

Interview with Sally May

July 6, 2010

Interview by Diane Kordich

[START OF INTERVIEW]

[Inaudible conversation]

Diane Kordich (DC): This is an hour-long interview with Sally May on July 6, 2010 about Dorothy Lewis, who donated prints to the DeVos Art Museum. This is Diane Kordich speaking. Memories of Dorothy Lewis?

Sally May (SM): Ok, well, my first memories of Dorothy were with she and I working together to establish a commission on aging in Marquette County. At the time I was on the county Board of Commissioners and I'd been assigned the responsibility of starting the commission on aging and kind of shepherding it, and Dorothy was on the board, was chosen to be one of the members of the board, and so she and I worked together on the Commission on Aging, and it was really a joy to work with her because she was so smart and so much fun to be with and so dedicated to the whole idea of having a commission on aging.

DC: How long was she on that board?

SM: I honestly can't remember but we can probably find out just by checking the Commission on Aging because they would have records.

DC: What time reference would that be around?

SM: This would have been in the '70s, probably the late '70s. And so that's how we sort of started socializing with them, although Phil had been Jean Reddiker [spelled phonetically], who

was her friend and housemate, because Jean taught psychology at Northern, so Phil knew her as another faculty member, but then we started socializing, and –

DC: Can I ask, was this just at the beginning of the Commission on Aging, or - ?

SM: Yes, probably at this time there was no Commission on Aging, and the county board had decided that we should have one, and so that was my responsibility as kind the group liaison to establish it, get a director and the whole thing, so that was how we started kind of a, you know, social relationship with them both, and they were so much fun. Jean had been raised in Southern California and I had also been so we kind of had shared that, and Dorothy and I did a little bit of traveling around the U.P. to, on Commission on Aging business and so on, and of course attended many meetings. They lived just down on Lakewood Lane a ways from us and they were really fun to be with, we also went to visit them once, I think they had rented a place on Thousand Island Lake in Wisconsin, and we went and stayed with them, and at one point, so that's, oh, and then later on as we established the relationship, later on, and this was after Jean had died, she moved to Florida, and then she also had a place in North Carolina, right, Phil, it was in North Carolina?

[Man's voice – Phil?]: Yeah, in the mountains in North Carolina. Probably know the name but it's not coming to me.

SM: And we went to visit here there on another trip that we had planned, she, Jean and Dorothy lived on Lakewood Lane, and then after Jean's death sometime, it wasn't very long after Jean's death that Dorothy decided that she was going to move and go to Florida, which is where members of her family lived, and we were very sad to leave her, well, I mean, to see her go, but–

DC: I think her sister Lucille was living there, wasn't she?

SM: Yes, her sister Lucille was living there, and at one point they had decided, the two of them, that they were going to go into an assisted living, it was quite a very posh, hotel-like, all amenities type place, and I'm assuming that they did move in there at some point, but this was, we had seen her just prior to that, we went through the place with her to see what it was like.

[Break in tape]

SM: So I'm not really sure whether that actually happened because that was the last visit that we had with Dorothy, and then –

DC: Do you know what year that was, kind of, was it in - ?

SM: No, I can't really remember, but I might be able to find on my calendars I can check that for you. Now, I know one of the things you wanted to know was about Dorothy herself, and I was thinking, and I can, during the time that I knew her she gave me a lot of stories about her past and so on, and about her life, which were really fascinating, and one of the things that I thought was particularly fascinating was that she had been in the Army and was one of the first WACs and I remember that she said they went to Kansas to go to their, like, boot camp, and this was all very new because this was the first time women were in the Army, and they, it was in the winter, and they had to be out on the parade ground, or whatever you'd call it, marching up and down, but they didn't have proper clothing for them because they didn't have women before, so they were out there in really light clothes and it was very, very cold, and she told me that the man who was in charge, the commanding officer, said, "Well, if you have to parade up and down without proper clothing, then I won't wear an overcoat either," and so she said he ended up getting pneumonia, and I think none of the women did but he did [laughs], and she said they eventually did find some greatcoats that, in a supply somewhere in Kansas, that had been used in the first World War for the men, and so he issued those to the women, and all of the coats were much too

big for them, and she said it must have looked really silly because they were marching up and down the parade ground wearing these huge greatcoats that it looked like greatcoats marching up and down on the parade ground.

DC: Do you know what year that was?

SM: Well, I'm gathering that she enlisted soon after the war, it would have been as soon as women were allowed to go in, so that would have been, see, well, '41, '40, it was probably '42, no later than '43. And then she eventually, she was assigned to intelligence and both she and Jean were in the intelligence unit, and I know that she was stationed in Tokyo after the war and was responsible for the postal service there, and at one point she was responsible for negotiating with the, or bargaining I should say, with the civilian postal workers in Japan for salaries and that kind of thing, but the person who was negotiating, the man who was negotiating for the Japanese workers, refused to negotiate with her because she was a women, so she sent her second-in-command, who was a man, but he had no authority whatsoever and he just made appearances and then came back and talked to her about it, she was the one that actually made the decision. While they were in Japan, and perhaps when they were leaving, I don't really know, both she and Jean had been invited to a home, a Japanese home, for dinner, and at the end of the meal the host said that they could both take anything that they saw in the house as a gift, some item to remember them, as a gift from them, and at the time she told me that Jean actually outranked her, but Dorothy was older than Jean, and so the host said that Dorothy should pick first because she was the elder of the two, and she said Jean was not happy about that [laughs], I mean she wasn't really unhappy, but it was just kind of a funny little thing.

DC: Do you know why she joined up in the Army?

SM: No, I don't really know, I really can't say, there was so much, you know, patriotic fervor at the time and I suspect that that had, you know, something to do with it. She was very much a feminist before people used that term, I'm sure, and so she may have, I'm guessing here now, but she may also have seen this as an opportunity to do something different and to, you know, make some...I don't know, to make a point, maybe, it was something that was new to her, and she always wanted to try new things, she was very adventurous and was not...I mean, when you think about it, and you said before, too, that she, for a woman of her time to, first of all to go into the service, but then also to end up getting her Ph.D. in psychology is pretty amazing, and so she was, that was just the kind of person that she was.

DC: And did they, they stayed in Japan, do you know how long they stayed in Japan?

SM: No, I have no idea.

DC: And do you know how she became interested in coopting Japanese prints, because we have, she gave us a gift of prints, Japanese woodblock prints, and they're excellent quality, and so I was wondering if that topic ever came up anywhere where she, how she received them?

SM: No, I do know that they had a number of Japanese art objects in their house, not just prints but other objects, I don't know if she also donated those, but I remember at one point she asked our older son who was probably, I don't know, 10 or 11 at the time, to come down, she actually hired him to take pictures of all of the art things that they had in the house, and I don't know whether it was for insurance purposes or what, and I know that they had pieces, you know –

DC: What types of pieces?

SM: I'm trying to think, seemed to me like they had, you know, a sword, and they had, I can't honestly remember, there was like maybe a Japanese figurine, I'm trying to think and I can't

honestly remember, but I do, and I'm assuming that in some sense it was to remember their time in Japan, that had to have been a pretty amazing time in their life.

DC: I think Mary Seldon [spelled phonetically] said that they were there six years and then of course they had to furnish where they lived, so she remembers a highboy and a Buddha and the prints, I don't know if they have any s_____ or things like that, screens.

SM: I can't honestly remember.

DC: Ok. Do you think she was always interested in art?

SM: I don't really know, I don't really know. I know that...No, I don't know.

DC: Ok. We talked about her artwork, as I understand it that she had gone to Lee Hall Gallery, thought that their collection was so pathetic [laughter] that she decided to give the Japanese prints after Jean died, and she was kind of looking for things to do, and I guess that was one of her pleasures was to give those prints. Do you have any more memories of Dorothy Lewis?

SM: Well, I know that she, like I say she was very adventurous, her brother was a contractor and had actually, he had not actually graduated from high school she told me, but he became fabulously wealthy and he was a friend of a Saudi Arabian prince and that got him in to Saudi Arabia, and he ended up building the desalinization plant in Saudi Arabia, I can't remember where, and also the airport, a new airport there. And at the time, while he was there, one of those periods of time, Dorothy went to Saudi Arabia, I remember that she was, first of all she had to be vouched for by her brother and by the prince because she was a woman alone, she was not married, and so they had very strict requirements that single women could not just come to Saudi Arabia, and so they had to have special permission for her to come. Dorothy had beautiful gray hair, I think she said her hair turned gray when she was like 21, so this beautiful white hair, and she, her brother told her that she should wear, well not a t_____, a kaftan, you know, to, and so

when she was going shopping and so on the children would point to her hair, she was also very pale, she had blue eyes and she was very pale, and the children, she found out later, were calling her “cabbage” [laughs] because of her white hair, and then her brother also, at one point, purchased a, an island, actually, in Ireland, and I know that they had invited us to come and visit but we did not, but she had gone to visit him for a while there in Ireland.

DC: And was this her older brother, younger –?

SM: Younger.

DC: And do you remember what his name was?

SM: I don't remember his name.

DC: Ok. While we're talking about her family, do you recall how many brothers and sisters she had?

SM: I only remember her older sister, who was the one that we met when we were in Florida, and then her brother, whom we met when he came to visit. Those were the only ones that I knew of.

DC: Did she ever talk about her mother or father?

SM: No, not really.

DC: Ok. Did you know what her father did?

SM: At one point when, I believe it was when they lived in Iron Mountain, that he worked for Ford, because Ford had a plant there, they were using wood, I guess they used wood in the cars, and he was, I believe, the manager of the plant there. Which may have been why they moved from downstate.

DC: Ok. So, are there any, like, younger experiences in Iron Mountain that she might have related to you?

SM: No, she didn't say much about that at all, other than what her dad did.

DC: Ok. Do you know if she went to school in Detroit?

SM: Do I know if she did? I don't remember if she went to school, where she –

DC: Well, she graduated from Iron Mountain High School, that we know. We know that she stayed at home for a year, and that she went to school in Detroit, but we don't know much more after that. Then Mary said she got a job in Chicago, did she ever talk about Chicago?

SM: She did tell me about getting a job, oh, I do remember, she told me that she had a job in a gun barrel factory. [Laughs]

DC: Oh my goodness!

SM: I know. She told me that she was responsible for the bookwork and so on, she was very good at figures and bookwork and stuff, and so that was her job, but she was quite interested in the whole process of making gun barrels, the finishing process, she got me that they had used, actually used gasoline in making the shiny, you know on [both talking and laughing inaudible] the gun barrels, and tempered them somewhat with gasoline or something [laughter], I thought, I had a hard time believing that, but I guess, so, yeah, she did tell me about that.

DC: So, do you know what year that might have been?

SM: Well, it would have been before the war, obviously. Yeah.

DC: Alright. That's pretty interesting. Let's see, so you did state that she left Harvey maybe a year or two after Jean's death?

SM: Yeah, I would say maybe a year after Jean died, she decided that she, you know, she needed to go I guess where her family was in Florida, so. And that was in Lantana, I think.

DC: Yes, Lantana, Florida. And she also had a house in North Carolina.

SM: Yes.

DC: And do you know how she decided to go to North Carolina, or?

SM: Well, I'm trying to think, it seems to me like the North Carolina house was a house to go to in the summer, because Lantana would have been so hot, but this was a second house and it was up in the hills in North Carolina, it was really quite beautiful. And her brother's wife lived nearby in North Carolina, she had a home there, too. So that was another connection that they had.

DC: Alright, and her death, as I stated before there was no obituary of Dorothy Lewis anywhere, and so in talking with Mary Selden she felt both with Jean and herself there was to be no funerals, no obituaries, nothing, and Mary Selden was there, she had arrived in Florida, she had called Dorothy, Dorothy had stated, "No, don't come today or tomorrow, rest up, come the day after," and she died in between those days, and when Mary had gotten there she had died. And so I guess Mary had talked to the younger brother, and had asked him, you know, she wanted to be cremated, that they would take the ashes and take them wherever, and the brother wanted to throw them in another river, and the wife and the brother, the wife of the brother said, "No, no," pretty much, "She should be in Lake Superior," because she had loved Lake Superior and had a house on Lake Superior for so long, so basically, I think that she's with Jean in Lake Superior but I'm not sure about that because the brother and his wife took them and took care of it from there, so they pretty much respected her wishes of no funeral, no obituary, and so that's why we're having a little difficult time, here. Do you know any of her hobbies, can you remember any of her hobbies?

SM: Yeah, she liked gardening, and she had gardens that, I can't, they're called raised gardens where you don't have to go down on, you know, they're like 3-4 feet –

DC: Raised beds

SM: Yeah, raised beds, and she had, she tended the gardens and she loved to do that, in fact I had written up, when I was taking a creative writing class on, we were supposed to write about some memorable person, and so I wrote about Dorothy and she was still here at the time and living down on Lakewood Lane, if you want me to I can read that into the –

DC: That would be good.

SM: [Reading from her writing on Dorothy] “That afternoon when I answered the phone the familiar weak, chronically wavering voice said, ‘If you come down and look at my irises I’ll reward you with a drink,’” and this, I should just, as an aside, her voice did sound rather weak and wavering, it had something to do with the length of her vocal cord, I don’t think it was always that way, but in later years that was how I remembered it was. “I didn’t have to give it a moment’s thought, since Dorothy makes the best drinks in town and is a friend whose company I enjoy immensely, my response was immediate: ‘You’ve made me an offer I can’t possibly refuse, I’m on my way.’ A very short time later I was driving down her immaculate asphalt driveway surrounded on all sides by beautifully kept trees, bushes, and flowers. I spotted the iris bed as soon as I reached the house, and since D was nowhere in sight, I got out of the car and wandered over to it. I was standing admiring the flowers when D came up behind me, because she was wearing her favorite gardening shoes, high-top tennies, her footsteps didn’t make a sound on the blacktop. ‘That’s enough, you’ve earned a drink, come on inside.’ I turned around and was greeted by the familiar smiling face and twinkling blue eyes that never failed to amaze me. While her eyes are not necessarily large, the bright blue portion of the iris is large by comparison, and it gives her eyes a stunning quality. She had a crumpled old fishing hat pushed on over her short, cropped silver hair to protect her face from the sun. She has the beautiful, smooth, clear skin of a woman half her age. She was wearing her garden clothes, old black capri

pants and an old gray sweatshirt. 'The irises are gorgeous,' I told her, and she was pleased. 'They won't be in bloom very long and I thought someone besides Jean and I should enjoy them before they pass their peak.' She turned and led me into the house at her quick, purposeful pace. Her walk shows no trace of the surgery she had to replace a deteriorated hip joint, a condition that forced her to retire early from her most recent career, school psychologist. Watching her, I thought the walk to be more of a retired Army lieutenant colonel, her first career during World War Two. Once inside the house, while she went back and forth in the kitchen mixing our drinks, I decided to bring her up-to-date on the most recent Women's Center activity, since she is a great supporter of the Center and avowed feminist. 'I really enjoyed the Center's conference on women in the labor market,' I said. 'I'm sorry you didn't come. One of the speakers was a young woman captain from K.I. Sawyer, who in my opinion was the outstanding speaker of the day. You would have loved her.' She took too long to answer, and when she did her voice was quiet. 'I guess I should have gone but I didn't think there would be anything there for me since my career is over.' I wish she hadn't said it, tears welled up in my eyes. Then she said, 'Before you leave this afternoon you must come and see my vegetable garden, I think it's going to be a good one this year.' And it was."

DC: Ok. Did she have many parties down there on Lakewood Lane, or was there small dinners, or - ?

SM: We remember small dinners, and she seemed quite interested in our two boys, she hired them to help around the house, and she and Jean invited us, Phil and I and the boys, for dinner, and at one point they also rented a house on Lake Michigamme, and invited us to come there, and they had a little dinner for us there, too. So, and Jean was always the one who cooked.

[Laughs] So Dorothy made the drinks and Jean cooked.

DC: I heard that Dorothy doesn't cook [both laugh], I heard that from someone. Did she ever talk about the _____ her job was psychologist.

SM: No, she really didn't. Well, I mean, she might have, nothing that I could find.

DC: Ok, so that was her work life and you were probably more her social life down here?

SM: Well, we knew her after she'd retired, so –

DC: Oh, that's right. So she wasn't working at that time.

SM: No, and I think, and Jean was still working, but I think it was, you know, her last couple of years or something, because I remember she took on some extra, it had something to do with kind of your retirement would be higher if you, it was based somehow on your last two years or something, so I know she was working extra hard those last couple of years or something. But Dorothy had already retired. And she'd had her hip replacement done many years before, I believe at Mayo, and I remember her, probably in kind of the early process of doing this as a treatment, as a procedure, and I remember she said that she saw the x-ray of this after it had been done and she said it looked like a bird's nest [laughs] in her hip, so, it's of course quite different now, the way the procedure, but –

DC: Right. Do you think she was a healthy individual?

SM: Yes, she seemed very healthy, but she did have problems with arthritis, which was why she had the one, but –

DC: The hip replacement.

SM: Yeah.

DC: Ok, let's see, I did have some other things I was going to ask you and it just escaped me.

How was your relationship when Jean became ill? I mean, did you, how was that?

SM: Well, of course, you know, we knew that Jean was failing, that she, you know, she did have cancer, and this was, you know, very hard on Dorothy, and she, you know, people who had known them before were coming in and wanting to see Jean and so on, and I remember at times that seemed very trying for Dorothy depending on who it was –

[END OF SIDE A]

[START OF SIDE B]

SM: Yeah, I knew that Jean was ill, and I had gone down to see Dorothy, Dorothy had also, Jean was not at the hospital at the time, she was at home, and Dorothy had had a bout of arthritis that actually put her into bed, and it was, you know, I was quite concerned about her, and then she got better and then Jean did go into the hospital for the final time, so that's about all that I know, and of course Jean's death was, you know, a terrible blow for her, they had, you know, made plans to stay here as far as I know and, you know, retire, and they loved being here and so on, but once Jean died that, you know, changed things for Dorothy.

DC: And Lakewood Lane seemed to have been, she loved Lake Superior, did she boat, swim, do any activities with the lake?

SM: Well, she, I know that she occasionally, well, let me back up because I don't know. When my parents came to visit, she recommended a place to go to for, you know, to go out to take them sport fishing, because my father liked to fish, and, you know, out on the boats, and I'm trying to think of where, it's somewhere this side of Munising, maybe, I can't remember the name of the place, and so she knew about that, she did tell me once being out on Lake Superior, and I don't know whether it was fishing or what, on a sport fishing boat or, and a sudden storm came up, and she said that there was terrible wind and hail and so on, and it was really a bit scary [laughs], and that the captain went out trying to do something, and he was holding cardboard

over his head and the hail was so bad that it just shredded the cardboard, and I guess it was a very short-lived kind of storm, but that was one of the things that she said, but she did love Lake Superior, and as far as I know she didn't swim or, you know, anything like that, but I don't know that for a fact.

DC: Alright, I'm hoping there's... you seem to have loved Dorothy Lewis.

SM: I did, yeah. Yeah.

DC: Well, so does everybody. [Laughter] I sort of had the same reaction with Mary Selden.

SM: Oh, really?

DC: Yeah, so don't feel alone. I don't know what else to ask you, I really, you know, I had done a little with the artwork and a little bit more about her and -

SM: Oh, I did, and I know we said it, and I'm not sure it's on the tape, but, so I'll just say it again, and that is that I did know that she had set up a scholarship, did we get on the tape?

DC: I don't know, but just repeat it.

SM: Ok. A scholarship for women, I think, wasn't it specifically for women to go to get their advanced degree in Psychology, and a young woman by the name of Barbara Belew, who happened to be a counselor that I had hired at the Women's Center was going into the psychology department and wanted to go on for her Ph.D. and I believe she was the first-

DC: Master's

SM: Well, Barbara did eventually get her Ph.D.

DC: Oh, I see

SM: Yeah, but she -

DC: But the scholarship then -

SM: Was for a master's?

DC: It was, yeah, for her master's in psychology.

SM: Yeah, yeah, and so she, I think Barbara really was the first recipient of that award, and I remember that Barbara was very, very happy, Barbara was a single mother with two girls to raise, and so she was struggling to continue to go to school and that kind of thing, so.

DC: And she ended up at...?

SM: Oh, yes! Well, now she's working, and just this last year, so, she accepted a job at the Veterans' Hospital in Iron Mountain, which is kind of interesting because it brings things back full circle. But Barbara actually went to the University of Kentucky, and that's where she got her advanced education.

DC: Did Dorothy ever meet her?

SM: Yes, I'm sure that she did, and they corresponded, and I know Dorothy was, you know, very encouraging and, you know, supportive of Barb, so, and that may be someone you would want to talk to -

DC: Ok.

SM: Yeah, because she could certainly fill in, you know, that -

DC: And her last name is again?

SM: Belew, B-E-L-E-W, and I have her phone number in Iron Mountain and her address, so -

DC: Ok, that'd be great given that we're going to Iron Mountain on Thursday.

SM: Oh, good, ok, and so -

DC: Yeah. I don't know if I'll be able to call her then, but I'll at least try to make contact with her.

SM: Yeah, and I don't know if you've talked to the Duerfeldts, but -

DC: Not yet. I was going to talk to Pryse, did you have anything to do with her giving that artwork to Northern, or you just –

SM: No, no.

DC: Ok. Alright, well thank you very much.

SM: You're very welcome.