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Oral History Interview
TAPE LOG

Please note that this is not a literal transcript. Many of the questions and answers are paraphrased and abridged. [The information within brackets was added later.]

Interviewee: Richard E. Peterson, Associate Professor, Technology Education, NCSU College of Education (and NC State M.A. in Education, 1974)

Interviewers: Robert Serow, Professor, Education Research, NCSU College of Ed.
Anna Dahlstein, NCSU Libraries Fellow, Special Collections

Date: December 4, 2003

Location: Poe Hall 608p

Length: Approx. 20 minutes

000 Dahlstein: Introductory information (same as above)

011 Serow: When and where were you born, and where did you grow up?

Peterson: I was born on April 25, 1945. I was born in Summit, New Jersey and grew up in Scotch Plains, New Jersey all through elementary, middle and high school.

016 S: What did your parents do for a living?

P: My father emigrated to this country from Sweden and he was a printer. My mother emigrated to this country from Norway and she worked as a secretary in Westfield High School. *[Their names were Ingrid and Eric Peterson.]*

026 S: How much education did your parents get?

P: My father came to this country when he was 14, so it was a rather interesting kind of experience – the whole family [of] nine went to elementary school because they came to this country and didn't speak English. They had to learn English somewhere... So the whole family went to elementary school. When my father learned enough English, he was the oldest son in the family, so he went to work. My father, over time, eventually, finished high school with what we would consider a G.E.D. and then went to some trade school associated with his printing occupation. My mother – when she came to this country, she was young enough that she enrolled and went through the entire school system: elementary school, middle school and high school.

050 S: How about your siblings – did you have brothers and sisters?

P: I'm an only child.

053 S: Could you tell us when you went into the military and about the circumstances surrounding your entry into the military?

P: When I graduated from high school, then I went to Wake Forest University, which was in Winston-Salem at that time. That was in 1963. I enrolled in ROTC – that was a common practice at the time. It turned out to be a good thing, because when Vietnam started really getting going, then one of the ways you were assured of staying in school was to continue on with the ROTC program. So that assured me that I would be able to stay in school for four years and graduate. But then when I finished school, in 1967, then I had a military obligation. I graduated in June, but then there is of course a delay [until] you go on active duty. In September I went on active duty at Fort Gordon, Georgia. I was a second lieutenant in the Signal Corps and was there for three months and then got my active duty assignment in Bad Kreuznach, Germany. That was 1967. And then I reported to my duty assignment over Christmas 1967.

086 S: How long were you in Germany?

P: I was in Germany [until September 1969]. I had a two-year commitment.

091 S: Did you have to serve in the Reserves after that?

P: I had a commitment to serve in the Reserves, but they never did call me up for that. They had a hard time finding me... My date of entry was in New Jersey, where I grew up, but I never lived in New Jersey [again]. My first employment was in North Carolina when I got out of the Army. There was a lot of confusion there in terms of where I actually was. They kept sending things to [New Jersey]. But anyway, I never ... did serve.

106 S: What did you major in at Wake Forest?

P: I majored in Sociology.

108 S: So it's now September of 1969. You're freshly mustered out of the Army. What do you do?

P: Well, I had to work. I had a family – I had a wife [*"Clem", Clementine*] and... one daughter, Amy. She was born in Germany right before I came back in May of 1969. And so of course I had to find employment. I came back to North Carolina and wound up working for Wachovia Bank. I worked there for two years.

120 S: Doing what?

P: I worked as a trust auditor. Which is not exactly consistent with a degree in Sociology, but I also had a minor in business, which gave me some accounting, and I relied on that for my first employment.

127 S: By the way, ..How does a New Jersey guy wind up in Wake Forest?

P: My mother was a secretary in the local high school [in N.J.] so she knew all of the schools all across the country. I was looking for a small liberal arts school and Wake Forest is a unique kind of school. It has a good academic reputation and on my first visit there, the people were really friendly, and it's a beautiful campus, and I was attracted to that.

136 S: That was the new campus, wasn't it?

P: Right – they moved from Wake Forest to Winston-Salem in 1956 so it was about seven years old.

139 S: OK, so it's now about 1971, you've put in two years working for Wachovia; what happens next?

P: I knew I didn't want to spend the rest of my life being an auditor and checking over people's shoulders for what they did right or wrong. I looked back to my high school experience and as I sorted through all the different possibilities, I decided what I really wanted to do was be an industrial arts teacher. So on my different visits to Raleigh in conjunction with working for Wachovia, I made contact with Dr. [Talmag B.] Young and Dr. [Delmar] Olson here, and they encouraged me to go ahead and pursue a degree in Education.

152 S: Did you sign up for the Master's program or the doctoral program?

P: The Master's program.

155 S: The GI Bill factored in here, did it not, in your financing of the degree?

P: Right – that's what really made it possible. I had two children at that time. [Amy, born May 16, 1969, and Eric, born January 28, 1971.] A wife and two children – it's not particularly conducive to going back to school. I remember conversations [in which] my parents were like, "You want to do what? You have a perfectly good job and..." They didn't understand why I would want to go back to school or how I could afford to go back to school. The GI Bill was really the difference between being able to pursue additional education and...[continuing to work in an unsatisfying job.] It would've been much more difficult without that. In fact, I'm not sure that I would've been able to go to school without the GI Bill.

167 Dahlstein: To what proportion did it cover your tuition cost and/or living cost, do you recall?

P: It didn't cover all of my expenses. I did some odd jobs – cutting lawns, and different types of things like that. We also worked as resident managers over here at Dutch Village Apartments. That helped to provide our living expenses. That, with some odd jobs and the GI Bill enabled me to go back to school.

177 S: When did you get your Master's degree?

P: It was 1974.

179 S: What did you do after your Master's degree?

P: I taught school in Virginia. I taught high school for a year and middle school for a year in Fredericksburg and Quantin, Virginia.

185 S: So you're up to about 1976...

P: That's exactly right. At that point in time... I had always realized that I wanted to work on my doctorate. But I realized that I needed public school teaching experience as well. So I had started to think in terms of working on my doctorate within a few years when, in the spring of '76, I got a call from West Virginia University. Paul Devore who probably had the best program, in my opinion, in our field, said that they had an assistantship and would I be interested? So it was a little premature, but it worked out and in the summer of 1976, we moved to Morgantown, West Virginia, and I continued to work on my doctorate.

201 S: How much of your expenses did the assistantship cover?

P: Well, you know, [assistantships don't pay very much] – It covered part of my expenses, and then my wife worked as a secretary in one of the departments at WVU. Between my assistantship, the GI Bill, and my wife working, we were able to barely survive.

209 S: So you did have money left on the GI Bill?

P: Right, the GI Bill covered most of my doctorate. The last nine months or so I had to cover myself, but with the GI Bill and us all pitching together, we were able to survive without having a large debt... And of course I had two kids who were in elementary school, so they required some attention as well.

218 S: You got a little extra money for the kids, didn't you?

- P: I don't remember that. Probably. If you had a family, you probably did get extra money.
- 220 S: Yeah, I think they paid for up to two kids, so you nailed it exactly. When did you finish your doctorate?
- P: I finished that in 1979.
- 222 S: Was that an Ed.D. or a Ph.D.?
- P: Ed.D.
- 223 S: And is that when you came here [to NC State], right after that?
- P: Right. Way back when, when I first started my Master's degree, what I always wanted to do was to teach at NC State. So as luck would have it, a job was available here, and I applied and was fortunate enough to come.
- 229 P: So I've actually been here two years longer than you – I thought you came around the same time. I got here in 1977.
- S: No, I came here in 1979.
- 232 P: And you were in the Department of Occupational Education, is that right?
- S: Right.
- 234 D: Could you specify your current position?
- P: I'm Associate Professor in Technology Education in the Department of Math, Science and Technology Education.
- 238 S: So – Any thoughts about the GI Bill? You said that it helped you, it really made it possible for you to do the Master's degree and also helped with the doctorate.
- P: I think at the time [of my service in the Army] I wasn't aware that there even was a GI Bill benefit. I certainly had a military obligation and I fulfilled that, but never really thought about the opportunities of a GI Bill. But once I started to think about going back to school, then I realized that that was a tremendous benefit that was available to people who had served in the military. So I looked into that and it certainly made it much more... made it feasible for me to go back to school.
- 247 S: Was there anybody here on campus that you spoke with about the GI Bill, somebody in Student Affairs...?

P: Right – in Leazar [Hall]. I can't remember who that was, but there was a division there that was specifically devoted to veterans and people who served in the military.

251 D: And that's where you obtained the information or was it just common knowledge?

P: No, I was working in Winston-Salem, and so there was, I suppose, some division of Veterans' Affairs [there]. I remember going to see them to investigate about the GI Bill. It was before the Web, so you couldn't figure that out on your own – you had to make some phone calls and go figure that out: what your eligibility was, and what you were entitled to. So I started there, and as I enrolled in school, then I worked with the people here.

260 S: Do we have anything else?

D: The final question we pose to many of our interviewees is: How useful a policy do you think the GI Bill may be in the years ahead? Is it something that should be continued...?

P: Well, absolutely. I think I personally benefited from that, as well as my family. I never had aspirations beyond a bachelor's degree. My family obviously revered education and they thought, "Golly, if you could just get a college education and a bachelor's degree, what more could you possibly want?" But of course it has dramatically affected my life. ... It has enabled me to do what I really wanted to do. Looking back, it's just a tremendous benefit. I think that everybody benefits from that. Of course I benefited personally, but I like to think that the people that I have taught have benefited. I think I have been able to make some difference in the lives of my students. So it's a greater benefit than just monetarily. It's a career that I would probably not have been able to engage in, had it not been for the GI Bill. And I think it's important to continue that. When you graduate from high school, it's hard to know the contribution that you can make – what your interests are, what your skills are, what your talents are. So being in the military, I certainly developed some skills there, but coming out of the military, having the GI Bill – it has made a difference in what I'm able to do today.

286 End