

Elin Langholm
October, 10th. 2001
Writing assignment #3

Interview #1

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT: The history of East Carolina University.

NARRATOR: PIA LEAHY

INTERVIEWER: ELIN LANGHOLM

PLACE: LEAHY'S HOME IN GREENVILLE, NC

DATE OF INTERVIEW: October 2nd 2001, 11am.

Field notes

The interview took place in Pia Leahy's home here in Greenville. After talking with her for a good while on the telephone, I was not nervous when I drove up to her house. However, I did drive by her house the night before just to make sure where it was located. I did not want to be late the day of the interview. Dr Leahy came out of her house to meet me when I stepped out of the car, and she made me feel welcome at her home immediately. She wanted to showed me around her house, and it was interesting to see pictures from Brazil, diplomas and other documents from her time as a professor at East Carolina University. She asked if we could sit in the living room and do the interview, but I suggested that the kitchen table might be a better place to sit and talk. So we sat down at a small table with two chairs. It was a very good place to do the interview, because the outlets were near by and I could set up the equipment close to both of us without any problems. I explained our oral history project for her and she asked me a few questions about our history class. She also wanted to know about my home in Norway, my family and education. I think this conversation was important for us to get to know each other better before the interview started.

I started the interview with an introduction, stating the narrator and interviewer, date and time, etc. I began with asking her some biographic questions about her place of birth, parents, sisters and brothers etc. She was not so willing to tell me about her childhood and her family, but she wanted to start talking about geography immediately. After going through the basic questions, I tried to ask a couple of open end questions about her education. The informant was more than willing to talk about this, and we ended up talking about her education and teaching experience in Texas sooner than I thought. I did let my narrator lead the conversation as much as possible, even though I had my questions typed up on some small pieces of paper. These typed questions were valuable for me at several occasions to get the conversation back on track. I was a little concerned about interviewing someone who has been a professor for 30 years, but she really made me feel comfortable about the whole situation. My narrator was very talkative, and many times our conversation ended up somewhere else. She really was a great storyteller, and I felt very at ease asking her questions. The whole interview was very dynamic, and the time flew by. I understood that she started to be tired of talking, so I ended the interview after about 1.5 hours even though there were still some things I wanted to ask her about.

After the interview we sat down and ate a very nice lunch, and I felt that she had looked forward to me coming there this Tuesday. I ended up staying there for 4 hours all in all, because every time I was about to get going she wanted to show me something else. I am very glad we managed to schedule the meeting on a day when both of us had enough time. I ended up borrowing several books from her, and I promised her to keep in touch and stop by her house again soon.

Summary of the Tape Recording

<u>Initials</u>	<u>Side</u>	<u>Counter number</u>	<u>TOPICS OF DISCUSSION</u>
EL	1	001	<i>Introduction</i>
EL	1	006	<i>Birthplace:</i> Bela Horizonte in Brazil.
EL	1	007	<i>Overview</i> over career in the academics.
EL	1	032	<i>Parents work:</i> Father worked in social security, and mother was a schoolteacher. 8 brothers and sisters. Pia Leahy is the oldest.
EL	1	010	<i>Education:</i> She has always loved geography, and took her whole education in her home country. Entered the university there and took her masters and PH.D. (Could never defend due to political problems, so she got a abd).
EL	1	070	<i>Education and work at the University of Texas.</i> In 1963 she got a Fulbright scholarship and came to Texas. She traveled to every country in Latin America (except Haiti) to collect maps for the Latin American collection there. She did not go back to Brazil, due to political problems. The university of Texas offered her a teaching position.
EL	1	169	<i>Arriving in Greenville:</i> She came to Greenville in 1967 and has stayed here since. Greenville and the university were so small at the time and there have been many changes since then. The first thing she saw when she came driving in to Greenville was a big sign saying: KKK of Greenville welcomes you". She went to a KKK meeting once. She met her husband during the first year she worked here.
EL	1&2	294	<i>Teaching at the department of geography, East Carolina University:</i> Started in the department in 1967 together with many new professors that also retired together. Faculty and students. She taught many different classes, but mostly cartography. The students drew beautiful maps, it's a lost art now. Many international students from Malaysia. She also tells me stories from the Vietnam War.
EL	2	185	<i>Retiring from ECU:</i> She loves to be retired. She was afraid she would get bored so she involved herself in to many activities. Now she says she has too much to do. Half the town has been in her classes. More stories from the Vietnam War.

Interview transcript

This transcript is a selection of moments in the interview that I found very interesting and important.

006: *Can you tell me a little about Brazil? Where you grew up etc?*

I grew up in the city of Bela Horizonte in the eastern part of Brazil between Rio de Janeiro and Brasilia. I took my university education at the university there. Then I came to the United States to Syracuse with the first Fullbright group. Then I studied for a year in France. Then I came back to the US in 1963 to write a book for the University of Texas. It was a book on cataloging Latin American maps. Stayed there from 1963-65 working on that. After I was done with that project in 65, I taught at the University of Texas. Then in 1967 I was supposed to go back to Brazil, but due to a difficult time in the home country she decided to stay in the USA another year. East Carolina University offered her a job after talking to friends she had met in conferences. I came to Greenville in 1967 and I have been here since.

032 *What did your parents work with?*

My mother was a schoolteacher and my father was a judge of the social security. We were 8 children, and I was the oldest. Everyone in my family had university degrees so it was expected of me to go to college. I have always loved geography from elementary school and up and took a master degree and a Ph.D. she never could defend, due to bad political problems. So I have what you can call an ABD, but it doesn't seem to have bothered me very much.

070. My family has always traveled a lot. Pia tells me that they used to go to Europe in the summers, and they traveled to Argentina all the time when she grew up. We always did travel quit a lot. In Syracuse I went to the department of geography. Because of my scholarship were in political geography (it was my Sophomore year) they put me in this class where everyone was about three times older than me. There were only 10 students. About 2 months into the semester I got a call from the dean and I asked what have I done wrong? He said you haven't done anything wrong, but we did. You are taking a course in a Ph.D. program. No wonder I was so horrified. The first day I went there, the professor made us do a little paper everyone had to take. Mine was the political duality of Nigeria. I barely knew what Nigeria was and for sure I didn't know they had a political duality.

96. But I worked very hard and everyone was nice to me. I asked the professor in the Ph.D. class how I was doing. He said you are doing all right, so I continued in that class. So after that everyone was extremely nice to me.

103. I came to the United States almost permanently in 1963, when I came to the University of Texas. I used to work for the Fulbright commission in Brazil, so I met many Geographers from the United States. I got a grant that was about writing an update catalogue of all the Latin American maps. I had to date the whole collection from 1926 to 1964. This was done for research. I was also in charge of building the map library at the University of Texas. They wanted a collection of maps that could be used by everyone. That was my function. I went all over Latin America buying maps. Traveled in every country except Haiti. It was great fun. This was during the time of Papa Doc so things were very rough. I went to the Haitian embassy in Panama City to ask for visa. Suddenly

the ambassador wanted to talk to you. He asked what she wanted to do in Haiti. I told him what I wanted to do there. He said: Do you really have to go there? I said, no I don't really have to go, but I would like to. So he said if you don't have to go, don't go! I went to Haiti a few years later.

156 What country did you like the best? Well, with exception of my country, I like most of the countries. I do like Mexico a lot. And I like some of the little countries, I like Salvador. They are all so different from each other so you can have a different taste for all of them. Some of the countries used to be very nice, like Colombia, but now you cant go there anymore.

169. What happened afterwards when you were done with the map-project?
I was supposed to go back, but then hell broke loose. Father told her to stay here. I was looking for a job. Some friends at ECU called her up and told her about an available job at the geography department in Greenville. So they offered me a job and I came her in 1967.

182. Had you ever been in North Carolina before?
When I arrived here, Greenville was so small, very small. There was one restaurant down town, there was nothing. Also there was no industry here before 1970. It was completely agriculture. It was so flat, but I soon loved it. I think the most important Greenville offers are friendly people. They are the friendliest people you can ever meet. I made many friends, and they all treated me so nice. This is home for me now; I have been here so long. I try to go to Brazil very often, but this is home for me.

200. Someone told me that the first thing you saw when arriving in Greenville was a big sign? Oh yes! I came from Rocky Mount and I drove into Greenville. Just out of

Greenville there was this big sign saying: KKK of Greenville welcomes you. I got out of the car and I took a photograph. It was quite shocking. I went to a KKK meeting once. I and another professor from the geography department. It was an interesting experience, because racial issues were not mentioned once in the meeting. But there was a young man being punished for mistreating his mother. His father was deceased. KKK wanted to be the private police. Everybody wore hoods except the boy- they beat him up badly. The meeting was on Friday. Then on Monday morning in class I hear a voice from the back of the class: Miss Montel- what were you doing at the KKK meeting in Winterville? I answered ohh- probably not the same as you were doing there. And then I changed the subject very fast. It was interesting and different.

232. Did you see many changes happen on campus?

Campus grew enormously except the center part that has not changed much. Where the School of Art is now there was this building called Old Austin. It was a very beautiful building and I think it was a pity that they couldn't save it. Then the School of Art building came that is totally different in architecture from the rest of the campus. When I first came here our building was the Graham building where the geology department is now. We did move to Brewster in the summer of 1970. Before it was beautiful woods there. The next building they made was Rawl and Bates. And of course the student union center (Mendenhall) was not there. There was a cafeteria where the archeology lab is now. Joyner Library was very small. The Coliseum was just starting being built. And of course there was nothing of the medical school.

259 Did you have a place to live when you first came here?

When I arrived I lived with the people that talked her into coming the first months. I tried to find an apartment, but it was very difficult. There were only 2 apartment complexes in Greenville. One was on Charles Blvd, and there was one on Fifth Street called Green Spring Apartments. This one was furnished- didn't have any furniture, so I moved in there. It was pretty nice. I got married in '69 and I lived there while I was pregnant. My husband came here for a meeting; he is also a geographer. He came to this meeting at ECU in 1968. We got married in April 1969.

294. *How did they welcome you in the geography department?*

I had met most of them in Geography conferences. I am very easy to get along with. It was fun. *How big was the department back then?* I can tell you exactly how big it was. In 67 there was 12 faculty. Before '67 there was 8. Maybe there was 10 when I started working here. We all came at the same time, and retired at the same time. Between 1993 and 1996, practically everyone retired. So everyone there now is very young.

313. *Were there both men and women working in the Department?* There were only Dr. Patterson and myself. She retired way before I did, so for a while I was alone as a woman. We did not get a good break before we started shouting. Our salary was considered top secret; nobody knew what other colleges were making. All of a sudden everybody knew. And from that moment it was ok. Our chairman was a little chauvinistic. But most universities do not allow husbands and wives to work together in the same department. Here it was good because my husband and I both taught in the same department. The department invited my husband to come here, because they wanted me to stay. So he came here to work.

343. *Can you tell me a little about the classes you taught?* The first year I came here I taught 11 different courses. ... We didn't have much to say about what courses we would teach, we were just assigned courses. Then in the beginning of the 1970s things changed a lot... Taught cartography before the computers came along. We were sitting there drawing the maps and they were gorgeous. It was very time consuming. We found out that the kids that took manual cartography became much better computer cartographers as well. They could use their practice on the computer also. For a long time we taught both, right now they only teach computer cartography... We had beautiful maps hanging in the halls. Everybody stopped and looked at the maps.... It is a lost art.

424. Where there any people from other countries working on studying there? We had 75 Malaysians and they came all at one time. We called it the Malaysian invasion. Nobody knew they were coming. So in the middle of the summer all these Malaysians show up and they all wanted to study planning (planning and geography were together). It was panic. We didn't have enough teachers. They were very polite and extremely bright, they were the cream of the crop of Malaysia. They were excellent students and their English was reasonably good and they were very studious. If you are a Muslim- Bin means that your father has been to Mecca. All guys called Mohammed. The registration sheets from the computers deleted their last name- didn't have space- so everyone was Mohammed Bin. I called them Mohammed 1, Mohammed 2, 3,4 etc. They were both boys and girls. We gave them a room to pray many times a day. It was an interesting experience for our American students and for the Malaysians also. They were really nice and I was sad when they stopped coming. *Were there any interaction between them and the American students?* Oh yes. They traveled to Charlotte to buy their food every two

weeks. And they all were riding bicycles to their classes. *Were they here just for one semester?* No, most of them graduated from here. And they all did very well...

477 *Was there any social things going on?*

Oh yes, we used to have parties and games. We used to play softball against the graduate students. You know, in Brazil we don't play baseball so I had no idea what baseball was. Anyway, there is a position called short stop. I didn't know how to play, and I didn't know the difference between a short stop from a long stop. You have to run around, but I didn't drop the bat when I ran around. Everybody was screaming when I ran around: Drop the bat! We had lots of things. We had picnics. We used to take the graduate students on canoe-trips. It was very nice. Lots of things went on these days.

495. Most people went to Raleigh to shop.....But there was a lot of shops downtown. When they started to open the malls, everybody left downtown.....The whole Evans Street were full of little shops.....downtown died. They made a road with bricks all the way from Fifth Street to Third Street, but it didn't work either, nobody came, no stores came.

550 When I came here in 1967, they renamed East Carolina College to East Carolina University. The number of black students increased enormously. *Were there many black students when you first arrived?* There were some, but not very many. Integration was over, but the schools were not integrated. There were black and white schools everywhere. There was a high school on Fifth Street that was a black high school. Rose High at Elm Street was a white high school. There were black schools and white schools all over time. The integration came in 66-67 and it was a mess. There were fights everywhere..... It was a disaster.

Side B: 066. *Do you remember when the first Mexicans started to come here?*

Yes, when I first came here there was none. The first Mexicans started to come in the end of the 1970. *How did Americans react to that?* Americans liked it at first because they came to work on their farms.....When they first started coming, there was no control. People from Florida got them in trucks and drive them here. They delivered them to a farmer that housed them in awful conditions. Since they didn't have an automobile, had to buy everything from the farmer. They were abused. By the time they got their paycheck, they had to pay the farmer for the house, for the food etc. But they got smart..... 3 or 4 families got together, they buy one car and one trailer..... But many were mistreated with very low wages..... I think Mexicans will start coming to ECU in a few years. First thing a wife do when they come here, she gets pregnant- that baby is American. When the kid gets 18, he request his/hers parents to move here. The parents are very strict with their kids going to school. You don't see many problems. Like the Vietnamese. Vietnamese kids after the war did very well, so I think the Mexican will as well.

146. *I know that you have seen many people come and go in the geography department. Did you have any contact with them after they left?* Oh yes. I was a graduate coordinator- so I had lots to do with the students. I was also in charge of getting all the internship, so I had a wonderful list of people who had been here and worked somewhere else.....It was a very nice network in the department, much due to the planning department. They had a wonderful network.

185 *How was it like to retire after so many years?* I love it. When I retired, at first, I was afraid to be bored to tears, so I got myself involved in to many things..... All of the sudden I found out that I had no time to breath, I was involved in so many different things. And I work at the university once in a while. After I retired they had problems in the department so I taught one course. Then I worked for the advising. I worked there for two years.....I didn't quit working, just quit getting paid.

224. *Do you have anything else you want to tell me?* Yes, I will tell you a story that I think you might enjoy. In 1960s during the Vietnam war the kids were, during the flowerchild and all that, the kids did not wash their hair; they did not take a bath. The kids looked like hell. It was awful. I had to teach cartography and I had to be close to them. And boy the smell, I tried to put a clothespin in my nose. Their hair was long and they didn't wash themselves, didn't shave or clean themselves. One day I decided to take photographs of all of them. I said I wanted them to keep this photograph and I want you to look 20 years from now and say: Oh my Gosh, did I ever look like that? Just about a year before I retired, a gorgeous guy walk in to my office, dressed to kill. And he said: Miss Pia, do you remember me? I said: Boy, If I ever known you, I would have remembered. Because he was such a good looking. So he gave her the picture, and she said: Johnny, I don't believe you! This kid had a beard that looked like ...had long hair; His pants had more holes than I have ever seen. And his sandals were tied together with ducktape. He said: I have been carrying this picture for 22 years in my wallet. My wife keeps telling me to get rid of it. But he said, no I am going to Greenville and I am going to show it to Miss Leahy. And he came.....

In the beginning the students dressed very nice, then during Vietnam it was a disaster.....They smell so bad. I think they made a competition on who looked worse than another..... I went downtown and bought Indian bands for them to wear in my cartography classes. The students had to wrap up their hair, because I couldn't take it anymore.

271. *How was it like to teach during the Vietnam war?*

It was terrible. I would get into my office and the secretary came running saying: don't go to your office. See, the kids, if they didn't go to school, and the university notified the drafters, they were drafted..... So parents came to my office all the time accusing me to kill their children. I said I am not killing him, he is killing himself. I can't give him an A when he didn't come to my class one single time. It was terrible... ..At the moment they flunked a course, off to war they went.....But what could I do? What could I say?

290 *What happened when the war was over and they came back?* We got a lot of Vietnam veterans here.....Many of them were messed up. They really were very difficult; they had mood swings and were very upset. Some of them did very well, but some finished up in the street and some of them finished up in the hospital.

333. *How many students do you think have run in and out of your classes?* It seems like everybody in this town.always meet someone at Wal Mart and everywhere else. I always got along so nice with my students. I think I can count on one hand people that I disliked in my classes.....

340. *Is there anything with this university that makes it special?* I find that the department of geography, in my time there, was very good. Our students were treated

very well. And we did everything to get them jobs afterwards..... I also find that for the city of Greenville, the university is a must.

Self critique

Although I felt that my interview went very well, there are a few things I would like to do different, or keep in mind when I do my next interview. I feel that this interview was very dynamic, since she was a very talkative person there were not many moments of silence. However, when there were moments of silence, I felt that she expected a new question of me immediately. This was ok, because it made me go back to my questions and get the conversation back on track. In other words, the typed up questions were important to me during the interview.

I wanted to ask her more background questions. For example, I would like to know more about her childhood and life in Brazil before she came here to the United States. As mentioned previously, I felt that the narrator was not really interested in talking about her childhood, so I left the subject after asking about it a couple of times. When I asked her about her parents, she answered me with 1 or 2 sentences and that was it. So I did find it difficult to “dig” more in to this area since she was “unwilling” to talk very much about it.

Since we both have a strong interest in geography, the conversation ended up talking about geography more than the history of East Carolina University. But she gave me some valuable information both about the development in the geography department and at the university as a whole. And not to mention, I really get to hear a very interesting and fascinating life story.

When I prepare for my next interview, I will try to meet the narrator face by face before the interview. I felt that this time, we both were so connected to one another at the beginning, so I don't know if a pre-meeting would make any difference. However, it might take some stress away when you know how the other person looks like, talk and act.

As mentioned earlier, Dr Leahy was very talkative and had many stories to tell me. After the interview was over, I felt that I could have done a better job. I started thinking about so many things I should have asked her more about. However, when I came home and listened to the tape again, it made me feel a lot better. Then I actually realized that I did get very valuable information and that we covered many important topics during the time I was there.

The last thing I want to mention is that I tried to pay attention to her body language and the way she responded to my questions. This was helpful to me in the end, when I started to see obvious signs that she was "tired" and waited for me to end the interview. She started stretching and looking at her watch, so I did not feel I could continue much longer and ended the interview after 1.5 hours.

All in all though, it was a very positive experience for me. I really feel that the work I did ahead of the interview was very important, and that the interview itself went somehow easy after that. I have never done an oral history interview before, so it gave me valuable knowledge about myself as an interviewer and about the interview situation in general. I also feel that this, in turn, gives me valuable experience before I will start my own field research in January.

Dear Dr. Leahy,

December, 3. 2001.

First of all, thank you so much for telling me about your life and work here at East Carolina University. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to listen to your fascinating story. It was a very valuable and enjoyable experience for me, and I learned a lot. I enjoyed hearing about your traveling experiences, your work in the geography department, and your stories from the Vietnam War and the 68-generation. You had some great stories to share! Your interview will be kept in the Special Collections at Joyner Library, together with many other interviews my classmates conducted during the fall of 2001.

Again, I am grateful for your time, for the interesting conversation we had, and for the important information you gave me about the history of East Carolina University and of Greenville.

Also, thank you for letting me borrow the two books about people and lands of the Caribbean. They both gave me some information I will further use in my research. I will use this opportunity to wish you and your family a happy and peaceful Christmas.

Sincerely,



Elin Langholm.