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TIMECODE

Ruth Thielke: I am Ruth Thielke, T-H-I-E-L-K-E. I was here as a student from 1964 to 1969. I changed my major from elementary education to music, so it took me an extra year. And then I taught for two years and came back as a clerk typist in the Registrar's Office, and within three years, I was the Assistant Supervisor there, and through various title changes, became Registrar in eight years. So then I was registrar till I retired in 2005. But in 1974, I was President of the Alumni Association, and I served on the Board of Directors for five years, started out as a secretary. Yeah.

Chris Butler: So let's start back-- we'll start back in 1964. What motivated your decision to attend UMM, because we were a pretty young school at the time, so why did you--

Ruth Thielke: It was. It was Jim Carlson. Jim Carlson, his father had been principal of our high school in Glenwood, where I grew up, and he was a very good friend of Rod Briggs, who was the first Dean, they called him, College Dean. Now it's the Chancellor, but Jack Carlson, Jim's dad, had a list of who was going to college, and where they were going to college, and I had applied to some schools that were good in music at the time, St. Olaf, Luther College was my first choice. I applied to Concordia and to Augustana. But my father, a farmer, had filled out his gross instead of his net income, which is quite different for farmers, and his net income actually was a negative number that year, because we had some crop failures, and I didn't qualify for any financial aid through the private school system. You had to wait in those days, for a year, to reapply for your financial aid, and so Jack said, "Well, have you applied to the Campus over at Morris?" And Jim had been coming back and just telling us what a wonderful college it was. He loved it over here. And so my sister was also in school here, and she liked it. So I thought, "Well, it couldn't be so bad. Maybe I could go there for a year, and then transfer to St. Olaf.

Chris Butler: Try to describe for me, Jim Carlson's influence on the Music Department in particular. Why was he such a good leader of music and culture here?

Ruth Thielke: Okay, Jim had a natural spontaneity, and he had a way of inspiring students. When I was working in the records office, it was records office back in the early days, the academic Dean at the time, was Gordon Volk. [ph?] And Gordon would have lunch with me, because I was friends with his secretary. So he would just sit at our

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table and we'd visit, but he was looking for ways to improve the quality of the student body, really raise the quality of high school rank and test scores of our incoming freshman classes. Yeah, and I said, "Well, improve your Music Department. Really pump a lot of energy into your Music Department." He said, "Why?" And I said, "Well, many musicians are also involved in the sciences. In the high schools, when you're involved in band and choir, many of those students do really well in math and science."

Chris Butler: So you're talking about, you had this conversation with Gordon Volk. You said, "You want to improve the quality of the student body, improve the quality of the Music Department." Why?

Ruth Thielke: Right, because when I was in high school, I had noticed that many of the music students, who were involved in band and choir, were also the college bound students. They were the ones who really excelled in choir, I mean, in the sciences and in mathematics, and they would be selecting colleges on the basis of which college had a good music program, because they would want to continue being part of the choir, band, orchestra, whatever, while they were in college, because they knew that, once they were out of college, they wouldn't get to enjoy that any more, perhaps. So he said, Gordon Volk said, "Where would I find a good band person, or a good choir person?" And I knew Jim. I knew Jim well as a student here, but also in high school, I knew he was excellent in music. I also knew that he was at Augsburg College at the time, and that he was president of the Music Educators Association, the National Music Educators Association. So I knew that he was very gifted, and was recognized for his excellence by his profession. But I also knew that Jim wanted to come back to Morris, that he loved the Morris campus. Gordon said, "I would never get someone like that to come here." So I looked up the salaries and actually the University of Minnesota was offering more salary, a higher salary than the private colleges at the time. So I said, "Well, why don't you give him a call?" And Jim readily accepted. Okay, that very same year, he was asking about a choir person, then. Where could I find a choir person? Well, at that time, the ones who were really known for choirs were St. Olaf and Concordia College, because of the Christiansen family. Olaf, and then his sons. Paul Christiansen was up at Concordia, and so I said, "Well, maybe there are-- I know there are two choirs at Concordia. Maybe the fella that directs the second choir," I didn't know who he was, but I thought maybe he would enjoy being the head of the Choir Department here. And Gordon called him, and yes, Ken came. So Ken and Jim came the same year.

Chris Butler: Are you speaking of Ken Hodgson?

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Ruth Thielke: Ken Hodgson and Jim Carlson, yes. And we've really, really enjoyed the quality of the music that those two have led us into, really.

Chris Butler: Summarize, if you can for me, if you can, Jim Carlson's influence on the Music Department in particular. What year was that, by the way, when he came?

Ruth Thielke: I believe it was in 1972, probably fall of '72, I believe.

Chris Butler: Okay, Summarize for me why he has, you know, because music is extremely popular here. The fine arts really have, sort of-- is a sort of very special division of our school. What is it about Jim's personality that makes it possible, that made it possible?

Ruth Thielke: Jim is very spontaneous and he had a way of-- he lived the music. So when he was directing, he wouldn't necessarily stop the music and drill, which gets to be kind of boring for all the other musicians, when they're sitting and waiting for that, whatever little passage to be drilled during practice, during rehearsal. But he would be singing it the way he wanted it to come through. And he'd be looking at the musicians, and he'd be singing it at the same time, almost bouncing on the podium, and they'd get it. And there was a real love relationship between Jim and his students, in a very good way, in a way that inspired. And they would do almost anything to get that look of delight on his face, and so they learned to just interact with him. It was almost like they were all one instrument, and he was playing them as one instrument.

Chris Butler: What are the things we have today that you would consider to be Doc Carlson's-- Jim Carlson's legacy?

Ruth Thielke: Well, the jazz band, certainly. When Jim came in, he was responsible for concert band. We didn't have a jazz band program, but Jim loved jazz, and he began inviting in jazz musicians, you know, the top jazz musicians from around the country. They could not believe it. The jazz musicians who came in could not believe the quality of the jazz program that we had here. They'd never heard of Morris, Minnesota. And so they would come in wondering what they had been scheduled to do, and immediately they would be delighted with Jim. But then, as the years went by, Jim became very well known, because he would take his jazz band to New Orleans, he would take his jazz

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band to other places, and they began to recognize that Morris, Minnesota was a place that was known for jazz. What Jim did, though, that really built the program, Jim would go into the admissions office. He would search-- he would be inviting musicians from the high schools to come, to apply. Then he would be searching through the applications to see if they had applied yet. He would be calling those students. He did a lot of clinics. He'd do up to 15 clinics, music clinics around the state, around the region, every quarter. Every quarter. You can't imagine how-- I mean, it was ten week quarters -- to get that many fit in. But he would be the judge at music contests. He really got to know who the musicians were in the high schools, all across the region. He had an incredible energy.

Chris Butler: Also, you didn't mention him by name, but you're also talking about what has become an annual celebration here, which is, what?

Ruth Thielke: The Jazz Fest.

Chris Butler: Yeah, tell us about that.

Ruth Thielke: Well, he really had two events.

Chris Butler: Say Jim, Jim had two events?

Ruth Thielke: Yes, Jim Carlson had two events. One was in the fall, and in the spring, though, Jim invited in high schools, bus loads of bands would come in, and there would be time for the schools to work with a clinician, where the clinician would be working with the bands on the stage, and helping them to improve the quality of their performances. The clinician also would hold workshops. And then, in the evenings, the high school bands would be able to listen. They would be invited to these Jazz Fest performances. And there was always an alumni jazz ensemble which would try to outdo, you know, our college students, so..

Chris Butler: It was a fun sense of competition.

Ruth Thielke: There was a wonderful sense of competition. And the jazz combos, Jim got the jazz combos going, that would go around and do gigs at various nightclubs and places. Any place they could perform, they would be performing and getting real live

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experience.

Chris Butler: I want to change our direction a little bit, to when you came on as an employee, and you know, we talked a little bit about this before, but you know, in the early years of UMM, the late '60s, through the '70s, there's a lot of up and down in terms of, you know, what it's going to be like next year, is the U. going to close us down? And I wanted-- I want to ask you to tell me the story about Jack Imholte and enrolment, and your role in letting Jack know that enrolment had exceeded a certain-- so if you could just tell us that story.

Ruth Thielke: Well, in the very early days, when I first started working here, enrolment was actually climbing. We climbed up to over 2,000 students. But each fall, because we knew that the enrolment was going to exceed the previous year, I would have an arrangement made with Jim Carlson, to have some of his music students, whoever was in the music building, over at HFA in the basement, ready with their instruments to rush out onto the mall, and play the UMM Rouser. My job was to find Jack, and he might be in a meeting somewhere. I would knock on the door, I'd step in, and I'd just tell the-- whatever group it was, it could be the Regents, it didn't matter, but whatever group that was meeting, "Excuse me for a moment, but I need Jack." And I'd take him out, have him stand on the front steps of Behmler Hall, while Jim and his group, across over by Edson Hall would be playing the Rouser for Jack.

Chris Butler: To celebrate the enrolment.

Ruth Thielke: To celebrate that the enrolment had now reached and passed the previous year, yeah.

Chris Butler: You used this interesting expression about a relationship with the larger system, called, Dancing with the Elephant. What did you mean by that?

Ruth Thielke: Yeah, that actually was Bettina Blake's phrase, and it is true that we had to attend, you know, meetings on the Twin Cities campus. We were-- the directors were part of the all campus meetings, especially in the admissions and registrars and financial aid group. We had monthly meetings, and all the policy, administrative policy was hammered out in those meetings. And it was sort of like, they would bring their policy to us, notify us of what the changes were going to be, and we were to live with those changes and bring them back. Well you soon found out that our campus didn't

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like that at all. We would say, "But, we're unique, we're a small campus. This doesn't fit us at all. You know, we're autonomous." Which-- that was a word that the Twin Cities didn't really understand. We were not autonomous, we were part of the University of Minnesota system, and that gave us the benefits of using their administrative systems, and the name, University of Minnesota, which is known around the world. So we had this ongoing battle back and forth. And so the dance with the elephant was working with that large, that huge institution on the Twin Cities campus that had all those members and all the clout, the votes in those meetings. We had one vote. They might have 30 members sitting there from the Twin Cities campus, including someone who was the coordinator for the whole system right next to the Vice Presidents. We had many, many directors that were there, and we had to use our persuasive skills to make them feel responsible for us. Yeah, so that was the dance.

Chris Butler: Dance with the elephant, right.

Ruth Thielke: Yeah.

Chris Butler: Tell me a little bit about Bettina Blake. What did she do for the reputation of the school, in your opinion?

Ruth Thielke: Bettina, actually I was on the committee that selected Bettina. Bettina came from Wellesley, and she brought a sense of the Ivy League to UMM, which we had patterned ourselves, when we first started out as a campus. I'm talking here about the original faculty, who shaped what UMM was going to look like, working with Rod Briggs. But the original division chairs, and the discipline coordinators, when they worked in their scholastic and curriculum committees, when they were honing what the curriculum was going to look like, they were looking at schools like Harvard, and trying to bring that Ivy League flavor into an affordable package for students who might never even have had a chance to go to college. Often the original classes, those first classes, were the first students in their families who had ever gone on for a college education. It hadn't been that many years, in 1940s, students in this part of the country, especially men, if they received an eighth grade education, that might be their-- that was their terminal education. And they went into the farms, or worked in their fathers' businesses in town. It wasn't until after World War II, when there was money for the veterans coming back from the war, to go to college, that you saw people in this part of the country going on and earning a four year degree.

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Chris Butler: So Bettina was a big part of sort of--

Ruth Thielke: She was the one who helped us change our educational requirements for the degree. Before that, it had just been lock step. It had been five categories that students had to fulfill, three groups, subject groups, there was a foreign language requirement, and college writing requirement. Otherwise it was the sciences, the social sciences and the humanities with a certain number of credits for each of those groups. But it was under Bettina that we came up with the curriculum that was originally called, Prosper. And those are the liberal arts requirements that was the basis of the liberal arts requirements that we see today. The reason that we came up with those, was that there was an old major called Physical Education and Health. Okay?

Chris Butler: That's okay, that's all right. That's okay, I mean, it's important context, but-- Summarize for me-- it sounds like what you're saying is--

Ruth Thielke: Bettina actually took it around the country, and pretty soon colleges all over the country changed their system of liberal education.

Chris Butler: Exactly, exactly, so if you could just kind of -- so what did Bettina do with Prosper? This idea, this conception she had for the liberal arts, what happened with it under Bettina?

Ruth Thielke: Bettina was very active in the American-- I can't remember the name, but it was the National Council of Education, American Council? Whatever, okay.

Chris Butler: Continue-- you can just say, "Bettina was active in national organizations if you can't recall the name.

Ruth Thielke: Sure, okay. Bettina Blake was very active in a national organization for faculty and administrators-- academic administrators. And she began speaking at their national conferences about Prosper. And the-- it wasn't long until colleges all across the nation had really picked up on this. This is a new way of packaging liberal arts, so that the liberal education became more of a focal point in the degree plan. The state of Minnesota got ahold of it and built it into their transfer curriculum. University of Minnesota, College of Liberal Arts grabbed ahold of it, and it became their liberal

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education requirements.

Chris Butler: Thanks. Thank you. I understand Jack Imholte had a very good sense of humor.

Ruth Thielke: Yes he did. Jack, especially, had a very firm hand on the budget, and so when we would need some increase in our budget, he would greet us as we walked in the door of his office, and he'd say, "If it has to do with money," and this is before he even saw our face, just as we were walking in the office. "If it has anything to do with money, the answer is no." And we would walk in, sit down and he'd say, "Uh.. so what was it you had on your mind?" And of course it was budget. So, because we couldn't ask him for money, one year, I wrote him a letter, and I said, "The Registrar's office is having a going out of business sale, and we no longer can afford to print registration forms for Spring quarter, so we will be closing our doors." And he wrote-- he called me up right away, and he said, "How much money would you need?" <laughs> So that was one time that I bested Jack. But Jack would also have this dance with the elephant. And he was a master at twisting arms of folks in the Twin Cities, and getting them to pay for projects that they insisted that we had to follow. You know, we had to follow their procedures, so we had to go along with whatever costly program they were putting into place. We had-- Jim Price was the coordinator for student affairs. Jim was a very distinguished man, actually had gone to graduate school with Steve Granger and was a dear friend of Steve's. But Jim was here, and was responsible for putting in some new computer system that was going to cost a great deal of money, and Jack invited him to come out with us, invited Jim Price to come out with us to the Sunwood [ph?] for a very nice lunch. As we were standing at the counter, and Jack whipped out his checkbook to pay for it, he said, "Are you willing to go half? Half and half, is that okay with you?" And Jim Price grabs his checkbook to write half of the ticket, you know, for lunch. And Jack writes out the full amount. I was riding back to the campus with Jim Price in his car, and Jim was just white. He said, "What did he mean? When he said half and half, I thought he was talking about the lunch tab." He was talking about the project. He said, "I can't go home to my campus. What have I agreed to?" And, of course, Jack held him to it.

Chris Butler: That's hilarious. That's-- <laughs> So a story that I'd like you to recount from your time as Registrar, is-- there's a lot of pressure with that job, and I understand that one day in particular, that Tom McRoberts I want to talk about Tom.

Ruth Thielke: Oh yes.

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Chris Butler: Tom provided you with some comfort, so can you -- So can you tell me about that?

Ruth Thielke: This was when Prosper was coming in, because we were going from that five step degree requirement, or it was fairly easy, you know, just five little requirements, and you add up the courses that were in each area. You could do it on one worksheet, and it took, maybe 15 minutes to run through a student's transcript, by hand, looking at it with your own little eyes, and ticking off the credits. Any advisor could do it. But when Prosper came in, there was a relationship. These courses couldn't-- it was just not a matter of taking certain courses, but they had to interrelate. And I knew that it was going to require a computer program to do it, but I didn't have the computer skill, and certainly we didn't have a program in place to do it. And I realized I had been told that it was not to increase our budget, or the staff. And I knew that I wasn't going to get any help. So I burst into tears one day. I was crying just brokenly in my office. I called Tom McRoberts. Tom and I had been friends as students. We were in the same class at UMM, and we'd been in the same group of friends in college. And he had been a friend of mine while we were working as well. Called him up, and Tom heard me crying on the other end of the phone. He said, "Ruth, I don't know what's going on, but whatever it is, don't go anywhere, don't leave your office. Keep the door closed. I have a meeting that lasts an hour. I will be there." So Tom came. In the meantime I called Steve Granger, who also is very supportive, and Steve tried to get me to calm down also. Didn't make any promises, of course, but Tom came over, he promised me the moon. He said, "Ruth, you know they won't have you do this alone." I knew that he was lying to me, but he didn't know that he was lying. He thought the campus would provide me with a committee of people, fine minds, to come up with all the solutions. But my problems to solve are the administrative problems.

Chris Butler: This is-- that story says a lot about the kind of administrator Tom was, doesn't it?

Ruth Thielke: Yes, oh yes. He was very gracious, very gracious, and Tom had a way, even in very tough situations, say, in the scholastic committee, or whatever committee that he was on. He served on so many, of being light hearted. People could be angry with each other in the committee meeting, maybe we were at a-- you know, just locking heads on something, locking horns, and Tom would say some delightful little phrase that would get us all laughing, and it would be just that break in the action that we'd sit back and think about what we'd been doing.

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Chris Butler: You later became head of the Alumni Board. Steve, do you need to get in? Okay. You later became head of the Alumni Board. You know, you were a very busy person. I imagine this wasn't something you had ample time for, but it meant something to you. Why was it important to you to be a member of the Alumni, you know, first Secretary and then Chair? Why was that important to you?

Ruth Thielke: Well I was asked to serve out the remainder of a term for the person who had been Secretary of the board, and--

Chris Butler: Why was it important to you to be on the Alumni Board?

Ruth Thielke: It wasn't, though.

Chris Butler: It wasn't?

Ruth Thielke: No, it wasn't.

Chris Butler: Okay, then I won't <inaudible> okay.

Ruth Thielke: Yeah. Yeah. I was helping out, actually. Herb Krume [ph?] had been Director of Alumni Association, and Herb asked me to serve.

Chris Butler: Okay. Well then let me ask you this. Why are you proud to be a UMM Alum?

Ruth Thielke: Well I'm proud to be a UMM Alum because not only because the college has become very well known as one of the top liberal arts-- public liberal arts colleges in the nation, but because I had a hand in helping it become that. Here's what was so unique about UMM. It was beginning, it was coming. It was something that was being created, and so you had that tremendous energy from Rod Briggs. Rod had tremendous energy. But then the students had to be members of all the power committees because there weren't enough faculty to man the committees. Then, you know, you came into this transition, where there were plenty of faculty, plenty of staff on

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hand to run the committees, but there were all these student positions written into the constitution.

Chris Butler: So let me ask you the question this way. Did you feel a sense, as one of the early students, as someone who was helping contribute to the creation of the campus identity?

Ruth Thielke: Yes, absolutely, because there were so few of us when we started out. I think in the early years, the very first class was under 300. When I arrived, my freshman class was also small, but there might have been, maybe, I don't know, probably less than 1,000 students on campus. In the early years, there were so few faculty, so few staff, that, in order to have all the constitutional committees in place and functioning, students had to participate as full voting members, to get the work done, and that meant that we had a very important role to play, and we were held responsible. Even though we were going through all of the same things that college students were going through on other campuses. There was the Vietnam war, you know, the disestablishment, you know, we were tearing down, looking at what is this culture that we have here in America, and we were questioning everything. Still, on the Morris campus, we had to be responsible. We had to help this place become a college, and there was an excitement about it. So, as the campus grew, I believe that, as there were more faculty, as there were more staff, and they had enough people to man the committees that were not traditionally roles that students held voting memberships in, then the question became, you know, do we still need the students on the committees? Do we still need that many students in the faculty assembly, which, on many campuses is a faculty assembly. But we had it in the constitution. It was a part of this place, and I believe that it was a part that really made UMM great, because we had that sense of our mission is to educate students, which, when I mentioned that on the Twin Cities campus on our monthly all campus meetings, they would say, the directors, other directors would say, "What a novel idea. What a novel idea."

End of ThielkeRuth.mp3