

TRANSCRIPT

SCRC Series: Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project – MC 00191

Field Notes: Susan P. Little (compiled April 23, 2009)

Interviewee: SUSAN P. (“SUSAN”) LITTLE

Interviewer: Yona R. Owens

Interview Date: Thursday, April 23, 2009

Location: Raleigh, North Carolina

Length: Approximately 22 minutes

This interview for the Lewis Clarke Oral Histories Project was conducted at the offices of Little and Little Landscape Architects PLLC. A native of Waccamaw, N.C., Susan Little attended North Carolina State University School (now College) of Design where she matriculated with her husband, landscape architect Mack Little, and received a master’s in landscape architecture in 1974. Clarke was an adjunct professor and Little was one of the few women attending the school at the time. She has had an exemplary career as a landscape architect, and in 1994, was accepted as a Fellow of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA)

YO: This is an oral history interview with Susan Little on Thursday, April 23, 2009 at her office at Five West Hargett Street in Raleigh, North Carolina and I’d like to start off with our first standard question. Just tell me a little bit about where you’re from.

SL: I’m originally from Columbus County in southeastern North Carolina, Lake Waccamaw, and grew up there my entire first eighteen years.

YO: So, how did you get interested in landscape architecture?

SL: I went to college in Lynchburg, Virginia at Randolph Macon Women’s College in art history and I heard of, I think, of landscape architecture maybe once or twice, that’s the first place I heard of it. And then I taught school after I graduated from college. I taught art and I’ve always been very interested in both art and nature. And I taught art in the City of Charlotte schools. After that, Mack Little and I were married and lived in Atlanta and we took environmental education courses at night at Emory. He had a great appreciation for the outdoors. Neither of us know exactly how we got interested in landscape architecture, but we came back to North Carolina, and I guess over the next year and a half we were motivated to come down to the School of Design and learn more about the field.

YO: You say you were motivated. What was the motivation?

SL: I think just things that had happened in our life growing up. I still can’t exactly put my finger on it, but I think just a love of the outdoors and the beauty of nature and finding a life’s work that you could be involved in that.

YO: About what year was this?

SL: Seventy two.

YO: So, was it still unusual for women to be going into landscape architecture at that time?

SL: Oh, yeah, there weren't very many women in the School of Design in any field. There were a few architects and a few people in product design and yeah, not that many.

YO: Did you feel like you were a ground breaker?

SL: No.

YO: No?

SL: We just—well, actually, Mack got the GI bill having been in the Army Reserves and so we sent ourselves back to school as a couple by various means of jobs and the GI bill and so forth. So, we were in school at the same time. We were at the School of Design in the same time.

YO: And this is what year again?

SL: We graduated in '74, '72.

YO: '72, so it was a two year program?

SL: It was actually two and a half years so it must have been the end of '71 because we graduated the end of '75 that's right, '74, excuse me.

YO: So we know what factors helped you decide to go to the School of Design?

SL: We think we do.

YO: Ok, you met Lewis Clarke as one of your professors, what courses did you take from him?

SL: I did not take—at that time he was an adjunct professor and Mack and I both I think we were in different classes that Lewis taught. He was the guest speaker at a lot of different [programs] and so we crossed paths. I was not in a formal studio with Lewis, but we were in many classes together.

YO: What makes him memorable?

SL: He was so passionate about his work. He believed so much in what he was doing and he acted a lot on principle.

YO: What principles?

SL: That it was important to make beautiful places outdoors that people could draw pleasure from.

YO: Well, do you recall any of the projects that you worked on as a student?

SL: Various studio classes, site studies, studies around campus, playground designs.

YO: Were any of the projects built?

SL: No, fortunately. [Laughs]

YO: No, fortunately? [Laughs]

SL: That's one of the things you learn is some of the most important things are the ones that never get built. [Laughs]

YO: Right. That's true. [Laughs]

SL: It's a great gift to other people that they never got built.

YO: Well, after you graduated from State then did you and Mack open your practice then?

SL: Oh, no. We've always done things in very excellent economic times. I say that facetiously. I went to work for the City of Durham in the Planning Department and continued to live in Raleigh and worked for the Planning Department for a variety of assignments. Some was grading design for the various parts of the old city cemetery over there and another was working on a small parking lot design in downtown Durham, actually in which we used reclaimed stone material, which I look back on now and that makes me really, really proud over that. But I worked over there I believe for a little over a year and a half and then I came back to NC State in the Campus Planning Office and worked with Abie Harris who was head of the campus design.

YO: What was it like working with Abie Harris?

SL: Oh, excellent. He was a great teacher as well and it was a small office so it was great opportunity to learn a lot of different subjects, interact with a lot of different architects, engineers, trustees. Buildings and grounds committee met in our office and so you got to understand a lot about how projects were put together.

YO: Probably some politics as well, right?

SL: Oh, yeah, as in all things.

YO: Abie was a great steersman, I call him because he headed up so many projects when the campus was under development. So, you were working there. That was a very interesting time.

SL: I was working there and actually—you know my grasp of dates is not very accurate—but I remember seeing Lewis Clarke coming and going through the years at all kinds of events, and certainly when I was working in the Campus Planning Office as well.

YO: How did your experience with Lewis affect your own practice, or has it?

SL: I'm quite sure it has. We take our work very seriously. We don't take ourselves very seriously, but in the office our rule is "don't take yourself so seriously, but take your work very seriously." And he always seemed to do that. He thought that—you could tell by looking at his work that he thought it was an important thing to be doing with this brief life that we all have. I remember going to Ballentine's Restaurant in Cameron Village. And every time you walked in the entrance to that place and you walked through that little courtyard and I remember [wondering] how did this place come to be? And somebody said, well, Lewis Clarke was the landscape architect for this project. And I thought, you know, somebody knew what they were doing, they saw an opportunity to make something really nice, and he cared a great deal. I guess he did that with Willie York or?

YO: When York properties had Cameron Village and let's see, Clarence Steppe was the general contractor if you can put that sophisticated term to it. But they did the innovative thing of dropping their plant material in over the railing as opposed to carrying it through the building. So they used great, large plant material to start with which was innovation at the time.

SL: It's very unusual.

YO: But that stands out as one of his more famous gardens. It's been documented more times than some of the other ones that we find. So, I'm glad you mentioned Ballentine's garden.

SL: I think I remember that there was an evergreen oak in there and that's—I think that's the first one I ever saw. I think I'm telling you right, but I remember after that we'd kind of trailed after that tree and, and looked for examples of that tree which we later found down in Pinehurst and Southern Pines, but I was not aware of that tree. But I remember what a beautiful place that was and just no matter how in a hurry you were entering that space, just going in to get something to eat, it was just a beautiful experience to see that.

YO: Which of your own projects do you consider your signature project at this time?

SL: I don't. I really can't—I can't answer that question.

YO: Haven't got a favorite one?

SL: So, no, there's so many—so much of the work here is the work of a lot of people and is really the work of almost everybody here in different parts of it so there are things I like about it. I love to see people, bring pleasure to people, and make their day better, make an enjoyable experience and now can begin to try to measure our contribution to the environment, to be able to do a better job of measuring that. We've all spent many years talking about it intuitively from the heart and now green building is challenging all of us to be able to measure the impact.

YO: This is something your firm has been working on incorporating your designs for a long time though, right?

SL: We've surely been working on it. It's a work in progress for sure.

YO: So, you're seeing some turn around now with other people following suit?

SL: No, not so much following suit but all of us just becoming aware that this is what we need to do for the next generation. So, thinking about Lewis, he taught a lot of those skills that learning to look at and learning to see. That was something I remember about his classes whether they were out in the courtyard or something I was visiting or over at his office. When we'd visit his office, he was very gracious about letting students go over there, and it was a wonderful experience to just go be in somebody's office, and hear them talk about their work.

YO: What's the one important thing to know about Lewis Clarke?

SL: The one important thing? [pause] This is a really hard question because he's such a combination, there's so many things I remember, so many parts to him. The artist, the seer, the one important thing—example, he's a great example. If I have to put it in one word, he's an example. He's an example of many things. I think he's a great example for many people to follow.

YO: That's very gracious for you to say that. What's the one important thing to know about Susan Little?

SL: You have to ask a lot of other—you ask some other people here and they'll have different versions. I don't know.

YO: Ok.

SL: I really enjoy this work. It's a pleasure.

YO: What's important to know about landscape architecture today?

SL: I think it has a wonderful opportunity to be of benefit to the world we live in.

YO: It's not passé? Some people say it's a passé profession.

SL: I think it's just beginning.

YO: How's it going to look in twenty years?

SL: How's it going to look? How's the profession going to look? How will the profession look in twenty years? I don't know how it will look, but I know that the practice is requiring people to be constant students. I know when we started practicing there was not a continuing education requirement and I can't give you that date either, but I know it was in the nineties. It was the first time there was a continuing education requirement. Now, it is common. We laugh in the office. We are beginning our education because there's so many areas that we have to be up on and our commitment here. I have no idea how many hours of continuing education people have put in all

areas in the last year. There's just—well, we do know because we've got good records and could tell you, but we were just looking at the other day at additional information on porous paving. It's hard to keep up and obviously not everybody can keep up on all subjects, but just as a group I think people will have a very active job of continuing education going on all career long. I think they have up until now, but I think it's just heating up. I think information—it's the same with all jobs—is information is constantly—is just multiplying at such a rate that I think being able to access that information and make informed decisions is going to be ever increasing.

YO: What advice would you give to students today?

SL: [pause] I'm not a very good advice giver. One asked me this question the other day. What advice would you give me? And I just said, be confident in yourself especially right now when the economy has taken such a major swing in what seems like a very short period of time. And so I would just tell them to be confident in their pursuit of study of the profession, be really active, involved. Read. [chuckles] Read like crazy and—

YO: Read what kinds of things?

SL: Great examples from the past, examples of great history, great landscape architects, great history generally but also great landscape architectural history and how it responded to the times to try to understand these really challenging times. The advice that the students were getting about two years ago and the advice they're getting today is probably really, really different. It's a challenging time, but there have been those challenging times before.

YO: So everybody survives?

SL: Oh, they do. They absolutely do. Mack and I had parents of the Depression so we carry those discussions in our mind. Mack was very happy to get in the Reserve unit and not go to Vietnam. So, then there have been four periods of major economic upheaval in the time we've been practicing. People survive and they get through it. But I would just say to the students to be confident in themselves and keep doing a great job. They have so many skills today. They have so many skills and opportunities.

YO: Well, that's all the questions I have. Would you like to add anything?

SL: Well, I don't, this sound a little bit too much like about us, but I'm more in, you know, I'll be real interested in additional information about Lewis. I believe that Lewis if I'm not wrong, I think he did some of the first planning for Mount Olive College. Is this—

YO: That's true.

SL: —ringing a bell?

YO: Yes.

SL: And in the nineties, we in this office updated the master plan for Mount Olive College and Rob Harrison here—we did that first iteration when they were undergoing their first expansion. And the spaces that Lewis had left on that campus with his planning were understandable to people down there. There could be a tendency for everybody—folks, to come along and have their own solutions to the space or that. Lewis' was so strong down there and that's been respected. So, it was fun to be able to explain to some people why he did what he did down there. So we just really [have] done an update of that master plan last year and it's still built on the bones of what he set out.

YO: He says he always designed with fifty years in mind.

SL: He did. He really did there and that is an excellent small school. They really place a great deal of importance on the quality of the outdoors and people meeting outdoors and personal relationships and so forth. So it was fun to talk to them and follow in his footsteps down there.

YO: That's wonderful.

SL: We enjoyed that.

YO: Well, I think that's all we have for today. I really appreciate you talking to us.

SL: I look forward to learning more about Lewis.

YO: Ok.

SL: I know there are a lot of stories.

YO: Yes, there are.

Transcriber: Jennifer Curasi

Date: August 7, 2009