and then go external. This job was posted internally first and I got the job.

And now the interesting thing is, I think there was somebody who was also applying for the job. I had almost finished a master's degree in public administration. I think there was another person, he was in a master's degree in history or had almost finished a master's degree in history. But I knew a lot about the university and that was... I'd supervised a staff and so supervision was part of it. And I knew a lot about the university. I'd worked in different areas. The history of the university had always been of interest to me. My mother and my father were both Western grads. And I think I mentioned last time that I think one of the happiest periods of their life was when they first got together and they were at Western because I'd hear lots of stories about the things they did and the people and the professors and stuff. And so I got the job.

I was elated. I was so happy. And I knew that this was something I was going to do for a while. I didn't know going into it... And this job was centered out of East Hall, as it was known then. It's the part of Heritage Hall that was demolished on the north side of the building. It was the part that had had the gym, which later became the women's gym, so it had the showers and the locker rooms and stuff downstairs. And I was just geeked to be in the spot where it all happened, the beginning. I loved working with the university history and of course, being a small office, I knew a lot about the regional history too.

And in fact, I had done the master's in public administration, it didn't have a thesis option, but they did a capstone paper or project. And my capstone had actually been looking at assessed property values for properties in the historic district in the Stewart neighborhood and looking at an adjacent neighborhood, the West Douglas neighborhood; it's sometimes been called the Fairmount neighborhood. And there are some streets and some areas that are very comparable. Granted, there's not a Stewart Avenue in West Douglas, but the eastern part of the neighborhood, Elm Street. Anyway, I studied, I'd actually done research in the archives. I'd looked at tax assessment roles and I'd compared tax assessment roles before Stewart became a district and then looking at, I think I took it as far as probably 1980. And I've thought many times it would be interesting to go back and see what's happened now in the intervening time.

So I'd done research in the archive. I knew a fair amount about local history. I live in the Stewart neighborhood. I have since 1985/86. And so, yeah, I was extremely happy to get the

job. I was overjoyed to go to work and anything that was negative about the building, and there were lots of negative things about the building, I would say to many people that I had a love-hate relationship with East Hall.

Beautiful building, great location. I could walk to work in about 15 minutes. My commute/driving time and walking time literally doubled when we moved here. Which is kind of silly to think about, but I've walked it from my house over here, and it takes a half hour. I could do that in 15 minutes.

Of course, the honeymoon phase ends, and you start to realize the quirks of the building. And I did get to know East Hall very well when I first started. When I first started, I wasn't married, I wasn't engaged, I wasn't seriously dating anybody. And of course, once I finished my master's degree in public administration, it's like, well, I should probably start another degree.

And so, I initially applied for and got into, I think it was a master's program in history. And I thought, well, since I didn't have a master's already in history, let's apply for the master's program. Even though at the time, Ron Davis, who was the chair, said, you should think about applying for the PhD program. But that was way more than I wanted to think about. I eventually did apply. I got into the program after I'd been in the master's program. So, I spent a fair amount of time there after hours, too. Sometimes I tried to do papers and projects that might be related to things I would be doing or things that were related to the university.

And so, if I never did an all nighter in East Hall, I came pretty close. And the interesting thing about the time on East Campus was how much things changed over the time I was on the campus. And that would have been from 1991 to 2013, and just how the building became increasingly difficult to work in.

And I know in doing some of the research for the State High/University High, they had already cited in the 1960s all of the things that were wrong with the building and that needed correcting if they were going to continue to operate a school there. And of course, Western constitutionally has its own Board. It's like any other state university. It's in an interesting political spot because if it's condemned, well, it's not always necessarily subject to local ordinances and such. It was a building that was in horrible shape that continued to deteriorate. I mean, we were fortunate that it had been as well constructed, I guess, in the beginning.

So during my time there, one of our earliest neighbors was the School of Art. And I don't know if John has talked about that a bit, and they were great neighbors. They were a lot of fun. For starters, they usually weren't even in the building when we were working.

We were open 8 to 5 at first, 8 to 5 Monday through Friday. It was during our time in East Hall that we started offering the Saturday hours. But oftentimes, the art students and even the faculty who had studios over there, I mean, they wouldn't come rolling in until sometime in the afternoon.

And so when I worked there into the evenings, I could leave that building at midnight and there'd still be cars in the parking lot or there'd be lights on in the other end of the building. And I always took some comfort in that. I was really sad when they moved out and of course, when they got the Richmond Center constructed and they also built and remodeled Kohrman, they had just wonderful space, but I didn't like that part of being in East Hall. I missed them. At that point, I thought the building really felt very vacant and very isolated, although by that point I wasn't doing all nighters, either. So that was our neighbor in East Hall.

We had neighbors in the Speech Pathology building, and they were part of the College of Health and Human Services. And they were the College of Health and Human Services until they built the new Health and Human Services building. It was scattered all over. When I had worked for SPADA, I was under Health and Human Services and I was in Ellsworth Hall. There were people in Henry Hall. There were just people all over campus. But they were a fairly active presence, at least early on. I think they were even doing clinical work. So sometimes there'd be the public taking going in for Speech Pathology or taking children in for sessions.

They had a couple of vending machines over there, so that was another draw. And when we went to Saturday hours, we didn't get mail delivery on Mondays. And so they would drop our mail off. And every Monday somebody would have to go over to Speech Pathology and pick up the mail.

That was an interesting building that had been built initially as the first, I think, they called it an infirmary at the time, but that was the original health center. They actually had a couple of beds, and when I was able to get into the entire building after Health and Human Services moved out, you could literally still see the room where the beds had been and the plugs in the wall.

And I don't know how many services they were providing. I'm not aware that when Sindecuse was built in 1969 that they ever had patients there overnight. But they had the capacity for it, and I've seen pictures, and they must have done it at some point. That building was very different from the other buildings on the east campus.

It had a beautiful slate roof. And I'm not an art historian, but the design work and some of the patterns, like in floors and that, really mimicked Native American art. And, when I read articles about what they were trying to do design-wise with that building, they were trying to reflect that there had been a Native American and Indian trail that ran, sort of, behind Waldo Stadium. And there are references, if you look at the yearbooks and the newspapers, to this old Indian trail that ran there. So, they were paying homage. And, that building went up about 1939/1940. And I don't know to how much of a degree Waldo was involved in the design, but he was clearly in the very earliest buildings.

And his correspondence for the Oakland gym, what is now the facade of the Seelye Center, I mean he's sometimes corresponding with some of the contractors. That's just how small the

institution was at that time. But I wondered if, and I know he was still on campus until his death in 1939, but Sangren had become president in 1936 because of Waldo's failing health. But, Dwight B. Waldo was fascinated by Native Americans. And so whether there was something there, and I don't know that we'd ever know the answer to that, but he was one of those gentlemen collectors of the late 19th, early 20th century. He would buy arrowheads, of course, now you buy an arrowhead without knowing where it came from or any of the provenance. And I know some of those collections, I think, are still being curated over in the Anthropology Department. So that was a cool building.

And when Health and Human Services moved out, that was just shuttered. The other two buildings that, sort of, became temporary buildings for different offices, West Hall, which had been the original science building, and then College of Business had used it. College of Health and Human Services, apparently they had one of their cadavers. When Barbara Ryder, who was the chair, that was one of her accomplishments. She got an actual cadaver so OT students could work with it. And that was in the lower level of West Hall, but I never saw it.

That was a very standard, nothing remarkable about that building except if you looked at that building, if you stood in the quad, you realized that the ornamentation on that building... they had created columns in the brickwork to mimic the columns of East Hall. And the other thing that was interesting about that building, because it was a science building, they had a greenhouse that was attached to it.

Now, that had been long gone, but there was a cement slab that was still there. That building had also been used for some of the high school classes. And when they did that, they had to create a secondary fire escape. And so there was like this chute that would come out of the side of the building.

And, I can't remember if it was the second or the third floor, but in any case, it was an exit route. And I honestly could say I never tried to get in the chute, I don't know if you could get in the chute. Now, one thing I did do, and maybe John Winchell mentioned this too, there was a series of tunnels underneath the campus.

And so there was a tunnel between East Hall and West Hall that was almost always locked, except when it wasn't. (laughs) People would occasionally just break it down. At one point, it had just a lock, not a very good lock, and it would get broken open from time to time. I think later on it was more secured. And then the last couple of years, we were in that building, we'd had an alarm system put into the archival area shortly after I started there in '91. But as the rest of that campus became more and more vacant, they had more problems with just people hanging out up there and I think doing other things, they started to make the area much, much more secure.

But we did eventually find it one time when the door was open, I know we walked it a couple of times. I could stand up, and at that point I was probably about five foot three and a half. I could stand up straight pretty much walking the entire length of the column.

But somebody much taller than I would have to have to duck in places. And you would come out on the other side in West Hall. You would come out in like a basement storage area. They were almost like cages. And I know for a while, Western still has, I think, a press, but they had a more robust press. They had a press called the New Issues Press, and I think they had a press that dealt more with medieval imprints. And I know they had a cage down there and it was just filled with boxes of their books. And I think other departments had storage in there. So, that was West Hall.

And then there was North Hall, and that had been built as the original library. When it was built, it had a magnificent reading room. One of those two story deals, you'd walk in and just tall windows. Western in the 1920s had received a gift of art, paintings from a local philanthropist, a man named A.M. Todd. He had made his money in mint, lots of mint was grown in Kalamazoo county, and they extracted mint oils. So for chewing gum, toothpaste, mouthwash from in fact, A.M. Todd is sometimes called the "Mint King", and part of his company still actually, there are a couple of remnants. The Todd company still exists, it's north of Kalamazoo on Douglas. As you're heading out on Douglas, if you're heading toward plain-, actually, I think, you literally don't have to go... I mean, it's in Kalamazoo county, but there's a 1920s building, the Todd building, and that was where it was headquartered. I think it's since been subsumed by another company. And then, there's another company in town that was an offshoot called Kalsec, and that's located on the west side of town, and they do lots of oils and extracts, and I think it was an offshoot, there's a relationship there.

So A.M. Todd had this art collection and his company headquarters, before they were on Douglas, it was in downtown Kalamazoo, approximately at Rose St and Kalamazoo Ave. And he would have the art displayed, and he'd open up his headquarters on Sundays, and people could go in and see the art.

But as the 1920s came along, he decided to start donating the art, and he donated a fair amount to, I know there's a fair amount at the Kalamazoo Valley Museum, I think the Kalamazoo Institute of Arts, but he gave a lot to Western. And that's what was displayed in that reading room, in that library, and it was really quite magnificent to see if you've seen pictures of it.

By the time we were accessing the building, it had continued to be used as a library, but it was a branch library, the business library for the College of Business. And of course, by the early 90s, a lot was changing in publication. The College of Business got moved over to its present location, and their library holdings were subsumed into Waldo library.

But for that time, from the time that Waldo was built in the 50s until the College of Business vacated that building in the early 90s, that was like a business library. And they had, in order to expand the capacity, I think it was in the 60s, they'd actually built a floor in the reading room, so you had two floors there instead of one.

And they'd made, because they were teaching business classes over there, the dean's office for the College of Business was over there. In fact, the dean's office was, if you'd walked into

the original reading room before it was kind of remodeled in the 60s, there's a very large fireplace in this reading room, and it extended all the way up to the second floor.

And when they built that floor into the reading room on the lowest level, that became the office suite for the dean's office for the College of Business. And the dean's office for the College of Business had the base of the fireplace. So you'd walk into the room, and there'd just be this big fireplace taking over almost one wall of it, but it was pretty impressive.

We were in that building fairly frequently, but after the College of Business moved out, I think our next neighbors in there, it was the Psychology Department, because that was the period where they were redoing Wood Hall, and they had been in Wood Hall. So psychology was in there for a while, and I should add that in West Hall for a while, our neighbors were...it has a different name now, but Health Physical Education and Recreation.

All of the people that got moved out of the rec center, the Gary Center, when they were renovating well, the rec center was being built, I should say. That wasn't a renovation, that was a new building. But when all of that was underway, all of those folks got moved to West Hall.

So some of those folks were our neighbors for a while. After they moved out, the only occupant of West Hall for a period of a couple of years, was a couple of faculty members. They were a married couple, they were in the history department, Kristen Sylvian, Michael Sharapa, and they managed to snag several rooms on the second floor. And they were probably doing a lot more outreach into the community at that point than some other faculty members in history. But they'd forged a relationship with the South Haven Maritime Museum, and they'd established a Center for Great Lakes history or maritime history, and it's no longer in existence anymore.

So they had a presence in South Haven, and they also had a presence in West Hall. And some of their interns and I think even some of their classes were taught out of West Hall. So those were the buildings, those were our neighbors. Shortly after I started at the archives, Waldo Library was still getting put back together.

That was an interesting project if you've ever heard about the initial idea, Waldo Library, the guts of that building is a 1950s building. And if you go into the bathroom on the lowest level, I don't know that you can get there now because they're working, and maybe they've gotten rid of it. But the 1950s bathroom, you'd walk in there, and it had the salmon colored tile, and it was a bathroom unlike any other in the building, and that was a remnant of the 1950s building. They'd added onto it in the 60s, and then the building that you go into now is actually they used the structural steel, they saved the elevators and expanded it at that time.

But in doing that, they had realized, and in closing the business library, they'd realized they really needed a space for overflow books, so they used the original stacks of the original library North Hall, and they were an interesting... I should have written this name down, I should have looked it up, because there's a name for that system, but it was a system that was sold to many, many libraries, I've seen it at the University of Michigan libraries.

I don't know if they built the shell and then dropped the shelving in or just how it was done, but they were not solid floors. It was about five stories, and you had this metal shelving, and you had these marble slab floors. But you had enough space, like between the shelving and the floors.

I mean, not enough space that somebody could fall through, but there would be an inch or two if you dropped a marble on the floor. It could literally drop down maybe another floor or two if it hit it in just the right place. Similarly, if you were in there and somebody was on the next floor down and they were talking, I mean, you could hear them.

And so when that original library had been built in the 20s, it was known as a closed stack system. You could go into this big, beautiful, magnificent reading room, and they had probably some standard reference books and that. But essentially, if you really wanted to see anything, you'd have to give a call number to a person.

And apparently they were all these... I've heard horrible jokes over the years that all the guys wanted to date women who were the pages at the library because they were always running. I guess they had really good legs because they were always running up and down these stairs and going in and getting the books. So I guess they were physically fit students. If you wanna date a physically fit female student, find a library page. I couldn't have made that up.

Cassie: Wow.

Sharon: When they built Waldo Library, that was one of the things they said, it's going to be open stacks. You can just wander in and you can... Now, by the time the College of Business operated it as a library, they operated that odd little thing as open stacks.

But I would imagine over the years they had these kind of single light bulbs. It was kind of dark. It was kind of creepy. I would be curious, incidents and situations that might have been encountered or happened in the stacks because it was very isolated. I mean, good, bad, whatever just let your imagination run wild because I remember going in there to find things and just yeah...

I mean, I guess the great thing is if anybody screamed, anybody who would be in the cube would have heard it. But it was odd. There's no way to describe it other than it was odd. And there was also a book elevator. And the book elevator actually still worked when I first started there and it was handy because if you had a bunch of books that you had to reshelv, or if you had a bunch that you had to take out of the building... In time, poor North Hall, in time, the book elevator didn't work. Well, they weren't going to put any money into that because it was a bunch of electrical stuff.

And that building had a horrible roof. It was more of a flat roofed building that there were just spots. Unfortunately, most of them were not in the stack area. Most of them were in the, kind of, the central or the front part of the building. And so if you walked into, I mean when you walk into the reading room, you'd be walking on that new floor that had been put in in

the 60s, and it was still pretty high up, but you could see where water had come in and plaster and stuff was going... I guess for a short period of time, too, we had another neighbor and they had that main reading room and it was actually... they were kind of fun neighbors, although we never saw them, but we saw stuff they left behind... but it was a design class from the College of Engineering. Some of the stuff that's going on now out at Parkview, and you'd go over there after they moved out and they'd done mockups of car interiors and that kind of thing.

Cassie: You mentioned some of the quirks about North Hall and stuff, but you mentioned earlier too, that you knew a lot of the quirks about East Hall while you were working there. What were some of those quirks about the now Heritage Hall?

Sharon: I'm saving the best for last.

Cassie: Okay. (both laugh)

Sharon: I've thought many times how to handle this. Well, initially there was absolutely no air conditioning in most of the building. They had put air conditioning units in the lower level. They had also filled in where there had been a swimming pool and built shelving on top of that.

And so over time, we got more air conditioning. At one point, they decided maybe the break room should have an air conditioner. We were always subject to... we'd get notices if the heat index was going to be something or another. I mean, we were pretty logical about it. We knew we had to have a certain number of people out on the floor, but those would be the days if there's something to work on in the basement or if you can do some work on a table in the break room.

And this is a little story you probably wouldn't hear anywhere else. We had George W. Bush visit our campus, and we've had a couple of presidents visit our campus since I've been here, Barack Obama was here. But when George Bush came to our campus, I think he spoke at the, I think a lot of times they do those kinds of things, I think he was at the rec center because I know or in that facility, and I wasn't there. So I don't know how it was done, but I just remember all of the stuff that had to be done, all of the preparations, and of course, it'd be probably even more involved now.

And at that point, the library dean was a man named Joe Reish. And I can't remember... there was some figure of 30 or 40,000 was bantered around that that's what it costs to prepare for, I don't know, like a 30 minute visit from a president, which I mean, you want your president to be safe and you want everything to go off without a hitch.

I made the offhanded remark, "You think if they would spend that much just to accommodate a presidential visit, they could put window units in the gym." And he kind of took that idea and he went with it. And it wasn't too long after where they had made some electrical upgrades to parts of the building and so the electrical capacity was there and so they put a series of window unit air conditioners into that gym. That gym was another two

story affair. You'd walk in, there was a running track. Beyond the running track, there were offices that I think initially had been used probably by coaches and gym teachers. But we had window unit air conditioners put in and it did a pretty decent job.

Prior to that, if you've ever wondered why the hours of the archives were 9 to 4 in the summers, well, initially it was because we would get in there at 8 and we'd be opening up these screen windows. For the most part, screens. We still had a lot of birds and bats that came in... and we'd have these humongous fans that we would start up. And so it'd take about an hour to open things up, get fans going and then turn them off at the end of the night. And so that was the beginning of nine to four hours in the summer, even after we got our air conditioning units, we kept the nine to four hours.

So there was the temperature and climate controls and I'd mentioned birds and bats coming in. Birds were a frequent occurrence. Bats, and the reason the birds and the bats were an occurrence... the roof on East Hall was in better condition than the roof on North Hall. But East Hall had a couple of interesting architectural features. It had these built in gutters that I think were probably great when they started, but they eventually failed. And so you had areas of the exterior of East Hall where you could see where over time, as the water had, the gutters had jammed up, the water went flowing to the side and so you had erosion of the brick next to the gutters. And then there were, probably for ventilating the attic, but there were these little... they weren't exactly windows, but they were almost like the little Greek keys that you see on a Greek Revival house. And I think they were meant to move air in and out because they had no windows.

But over time, the screens were compromised. They didn't repair the screens. And so there were any number of birds, pigeons, I think, that lived there. Sometimes the odd bird would just find their way in and there were some holes in the ceiling of the gym at the corners where these birds would come in.

And then sometimes if you had a window open and we didn't have... I don't think we had screens in the beginning either. We just had open windows and they were way up in the air. But you would still have the occasional bird and bat that would come through.

Cassie: I heard that you became a sort of master at just catching the bats and letting them go outside.

Sharon: Well, yes, and it's not because... it's because I live in a house that was built in the 1870s, and it's not leaky now, but the first several years I had the house, I had a bat problem.

And so I had become kind of... I figured out ways and I don't deal well with a flying bat, but if you have a sleeping bat, you can kinda scoop it up gently in a towel and take it outside. We also had, and we are not immune from rodents or insects over here. In fact, I think sometimes the insect population here is a little more interesting because we are so close here in the Zhang to a wooded area. But we would have in the fall of the year, mice were a frequent occurrence, too, so we were dealing with that.

One comment we used to get pretty frequently was, "Well, you're up on a hill, so water must be no problem."

Well, it wasn't much of a problem, at least on the roof of East Hall. But where water was a problem in East Hall, in addition to those building gutters failing, there were a series of drains around the building and over time, those drains were just not as efficient or they hadn't been cleared out or cleaned out.

And one of the worst floods we had, two of the worst floods we had were sudden rainstorms. And one of them had to do with the gutters outside, pretty much outside of the northwest corner of the building, just overflowing. And over time, there are these very large pillows and snakes. I mean, there are still some in a yellow barrel out there. When we moved over here, somebody said, "we're gonna get rid of those." And somebody else said, "if we bring them, we'll never need them." At least when I was here I don't think we ever needed to use them.

But we got into a habit where we just had those pillows and those snakes and they're meant to absorb many more times their size in water and we just kept them at the door. But I think it was like the Friday, Thursday before a July 4th weekend, we had a huge rainstorm and that gutter or that drain just failed and it backed up and it went past the snakes.

And kind of the unfortunate thing, we were shifting a bunch of stuff and we really tried not to keep too many boxes on the floor. We were always trying to put things on pallets. It's amazing what one inch of water can do. And we'd been shifting something. We had a bunch of boxes on the floor and fortunately, I'm trying to remember if I had been working there late.

It was after I was married because I ended up calling my husband (laughs). I called my husband, I think, trying to remember if John came in. We had a couple of people. We just were moving those boxes because they were in danger of the bottom one was going to get saturated and then everything was going to topple over as it fell over.

So that was a bad one. And I think we closed on that Friday. We weren't supposed to be closed. I think we were supposed to have the Monday off. We managed to everything that... we didn't lose anything or we lost a couple of things, but they were things that were inconsequential.

And the rest of it we were able to either very quickly rebox and anything that had gotten damp or wet, we were able to spread it out in that reading room of East Hall. And, we had an incredible amount of space there and we had fans and air conditioners just going all weekend long and that got cleaned up.

The second major water disaster... this happened well, we don't have to talk about it, except we had one earlier on and they had not secured the other part of the building. There was some kind of project going on and we had a flash storm. Actually, it started I think it was like a Monday morning.

And at that point we had a secretary and she was kind of flexing her hours. And I can't remember if she'd gotten in there at 6:30 or seven, but she'd found it right away. And I got in there and as 8 o'clock came around, everybody was in there and we managed to take care of everything. But that had not so much to do with the building's failings, but an unsecure work site. So, yeah, there was water.

I mentioned the water, I mentioned the birds, the mice... The heating system. If we talk about the cooling system, well, the heating system, it was radiator heat. And I've lived in one house that had radiator heat. And if you go into Heritage Hall today, they've actually taken some of the radiators, and they're like ornamental decorative things in the bathrooms. But that was our heat source. It was probably a good enough heat source, except the windows were very leaky.

The windows that we had were, I'm sure, the same windows that were put in that building when that gym had been built in 1909. You could have wind, you could hear them rattle over time. I know we had a couple on the second floor off the track. We actually had a couple that just blew in during really bad windstorms.

Fortunately, that never happened on the lower level, but very leaky windows. When they were going, they were great. But sometimes when you had these intermediate periods in the fall and in the spring where you were trying to heat it up quickly or cool it down, just turn the heat off, you'd get a lot of air in the pipes and it would just be clink, clink, clink, clink, very, very noisy.

We had a habit, and this is actually something that Shirley Campbell, she was an assistant curator, and that position really doesn't exist anymore, and she retired after we moved into this building, and she had this thing where she always had like a two by four, and she didn't like the cold, she absolutely hated the cold. And she would come in and she'd have this two by four that she'd set on top of the radiator, and then she'd just kind of stand there and just try to get all the heat she could.

And I have to admit, during the early days, and I don't know why, I was colder more in the beginning maybe I got used to it, but I basically picked most of my clothes in the winter, so I could have either an extra I might have an extra layer on the top and the bottom because especially when it blew, when it was windy, the gym part of it, the main gym floor, just never maintained any heat.

Over time, we got some space beyond the gym, we got a room in the lower level. There was a thought, Western celebrated its centennial in 2003, but about five years before then, somebody said, "We should start collecting all these artifacts and we can use them during the centennial."

I think by that point I was interim director starting in '95, and then in 1998, I became director. That three years, that's an interesting story too, but... had to get another job offer and then the decision was made very quickly. Yeah.

Cassie: Okay.

Sharon: Yeah.

Cassie: We're running low on time, so I wanted to make sure I asked these two questions.

One is just a really short little tidbit that a few other people have mentioned was that East Hall was included in a list of haunted places in Michigan, and that there were quite a few people that said that they saw ghost or something, a scepter in East Hall that looked a lot like it could have been Dwight Waldo. Did you know about that? Or did you ever have any experiences about that?

Sharon: Well, there's a book called Haunted Kalamazoo, and they have a story in there about this volunteer who is alone after hours. And it's, well, first thing is we never have a volunteer alone in the archives after hours.

And I asked one of our longtime ones, and she just laughed. We actually had even some paranormal groups come in, and there used to be a really great website, I don't know, or a YouTube clip, I don't know if I could find it anymore, where they were in, not necessarily our part of the building, but they were in the far end that had been the training school.

And they claimed that they got voices of, they thought some of them may have been children who attended the school. I never had any personal experience, the sound moved very oddly in that gym. And the thing I noticed sometimes when I was there after hours, you could have a radio playing in one corner, you would not hear it if you walked to the middle of this very large floor, but you could go into another corner and you could hear it very clearly.

So there were very odd... but there was an administrative assistant who worked for us for many years and she said sometimes when she was there by herself, she thought she could hear people on the gym floor. Now, the building did have the track, occasionally you would hear noises there, but I am not a strong disbeliever in that kind of thing.

In fact, I personally experienced something in my childhood, in my childhood home that I, to this day, can't explain. But I never personally, other than odd building noises, in that I never saw anything, I never heard any voices. I heard a lot of creaking, a lot of settling, but maybe some people are just more sensitive.

And if I could find that clip, I don't know, we've had a couple of paranormal normal groups in Kalamazoo over the years, but the one was really really kind of fun and they would enhance so you could hear voices. Yeah.

Cassie: Yeah, so really in your experience with it, it was just a quirky old building.

Sharon: It was a quirky old building. I oftentimes thought, "What if I walked into the building some morning and there was Dwight B. Waldo? What would I ask him? What would I say? What would I do?"

Cassie: Did you ever come up with what you would ask them?

Sharon: Probably depends on the day of the week and what research project I've been working on and, yeah, just that kind of thing, so, yeah.

Cassie: So the last question I had was, you were the director, correct? In 2013. So, you oversaw sort of the move of the archives, right? To the current building from East Hall. How did that process go and what were some of the reactions to that too?

Sharon: Well, the whole construction of this new building, it happened a year before it was supposed to. We had initially thought that we would be breaking ground in 2013 rather than moving. And so at the point we knew we had to vacate East Hall and the materials in North Hall, as well as materials underneath Valley Three, we had a relatively short notice.

And I think, I don't know this for a fact, but in knowing how sometimes things go around the university, I think the momentum had probably grown and it was time to do Heritage Hall, time to redo that campus and we were in the way, that's what I think happened.

And the whole planning, and if we end up needing to do a third interview, that's okay, because I have more stories, but maybe they're not that great. But yeah, we had initially been given funding to plan the building, and then the building planning, we selected a firm and the building planning started.

And then we had a nine month delay because there was an "opportunity" (air quotes) to occupy one of Kalamazoo's former Kmarts, the one that is now, I think it's called, The Store for the Home or The Home Store, it's at the corner of Drake and Stadium. There's a little strip mall there, and there's a Store for the Home, there's a bowling alley there's, I think a Save a Lot, and that's a long story.

And in any case, it took nine months to convince the university administration that moving us to the Kmart was not such great idea. So then we were back on planning the building and we broke ground and the move was not only going to involve us moving our materials in here, but it also involved Waldo starting to populate what was the storage area.

And that's I think, another reason why this building was a go in the end. I mean, we had donors and there was a real need at Waldo library. They either needed to expand that building or they needed to put some of these materials somewhere else or get rid of some.

And they've been doing some deaccessioning through some collaborative agreements and going more and more electronic. So it wasn't a total move that totally involved this unit. Now the stuff that involved this unit, it was very much I would say it was a team effort. But I really relied very heavily on John to say what he wanted and how he thought the university stuff should be moved and I relied very heavily on Lynn with, how do you think the university materials should go? I mean, of course I had opinions about all this stuff too. And so we didn't have as much time to prep the collections. For example, we were able to get barcodes in almost everything and on almost every box.

In fact, probably. I would say we did most of the move in August and September, we were barcoding pretty heavily from January and if I had to do it over again, if I knew then what I know now, we should have been doing that months before then. We were not able to connect all of that barcode information to the library catalog or to the management system for the stacks.

So we were basically just bringing things in, putting them on shelves, and it had to all be had to go and take I mean, we tried to put things where we thought they should go and we'd made a decision that materials we thought we needed to get into more frequently should be on the lower levels.

Things that less frequently, higher levels, we had some mid level things because of security reasons, even where we wanted things out there for ease of access. So Lynn and John and I worked really well together, we had two other staff people at the time, Shirley Campbell and Con Hung, they were on staff.

Jonathan Kirkwood was not a full time staff member, but he eventually became a full time staff member, he was a stacks manager. And Scott sort of has that job now, but it was rewritten and then we had one volunteer. She was a person who... Pam Jobin, and she'd been at times working for us, at times volunteering, and we brought her back on the payroll.

And so we were doing great. Things that involved Waldo Library were not quite as smooth, some of that had to do with just some of the personalities and the people at Waldo Library. And there was a person at Waldo Library, a person who had a much larger role in budget and building than anybody over there does now besides the dean.

But, I think initially this person thought that she was going to be directing our move, and I had to really be very tough about things. And then the sad thing is this really was sad, but her father became... her 90 some year old father, I mean, he had lived a very good, long life... but he became very ill and then he died. But this was a process that went on for most of the move and so we were able to do most of our move without that presence and she was back at a point and handled most of the move at Waldo Library. The other thing that we had an excellent moving firm.

There had been some thought that there's a vendor that the library has used many, many times, and I think they're a good vendor, but I don't think they'd ever moved... well, I shouldn't say that. I don't know that that's true, it was a very large collection. I don't know that they'd moved a lot of archival collections and they had not moved into a facility like the facility we ultimately ended up in.

So when the moving went up for bid, and thank God it did, because there was some question at first, this person over at Waldo Library... how soon is this going to end up on the Internet?

Cassie: I don't know, we're going to start getting the transcripts within the next few months and then I think up on scholarworks sometime after that.

Sharon: Yeah, I should be really careful about what I'm saying (laughs). But in any case, we went with a vendor that was very experienced, they'd moved archival collections and they had actually moved collections into facilities like our facility.

And they were phenomenal, even though initially I wasn't sure if, they basically sent three full time people from this firm in Ohio, and they hired their real grunt heavy lifting labor here in Kalamazoo. And their model was, they actually liked to, when they worked at universities, they really wanted to hire students because they felt that students would be very invested in the process.

And it's like, I don't know... but it worked! And I mean, they started... when they first started, I don't know how many people they had, they had a lot of people. And then every day it just kind of kept dropping off. But then toward the end, because this was weeks long, and the people that stuck around and stayed, they were excellent.

And when we dedicated the building in October, a couple of people from Ohio came to the dedication and a couple of the students who had worked moving things came to the dedication. So I thought that was really cool.

Cassie: That is cool.

Sharon: Yeah.

Cassie: Well, it's 4:20 about, so I know that you have to be home and you said around like a little before 5:00 or something for dinner, so was there any other little short thing that you wanted to mention?

Otherwise...

Sharon: I think I've said enough.

Cassie: Okay. (both laugh)

Sharon: Probably too much, but I'd not expected to talk about the move, but the move, yeah, it was a lot and it worked out really well, but I wasn't sure how it was going to work out at certain points.

Cassie: Yeah.