

Interview with Virginia Vasen

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Interviewer: Phil Pogue

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Pogue: This is Phil Pogue. We're in Canton, Illinois. It's June 26, 2013. We're doing the Presidential Library project on the *History of the Illinois Community College system*. Today we have with us Virginia Vasen who is going to be talking about the experience at Spoon River College. So at this time, Virginia, we're happy to have you be a participant in our project. Could you give us some background about yourself, your family background, educational experience and work experience?

Vasen: As Phil has already stated, my name is Virginia Vasen. I was born Virginia Lundgren in Princeton, Illinois. I was born and raised there. I went to elementary school in the country and graduated from Manlius High School in Manlius, Illinois in 1952.

Pogue: What work experiences have you had?

Vasen: Right after high school, while I had a scholarship to Western Illinois University, I did not use this. I went back to work in the school district office, which had five elementary schools, a junior high and a high school. I was their secretary from '52 to '55, when I married.

I married in '55 and moved to Canton, Illinois. I went to work at International Harvester and moved [advanced] there every chance I got. I moved up the ladder, and within a year I was the chief inspector's secretary. I left there on a pregnancy leave. My son was born in May of '59. He was six months old when the superintendent of schools of the Canton School District

came to my husband at a Christmas holiday basketball tournament and said, “I know you have a new baby, but I also know your wife worked in a school district before. Would she consider helping get the community college started, which had been voted in in October of ‘59? If she’s interested at all, tell her to come see me.” That was Christmas of ‘59.

In January of 1960 I started to work for the college. My first job was to write a college catalog. As you know, we did not have the technology that you have today, so everything was typed on mimeograph stencils, run off, and I actually pulled students out of the study hall, football players, to run around the table and collate my new college catalog.

There was all kinds of things to be done, besides the catalog. We had different types of forms to be made, applications to design, health records, etc. So, on the first day of March of 1960, we took our first student application.

Pogue: What kind of assignments have you had in your years at Spoon River?

Vasen: Well, I started out as a secretary. I’ve had different titles throughout the years. I was a recorder; I was a registrar; I was back to recorder and then back to registrar. But I always had the student records and their grades. I also was the college treasurer. I was the college board secretary after we became a Class I community college. Well, actually before that, because I became their secretary when we separated in 1966.

We had always been a part of the common school district, just grades thirteen and fourteen. When Earl Bishop [College President Earl C. Bishop] came to the college, we had special separate board meetings from the school district. Then in January of ‘67—because he came in the summer of ‘66—I picked up all of the bookwork, all the bookkeeping [and was], you know, the recording secretary for the Board of Trustees.

So, I’ve been admissions clerk; I handled all the immigration students, the foreign students, the veterans, which we had a lot coming back from service. So I’ve kind of worn a lot of hats throughout the timeframe [while] I was there at Spoon.

Pogue: Why was there interest in creating a junior college in Canton before the Junior College Act of ‘65?

Vasen: Partly because there were a lot of servicemen coming back. Yes, we had a period of time where [International] Harvester was going strong; Caterpillar [Inc.] was going strong; the mines were going strong here. However, there were still a lot of people in Fulton County that had not had more than say, an eighth grade education. So they began looking at what can they do.

Dr. W.I. Taylor, who was on the Board of Governors for Higher Education, had a vision like fifty years ahead of his time, I guess you might

say. He thought it would be advantageous for us to look into the possibility of a community college, because those people, sometimes they would get a GED [general education diploma], but they were not able to go on to college, to a four-year school. They weren't ready to do that. So he was very instrumental in getting people working towards getting a community college for our area.

Pogue: Now, you talked about it being a part of Canton High School—

Vasen: Right.

Pogue: Was it physically in the same building?

Vasen: We actually started out in the Canton High School, yes. [The] college was formed in '59; it was voted in, and they hired Dean Phillip Osborn in December. Then I hired on in January. He was the guidance counselor at the high school. The first six months, he was still the guidance counselor, so I was doing a lot of his leg work and getting things up and running and that kind of thing, ready to go.

When the fall came, we moved upstairs. We had four classrooms, a couple of offices and a library. And then, what was a room that they housed like their band uniforms or choral robes in? [That] became our student lounge. There were just a lot of pipes running through the ceiling and everything, but it gave the students a place to be.

Because we were in the high school, and we only had those four classrooms, we had to spill over into the high school classrooms, especially for labs, like science labs or the office occupational labs, things of that type. So we might have classes at 7:00 or 7:30 in the morning and maybe classes from 4:00 to 5:00 in the afternoon, or 4:00 to 6:00, because we had no place else to go, and we had to work around their schedule. That's part of what and why we were working in conjunction with the high school.

Pogue: Before the Junior College Act was passed in '65 were those the arrangements with Canton High School for those five or six years?

Vasen: No, because we moved downtown. We kind of outgrew that area. So we had some buildings downtown, as I stated before, because we had become, of course, a Class II because grades thirteen and fourteen were still a part of the common school district. When that Act came through, some people thought we should, other people thought we shouldn't work towards becoming a Class I.

Dean Osborne left our campus and went to Sauk Valley, and Earl Bishop was hired. He came here as a dean, and it was not a very long period of time before he was named president; they changed the title. Between he and Dr. Taylor, they very much were pushing to become a Class I.

You mentioned Gerald Smith earlier, from the Illinois Community College Board. Of course, Gerald kept telling Earl that this wouldn't happen, because we just didn't have the population. We didn't have this, and as Earl said, "It was doom and gloom." (chuckles) It became necessary to form a community advisory committee, and that committee helped to get the word out to the people that we needed to do this. We needed to bring this up to a higher level and to separate not only the academics, but the financial, all of this from the common school district.

So, it was a long road, a big battle, but with the help of the Citizens Advisory Committee... There were actually about fifty-six people involved in that committee. We had people that were parents; we had people who were professionals, community leaders, just a plain average citizen, but they helped with our publicity and talking to people and whether their student might be interested in going.

We needed not only the academic, who might transfer on, but we needed some technical, some vo-tech [vocational-technology] things for students who weren't maybe able and weren't interested in a liberal arts or associate in science degree, but needed a vo-tech, occupation-type of things. There were a number of people, as I said, that were involved in that.

One of the people was Mary Wagner. She stated that she was amazed and could not believe that the average level of education obtained in Fulton County was only the seventh grade level. She was really shocked, and it made her more determined than ever to help convince the people that we needed a junior college that was affordable and easily accessible.

Pogue: Prior to the Junior College Act, when you were part of Canton High School, what kind of courses did you have? You mentioned that you had four classrooms reserved, and you were sharing labs and vocational courses.

Vasen: Well, we started out with a straight liberal arts program. When I wrote that first catalog, I felt like, What better place to start. So I called a friend I had at the University of Illinois and patterned our liberal arts program after their liberal arts program, because I felt like it wouldn't matter what university you went to, a straight liberal arts program should be able to transfer to any of the four-year universities. You had your traditional freshman comp [English composition]; you had maybe a speech class; you might have had a language class, history, geography, soc. [sociology], psych [psychology], some science classes, you know, the basic math classes, things of this type.

Pogue: You talked about the Junior College Act helping to break the relationship with Canton High School, but you said not necessarily all were in agreement. What were some of the reasons why people might have been hesitant to break away from Canton High School?

Vasen: I'm not really sure why they felt that. I don't know whether they thought that we should remain and why we should remain, but I don't know whether they were being a little selfish and not wanting to share it with outside of Canton itself. Of course, we kind of felt like it should be maybe part of Fulton County. So that's why we worked very, very hard to convince the people that yes, we do need... Not only do we need a community college, we need to update it and become separated from the high school district, so we could bring in some of the other territories. Like I said, there were some, not only at the local level, but even at the state level, that were kind of a doom and gloom for us. However, we were persistent and (phone ringing). Oh, I'm sorry. (brief pause)

Pogue: As far as the other communities that were going to be considered for joining a new community college, what were those areas?

Vasen: Well, like I said, we had this Citizens Advisory Council, and one of the fellows on this committee was Chet Claudon. When we decided we wanted to try for the Class I status, he said that our job as a committee was to sell it, market it, and lobbying for the community college of becoming a Class I. But we had obstacles standing in the way. We didn't have the needed population or a high enough assessed evaluation for a Class I classification.

We also didn't have a proper procedure or facility, so we went on to look at... like nobody wanted their taxes raised, but we did begin looking at Macomb. Then we [explored] Rushville and Balyki and Havana. We did work hard to get that, the concerns of the people. Most of them were, like I said, the taxes. Nobody wanted their taxes raised.

Dr. Taylor was very much a visionary. He realized that this world of education was changing and that we needed, as Canton and the surrounding communities or area, to change with it. It's the old adage, let's get with it. (chuckles) We didn't want to die on the vine. Even though we were a community college, formed before Illinois Central College in Peoria, before Carl Sandburg College in Galesburg, before John Wood in Quincy and all of those, we had students from all of those areas for our first several years.

But those areas began taking away from our eastern, northern section, some of our southwestern regions. So we needed to go south and west, even though [there was] Western Illinois University in Macomb. We felt that many of those students maybe started out but didn't do too well.

So there were a number of those that we felt we could serve there, as well as the local students over there. Basically, that, I guess, would be one of the things. And even though Springfield was a little concerned and didn't feel maybe we would make it, we decided we were going to prove them wrong.

Once our vote came up for our community college to become a referendum for the Class I status, it ended up that Dr. Taylor, Hearl Bishop and myself were the only ones left after all of ... We were waiting for all of the ballots to be brought in. We knew right away that this had passed, that we had passed the referendum, and we would become a Class I Community College. In fact, Gerald Smith called Hearl Bishop about 4:00 in the morning and said, "I understand your referendum passed." Mr. Bishop said, "Yes, it did. I told you it would." So there we were; we were up, running, ready to go.

Pogue: What other school districts became part of that original community college?

Vasen: Actually... You mean high school districts?

Pogue: Um-hmm.

Vasen: Well, basically all of Fulton County. Avon petitioned out eventually, because they wanted to become a part of Sandburg District, but the rest of... The eastern part of Farmington School District became a part of Illinois Central Community College, but we had the majority of Fulton County.

Pogue: You talked about adding on Macomb and then the Rushville area later and then the Balyki area. Were there any issues with those groups joining the college?

Vasen: I don't think a lot of issues. We also added Havana School District, as well. I know that Hearl Bishop was out campaigning. I don't know how many speeches he might have given to different organizations in the different areas that we were trying to annex, were trying to make it so that we could become a Class I institution, because we needed the population, as well as the evaluation, that kind of thing.

Pogue: You now have a larger community college, beyond just the Canton High School boundaries. How did the college get renamed?

Vasen: This was done at the July Board meeting, and there were like six suggestions made and considered for the naming of the college. President Bishop presented this list of actually five. One was Western Illinois College; one was Illinois College; one was West Central College, Robert F. Kennedy College and Spoon River College.

We felt like that Spoon River ran through our district and that the board president, Dr. Taylor, [noted that] the names and all for printing of the school [were] being held up until they put a name to the college. So it did not take them very long. They didn't hassle very long over choosing a name, mainly because the Spoon River runs through our district, and they felt like that was the best suited name for our area. It fit the general tone of a general community college and that kind of thing. So I guess that's the way... They all kind of felt it was logical, so that's the way it basically was named.

Pogue: You said that you began work in the Canton High School. You then moved down to downtown Canton, and eventually you would move to a new campus. How did that come about?

Vasen: When we moved downtown... By that time, we had some vocational, technical classes. We had a building that housed [a] farm machine technology program, down on Fifth Avenue; we had an auto mechanics program that was housed down on Cherry Street. Our library and bookstore and our science lab were in Kuchen Hall, which was an old bakery. Part of our farm machine program was down on Fifth and part of it was there, adjacent to Dahm Hall on the corner of First and Elm. And then we had the Jamison Building, which was down on another corner of Pine and First Avenue. That housed our bookstore and classrooms. Dahm Hall housed our main counseling offices, our student dungeon, or their lounge, which was in the basement of Dahm Hall, and the top two floors were classrooms.

So we had moved into all that territory, all those areas. Then as we formed in the community college Class I, we still were needing more buildings, more area, because we were scattered. So then they had the referendum that passed and sold the building bonds.

At that point, I was the school treasurer and signed all the building bonds for both phases of the community college campus, as to where they are now. But we built Taylor Hall and the Centers Building first. In the second phase, we built Engle Hall and the farm machine or agricultural building.

Pogue: How was the spot determined, were there—

Vasen: Well, here again, there were a number of places, looks, thoughts, everything, and they even had [an aerial] view. The district now had over 950 square miles. It encompassed part of Fulton County, parts of Mason and Knox County, and of course, Canton had the largest population area.

They were trying to consider the present programs and programs that we might add later on, easy access according to highways and housing options, because we have no dorms. That was a no-no. So they were looking at geographic locations and accessibility and physical characteristics and the public utilities and services and things like this. I think, if I recall, we had kind of a point system. To be truthful, I was not in on all of that, even though I did a lot with the recording of the board minutes, etc., and all the architects and all the plans in that respect.

However, Jamison's had owned this one building, and they had agreed that they would sell [it to] us for... I forgot exactly, and I don't have it here, exactly what it cost us, but maybe a dollar; I don't remember for sure. It was not very much. It was a gift to the college from them. They live on a farm adjacent to it. They have, I think it is a 130, 160 acres, and that's how we

ended up with that. But we can never have... It would never be mined out there, and it cannot [be sold].

Pogue: What have been some of the unique events that have taken place at the college during your tenure there?

Vasen: Oh my. Well, we've had a number of cultural events. Just recently there was an article in our local paper relative to... When were The Doors here? They played here in... I've forgotten; I want to say '67. And the Chad Mitchell Trio was here, of which John Denver was a part of. We've had local politicians here. We've had local plays, etc. I don't know, just the fact of different dedication ceremonies for the different buildings, students coming back, like a twenty-five year anniversary or a thirty-year anniversary. We had a fifty-year anniversary open house.

Some of those things are interesting, and it's wonderful to see some of these students come back. I talked to a student this morning. He told me that the third generation... He went to Spoon River College; his daughter went to Spoon River College, and his granddaughter or grandson—I've forgotten which—is now a graduate of Spoon River College. So it's wonderful to see that.

Pogue: As to your duties as a trustee recording secretary, what responsibilities did you have, and did they change over the course of time?

Vasen: Well, you have your board meetings, and each board meeting minutes must be typed up and made available to all of the board members and a set kept on record. Of course, as the treasurer, I also had a financial report every month, during the period of time that I served as the treasurer. I don't know that they changed very much, except that when we had a board meeting, we might start at 7:00, and it might be midnight before it's over. I told someone just recently, they don't know what a board meeting is; they start at 6:00, and they're done easily by 8:00.

Of course, we were building and making plans and going over things with architects and a lot of planning and things to get, not only Class II finalized but Class I finalized, buildings built, all of these things. So it did take more time than it does now.

Pogue: What responsibilities did you have as the college treasurer?

Vasen: Well, as I said, I had a financial report every month, and I had a number of different accounts to reconcile. When we were building, I signed all the building bonds a couple of different times when we sold building bonds. I had all the payroll to take care of. We got that switched over from manual to computer, but computers make mistakes.

The computer itself doesn't make mistakes, but humans do, and we all are human, so we all have to admit to our mistakes. I know I sat up one evening, because I had to do it here at home; I didn't have the time as registrar; some of my treasurer's work I had to do at home. I was looking for a \$10,000 error and finally found it, after having to go back and start completely over, because they had voided a check, rewrote it in the computer and didn't pull it out.

Pogue: How were the finances for Spoon River? You said that one of the concerns, originally from Springfield, was that because you had a lower assessed valuation than some of the other community colleges and a lower population, you weren't certain if you'd have the necessary tax base?

Vasen: That's the reason we had to increase our size, because that would help to increase our tax base.

Pogue: From your viewpoint as registrar, what challenges did the college have when you added new territory, like you mentioned Macomb or Rushville or Havana or Balyki? Were there some unique issues that had to be dealt with as you added new territory?

Vasen: As for as the registrar was concerned? We had offices in those areas, but the final paperwork all came through our office. I made trips, at least twice a month to Macomb, once a month to our other offices. I'd work my full day at the Canton Campus. I might leave here at 3:00 and go to the other offices and would work from 4:00...The last appointment I would let them make was 9:00, because by the time I finished, it would be close to 10:00, and I still had to drive home.

But in handling those duties, I would take care of anyone who wanted to graduate, who had problems, they thought, with grades of any kind. I took care of veterans, their problems or paperwork. I took care of foreign students, their paperwork, etc. So there were a number of things. If they had problems in between times, that I couldn't handle by phone, I made additional trips.

Pogue: You talked about some of the challenger during your time with the college, obviously getting formed from Class II to Class I, the building construction. What were some of the other biggest challenges facing Spoon River?

Vasen: Partly, a big change was made when we went from everything being done by hand or on the typewriter. We went to the computer, but we had a key punch system. Then eventually we went to an on-line system. So, over the period of time where I had to record a student's grades all by hand, I went through the key punch...I actually took a key punch class, so I knew what those holes were, if they'd been put in there correct by the computer center.

Then, when we went to on-line, [I] was able to do that, so that...I didn't want to have my computer yelling at me, telling me, "You can't do

this.” I had too many things to do. I wanted to be able to do it and go on to the next thing that needed to be done. So, by the time I left, I could print my own transcripts from my office.

If a student requested a transcript, I could print it from my own office. I didn’t have to go pull the record and make a photocopy or contact the computer center and ask them to run them at night for me to do the next day. So, it was a challenge, but it was also self-rewarding, because I was able to be of more service to the student. (coughs) Excuse me.

I never told a student that they could not graduate unless I already had an alternative plan for them. “Why didn’t I come to your office before?” I said, “But my office door is always open.” Some have said, “I would never had graduated, if it weren’t for you.” Well, I didn’t like to tell them “No.”

Pogue: As to the community, how well has the area now served by Spoon River accepted the college?

Vasen: I think very much so. They have a lot of students who I say would never had gone on to college [but] have done so. They [the students] think this is a good starting point. Also, the college is helping the community, because of some of the businesses that have come into town, such as the Cook Medical. We help do some testing for them and providing the college—

The community has accepted the college and respect[s] that the students coming out of the college, if they don’t go on to college, [a] four-year school, they’re trained to do a job. There have been more jobs formed in the community. And we’re helping some of the businesses train some of their people, not only here with Cook Manufacturing, but in Macomb with the Pella Window thing, and there’s a place in Havana; I cannot tell you the name of it, but they’ve helped train some of those people.

Pogue: Has the college had to run referendums since the original formation?

Vasen: You know, I can’t remember. I don’t remember anything recent. There is always a tax thing, as the budget and the tax levies come out, but as far as a large referendum, I don’t think we’ve had another referendum.

Pogue: How has the college worked with the four-year institutions, such as Western Illinois University?

Vasen: We have an agreement with Western for transfer people and a similar one—I don’t know if it’s quite exactly like the one at Western—with ISU [Illinois State University]. Of course, we have students that go to Bradley and to U of I, but a lot of our students do go on to Western. And, of course, with our local high schools, we have what we call dual credit with a number of high schools.

Pogue: Do any of the college's buildings carry the name of historic college figures? You mentioned—

Vasen: Well, Taylor Hall, that's named after Dr. Taylor, who was the visionary person. Engle Hall is... Hobart Engle was on the original, oh, not necessarily the board, the advisory committee. So those two are named after people. Of course, the main administration building and all is Centers. And then we have the tech building.

Pogue: You were involved with preparing a fiftieth year history?

Vasen: Right.

Pogue: What did you learn from that?

Vasen: We've done a lot of work. (laughs, coughs) Over the years, we had done a lot of work. I don't know. I just keep finding things like this paper. I still have the first catalog. I have the whole group of graduation programs, from the very beginning to when I left. I don't know.

Pogue: What kind of activities were a part of the fiftieth anniversary?

Vasen: Well, this was the biggest part of it. We also have what they call a highlight room, out at the main campus, and we had a lot of memorabilia that we had out there. I can't think. We've had, like I said, we had special things at twenty-five, and at thirty years we had a special thing. This was the big thing that we were trying to do, just a lot of publicity about the fact that we were fifty years old.

Pogue: What kind of unique programs exist at Spoon River?

Vasen: Now or then?

Pogue: Both.

Vasen: Both, okay. Like I said, we had the farm mechanics program and the ag automotive and the ag management. We have welding curriculums; we had secretarial programs, computer programs, nursing programs, both for nursing assistants, practical nursing and RN nursing. [I'm] trying to think what else we've had. There's been a number that have changed. We had a machine design technology program at one time. We had a civil engineering program at one time, in the tech area. This fall, with a combination between Sandburg and Spoon River, is a railroad curriculum.

I have a grandson who is very interested in railroads, and I kind of thought that might be right up his alley. He's been interested in trains forever, and he's now twenty years old. However, when I looked into it completely, they need to have the diesel tractor program first, which is a seventy hour

program. Then they could go into this hands-on... They would take that program here and then the hands-on in the train area, the actual train mechanics at Sandburg, because of the railyards there. So, when I looked at that and talked with him a little bit more about it, that's a little more than what... I don't think that was the actual thought, you know, where he was wanting to go. I don't really know, but I'm going to wait and see how it materializes.

Pogue: You look back at what started at Canton, above one of the upper floors and the four classrooms at the high school and where you are now. Although you left the college in '94, you've stayed active with the college, and you reside in Canton, so you've seen the growth. You've talked about family members being involved at Spoon River. What has kind of surprised you from this little seed that started at Canton High School?

Vasen: Well, I don't know. My own son graduated from Spoon, in the electronics program. He combined his electronics with computers [and] now works for the County of Champaign in their computer area. I don't know, except that I've seen one heck of a lot of kids go through there.

Pogue: When you talk about the kids, what do you remember about some of the kids that you're talking about?

Vasen: Well, the first student that we registered, we pulled out of a class, and we scared him to death, because he had no idea why he was being called to the office. We called him to sign up, an application. We had the newspaper here to take his picture and all of that. He finished his degree here, went to Southern [Illinois University]. He just recently retired as a financial officer and something else at Caterpillar.

The second, we laugh, because another young man, [who] said he was number ten, filed his application. He was a veteran, and he spent so much time with service and came back. Then he went into the insurance business. He said that the first one always got all the glory and all of that. I said, "No, that's not true." We appreciated all of them. They were, of course, in the first graduating class.

Like I said, neither one of them probably would have gone on to college to begin with. They wanted to, but families, even though things were good at that time and all these places like Harvester and Caterpillar and the mines were all going good at that time, people just didn't have the money to really send their kids to college.

It's really scary now, when you think about how much the costs have increased, to send a child to college. Of course the community college was much more reasonable, accessible, because they can live at home. They can

even keep their job if they had a part-time job. So, I really think that a lot of students would never have got any type of education without it.

Pogue: You've dedicated much of your life to Spoon River. What was enjoyable about that? You mentioned the students, what else?

Vasen: People. I'm a people person, and I'm also sentimental (emotionally). I have a soft spot for Spoon River because I started it. Our Dean Osborne's been gone for a long time. I still go out to the board meeting. In fact, I may go out there tonight, because they meet tonight. But I like to keep my finger in it. I get a weekly email about what's going on, and I really enjoy this.

Pogue: Obviously, from what you've been telling us, you've had a great investment of time and interest in the growth of this community college. It certainly has stepped up to all the expectations created by that Junior College Act of '65. So I want to thank you for your dedication and interest in our project and for helping to explain how Spoon River fit into that history.

Vasen: Well, I'm glad I could be of some help. Hopefully many more students will pass through the doors of Spoon River.

Pogue: And, as you called it, Spoon; is that correct?

Vasen: Spoon River, yep; that's Spoon River. I was the financial aid officer, and I always laughed, because I was the mean old dragon lady for years, because I was the person who had to say "No" to a student. But I kept telling him, I never tell a student, "No" unless I've got an alternate plan. So when I retired, my gift from the college was a tree planted out there. It was a flowering crab apple tree. So I told him, I said, "I'm no longer the mean old dragon lady. I'm now the flowering crab." And we chuckle about that. Unfortunately, that tree, I think... Well I know it's been cut down now; within the last year, it's been cut down. But I always went out every year to see it bloom.

Pogue: Well, that's good symbolism for the growth of the college.

Vasen: Right.

Pogue: So thank you again, Virginia, for sharing your involvement with the college, from its original days as part of Canton High School until where we are today.

(end of interview)