

00:00 I am John Harstad. I am at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Stan and Thelma Willis in Spanaway. We are about to talk with Thelma Willis about some of her early recollections in connection with Pacific Lutheran University and its founding father the Reverend Bjug Harstad.

The Willis' have graciously invited me to come to their home and talk with them this evening. I would like you to know a little bit about the Willis. One interesting fact is that they are the parents of Dr. Judy Carr. They both attended Pacific Lutheran University as students back in the 1930's, I believe. They both are also long time residents of the Parkland or Pierce County community.

Mrs. Willis is going to share some of her recollections of growing up in this area, as well as sharing some of the information she has that is pertinent to Pacific Lutheran University. Particularly, maybe, to the rededication of Old Main, which has come to be known as Harstad Hall.

To begin, I would like to ask Mrs. Willis to talk, if she would, a little bit about the man, Bjug Harstad, who is the pastor, I believe, that baptized her.

01:46 Unfortunately, no, it wasn't pastor Harstad that baptized me because I was actually born in Idaho. I think I was about two when we came over here... when my family moved back to Parkland. But, of course, we were members of Pastor Harstad's church. He was the only pastor I knew until I had almost finished eighth grade. I couldn't give you any details about his having a church service.

I distinctly remember sitting in the old church, and he was in the pulpit and that he was the pastor. For some crazy reason, and I don't know why in the world it is, at one point there was something in his sermon that I took to be "beans." My mother later said, "No, no he was talking about human beings". And why I should remember that, I don't know. It doesn't make sense. That's the kind of thing you remember when you are almost eighty. This happened a long time ago.

02:56 I think all of us have our little childhood misinterpretations of phrases and certain words.

03:04 I remember thinking of Pastor Harstad as being a very firm person as far as his religious convictions were concerned, but he was a very kind person as far as he himself was... as far his relationship to other people was. He happened to be a good friend of my grandfather, Storaasli. My mother was a good friend of his two daughters, Louise and Lydia, and because of that, maybe I thought of him more as a family friend. I thought of him as a family friend and as a pastor.

I remember we always thought the old house, the Harstad house, up on the hill, was just like the manor house of the village if you had been living over in Europe. And that was the Harstad house. I remember they were very gracious.

There was somebody there whom we called Grandma Larson. I think she lived with them for several years. At one point I believe her husband had taken Pastor Harstad's place as president of Pacific Lutheran University for a short time. His name was Reverend Tobias Larson. It was during the time... I believe it was when Pastor Harstad was doing some work down in California.

I wish I could remember more about him. I have always, looking back on him, I have always thought of his being a very great man. I have always felt I was very fortunate to have been brought up in a community where his influence was so very strong. And not only in our church, Parkland Lutheran Church, but his influence as far as founding Pacific Lutheran University was concerned.

04:55 Very, very interesting information there, Thelma.

05:00 Oh, I forgot to mention that... I think this is rather significant. I attended parochial school and unless I am very mistaken, Pastor Harstad used to be down there starting the fires in our school in the morning.

05:15 And what was the name of your school?

05:17 It was Parkland Lutheran School. And incidentally, our Parkland Lutheran School is, just this year, celebrating its 100th year anniversary.

05:25 And where was the actual school that you attended located?

05:30 The actual school, Parkland Lutheran, in later years was called Concordia Lutheran when it was joined and it became a larger school. It was joined by a group of five congregations in Tacoma. It was called Concordia. So when the property was sold, as I understand it... At that time we were living away at the Concordia Arms on Pacific Avenue. oh dear, what street would that be?

05:55 That'd be about 120...it's in the 120's, probably 126th or 127th

06:05 Well anyway, Concordia Arms I'm sure was given its name because of the fact that that was the location of the old parochial school.

06:20 You have a recollection of old Pastor Harstad coming into your school, you said, maybe starting the fire to get it warm. Do you remember some of the teachers you might have had at your school?

06:33 Well, very definitely; however, I did not have that many teachers because, for instance, my most vivid recollections are from the 5th to 8th grade. For four years I had Mrs. Hannah Strom. I say poor soul... bless her soul I should say. Not only did she teach, but she did the janitor work. She used to have us come up to her place on Saturdays and do extra projects and activities that she had. She was a widow. Had three children of her own. Living with her was her bachelor brother and spinster sister. I am sure that she had all that she could live with and more than she could take care of. But she was a tremendous person and I will always be grateful for having had the exposure to her teaching for those four years.

07:28 Her name was Hannah Strom.. is that spelled S-T-R-O-M?

07:30 Yes it is. S-T-R-O-M. Yes. Incidentally, she was the sister of Nils Hong, Professor Hong. Which leads me into how I happened to go to Pacific Lutheran University.

07:42 I want to ask you a couple of other things in connection with your church affiliation. You mentioned as we were chatting before our interview, a group called 'Willing Workers.' Do you remember what they did or who they were?

08:05 It was the 'Willing Workers.' As I remember it, they were a group of young people. Why we happened to go on Sunday evenings to those meetings, I'm sure I don't know. My parents weren't that old, well you always think your parents are real old. I don't suppose they were that old. Nevertheless, they were past the age when you'd think they would be going to young people's meetings. It was probably an excuse for a social get-together for the congregation on Sunday evenings.

But I remember, of course we ate, and that was always the most important thing. I always would set aside what I thought tasted the best and eat it the very last, because it might be a very long time before I'd get anything that good again. I remember often, after we had eaten, they would play games like 'Chatting on the Stoven.'

09:00 Was that a Scandinavian kind of folk dance? Does it refer to a dance or a type of music?

09:05 Yes. Like 'Chatting on the Stoven.' I have been told how it translates, but I don't remember now. It's the name of a certain dance. A certain song that you dance to. If I had a good voice I would demonstrate. But since I don't, I'll leave that up to your imagination.

09:33 Do you have any recollections of early church services as a child? Do you recall if the church services were held in the English language or if the minister or congregation used Norwegian language?

09:50 I know, at one time, that three services a month were in Norwegian and one in English. I'm not so sure I can actually remember back to that. But what I remember was hearing the English. I believe at the time I am recalling maybe there was one service a month in Norwegian. But it had basically been Norwegian. For instance, in my mother's day, they were all confirmed in Norwegian and the services were all in Norwegian. But a little bit farther on there was more English. The congregation was basically Norwegian. I doubt that there was anybody else in there. There may have been a Swede who slipped in. But other than Scandinavians, I doubt that at that time we had any others. The community of Parkland was basically Scandinavian.

10:59 When you began to talk in connection with Mrs. Strom, your teacher, you mentioned that she was a sister of a very important person in the early days of Pacific Lutheran University, a person by the name of Nils Hong. You and Stan, or Stan, had a story or an account of how you came to attend Pacific Lutheran University. Can you tell us about that?

11:27 In 1933, when I finished high school at Lincoln in Tacoma, I really wanted to go on to WSU. I wanted to be a music director. I wanted to be a high school music director, but those were the days of the Depression and I couldn't go away to school. But at that time, you could continue on in high school in what they called PG. You took what they called a postgraduate course. I think a big number of us who graduated from high school went back for a fifth year. But I had been in school for only 2 or 3 weeks when Professor Hong came around and spoke at an assembly. I suppose he was giving us a pep talk on PLU because...whatever. I decided I really didn't want to go to Pacific Lutheran University. It was too close to home. We lived just below the hill and I had visions of going away to school. I remember I left high school then and went and started PLU.

My father had gone to PLA [Pacific Lutheran Academy] many years before that. He had gone there just a matter of a few months for a short business course, I believe it was called. I remember Dad

taking me up to the registrar's office and getting me signed up. If I remember correctly, it was like \$350.00 for the whole year.

12:59 Has it gone up since that time?

13:02 I believe it has.

13:03 Can you tell us the name of your father?

13:07 It was Ted Daniels, or Theo M. Daniels. For years he and my uncle, Walt, had a hardware store in Parkland. At the end of Garfield Street where Garfield meets Pacific Avenue. He had met my mother years before at Pacific Lutheran Academy, when he was there as a student and my mother was working in the dining hall... or was it the kitchen? I think she probably waited on tables, or whatever. Her name was Storaasli, Deena Storaasli. At that time the woods were full of them. There were many there, I think there were maybe 5 or 6 Storaasli brothers who settled around this area. And there were many, many Storaaslis. My father and mother's marriage was only the one of the first of three such. There were three Storaaslis who married Daniels. That's digressing, definitely.

14:05 That's certainly an interesting aside.

14:07 But back to PLU. Once I got registered and classes began, I remember as we went up Old Main, on the left hand side, as you entered Old Main, that's where the Dean and Registrar's office was.

The Dean was Dean Hague. Phillip E. Hague. I liked him very much. But people shuddered. People would say, "Oh, we have to have Dr. Hague..." or Mr. Hague it was, until he got his doctorate. "We have to have Mr. Hague for class." And people would just have a fit.

After a year or two I worked in his office. I thought he was just a great person. I admired him tremendously. Incidentally, digressing again, I remember he told me one time he had come to PLU as a very young man, right out of college in order to — what he thought — get the respect of the students. He had to assume a certain dignity which was beyond his years. And he always kept that dignity. And students would remember his walking around very, very erect, his head held very high. And the kids were just scared to death of him.

15:35 You described his office as just off the main lobby, in what is now known as Harstad's Hall. Can you describe any other physical features of the layout of Harstad Hall when you attended there?

15:55 On the right hand side of the steps was the library. The two persons presiding over the library were John Stuen... no, not John... [it was] O.J. Stuen. Professor O.J. Stuen and Mr. Xavier. [Mr. Xavier] He really was a pastor. I think he went by Mr. J.U. Xavier. I believe, John, isn't there a Xavier Hall on campus?

16:25 Yes there is.

16:30 And Stuen Hall is a residence hall, which incidentally is built where the old Stuen house used to be. The streets have changed. The streets, I guess, were taken out or filled in. Anyway, that's just about the spot where their house used to be.

Getting back to Old Main, if you were to go to the left, past the Dean's office, you would have gotten to the Business Office. Paul Larson's father, Ludwig Larson, was the business manager. I believe part of the time anyway, Esther Davis worked in that office. Esther was the sister of Mrs. Stuen. And if you

had noticed, in front of the Eastvold Auditorium, there is an abstract statue, which is called ‘The Two Sisters.’ That refers to those two, Esther Davis and Agnes Stuen.

17:27 Everything we are hearing is so very interesting to me. You were a town student. You lived in the Parkland area. You didn’t get to go away to some exotic, far away place to go to school. But you got to go to PLU. And some of the students at PLU, I would guess, lived in dormitories even at that time. Can you tell me what the residential scene was like? Where did the students reside?

18:00 The dormitories, as I remember, were up, must have been on the third floor. There is a third floor, right? Yes, they were on the third floor. And I wonder if they were a little bit at the ends... I don’t know if we used all of the second floor for classrooms. I’m quite sure that there were some dorm rooms on that floor too. And, of course, there were very, very, strictly boys and girls sections. You didn’t cross over the line. I suppose you did, but you weren’t supposed to cross over the line. We dorm students had a room down in the basement... Oh, I’m sorry, day students. Oh, I should say, we Delta Ro Gamma girls. We always got such a kick out of that. Someone had given the day room girls, DRG, the great title of Delta Ro Gamma. So our headquarters were in a basement room down in the north corner... east corner of the building. Not that we didn’t have any good times. We had great times. I really never regret... I would have liked to live someplace in a dorm. I lived so close to the college. It really was fun. I would drag these, well, would invite kids down. And I remember my mother making waffles and fixing foods evenings, or Saturdays or Sunday evenings, or whatever it was. There were many advantages to being a day student. But dormitory life is something I never experienced and I’m sure I missed a great deal.

19:40 Even though you may not have been living in the dormitory, what kinds of activities took place for social activity for students in your day at PLU?

19:55 Well, of course, there were many organizations, clubs that held meetings and outings of various kinds. Two or three all-college affairs. One, a freshmen initiation, was always a very impressive part of an entering person’s life. I particularly remember that of course, because somehow or another, I was given the assignment as my part of the initiation, of scrubbing the front steps of Old Main with a toothbrush. May Day was another great celebration during the time I was at PLU. The festivities were held, the court so to speak. The queen held court down in front of the sign that says “Build for character” down on the front lawn. There was an annual campus day, a clean up day. We all did our share, or tried to do our share of picking up trash and all that sort of thing. It ended with a picnic in the afternoons. That was always fun. Of course football games. I believe we used to go down to... I believe we went down to Lincoln... no, Stadium Bowl, for games. Of course it was the Parkland Pebbles. They practiced out on the... in the back of Old Main.

21:35 Who was the Parkland Pebbles?

21:37 Well the Parkland pebbles was...they played on the Parkland Pebbles. That then was the name of the field. At the end of the field there was the Kicking Post. It was out there pretty close... fairly close to where the new music building is going in I think. And it was a favorite spot for the twosomes to wander to. Who knows what romantic sweet things were said down by the Kicking post.

22:05 Physically, what was the kicking post?

22:09 Actually, it was stile as I remember it. It was leftover, I don't think there was even a fence there anymore. It was leftover from the days, I suppose, when there had been a stile. There had probably been cattle roaming around and fenced in.

22:22 Was it a concrete structure?

22:23 No. It was just wood as I remember at that time.

22:25 Now, Mrs. Willis, as you attended PLU, did you meet any interesting young men yourself? Did you perhaps, ever stray over to the Kicking Post?

22:41 Oh, maybe I might have once or twice. But I didn't meet my husband there at that time. No. He was there after I was.

22:53 Oh, OK. I thought perhaps you'd met at PLU.

22:58 No. No, I didn't. But I was there at a time when there were some people who were very good friends who later came very prominent as far as PLU. Milt Nesvig started there the year I did. He was known as Mr. PLU.

23:29 Tell us a little bit about Milt in your student days. Do you have any recollections you can share?

23:10 Well, Milt was one of the kids who used to come down to the house and used to have waffles and this and that. He was one of the gang, so to speak. He was a PK, preacher's kid. There was just a whole bunch of PKs there. Well, we weren't very many. I suppose we were some, over three hundred, in the whole school, I guess. The percentage of PKs was pretty high.

Wilda Wilkestead, who passed away just last week, Wilda Wilkestead Young also was one of us. One of our gang, so to speak, who started there in '33. Another one I remember, Eldon Anderson, was in that class. Who else was there...Roland Swanson.

24:19 Paul Larson.

24:22 No. Paul Larson was younger. Paul Larson didn't come along 'til later.. He probably was there at high school at that time. Because Pacific Lutheran College had a high school as well as college, of course.

But some of the well-known names as far as the professors are concerned. I have always thought it was so wonderful to have been there at that time. I had mentioned Xavier. Kreidler, Mrs. Kreidler was the Dean of Women. There is Kreidler Hall. At that time, Mrs. Kreidler was a grandmother of the politician, Mike Kreidler. I mentioned Stuen, and Hauge and Dr. Pflueger.

If I was to write something for *Reader's Digest*, the most unforgettable character I've ever met, I think it would have to be Dr. Pflueger. He was absolutely remarkable. The man was intellectually a brilliant person. He had finished college when he was 16 or something like that, and then he had gone on to medical school. He was a medical missionary when he was a very young man. In addition, he taught religion classes at PLU. But he also sought philosophy and fine arts. To hear him describe something in the fine arts fields was just amazing. I can still visualize his acting out this and that when he was describing something he had read or some piece of sculpture. Incidentally, he was a sculptor. There is more than one church in Germany, I think, that has some of his sculpted works. He was a specialist in growing irises. I think he — what do you say when you create new varieties? He was known as an authority on irises. He was the debate coach. I happened to be on the debate team. He was the debate coach when I was on the team. He was just wonderful, just so sharp.

26:40 Talk about a renaissance man! Did you have any outstanding teachers that you have any other recollections?

26:49 Oh, well, any and all of them. Mr. Xavier had a little goatee, and a goatee in those days was a little unusual. He was kind of a little... not prissy exactly. But, you know quite... how can I describe it except with my hands. Anyway, one day — I worked in the library — he came by me and he left a little note on my desk and it said, “Thelma, petticoat hangs in back. JUX”. This was Mr. Xavier.

Ramstad was great, he was just everybody’s professor. Professor Ramstad. I had him for summer school one time. I had almost no science. I had no science, absolutely no science in high school and not anymore than I could help in college. But I had to take chemistry one summer. Just one fellow and I took chemistry. Just the two of us. “Ramy” was there for the first hour and left us to do our experiments while he went out and had another class. I skipped every experiment that said, “Use the bunsen burner” because I didn’t have a clue as to what I was supposed to be using. I don’t think “Ramy” ever got, to his dying day every time he saw me he would ask me about the bunsen burner and something or other about chemistry.

Mr. Hinderlie — there’s a Hinderlie Hall, too — was the custodian. He was just a tremendous person. Very soft spoken, Very slow speaking, but a friend of everybody’s. His son was Ray Hinderlie. His daughter was Ida Hinderlie who married Henry Berntsen and it’s their son who is on the staff at Pacific Lutheran University now.

29:15 Dave Berntsen.

29:16 Right. Also, if I remember the cook in the kitchen. I had almost nothing to do with her because I didn’t eat my meals there. But it was Mrs. Thomson. Tina Thomson I think her name was. She was an institution in herself also.

They were great. We had a good group of teachers and people working. Those people worked for little or nothing. It was said they practically couldn’t keep body and soul together. But for the love of the University and for the love of Christian Education they continued on in spite of the fact that many of them had quite good offers at other places. They were just a dedicated bunch. One wonders if the same motive is present in all universities now.

30:17 I have also heard it said that, in addition to the faculty and staff, there were some terrific support people in the Parkland community. One name that comes from mind is the Dahl family. Can you tell us something about the Dahls?

30:35 If you were to look across from the present post office, almost directly across the street, you’d see this dilapidated, old building, which at one time was the Dahl Grocery Store. I believe way back, I believe that was put in in the early days as a place to gamble. But I think that that part of it was snuffed out very soon. But the Dahl Groceries had that and I think they lived upstairs. During the Depression days I understand that the PLU profs could go there and get their food and run up bills of hundreds of dollars. I don’t quite know how the Dahls managed to float many loans, so to speak, to all those people. They themselves must have been in tremendous debt. They had always been good supporters of Pacific Lutheran University.

I remember one of the homecomings many years ago when Mrs. Dahl was honored particularly because of the things she and her husband had done for the faculty years ago.

One of their daughters was Irene Dahl. Irene Dahl-Hageness. And she, for years, was the secretary to Dr. Hauge, who was both Dean and Registrar. She was like Mrs. Dean and Mrs. Registrar, practically. She was in his office for many years... He has two sons who are still living in this area — Stan and Orwoll — Orwoll passed away, but the other one is...

32:22 I have only met Stan.

32:24 Oh my goodness, I can see...maybe I'll think of it later. They have always been Pacific Lutheran University boosters as far as I know.

32:36 The way you describe the faculty and the students and others back in the Parkland and in PLU of your day does sound a little bit like the school today. Although, probably many times, many times over the numbers of people. But I see the same kind of caring and close knit caring community among people on campus today. My father, the Reverend. Adolph Harstad, when he came to visit the campus, never failed to comment on how very friendly and cordial that everybody on that campus was to him.

Mrs. Willis, thanks so much for your time and for this interview. You've been most gracious.