

An Interview with the 2001 Carolyn Shaw Bell Award Recipient

Professor Eva Mueller

Professor Emerita of the Department of Economics

Research Scientist of the Population Studies

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Interviewed by Sherrie Kossoudji, Associate Professor, Social Work, University of Michigan, who completed her dissertation under Professor Mueller.

Edited for the Newsletter.

In the Beginning

My mother had a Ph.D. in Chemistry, which in those days was very unusual. She really wanted to be a doctor. They talked her out of it and said a woman couldn't be a doctor because it was unfitting for a woman to look at corpses. After she got her Ph.D. World War I had started. She worked for about two or three years, maybe, first in the lab. She finished her lab work and then she was hired by a big chemical trust in Germany as their first woman chemist. She was working for my father, became engaged to him and married. In those days in Germany a woman couldn't work if she had a working husband. So she had to quit and she never resumed work, but she always talked about it. She had her mind set that even though now she was a housewife and had three children, they must all get Ph.D.s. My sister got a Ph.D. in education, got married and taught at Arizona State. It wasn't easy to get two people teaching in the same university, and it still isn't easy.

My mother was the main influence in my decision to get a Ph.D. There was also this

woman teacher who got me interested in economics, but that's not the whole story. Because of the Depression it impressed me that what the world needed was to rescue its economies. In my class (1942) at Smith I think only one person went on to a Ph.D. out of 500.

After Smith

During the war you couldn't go to Harvard because they more or less closed down the economics department because all of the faculty was away in Washington working on the war effort. They couldn't maintain enough of the faculty to take in students. During the war, when I couldn't study, I got a job at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York through Smith College. The men were all leaving and they were asked if they had any women graduates who could work in their research department. Three Smith graduates went there. One left after a year on the grounds that she didn't meet enough men because they had all gone to war. She joined the WAVES (you know, that was the women's part of the Navy). I and the other woman remaining were advanced very quickly because there were no men. The other woman became

the First Assistant Vice President of a bank in New York and the first woman who ate in the Officer's Dining Room of New York Fed. I stayed until the war was over and then quit to go back to school.

Graduate School

Harvard had made a decision at that time to admit only veterans unless there was a special reason. My boss at the Federal Reserve Bank, George Garvey, introduced me to one of the Fed's Vice Presidents, Dr. Williams, who worked at the bank maybe one-third of the time. He was a Professor at Harvard. Garvey explained that I had applied and was turned down, so Dr. Williams said, "Oh, we can fix that." Three days later I had a letter saying I was admitted. That was thanks to my boss and thanks to Dr. Williams.

It's nice to have somebody who sort of sponsors you and is your patron saint. George Garvey was that and, later, George Katona.

Harvard had admitted about 80 men and about six or eight women in economics. Some of the women had some special connections,

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like they were engaged to somebody whom the department valued. Some were just floating around, like me. Probably more than half didn't finish. The man I wrote my dissertation under was Alvin Hansen, who, at the time, was the number one Keynesian in the U.S. He was kind of fatherly; he had a daughter who was also getting her Ph.D. in economics. She didn't finish as she got married.

While writing my dissertation I needed money. I implied I could teach and I got a job at the University of Buffalo. I had huge classes: 40 to 60 students. I did that for two years and I made no progress on my dissertation. In those days they didn't have teaching fellows to grade papers. So I went back and finished. I was lucky because I could always ask my father for money.

Job Search

The Chair of the Economics department at Harvard said that economics was not a field for women so he couldn't help me get a job. I don't know if he knew that I had worked at the Federal Reserve. To get my first job after Harvard I wrote some letters to people whose stuff I had read and thought they would be interesting to work for. One was George Katona. He happened to know George Garvey, for whom I had worked at the Federal Reserve, so he wrote to him and asked if I would be a plausible candidate. That's how I came to Michigan to the Institute for Social Research. I wanted to go to the Economics department, but they would not accept me. Then I was sort of on the waiting list. John Lansing and, I think, even Jim Morgan, were on the waiting list ahead of me.

They eventually got to me. I always wanted to be in economics.

At Michigan

I had one rule that I would impose on students. The main thing was to go ahead and finish your work because someone, e.g., NIH, monitored how many people didn't finish the fellowships. (Interviewer remarked that one of the emphases with everyone was "take no more than eight months to finish.") I didn't want students unless they were going to finish. (Interviewer remarked that Professor Mueller worked hard to make sure that everybody did finish.) I helped them with my advice and I think almost anybody who was on a fellowship finished, except maybe one person.

In the first place, because there's no difference in my mind between men and women, I encouraged both equally. There was no preference given to women. I told them what they had to do to get ahead, and gave them advice and told them whom to see and who could help them.

I knew that I did well and that I would eventually get promoted. I did really feel confident about that. I can't remember that I ever thought about quitting, at least not in a serious way. Everybody thinks about it once or twice but I was lucky that I got into the Survey Research Center which was a very secure place. I stayed one-third time there and two-thirds time in Economics when I could. I was an Associate Dean for four years. If you stayed more than four years you really lost academic status. So I never wanted to do it longer.

I taught micro-economics and business

cycles, which tied in with my interest in the Depression. I stuck with that for a long time. Then, by chance, I was sent on consulting assignments abroad. So I found places in the world that needed me more. Doing a survey in India was how I started thinking about population and economics. This was a completely new and non-existing field in the sixties. I became involved in economic demography. People in those days were so much more optimistic about population issues. I never became involved in fertility issues, but, instead, worked on developing issues.

After Michigan

In those days you had to retire at age 69, only I waited a year too late. They let people stay. People think now that's not good. Most of my students hadn't finished their dissertation when I retired. You know when I took them on I thought they'd be finished by then. They always took longer than I expected. So I still had a lot of students, but that has petered out. I still am invited to give a paper on this or that, but that is petering out too.

Finally, Professor Mueller was asked if she would have done anything different with her career. After I completed my dissertation I spent my whole career at Michigan. I was well known throughout the university. Being one of the few senior women I was available and served on many committees. I was pretty well settled, there were times when I complained as you would on any job, but nothing big happened that I would have changed.