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## TRANSCRIPT

## TIMECODE

**Helen Briggs:** I am Helen Ryall Briggs. That's Helen, H-E-L-E-N, Ryall, R-Y-A-L-L, Briggs, B-R-I-G-G-S. We were with the university from 1959 to 1969.

Q: Start at the beginning. What were the terms, what were the conditions, by which you and Rod were sent out to Morris to run the school?

**Helen Briggs:** Okay. Rod had been offered a job in South Dakota as Director of Extension for the State of South Dakota. He was ready to accept it and it was I who said, "No, you have to tell the people on campus that you are leaving." And so he left the house and went out for-- was gone for several hours. I can't remember if there had been talk about UMM before. I don't think so. At any rate, he went to campus, came home a few hours later glowing with excitement. He said, "How would you like to help me start a college?" And of course that was the beginning for us. The legislature, understandably I guess, is quite jealous of its prerogative to name and fund extra campuses, things that are going to be very expensive of course. And they had not yet done so, so Rod was sent out there to replace Edson. I don't remember his first name. Mr. Edson was the head man out at Morris.

Q: Alan Edson.

**Helen Briggs:** Alan Edson, that's right. I think he had died by the time we went out there. I don't think I ever met him. And so Rod filled in Alan Edson's spot as Director of the Experiment Station, and he also became whatever the title was, head of the West Central School of Agriculture. We went out there in the spring of 1959 and probably school was out by that time. It was-- so-- and we were living on campus. It was really a very happy time. It was, you know, living on campus was just like living in a park. It was very pleasant.

Q: Did Rod know at the time he went out that he was going to be moving...

**Helen Briggs:** Absolutely. That's why he went out there.

Q: But that wasn't very well known. Why not?

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**Helen Briggs:** They-- well because the legislature had not yet authorized it and it had to be somewhat secret. I don't know how secret actually. Ed LaFavre [ph?] and Ed Morrison are the ones I remember as being the heavy lobbyists, you know, for the college.

Q: Did the idea of going to a rural town like Morris on the Prairie phase you at all?

**Helen Briggs:** It didn't excite me, believe me, but no, it didn't phase me really. I'm from a town-- I grew up in Kenosha, Wisconsin, which was oh, 45,000 I suppose, at the time I was growing up, but just north of Chicago. We were in a-- basically a fairly well populated area and here we are-- here we were out in the midst of the prairies. I liked it.

Q: What were the challenges adjusting to life in Morris?

**Helen Briggs:** I don't remember that there were any. If I wanted to shop, Dayton's in those days, I would have to drive into town, shop, and come home, which was a good deal more <clocking chiming> amorous [ph?] than, you know, having done it from...

Q: I've read in the archives that there was a bit of controversy about the fact that Morris got the campus.

**Helen Briggs:** Yeah, I think our competition was Montevideo. I think. I know they were the bad guys. But I don't think they had a college. They didn't have the campus that existed in Morris, which was a very nice campus even before they started putting in the college buildings.

Q: We've talked to many people who knew Rod, and one thing we hear that's consistent is that it took a man like Rod to start a campus from scratch. What about his personality do you think made him suited for that job?

**Helen Briggs:** Oh dear, well he was an extremely intelligent man. Because he was in agriculture-- his father was a professor at the University of Wisconsin in agriculture, and Rod followed in his father's footsteps in agronomy. Because of that, you know, on the

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hierarchy that exists at the universities all over the nation, agriculture, of course, is way at the bottom. And I remember there was one faculty member, who's name I have fortunately forgotten, who said, "Well, you know, his research was in, and then he named something that Rod had done. In silage [ph?] was what he-- he was wrong but-- so this was not regarded as being-- he wasn't regarded as being a real big intellectual, anything of that sort. He was, however, an extremely intelligent man, and he was a happy man, and I think he was quite charming. Well I found him charming of course. And what else was it? Oh, one thing was that given this assignment he was scared to death. He never expressed it to me but I know he was scared to death. And this led to his-- this motivated him. He-- this business of he-- would speak to a Kindergarten if they asked him. He worked long hours and was totally dedicated to the proposition before him of creating a college. The meetings that they had, the all night meetings, see, we went out there in June and it was, I think, the following winter there were several all night meetings. I wasn't there so I don't know exactly what was discussed but they were looking at what facilities would be needed, what rooms could be used for-- what faculty members at the west central school of agriculture would be suitable for teaching in a college situation and that sort of thing. And it was-- for him it was morning, noon, and night. He had enormous energy and it was all dedicated to this. In fact it was a source of annoyance to me that if one of the kids was in something rather important at school, if Rod had, you know, a speech at some nearby town, the town-- Rod's-- the job took the precedent over anything our kids were doing.

Q: It's interesting you mention he might have been motivated by fear because no one mentions that. Everyone we've talked to says that he seemed like a gentleman that was supremely in control of his vision and pursuing that.

**Helen Briggs:** He was but it-- but at the same time he was afraid he-- I don't know how to put it. He wanted to make sure it was done right I guess.

Q: I understand Rod had an amazing memory.

**Helen Briggs:** Could be.

Q: That he never forgot a name.

**Helen Briggs:** Yeah, I know. I know. His father was that way too. His father was an extension of \_\_\_\_\_ at the-- in the state of Wisconsin. And we

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were-- Rod and I were with him once at a meeting, a farmers' meeting, when Dad spoke. Afterwards a man came up to him and he said, "Well, my name is Olaf Sven-whatever," and Dad said, "Oh, oh yes, you're the brother of" and it had been 20 years since he had had contact with this man's brother and he remembered. Dad Briggs was really remarkable and I think perhaps yes, I guess I never gave it much thought frankly.

Q: Starting a college from scratch...

**Helen Briggs:** Well it wasn't from scratch. He had a lot, you know, there are people on the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses, and he had also the experience of the people who were teaching at the West Central School of Agriculture, some very competent people there.

Q: But making the shift from a high school to a college, one of the things missing was tradition.

**Helen Briggs:** Yes.

Q: What did Rod do to instill tradition?

**Helen Briggs:** Well I don't know because I don't really know the campus now, you know.

Q: What did he try to do?

**Helen Briggs:** Well he-- first he assigned somebody-- a lady in town was quite colorful. I cannot remember what her name was. We never knew her terribly well but she was the one who-- let me think. She's the one who instigated having the hats, the maroon, whatever you call them, those hats.

Q: Beanies.

**Helen Briggs:** The beanies, yes. Are they-- they aren't still around are they?

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Q: They are not but begin with the woman again.

**Helen Briggs:** Well I'm at a loss for her name. I cannot remember. It's one of the ladies who lived in Morris who-- she had various ideas on-- for how to jazz up the college but one of them was the hats, the crew hats, the maroon crew hats. What else. They were trying to find the name for the publication, the daily publication. I didn't like what they chose. Or maybe it was for the teams. I liked the name of the prairie, you know, that had some prairie significance to it, but they weren't the names that were chosen. At any rate there was a vote on campus for naming the teams, naming the publication, the-- I guess there was a newspaper. Yeah, that kind of stuff. And I can't-- I'm sorry.

Q: Someone mentioned that you taught etiquette classes.

**Helen Briggs:** I what?

Q: You taught etiquette courses to some of the young women. Is that true?

**Helen Briggs:** No, no. Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. No. I wouldn't have felt competent to do so. I mean, you know, yeah.

Q: Rod was a great recruiter.

**Helen Briggs:** Mm-hm. He was.

Q: Tell us some of the things he did.

**Helen Briggs:** I don't know. He would leave town. He would say, "I'm looking for someone to teach chemistry," and he would go to various colleges, universities mostly, around the Midwest and come home with some very competent people. I think it was his-- Rod was a charming man and yeah, he just enthused the people he dealt with.

Q: When you talk to Rod you got the sense of what he wanted and you got excited

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about it. Come out and...

**Helen Briggs:** Yeah, yes. Eric-- yeah, Eric was interesting because he was a first class recruiter. He was one of Rod's-- one of the ones that Rod was really anxious to get. And he got him. He was at the University of Wisconsin at the time Rod spoke to him.

Q: What did Rod do to recruit students?

**Helen Briggs:** What did he do. I think he spoke to many, many high schools, whatever organizations there were to speak to. What would there be? Did he do-- I don't know that he did any campus-- on campus recruiting. He may have. But I was home taking care of kids, you know, and Rod was gone, and I wasn't always sure what he was doing.

Q: We heard he would speak to Kiwanis and Lions.

**Helen Briggs:** Yes, and in all of these little towns in Western Minnesota.

Q: One person said the first time they came out to campus that the grounds crew was working on the mall and Rod was in the middle of it.

**Helen Briggs:** Oh really.

Q: Yeah, and they were impressed that he had this incredible capacity. He knew everything that was going on on campus.

**Helen Briggs:** Yes he did, yes he did.

Q: Why do you think he was able to do that?

**Helen Briggs:** Because he was interested. He was deeply interested in every single blade of grass that grew on the mall and everything that was happening there.

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Q: Did he ever express to you things that he wished he had done differently?

**Helen Briggs:** Mm-mm.

Q: No?

**Helen Briggs:** If he did I've forgotten. It wasn't important at the time. So he may have.

Q: But then, 1967, '68 it was time to go.

**Helen Briggs:** He was worn out. He was exhausted, I think, emotionally and-- not so much physically as just he had done it and he was ready for the next big challenge. He also had-- his mentor in college was Doctor Bill-- oh, what was his name. At any rate, I have forgotten his name at the moment. This man had gone to the Rockefeller Foundation and he-- oh dear, I can't remember exactly. He's the one who basically asked Rod to go with him to Africa. But by the time Rod was assigned to go to Africa-- by the time that came to be, Bill-- I can't think of his name. He was in the Rockefeller Foundation. He was Vice President of the Rockefeller Foundation.

Q: Can I ask you that question again? In 1967 Rod decided it was time to go. Why did he decide to go and what did he do?

**Helen Briggs:** He was-- he had-- Rod was highly employable and he had been contacted by Dr. Moose-- no, wasn't Moose, Doctor Willy, Dr. Malcolm Willy. And Willy was in India, begins with C, c-c-c...

Q: Calcutta.

**Helen Briggs:** Calcutta. Yes, he was in Calcutta, India, and he asked Rod to join him and Rod was, "Yeah, well," and then Bill Myers, Bill Myers, Dr. William Myers, who was on the faculty at the University of Wisconsin when Rod, of course, became acquainted with him, Bill Myers was the one who said, "Come to Africa with me." And Africa, Nigeria, sounded much more appealing than did Calcutta, India. And so he started

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thinking internationally and was delighted finally. We were both delighted. I wanted to go to Nigeria too.

Q: So it was time to go.

**Helen Briggs:** It was time to go, yes.

Q: Tell me about the social life when you lived in Morris.

**Helen Briggs:** It was very active because it was a small tight knit group, but one of-- there were things that amused me. It amused me that-- the beer run amused me, you know, when they wanted beer. Is that still in existence? No? Well apparently the local beer town, the whatever who was selling beer in town, wouldn't give them a good price on beer and so they'd go around and they went to different towns and find out that it varied. It wasn't every-- it wasn't the same price. But they'd send out a station wagon and come back with it full of beer. Rod and I weren't beer drinkers particularly so we weren't part of that, but it just amused me that there was another beer run going on. We would-- we had these parties and there was drinking. I don't remember drunkenness, but tipsy I suppose and lots of dancing. And Rod would give me an assignment. He'd say, "So and so, a very quiet couple sitting over in the corner, Helen, I want you to go over." He'd go out and pick out the-- a pretty wife to one of the faculty wives to dance with and I'd be over talking to the quiet ones too often. Yes, it was <clock chiming>

<crew talk>

Q: Go ahead. It sounds like Rod felt a responsibility to make people feel welcome.

**Helen Briggs:** Yes, yes, yes, as long as he didn't have to do it. It was the assignment given to me to a couple who doesn't speak English \_\_\_\_\_, or very little English.

Q: That's something that gets overlooked I think. I think your role gets overlooked. That is quite a commitment to make not just for Rod but for his partner who has a lot of the responsibilities.

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**Helen Briggs:** But Rod was fun to be with, you know. Our-- we were married for just over 50 years when he died and it was a good 50 years, you know. We had a lot of fun.

Q: You ever think about Morris?

**Helen Briggs:** Had we stayed?

Q: Well what do you think about that? Had you stayed, what would've happened?

**Helen Briggs:** I think we would've been bored to death, frankly. It had-- I think maybe-- I said Rod was exhausted. I think maybe some of the excitement was gone. It was an established fact and it was going to be a case of simple administration from then on. And of course Jack was just a great person to do it.

Q: A few people have mentioned that it seems unusual that Rod's specialty was agronomy and here he was tapped to be a liberal arts college leader.

**Helen Briggs:** Well they weren't thinking of that, they were thinking of getting someone who could service-- who could act as a Director of the Experiment station, and they did have to have an ag degree for that. And let's-- pardon me?

Q: Who is they?

**Helen Briggs:** They? Well the-- I don't really know but I think probably it was the Dean of Agriculture, who was Dean Murphy-- Marvin-- or Dean-- what-- the Dean of Agriculture. Ted Phinsky [ph?] was very important in all of this. Do you know Ted Phinsky's [ph?] name? Okay. So I don't know who in the central administration it-- it would've been Malcolm Willy who was-- he was a vice president, yeah.

Q: Why do you think that Rod was suited to sell liberal arts?

**Helen Briggs:** I don't think he was-- you see he was hiring all the different, what's the term I want, the-- all different disciplines, and he wasn't selling any one discipline. He

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was whoever he was. He was there, I guess, as administrator not as a, you know, pushing specialties.

Q: Did Rod believe in the value of a liberal arts education?

**Helen Briggs:** Absolutely. Absolutely.

Q: Why?

**Helen Briggs:** He wanted-- his dream for Morris was a good liberal arts college. Well he came from a family-- his father was on the faculty. He was-- Dad Briggs was, as most-- he was born in 1885, and most people born in the Midwest in 1885 were farmers. Dad was a farmer and mother was raised on a farm, Mother Briggs that is, was raised on a farm, and-- but they were very intelligent. They were academically oriented even though the discipline that Dad was promulgating, that he was using, was agriculture. There isn't that big of a step, you know.

Q: You don't feel it was that big a step...

**Helen Briggs:** Oh, I'm saying from-- I'm saying from-- I don't know what I'm saying. It isn't that big a step from being a farm boy and then going to college. Now Dad Briggs, you see, was quite a remarkable man himself. He was married and had two or three children when he went to the University of Wisconsin and University of Minnesota, primarily the University of Minnesota, and got his degree. And he had a very intelligent literate wife who helped him. And no, it isn't that big a leap.

Q: What are some of your favorite memories of Morris? What are the things you miss?

**Helen Briggs:** What did I miss? I miss the people. I had very good friends there, of course Steve and Arden Granger. We bought an island with Steve and Arden and they're people I'm deeply fond of. Carla Klinger, yeah. I was never terribly close to the Imholtz, [ph?] just-- no reason, it was just that they-- we were raising our kids and if the kids didn't-- if the kids weren't the same age-- yeah. So...

Q: Do you miss the pace of life in the old small town?

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**Helen Briggs:** No, there were some things I didn't miss. I felt a responsibility when we lived in Morris and I'd come into town to buy something, I needed a hammer or something at the hardware store or something, I couldn't come in dressed in just, you know, whatever I was wearing around the house. I was upholding the reputation of the, you know, the wife of the chief administrator of the college. And that I didn't miss. I enjoy going out wearing whatever I'm wearing, you know. So that part of it I didn't miss. But it was the people I missed of course.

Q: There's a lot of pressure isn't there?

**Helen Briggs:** Yeah, yeah, there is.

Q: <inaudible>

**Helen Briggs:** I don't know, let me see. Who is-- oh, it's Jackie Johnson. And I suppose she feels it. I don't-- I have met her just once so I don't know if she feels it or not. This is-- are you on? Okay. This is a Stetson hat, a real honest to goodness Stetson hat which was given to Rod by the chapter of Alpha Gamma Rho at the University of-- at Arizona State-- no, at the University of Arizona in Tucson. His brother was on the faculty there and they were establishing a new chapter of Alpha Gamma Rho. Rod had been in AGR at the University of Wisconsin. Bob never had-- his younger brother had never joined a fraternity. So anyway, Rod went down to initiate the AGR chapter at the University of Arizona and they gave him this as a thank you. And I find a spot on it. Yeah, and it's obviously been cleaned because I think Rod wore this-- he wore it as a signature, a UMM signature. And he enjoyed wearing it.

Q: It became as identifiable as he was.

**Helen Briggs:** Mm-hm.

Q: When you got to the UMM campus, what were your first impressions of the campus itself?

**Helen Briggs:** It-- very, very favorable. Rod had told me, you know, when we-- when

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we went to-- when we came to Minnesota from Rutgers he went around, you know, and got-- went to all of the experiment stations. At the moment I don't even remember where the other experiment stations are. But he said the nicest one in the state is at Morris. So yes, I expected something nice and it was a very nice, well groomed, well planned facility.

Q: What about the town itself?

**Helen Briggs:** The town of Morris? Well it had a hardware store, a grocery store, you know, everything I needed. And it was fine.

Q: Did you socialize very much with people who weren't part of the university?

**Helen Briggs:** I suppose we did. There wasn't any division but there were-- I'm trying to think. Most of my best friends were people who were connected with the university but we also, you know, socialized with-- yes, excuse me, yes, there were parties. The hostess ladies of town would be Pat-- Helen LeFavre [ph?]- Helen Morrison, Ed Morrison's wife, and of course Patty LeFavre. [ph?] And we-- I was close to both of those women. So yes, I-- we did socialize some.

<crew talk>

**Helen Briggs:** You know, I've written about this several times for various purposes and I just feel as if anything I've said I've said. And that's it.

#### End of BriggsHelen.mp3 ####