

Helen Fernald

SB: This is Sally Boyd. Today is May 6, 2006. Mrs. Fernald, would you please state your full name and your maiden name please?

HF: Helen [Merimund]-Fernald.

SB: And your date and place of birth?

HF: In Cambridge, Massachusetts, January 23, 1920.

SB: Thank you. I'm going to ask you several questions. The first is how did you happen to become affiliated with Perkins?

HF: Well that's quite a long story. After the war in the forties, we went to live in Philadelphia and there is a school there called the Overbrook School for the Blind, and I was asked because I had some friends and we were talking about bad eyes and my father's eye having been shot out from an accident, and he asked me if I would be interested. Do you want me to continue this?

SB: Yes please.

HF: Interested in going to the Overbrook School for the Blind, and I said yes I would, and they asked me to come to the board meetings which were held in the eight floor of a tall building in the city nowhere near the school; and I went and somewhat timidly and there were about 12 people sitting around a table, and they asked me to read a report that they had to be read to, and I did, and some fear and trepidation, I think they were trying to prove that I was of English birth, but that's just my accent, but anyway, I was there and then they asked me the next couple of weeks for another trustees meeting and the first thing you know, they asked, make me a trustee. This was all very well but I hadn't really been to the school, and I said to them don't you ever have a meeting in the school, because how many of you have ever been there to see what the situation is. Oh no, we can't do that because we can't leave the city. It's too far to drive out to the country, da, ba, ba. I was horrified! So I went in the car and I went to the place myself and all around it and there were a few kids walking around and big empty rooms with maybe one or two children and there was no livelihood or anything there. I was very depressed about it, and I came back and I told the board that they should at least have their board meetings out there so they can feel, get the sense of the feeling of the school. Oh well, then went out to get in their cars and drive out there, well it's only a matter of 15 or 20 minutes, you know, it was... So, yes we would try to do that. Well shortly there after, [Macie's] job ended in Philadelphia and he was brought back, and we both came back to Cambridge to live which is wonderful, and someone

called me on the phone shortly after I got home here to say that they had given my name to the Perkins School for the Blind and did I know anything about it, and I said no not much but I'm flattered and thank you very much. And shortly there after, someone called from Perkins and said would I come out and talk to them and I said yes, I'd be proud to, and I did, and I had a wonderful time in that school. In the first place, the campus is absolutely gorgeous. I don't even know it very well, and it wasn't quite so then good in 1970, it was, '71, but it was still lovely and the buildings were lovely and... [Deary], I'm on a tape recorder, so.

F: (whispering) Oh I'll be down the Center.

HF: Oh, all right, fine! (laughter) I was very very pleased and happy with the school and one summer shortly thereafter, we have a place on an island off the coast of Maine, we always go up there, and the telephone rang and someone said you're wanted down here for a meeting, please come, and I said well it's a matter of four hours drive but I'll be down there for tomorrow or the next day; and then I realized, oh my goodness, I rented my house here in Cambridge for the summer to Harvard professors who come and teach in the summer and I have no place to stay and I don't want to stay in a hotel. So I told them that. Oh well, you can stay at Perkins. So Mason said fine, we'll go and we'll stay and indeed we did, and we went to the then house, what is it called?

SB: The Guest House?

HF: Guest House, I guess it is, and we had a nice bedroom there and access to a kitchen and living room, and there was another, there were two other people in the other guest room and they were mother and daughter, and of course we fell to talking about life in general and they, she, the girl, the young girl, who has now got her Ph.D. and is teaching here at Longy School of Music, has a beautiful voice. She was just learning how to speak and her mother spoke pretty fairly good English. She was Maria [Josokahahoo] and her mother was Sophia, and her mother wanted to get her settled in Perkins so that she could go back to Greece, which she did eventually, but I became very fond of Maria and still am and her mother comes to see her once or twice every other year or so or if she sends for her and Maria travels all over the world alone stone blind, absolutely blind, and I've seen her go through Customs and I don't know how she does it and I can't even do it myself. But she's a wonderful girl and absolutely beautiful voice. So, where am I? That was one of my things about Perkins and I have many other connections there and I got to know the head, head of the school there for a long time. I was a trustee and I got to know Dick Carlson and Kevin Lessard and a lot of the very fine teachers there, and listen in occasionally to some of the arguments and fusses that they had at the school that I could understand, but I, I have been there, a member of the trustees until '89 I think, didn't I say? Then I decided to stop taking

up a position on the trustees, or the number of trustees, because I felt that in my eighties and going on 90 now, I did not have half the intelligence and wit and quickness to be any good there and just as I'm sitting like a little old lady listening to what was going on and not really understanding or contributing anything. So I retired and since then, I haven't been closely to it, although every time I go there, someone yells at me and they'll say hello and I'm very fond of Steve Rothstein and his wife. They came here for dinner when they were first beginning there and so I have very many close feelings about Perkins. Occasionally, I just take the time and drive through it as if I was going to be there just to feel, feel at home again, but really, I haven't been back for a matter of years now. So I think that's all I have to say, and I'm quite convinced that it's the best in the world. I did go to Africa and so, and Italy too, I think it's the Lighthouse School for the Blind there, and somewhere else, I can't remember. This is 10/15 years ago. I can't remember any more. But I have loved my association with the school and I'm amazed at the people who are very healthy and hearty. Oh yes, they've heard of the school but what is it like and there were some, usually you'd set them down on it and I let them have it full brass. So I think that's all I have to say of importance.

SB: I have a few other questions that might trigger some ideas from you. How has Perkins changed in your years that you were involved there?

HF: It's grown and the people in it now are wonderful. I'm not saying that they weren't before, but there were those that some fussing and fuming at the trustees meetings and as to how to do this or that, and then there was quite a lot of noise about the building, I think it's called the North Building is it, the big red brick building?

SB: Yes.

HF: And how much money they, I guess it was Kevin or maybe it was, I don't know, whoever ordered it built, I mean it was in the thousands, five hundred, a lot of money just taken out of the Perkins and that did not please all the trustees particularly because he hadn't asked their opinion, but anyway, it was done and I don't think anybody regrets it now. I go there just whenever there are parties or gatherings and see the trustees that I can remember and see them but since I've got macular degeneration myself, I really can't see who I'm talking with which puts a sort of a stopper on my social life. I think that's all.

SB: That's hard.

HF: Oh at one point, I thought it would be wonderful if you were allowed to have a seeing eye dog there, and then I realized that you could have 600 dogs wandering around that would not be advisable or possible.

SB: Who have been the most memorable people that you, that you worked with or that you met through your work at Perkins?

HF: Oh all the trustees and certainly Kevin Lessard and Dick Carlson, all very good friends. I have pictures here of them and wonderful picture here of, oh it's not in this bunch, it's over there, the President came to, the President of the United States came, Bush that is, Bush's father, came to the school and the children were told that the President was coming. Well they, he was just jammed with all the kids were running up and turning around and say I touched him, I touched him, maybe they just touched his jacket or, you know, but I touched the President, I touched the, and he was wonderful with the children. He was incredibly gracious and he didn't mind being hauled over so to speak, and he was just dear, and the children there in that time... Here's a picture of him with Mace and me, and.

SB: A wonderful picture of you with President Bush.

HF: Yes. Well...

SB: That's wonderful.

HF: He was wonderful and wonderful with the children and I say when you meet any of the children there, they usually stop you and start to feel you. They put their hands out and you have pants on, no you have a skirt and then further up, oh you wear glasses too? Oh! And you have earrings on. Of course they can't see any of this. They're feeling you, so you must be used, get used to being felt all over and your hair is long and straight, and they tell you all these things about yourself, and that's the way they get to see a lot of pole. It's very interesting. I've been tempted to use the same thing that (laughter), but I don't think I better.

SB: Were there any particularly interesting or important events, you've certainly talked about President Bush being there, but do you remember any other events?

HF: No, but I've been away now for so many years. I'm really not up on it. I have an invitation to the coming party and I will go and see some of the trustees who remember me and I'm looking at them and I don't know who I see, so I'm a little embarrassed, and I don't get into any of the trustee or corporation work because I think that's taking up a place and time when they better get someone who can really answer their problems.

SB: Well I'll look forward to seeing you on Wednesday night because I am singing for the gala.

HF: Yes.

SB: So that will be very nice.

HF: That will be wonderful. Yes, that will be great. I'm not sure I can come. I think I said I couldn't and on my book, look up and see, because I've got a family member coming in. I've got four married children and 11 grandchildren, and now five great grandchildren.

SB: Wow!

HF: And they all come in various times and don't give me much notice. Suddenly the phone rings and oh, hey mom, it's [Francie], can I come down tonight? She lives in Vermont, and spend the night and do this and yes, of course, of course, you see, you see, so I'm running a hotel sometimes. (Laughter) But I'll try to be there.

SB: Good. Well is there anything else you would like to tell me about your time at Perkins? I know you mentioned travel. How did you happen to go to those countries?

HF: Because, was it Kevin or was it...

SB: It must have been, maybe both of them went with you.

HF: Yes. I remember when you went.

HF: I... Do you see the pictures up there on the, all those of the elephants and the giraffes and the lions and tigers and all that wonderful trip. I had two of them down the tip of Africa, and you talk with the, there's a school down there and but you can't really understand what they're saying. They try to speak English but it's not very easy, so I didn't do much socializing but I just loved being there and I have all these pictures of lions and tigers and elephants and I have many, many memories of that; and then I went to Indonesia and then I went to Hong Kong, I can't remember why I went to Hong Kong, and for some reason people I was with had to get home in a hurry so they left me there alone. That was all right, they got a plane which took them back to California and then home to Boston, and I was in Hong Kong alone for, by myself for a day and I wandered around and that place is something else, the city and the people, and finally I got on a plane and came home. But I got a beautiful piece of material and it's all...

SB: Oh yes.

HF: I don't know what do you call that, sewing or stitching. It's huge, it's about three feet by four feet, and it was all wrapped up like a piece of paper, and I had it framed, put against a piece of wood and then had the whole thing framed and there it is, and I love it.

SB: Were you mostly visiting schools for the blind you were traveling?

HF: Yes, yes. That was what we were there for, but of course we did a lot of sightseeing on the side.

SB: Well it sounds like a wonderful experience.

HF: It was, it was, I did it twice and it was absolutely wonderful. I never would have done that otherwise you know, and I had to have a reason for going, and it was, I hope, helpful to them and their schools and I guess you've seen this map of Perkins and all the places in the world. Have you seen that?

SB: Yes I have. It's a quite amazing how Perkins has.

HF: Spread!

SB: Spread its wings.

HF: Oh! Terrific!

SB: That would be a major change during the time that you were there.

HF: Yes.

SB: I think that all of the expansion of the International Program, the Hilton Program.

HF: Yes. Oh the Hilton, that made a terrific difference; all that money, wow. I know it made a lot of difference. I never got down to South America but I did go other places. I went to the English school there, was not particularly impressed, and the school...

SB: Was that in Africa or in...

HF: In London.

SB: Oh in London.

HF: In London and there's one in Paris.

SB: Oh, did you.

HF: But I didn't do anything with them and that means that different language and so I, you know, I was just seeing that they were there. You've seen this, haven't you?

SB: I have seen the maps, maybe not this particular one. But I know we're expanding all the time. We have visitors coming in from Australia and Israel this month.

HF: Really? Will they stay with you or...

SB: I believe they're staying on campus in the Guest House and I'll be involved in some touring through the Secondary Program, so.

HF: I don't know how, will you please explain the Secondary Program versus what, or the various programs at the school?

SB: I'd be happy to do that. Maybe we should stop the tape just so because I wanted to record anything you have to say.

HF: Oh, well, what I have to say is not important, please don't pay attention to what...

SB: Do you have anything else you'd like to talk about; and then I'll tell you about Secondary.

HF: Not that I can really think of. I've always been close to the trustees and that's been wonderful. Of course you could say that being that close perhaps I pulled myself away from the every-day goings on but I never felt bad.

SB: Were you ever involved in any of the visiting committees that tour the programs?

HF: I don't recall, I don't recall.

SB: Because I know there were special committees that would.

HF: Right.

SB: Go through, I think Lower School or Deaf-Blind or...

HF: I think that came more prominent after I left maybe, I'm not sure. And these little rugs here, that one and the elephant and the other one in the kitchen came from Africa.

SB: Really? Beautiful.

HF: Well, that was the fun and foolish parts of it, but, of the trip, but I really relish all of that and think of it often. I'm very glad I went because it made me realize how... Be careful what you say Helen... Narrow minded a lot of kind of Cambridgians are, I mean if you don't live in Cambridge, and nobody, you got to do this and you got to do that, and it's nonsense! They've

never been out of the country, maybe not even out of the state. So if you travel a lot, that really comes up short.

SB: It will broaden your mind.

HF: Yep, right.

SB: Well thank you very much. I'll turn this off.

HF: All right.

End - Helen Fernald