

Dance Department History Project 2010-2011

Transcribed interview of Sara Lee Gibb on June 11, 2010 Interviewed by Susanne Johnson Davis

This is Sara Lee Gibb, today is June 11, 2010. Susanne Davis is here doing this interview but she says she isn't going to ask me questions so I will probably talk non-stop for a while.

Since I have just retired in September 2009, and I began my teaching career in September 1965, that means it was about forty-four years. I've had a beautiful career at BYU, and I couldn't have asked for more joyous things that happened while I was there. When I first came, Ernest Wilkinson was the sitting president. Leona Holbrook was the department chair. It was not the dance department, it was the department of women's physical education.

It was a combined department and the department was primarily women's physical education, but men were also teaching women's physical education. The department was split in women and men's, but that was quite a long time ago. Milton Hartvigsen was the dean at that time. I always had a wonderful relationship with him. I always felt like he liked me and trusted me. There were some difficulties with the dance department at the time. I went in in the 60's and there were a lot of crazy experimentation that didn't look like dance to Dean Hartvigsen, and in fact was one of those periods. He often came to me and we would chat about things. When he had to write things, he would write specifications for dance and studios and floors. He would always come to me and have me do that. I enjoyed him very much and liked him. I took a class from him and thought he was a wonderful teacher. It was a good situation when I got there.

I was teaching at BYU-Idaho, Rick's College at the time, and Leona Holbrook called me several times and invited me to come and visit with her about a position at BYU. So my husband and I came and auditioned, so to speak, and she hired me. That's why I came. My husband was still in school and he wanted to come to BYU so that was a good move for us. We've been here all the time since then, and raised our family here in Provo, which has been a really happy time.

When I first began, I taught ballet and modern dance. They asked me to teach physical education classes and there were a few I was qualified to teach, which I did. I didn't enjoy that as much, but there were fitness classes, which I did enjoy teaching. I was actually writing a book on how to be really fit and do a lot of exercise, so that became a laboratory for me and that was fun. Primarily, after the first couple of years, I was really needed in the dance area and I didn't teach anything but the dance classes. Ballet was really in a precarious position. There were only two classes and they were called Beginning and Intermediate at the time, but Intermediate was only for the second semester. Skill-wise, it was not really intermediate.

I felt I didn't come to BYU with many dreams, only that I wanted to see dance become what it should be at a wonderful university and it was pretty minimal at that time. There was no dance major, so I worked very hard at ballet, since I was the only one teaching. I requested we get guests from Salt Lake City, since they had a good dance program there. Semester after semester, we were finally able to bring guests in and we increased not only to first and second beginning, first and second intermediate, and then advanced, but we were able to really offer something more substantial in ballet. Modern was somewhat more developed, but our performing groups were pretty small. In fact, everything was very small. We just weren't known as a great dance department.

Actually, I did have a dream. I think my dream was that we would have a strong major program because none of the other forms would exist in a vacuum. They would only be seen as recreational, which they were at the time. For ballroom, Alma Heaton was wonderful in what he was doing, but it was primarily seen as recreation. Mary Bee was just beginning with the folk dancers, and it was actually located in the recreation department at that time. It felt like if we were going to have a substantial dance department, we would need a major. I really worked very hard on that.

We did have students interested in dance only, but they couldn't take only dance classes because we didn't have a major. We got around to where we got a dance emphasis, where they could take most

classes in dance. One of the things very strong in the women's physical education was the education program, the teaching program. There were certain programs through the Salt Lake Valley that had dance classes, so we capitalized on that. That became my first big challenge and passion with dance education because I could see if we were ever to have something strong, we would need students coming in with some experience. I mean you didn't major in music and just start violin at the college levels. There was a huge need for this among the public schools and in interest. We did work through the physical education program to get people out of the dance programs that were just beginning.

We had all sorts of interesting things, but I believe that is one of the strengths I brought to the department: to help develop that. The University of Utah people were particularly interested in performance, but they were working on dance education, and there was no certification in our state. It became an initiative we worked on together. We would go to the state offices and test them out.

We would design our programs and they would tell us that we couldn't do that, and we'd ask "Well, why not?"

We worked on that for quite a long time. Finally, we were able to get the certification for dance, and that was a huge thing for us because it gave legitimacy to the discipline.

We had a lot of our administrators who would say, "We don't have a swimming or tennis major; dance is just one of the physical education things."

They didn't realize that dance is an art form with infinite varieties and theory and practice within that. It is the legitimate discipline and it was hard to convince people of that. Little by little, it did happen.

We started in the development of the major program, and I felt we needed to recruit. It was about 1973, maybe 1971, when we started dance camps. I was a teacher and we worked with our youth and brought them in for a few weeks. We are still doing that and have expanded that; instead of doing two, we are doing three, and one is a week. All that started by getting people interested. It was a great recruiting tool to get people on campus and see what we had to offer. We had quite nice facilities at the time and students would have a good experience. We made it really fun, but two weeks is a long time to have kids away from home. We learned a lot of good lessons, and we are still doing it. We learned to do it really well.

Conferences and workshops were a part of that and we went through different administrators there. We have persevered. We have continued our guest workshops. I didn't originate that. They had been bringing in people before I came. But that has been a beautiful opportunity for our students to study with those that come in and our own faculty, which is important in the field. We brought some of the top names in; we worked with students coming in.

One of the other initiatives that I felt strongly about was having a high school day. People often didn't want to do that, because it was an extra burden, but we did it anyway. We developed that into a recruitment when we would get a little bit of money and scholarships. The university and city helped with that a little too and that became a big thing for our recruitment, and we were able to get some of the best dancers that were going to go to the University of Utah or out of state. Between the U and the Y, they were the strongest programs in dance.

I think that was something that got us going. We got our major program going in dance education, and started to get really good students to come in. Our faculty was increasing little by little. By 1980, we were able to change the whole configuration of the college. I think it was 1980 or 1981 when we became a dance department. Phyllis Jacobsen became chair and did not go with women's physical education, and stayed as chair of the department even though she did not teach dance classes. She often had assignments in the other department. She administered over the dance department for thirteen years after that.

That was an interesting period of time where we had to decide what we were about. This time, there was a tension, as there still is and always be (I hope), between what we offer for the general university and what we offer for the program. While I felt strongly about the major program, I never thought it would be at the expense of other things we did. We worked really hard to do things that would interest our whole student body. We did a lot of beginning and intermediate classes in a variety of different dance forms in ballroom and folk.

It's interesting. My first assignment was to help and co-teach folk dance with Mary Bee. I remember that first year I was pregnant and sometimes I would come so sick in the morning; I would put a review record on and tell them to review it while I went to the back behind the little stage in the Wilkinson Center and try to collect myself. I remember what an interesting year that was, but a good year and a wonderful one to work with Mary Bee.

I had worked in workshops prior to that in Rick's College and had taught some folks as well. It was fun to work with that. I also worked with Alma the summer before I came down, because again, at Rick's I had been teaching ballroom. We did performances, what we called floorshows back then. I taught ballroom and folk, but it became clear through time where I was most needed, and that was in modern and ballet. I was assigned to become administrator of ballet/modern dance. I did that for some time.

Back to the idea of offering many classes for students, I would look at the General Education offering and it would have everything but dance. I felt so strongly that we should have something that was enriching to all students. I'm not sure on the year, but I prepared a syllabus and did a lot of work for background literature for an intro to dance class for general students, but offered in the dance department.

Our dance history class was a relatively strong course and we had two semesters of it. It was really aimed at major students, though, and not for the general education class with the content that brought students in. I worked really hard to create a three-hour course and before Leona Holbrook died, I had her read the overall class purpose and she had some thoughts about it. She thought it was a very good idea, which was encouraging to me. I met with the general education people. They weren't at that time very welcoming to adding new classes since it was not an easy process. I had to really talk with my dean and department chair about it and we were able to introduce that course.

That was at a time when the general education class became a super popular course because it was before History of Civ courses and this was the only way to fill some of the cultural components of general education. I had many classes of seventy plus, and more than half of them were athletes because the proximity was close, and we did have experiential classes with movement and it was just delightful. The History of Civ courses came in and sometimes we would have five sections a semester. We could have filled more. With the History of Civ, there wasn't quite so big of a demand and it involved a lot of other teachers as well. That is still a continuing course and I've felt for years, years, and years, that was the only course considered general education from our whole college.

Then, as our requirements changed and they did put the activity classes, which are beginning and intermediate and most of our dance and physical education classes began to fill the fitness requirement. I have had students who have said it has changed their lives and I think it has been a good course that was an addition to the richness of the university's offering. I think as it evolves and changes, I hope that it continues to be a good offering to student body.

In terms of what I did teach and continue to teach, there were no methods classes, so for education, we had to create our education methodology and in our practicum and in our whole thing. I think we developed a plan for dance education. It was quite unique at the university level because we kept the students teaching in workshops until they were ready, and during that period they were visiting their actual assignment, which we still do. I think it was a good plan for when our students began to take over the course work: they became the teacher, not the assistant. It has helped them to be successful, and now our students have really been sought after as teachers inside and outside the state. It continues to be a wonderful program and I think Pam has done a great job picking up where we left off and continuing. We have wonderful teachers and I'm proud of the program.

I'm disappointed in one thing and that is our graduate program, which has been put on furlough and never brought back. It's not easy to reinstate a program, and I don't know if the proper thinking was done at the time when it was put on furlough because now I don't know if we will ever have one back. I think it is unfortunate because it really added to the essential depth of the knowledge of the whole department. I think it also added credibility for our students and what they were learning on their own campus. I'm disappointed in that and hope someday it will come back like in the days that it was conceived. We hoped that at the change of college, that would happen. We had money from the graduate

office, which was primarily the problem, since the money was used for another department. Today, that money still sits in the pot with the graduate office, but nobody seems really anxious to support the idea. I think in terms of dreams for the department, it would give it a great deal of strength. It would put our teachers out in other universities, which just adds to the visibility and viability of our program. I hope that is still in the future and can be fulfilled.

I remember the time when there were no computers and I remember one of our colleagues had inherited a Mac, and it was one off the first ones out. This was Les Dibson and he enjoyed being creative with his mac, and I was fascinated. After I had learned, he got a new one, so he passed that one on to me. Later on, I was able to get my own, which was wonderful. I learned to appreciate Macs because I had a vision of how you can really teach. You can see the scores and listen and tell them to see the patterns. You could see that in examples and see how different he was from Haydn in the same period, and you could compare them and listen and look at the score. It was almost impossible to see that before in modern dance. Early on, I brought Betty Jones out, and she brought out Doris Humphrey's works, which we presented.