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TIMECODE

Mimi Frenier: Sorry, the last name, F-R-E-N-I-E-R. Full professor, '73 to '05.
<inaudible>

Chris Butler: I always start with how people came to Morris. How did you hear about Morris? How were you recruited here to teach?

Mimi Frenier: As I became-- as I got through my classes toward a PhD, I went to conferences, and tried to get a job. There were jobs then. This was the early '70s. And I think there might have been a feeler out from UMM, but what I believe-- and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. There was an ad in there. But I believe I got it through my placement office at the University of Iowa.

Chris Butler: And what do you recall about your first visit to Morris, or the first people you encountered who were associated with the school?

Mimi Frenier: Well, Ted picked me up at the bus. There was a bus to Morris from downtown Minneapolis in those days.

Chris Butler: Can you use his full name? Ted...

Mimi Frenier: Ted Underwood.

Chris Butler: Oh, it was Ted Underwood. Okay. Sorry, go ahead.

Mimi Frenier: And got on the bus, middle of Minneapolis, never really been in Minneapolis before. We go on and on and on and on. It's three hours. I expected three hours. It's four hours. It's five hours. Finally, we get here, and it's the middle of nowhere. And he picked me up, and he took me to the motel that's still on the highway now. It's a different name now. I can't even remember what name it is now anymore. And I met with all of the historians that night, and I was very positively impressed, because not only was it true of Ted Underwood, it was true of all of them-- they were glad to be here. They were excited about teaching. They were excited about UMM and its newness, and what it meant to the state of Minnesota.

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Chris Butler: And that was 1973?

Mimi Frenier: Right.

Chris Butler: What were the first courses that you were assigned to teach when you were hired?

Mimi Frenier: I was hired specifically to teach East Asian courses in Chinese and Japanese history, and we had an intro to Asian studies, which went for three quarters--we were on the quarter system. So you had the first third, and so on, and that first quarter I taught that, and I taught a small class on Chinese history.

Chris Butler: Now, I understand there's a story about how Women's Studies was started.

Mimi Frenier: Absolutely.

Chris Butler: <inaudible>?

Mimi Frenier: I had no idea that anybody knew about my Women's Studies connections when I took the job, but the second quarter, I believe it would have been, Truman Driggs called me into his office and said, "I'd like you to teach a Women's Studies class." And I said, "<gasp> I have never taken a Women's Studies class except as an audit." I taught one in something called Free University, and that was on my CV, and he'd seen that. But this was graduate students teaching in Free University, which was extremely open. You could do anything so long as you could convince the university that it was okay, and we did. So I felt totally unqualified. My dissertation was on Chinese women, 20th Century. So I had studied women. I had studied Russian women too, as a matter of fact. But that's-- I didn't come out here to teach about Chinese and Russian women. I don't think so. So he said, "You don't have to teach it by yourself. There are other people you can co-teach it with." And so that's what we did. We had a team that we brought together and we taught it that spring of '74.

Chris Butler: And who else was on that team to teach Women's Studies?

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Mimi Frenier: Dennis Templeman, anthropology; Peg Peterson, who was a sort of teaching assistant. She was our student student. And Ellen Robert, who was in sociology.

Chris Butler: Before we get to those classes in particular, I wanted to ask you about the campus climate for women at Morris when you arrived. I remember you saying it surprised you. Why did it surprise you?

Mimi Frenier: I was amazed. I came here from Iowa City, which is and was the most liberal place in Iowa by a long shot. We had Women's Studies beginning. We didn't have formal Women's Studies, so we had this open university that I've just talked about. We had Women's Center. We had feminist caucuses in various parts of-- like SES and so on. Iowa City was very in the middle of protest against the Vietnam War. Got here. This place had been in the middle of protest against the Vietnam War. We had the beginning of a Women's Center. The most amazing thing, and I forgot to tell you this the other day, one of the students turns to me and says, "We have had a women's health clinic come to the Women's Center and demonstrate how you can examine your vagina." And I thought, "This is not what I expected when I got off that bus five hours after I had left Minneapolis."

Chris Butler: It was also fairly liberal in terms of sexual preference. Is that right?

Mimi Frenier: And we had an open gay community. I'm sure we had a lot closeted gays. But we had an open gay community. Guys-- the guys were probably more prominent than the women, and that lasted to the mid '70s maybe.

Chris Butler: Why do you think Women's Studies took its roots in social science in particular?

Mimi Frenier: The people who were prepared to teach about women-- Dennis Templeman had studied groups in India and he'd focused on women; Ellen Robert had understood the sociology of gender and taught the sociology of gender; I had at least some knowledge about Chinese women. We were all located in social science.

Chris Butler: So starting here in '73, the school was only 13 years old, and in some

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ways was still defining itself, still coming to know who it was, what it was. It knew it wanted to be a liberal arts campus, but what we call liberal arts was not all settled. What was your perception of the debate on what liberal arts should be?

Mimi Frenier: At that point, I was so worried about getting tenure and finishing my dissertation. I knew that sort of thing was going on, but I wasn't closely involved. I came from a liberal arts background. The University of Iowa has a lot of _____. But being in history, I was in liberal arts, and so I had the concept that liberal arts, amongst other things, teaches students how to look at life through many lenses-- through many disciplines, through many points of view.

Chris Butler: I understand that Truman Driggs and Don Spring [ph?] had some debates. If you could-- and I realize I'm generalizing here-- what kind of camps did they represent in terms of this debate?

Mimi Frenier: Well, I thought-- and probably, again, it was my lens I was looking through-- that the Vietnam War had left a fissure on this campus, and that Don Spring stood on one side, and Truman Driggs stood on the other side. Not everybody, not all faculty were partisans in this, but a lot of people were. People used to talk about-- Don Spring used to talk about the awful things that happened in Minneapolis in the late '60s, which of course I wasn't here to be around. But I know that there were sort of riots. Not like Watts or anything, but riots, and students had done sit-ins and that sort of thing, and this was very upsetting to a lot of people. In fact, I was thinking out this this morning. I think there's some left over from this in our culture, but I don't feel leftovers of this at UMM, at least very seldom. So there was that. And Truman Driggs stood for the anti-war-- liberal by 1973 standards-- part of the divide, and Don Spring for the conservative, pro-war side.

Chris Butler: It's an interesting split, because it seemed to come to represent different sides of other debates. Like, for example, the role of students in governing on campus.

Mimi Frenier: Absolutely.

Chris Butler: Explain to me about the two sides of that debate.

Mimi Frenier: Now that, I was in the middle of it. Not at the beginning. By the time I

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got here, it was basically decided. But the way I understood it was how much power students would have in shaping the curriculum and other aspects of the university. Truman was pro-student power, and Don was opposed to student power, wanting to take the traditional route.

Chris Butler: And I know even today, when we have new faculty that come from maybe larger universities, this is something that's very surprising to them.

Mimi Frenier: Yes.

Chris Butler: Did it take a period of adjustment for you? How did you deal with <inaudible>?

Mimi Frenier: I went into shock. Here I came from Iowa, Midwest-- you couldn't get more Midwest-- very casual. Students called me by my first name. Boy, I wasn't used to that. Students were on committees. They were on search committees. They attended division meetings. We had a history representative who attended history meetings. It was all new. I liked it.

Chris Butler: What do you think that adds to the student experience, if you choose to go to UMM?

Mimi Frenier: Oh, everything. Those students who get to take part in governance of this institution, at whatever level, I think they have a chance to learn so much, and they can be so much ahead of other people when they go to the work world, to graduate school.

Chris Butler: So we talked about the liberal arts. Why or how does Women's Studies fit into liberal arts? What does it belong on a liberal arts campus <inaudible>?

Mimi Frenier: It reflects back on what I said about what I think liberal arts is, which is helping people see aspects of life through different views and disciplines and lenses. Women's Studies encompasses everything, because women are everything. You can't study the history of women without thinking about the sociology of women, the biology of women-- reproduction and so forth-- and the political place of women. You can't just say, "We're going to focus on the sociology of women and ignore everything else." It

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doesn't work.

Chris Butler: So it's sort of a perfect vehicle in other words.

Mimi Frenier: I think so. There are probably other ones. I think environmental studies might turn out to be like that too. For example. I don't mean to leave out the many other examples.

Chris Butler: No, of course not. Bettina Blake arrived in 1979. How did that affect the role of women on campus?

Mimi Frenier: Well, I picked her up at the plane. I'll never forget this. She'll never forget it.

Chris Butler: Can you say, "I picked Bettina Blake..."

Mimi Frenier: I picked up Bettina Blake at the plane.

Chris Butler: Start from the top. Take a deep breath, and just start from the top.

Mimi Frenier: Okay. Me?

Chris Butler: Yeah.

Mimi Frenier: Okay. I picked Bettina Blake up at the plane when she came to interview us. I was on the committee-- search committee-- and I was going to be in Minneapolis anyway. So it was all very convenient, and I don't know if I held up a sign or something. I think I said I'm going to have on a red coat. And we talked all the way from Minneapolis to Morris, and had the best time. So I immediately liked her. I believe she liked me. So that was wonderful, because we now had-- I don't even think she was the only woman who was an applicant for the job. But when she got the job, we had a woman in administration, somebody that I could go talk with when I had any concern. I mean, many of my academic concerns had nothing to do with women, per se, but often they did, and I felt that she could lend me an understanding ear.

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Chris Butler: Excuse me. She was the first female administrator at UMM.

Mimi Frenier: Of importance. I think there was some-- that's a terrible thing-- a pyramid-- at the top of the hierarchy, she was the first. There were people, I think, in staff jobs, who managed offices who were women. There might have been a couple.

Chris Butler: If you had to characterize what Bettina gave to the school in terms of her leadership, how would you describe that?

Mimi Frenier: She was classy. We are very informal Minnesotans, Midwesterners, and some of us are classy, but not like that. She knew how to make people feel comfortable. She said the right thing at the right time and the right place. I thought she lent us élan.

Chris Butler: That's a good way of thinking of it. But it seems-- I guess I jumped ahead with Bettina a little bit. There was a little bit in the '70s, and we didn't understand the support _____, how consistent it was going to be. What was your perception of that during the <inaudible>?

Mimi Frenier: Well, again, I was hiding, trying to get my dissertation, and trying to get those lectures written and so on. I didn't really notice that support was eroding until the early '80s, and we were really hit in the early '80s. And by that time, I had tenure and had been around long enough to be paying some attention to something besides myself. And it was very hard. There were people in the state legislature who talked about closing UMM, and do we really need that university out there? And that was, to a certain extent, scary. I didn't feel that they would close us, but I certainly worried that they would diminish our size, cut our funds. Which they did. They did cut our funds.

Chris Butler: When those threats came about, were there promises of reassignment or anything like that?

Mimi Frenier: I don't remember that.

Chris Butler: Just curious, because I've heard that is the case today. If you have

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tenure here, you're tenured in the system.

Mimi Frenier: Well, when-- which one of us went belly-up? Waseca?

Chris Butler: Waseca, yes.

Mimi Frenier: When Waseca went belly-up, they talked about reassigning people. So that was very comforting. So if they ever did us in, we assumed we would be treated similarly.

Chris Butler: How many students, again, in your first Women's Studies class?

Mimi Frenier: About 30.

Chris Butler: What do you recall? How was it received?

Mimi Frenier: The students loved it. The evaluations were glowing. They would come up to us and say, "I'm so glad you're doing this." Most of them were women. I think there were maybe two men in there, but-- and the men liked it too-- but they just seemed so grateful to have the opportunity to learn about women in ways that they hadn't learned about them before.

Chris Butler: We tend to think of this in terms of race, but we should also mention that Women's Studies plays a big role in the diversification of campus. I imagine it had a lot to do with changing the student body. What did it do to the student body, in terms of diversification?

Mimi Frenier: Well, it certainly gave people ammunition if they felt that sexist things were happening, that people made sexist comments. The students who went through Women's Studies classes could, and didn't always, say, "I don't like that joke," or say to a professor, "Why don't you teach women authors from the 19th century?" "Surely there were women poets in the 20th century," kinds of comments, and so started shoving at some of the professors in some of the other areas of the university.

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Chris Butler: So it kind of gave them some support to sort of voice this--

Mimi Frenier: Absolutely.

Chris Butler: --justified criticism.

Mimi Frenier: Yes. To get back to the '70s, when a person taught a class that was only about men, that was reflecting what they had learned, what the nation was doing. So it's not that those professors were at fault, they just hadn't thought of it yet. And so the students would come along and they'd say, "Think about this."

Chris Butler: When you phrase it like that, it's just another way the student body started to influence the campus.

Mimi Frenier: That's right.

Chris Butler: Yeah. It didn't come from the--

Mimi Frenier: That's right. And they felt comfortable to do this, and I think that's in part because students had a lot of power here, felt a sense that they were important. And the institution is small, so they know they're profs well.

Chris Butler: You're a native Californian and Louisianan, and now you're retired. But you were still here in Morris.

Mimi Frenier: I was born South Dakota. I always have to talk about that. I was reading the *New York Review of Books*, and somebody referred to Deadwood, North Dakota. I was born in Deadwood, South Dakota. There is no Deadwood in North Dakota.

Chris Butler: Why did you stay in Morris? What is it <inaudible>?

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Mimi Frenier: I love Morris. The weather stinks, but I like being in a small town. I like having been here 30 years. Gradually-- it took a long time-- I became acquainted with people outside of the university, and I felt that I wouldn't want to retire here if I only knew university people. But I live in a town where everybody knows my name, and I love that. And I have friends who have no connection with the university. And of course I have friends who have connection with the university.

Chris Butler: And I don't want to-- but you told me a nice story about <inaudible>.

Mimi Frenier: The day that I decided that I would stay in Morris, I would retire in Morris, occurred in the mid '80s. The system of busing around here, which is a taxi bus, and takes you from place to place, or buses you from area to area, was something I used every winter. I would just put my car in the garage and forget it. And one day, the streets were filled with snow. I had bought my groceries at Willie's. The bus driver stopped at Willie's to pick me up and pick up an elderly woman, maybe in her 70s, like I am now, and took her to her house, but had to park across the street. And she said to the woman, "I'm sorry I can't park right in front of your house because of the snow, but I will carry your groceries to your door for you," and she did it. She picked up those groceries, she walked across that snowy street and deposited those groceries at that woman's door. And I thought, "I'm going to get old some day. I want to be around people like that."

Chris Butler: Love that story. So I want to end, Mimi, on a few statements that I'll just read to you, and if you have a response, that's fine. If you don't, that's fine. I just wanted to see what you'd think of when I say these things: UMM is an institution that-- in all its configurations-- the boarding school in West Central; of course you're familiar with UMM-- reflects important social changes that are taking place in rural America. What do you think of that statement.

Mimi Frenier: Absolutely. I think we're plugged into our state, and we're plugged into the nation. The trends that we have seen here, that more and more women are in positions of administration-- this is a national trend; it's a state trend.

Chris Butler: UMM has fulfilled its mission to the students and surrounding area by doing what?

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Mimi Frenier: We have tried to take education to people, not just enrolled students, but to communities in the area. Sometimes probably more successfully than other times. Now of course we can do it with the Internet, and it's wonderful. But before the Internet, we would take classes to places like Ortonville, which is one of the places I taught a night class, for example. And those people interests changed, and as their interests changed, our majors shifted. More and more people majored in business, for example, than they had in, let's say, 1975. And so of course we had to-- I'm glad-- we had to change so that we had a larger business-- well, we instituted a business major, for one thing.

Chris Butler: Among schools, UMM bears a special relationship to the land. What do you think about that?

Mimi Frenier: Well, we do. The experimental station, which is something I'm only getting to be involved with now, was here before I came here, and it always impressed me that that was-- the state of Minnesota wanted that experimental station to be here and to be connected with UMM, and that the people there, in the station, were very conscious that they were part of our institution. And that to me means we could serve the population in the surrounding areas much better than if we hadn't had something like that.

Chris Butler: I know your children are grown, through school and all that, but if you had a child, or if you knew someone who was thinking about UMM, why would you encourage them to send their child here?

Mimi Frenier: The last time I did this, encourage a child from Iowa to come here, he was interested in Native Americans, and we were just instituting our major in-- our new major that has to do with the study of Native American culture. And he didn't know about us; he didn't know that there was such a major. He lived in a very small town in Iowa. So I trotted it out, and I gave him all this stuff, and I said, "This is a small place. You will get to know your professors well. They will be able to cater to your needs. You can institute a self-designed course in something having to do with Native Americans, and people will probably be grateful to go along with it and be your teacher."

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