

# Bringing University History to Life

*A new online history project gives voice to Rochester's past.*

*By Kathleen McGarvey*

**H**ave you ever wanted to peek behind the scenes of University history? Hear the voices of one-time leaders and alumni who experienced a very different Rochester?

The River Campus Libraries, collaborating with the other campuses, have launched a new project designed to let you do just that. The Living History Project was formally established in 2013, at the suggestion of President Joel Seligman. It's an effort to make existing oral histories, recorded beginning in the 1960s, easily accessible and to add to them with new interviews.

The site complements the new book about University history, *Our Work Is But Begun: A History of the University of Rochester, 1850–2005*, by Janice Bullard Pieterse (University of Rochester Press, 2014). While the book offers a formal account of the institution, the living history project “adds a diverse mix of people who can flesh out the history of the University,” says Mary Ann Mavrinac, vice provost and the Andrew H. and Janet Dayton Neilly Dean of River Campus Libraries.

“It’s very individual, very personal,” says Melissa Mead, the John M. and Barbara Keil University Archivist and Rochester Collections Librarian. “A University is made up of its people—and oftentimes it’s how we best respond to our history.”

Paul Burgett ’68E, ’76E (PhD)—vice president, senior advisor to the president, and University dean—has conducted several of the recent interviews. “I believe it is important to our understanding of the history to include the spoken words of those who have had the lived experience at the University, including faculty, alums, friends, trustees,” he says. “Each has his or her

own unique story, which taken in aggregate, with the stories of others, provides an exciting and informed human quilt about the University of Rochester.”


The effort “will go on and on and on as there are more people who will share their experiences as staff, faculty, and alumni,” Mavrinac says. “We’re talking not solely to the luminaries, but to everyone—a long-standing staff member, or someone who came here as a student after World War II. It adds such a rich tapestry to the history of the University, which is typically more formal.”

Inclusiveness is critical, says Burgett, a member of the project’s advisory board.

“It’s important that our subject pool be representative of the great diversity in the University, so knowing the experiences of women, of people of color, of the young, of the old, of the disabled, of the international population.

... The challenge, of course, is in there being time and resources enough to do all of these things, because those who are involved have so much on their plates. If we had an army of 20 interviewers, that would be great. But we don’t. So we do as much as we can.”

An anonymous donor has given funds to provide for hiring a researcher and the cost of travel, of transferring recordings to digital formats, and of creating transcripts.

Former University archivist Nancy Ehrich Martin ’65, ’94 (MA) has worked both as an interviewer and an annotator of interviews. “There is a huge amount of closeness to the history of the University that you can’t get any other way. You have the person’s voice and their personality—it’s a prism through which you see the University at that time. The people interviewed in the ’70s were sometimes remembering things in the 1910s, the 1920s—and it truly was a different world.” 

## Hear the Voices

The recordings from which these excerpts were drawn can be heard by visiting the Living History Project at <http://livinghistory.lib.rochester.edu>.

## 'As My First Insurrection . . .'

*Eleanor Garbutt Gilbert (1898–1984) was a member of the Class of 1919. She was interviewed in 1978 by Helen Ancona Bergeson '38. When she entered the University in 1915, she says, the students came from a radius of 20 miles and “we were most provincial and conservative. And Miss Munro, our dean”—Annette Munro, dean of women from 1910 to 1930—“attempted to keep us that way.”*

**W**e had fine professors. Except for the few who didn't accept the fact that young women were allowed at the University of Rochester. I remember how we loved Dr. Gale even if we weren't so fond of his subject, Math I. Dr. Kirk was inspiring in economics and sociology. Oh yes, I have a personal story about that subject. Miss Munro checked our schedules individually. She crossed out my sociology. Too sophisticated for me, I guess. And wrote “Spanish I” instead. As my first insurrection, I crossed out her “Spanish I” and again wrote in “Sociology,” which went undetected.

Psychology and education courses were rather deadly but they were required for school teaching and we had to have them. Oh, this time was of great excitement for two young teachers who were coming here from Harvard. Professor Perkins and Packard were excellent teachers and much beloved.

Well, since there was a war on, 1918, the surgical dressing room, Red Cross knitting on Alexander Street, the Home Nursing Course at Genesee Hospital all had much more meaning for us than did Latin and math.

We did have lots of fun. Dancing at noon to the jazz band made up of four of our classmates. There was a good theater at the Lyceum—a Shakespearean comedy came from New York for four days every year. And we would stand in the long gallery line. One afternoon, we spent the afternoon and evening there with our sandwich bags.



# A Hospital: 'A Complex Social Institution'

*John Romano (1908–1994) founded the Department of Psychiatry, where he held the title of Distinguished Professor and was chair for 25 years. Romano, together with Rochester colleague George Engel, developed the biopsychosocial model of medicine, which places health and health care in biological, psychological, and social contexts. He was interviewed by Jack End '40E around 1971.*

I've once defined the teaching hospital as one of the consciences of the medical profession. Wherever you have a set in which the questions which are asked must be answered, you have the equivalent of a conscience. And this is the sum and substance of a teaching hospital: that whatever is done, there is a special kind of accountability. One must be

accountable. One must be accountable not only to the patient, but also to the student. That if a measure is undertaken or not undertaken, there must be explicit reasons as stated for that action or inaction.

So a teaching hospital, different from any other hospital, is a hospital where certain standards are kept high in terms of the need to explain, to justify the conduct which has been taken.

Now a teaching hospital is always a more complex institution. A hospital in itself—any kind of a hospital—is a very complex social institution. And at times it seems to be almost a Tower of Babel, because of the many different kinds of persons, particularly today when there are increasing numbers of persons per patient, for example, involved in patient care.

Studies have been undertaken indicating how long a chart was and how many people saw a patient, let's say a middle-aged woman with heart disease, some 40 or 50 years ago as compared to today. Today, many, many more people see that same type of patient, many more notes are written, and there are many more paraprofessional persons involved.

So today, the hospital is an extremely complex social institution with many persons of very different backgrounds, at times appeared—they appear dissonant to each other, and it requires a degree of courage and tolerance and fortitude to help people understand something of the ventures they have in common in patient care and in teaching the young and in pursuing new knowledge.





## 'Just Go to It'

*William Warfield (1920–2002) was a member of the Eastman School of Music's Class of 1942, and returned in 1947 for graduate work. He became a world-renowned concert baritone. In 1992, he was interviewed by Ruth Watanabe '52E (PhD), the longtime librarian of the Sibley Music Library, and John Braund '53, '61W (Mas) of alumni relations. Here he tells of his dilemma—and of his conversation with school director Howard Hanson—over going to New York City to audition for a role in the musical Call Me Mister while working on his master's degree.*

I went down and auditioned for it, and they offered me right then a tour of the road company, which meant that I would have to leave school and couldn't finish the master's degree. So, I came back and I had a talk with Dr. Hanson about it, he said, "Bill, why don't you do this . . . go on it, you can always come back and finish your master's degree but this might be your entree into the career, and just go on and do that and see how that all works, and if you then find you want to come back and finish the master's degree, you can, and if things start working out for you, well, you won't need a master's degree to perform anyhow, so just go to it."

Well, it just so happens that he predicted that. By the time I came out that year later, I decided to stay in New York and just see where this was all going to take me. That's when I got with the American Theater Wing and started grooming for my debut. I did a few night club stints, I was at cocktail lounges where I sat and played and sang for myself. As a matter of fact, it was at a night club stint that I met the gentleman who actually sponsored my Town Hall debut in 1950.



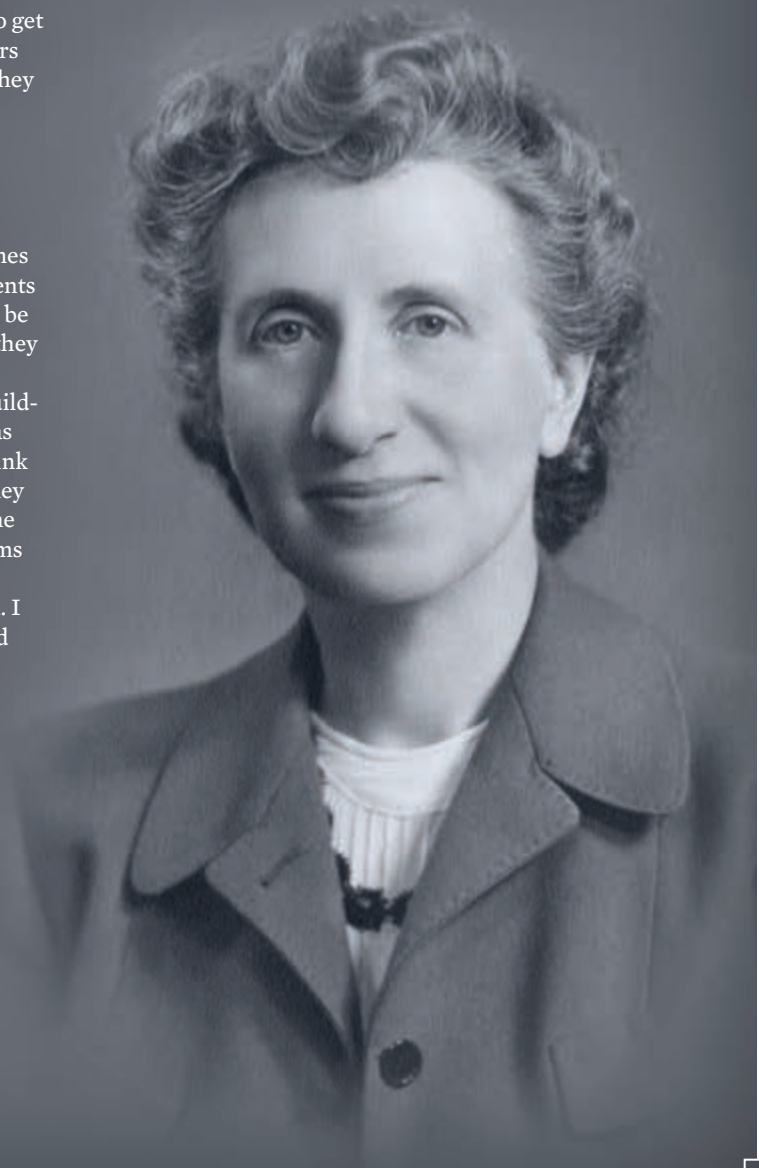
## 'The Girls Felt That Building Belonged to Them'

*Ruth Merrill (1894–1980) directed the Prince Street Campus's Cutler Union from 1933 until 1954. That year, she was named dean of women when the men's and women's campuses merged. She spoke with Jack End '40E around 1971. Here she reminisces about when the men who weren't involved in the naval program came to the women's campus during World War II.*

I have never seen such unhappy young men as when they first arrived. And I've never seen happier ones before they left. They were most helpful and I think they thoroughly enjoyed being on the campus. They took part in student government, they took part in religious activities, they took part in most everything; they were extremely helpful young men and it was possible to set aside a room for their own use so they felt they had some privacy and had a chance to get well acquainted with one another, and as those years developed I enjoyed them thoroughly and I think they enjoyed the campus.

I think that was an outstanding period which could've been an extremely difficult period on the campus. I think that when a dormitory came into Cutler Union, that was a change, that we all had to make some adjustments. I remember that many times when the girls were looking over the balcony at events that were going on in the first floor and they had to be shooed back to their dormitory. But on the whole, they were very considerate and helpful.

I think the pride that the women took in their building I'm not certain has ever been developed as far as buildings are concerned on the River Campus. I think the girls felt that building belonged to them, and they wanted to take care of it and they wanted it to be the very best building possible. I never had any problems with what nowadays we call vandalism. During Freshman Week I always talked with the freshmen. I always took them on a tour around the building and I pointed out the little interesting things. I pointed out how the dandelion had been used in the light fixtures, how it had been used in the andirons, how it had been used in many and surprising places around the building. And many the time have I heard a girl showing a stranger around the building and pointing out all these little special things.



## A 'Close Personal Connection'

*Dexter Perkins (1889–1984) came to the University as an assistant professor of history in 1914. He became chair of the department and was an expert on the Monroe Doctrine. He was interviewed by Jack End '40E in 1971, and here conjectures about the future of the University—after first demurring that a historian “always tells you about it after it’s happened.”*

I should think it would be bright. I think there are problems ahead for all the universities, of course, as a matter of fact . . . but it seems to me that we have been moving along sound lines and that the reputation of the University has been growing. I see no reason to be otherwise than optimistic except as the whole story of education is going to be complex as time goes on. The difficulties that exist in American education today come from the enormous volume of students and faculty. And this is not a criticism of any individual institution but what [there] is likely to be less of, what I think of sentimentally, is the close personal connection between the student and teacher that was possible when I came to Rochester. This again is a question of the situation, and not a comment on personalities.

