

Interviewee: Sue Wells [W]
Interviewer: Sweta Baniya [B]
Transcriber: Elizabeth McGhee Williams
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Transcript

B: Do you want to introduce yourself?

W: Yeah, I'm Sue Wells. I've just retired from Temple University. And I don't know how long I've been a member of RSA, to tell you the truth. But it's been a while. [chuckles] I first heard about RSA back in the 70s—late 70s. I went to graduate school at UT-Austin with Jan Swearingen, and at the time I was in graduate school, there really wasn't rhetoric as a graduate area at Austin. Basically, you hung out in Dr. [James] Kinneavy's office, which is really almost better than any coursework you could have.

B: That's awesome!

W: Yeah! [laughs] But I had a publication in the field, so I was hired at the University of Louisville, and then I eventually moved to Wayne State. And I was staying at Jan's house in Ann Arbor while I got ready to, you know, waiting for my house to be ready in Detroit. And I was going to be teaching a survey of research in composition, and Jan had done that, so I was using a lot—stealing a lot of her material. [chuckles] And she also told me about this organization ISHR,¹ and I noticed Jan would always go to these really exotic wonderful cities, in Europe and stuff, and give papers on very cool things. And for me, rhetoric was just part of rhetoric and comp, you know? So this was the first time that I understood there was also a world in which rhetoric was a kind of disciplinary and professional home to a certain kind of scholarship. And she also introduced me to RSA, which Jim Kinneavy had also tried to get me to join. But I was a bad student. I didn't. And at the time, RSA was a mimeographed newsletter, I think. Then, you know, I stayed at Wayne State till the mid-80s and moved to Temple in '85. And for a while I was—we [Temple faculty] went on strike twice in the late 80s and 90s. It was really a tumultuous time. And the finances were grim. I had basically one conference a year in support, and that support was \$300.

[both chuckle]

B: [groans]

W: So, actually what I retired on was one conference and \$500, so it wasn't all that different.

B: It's been almost twenty years, then? It's been twenty years and the raise is just \$500?

¹ International Society for the History of Rhetoric.

W: Thirty years.

B: Thirty. Oh my god, yes.

W: [laughs] Well, our salaries were better.

B: Yeah.

W: So I basically went to—I used my money for Cs,² and I went to MLA³ on my own dime when it was nearby. And then to have a really more intense kind of experience I would go to the Penn State conferences,⁴ which were very important regionally. And that's where I met people like Jack Selzer and Don Bialostosky and Jeanne Fahnestock and Marie Secor. Steve Mailloux was there a lot. And they were all talking about RSA. So somewhere in there I started to check it out, whenever it was within a train ride or a car ride, [chuckles] which was pretty often in the late 80s and early 90s. And I remember I used to, especially if I was teaching summer school, I would be so depressed that I was teaching summer school—I was like, “Come on!”—that I would just up and go to RSA. [laughs] I remember it was the year that Jan [Swearingen] was doing the program. RSA was in Pittsburgh.⁵ It was the year that Jackie Royster gave that amazing talk on the next voice you hear.⁶ Whoa!

B: That's awesome.

[04:34]

W: That was *chills* to hear that talk. I hadn't submitted a paper. I decided on Wednesday that I'd go on Thursday. Took a Southwest flight—45 dollars, yay!—and ended up in Pittsburgh, showed up at the conference. The program was four mimeographed, you know, eight and a half[-inch wide], long legal sheets of paper. I turned to see what's coming up next, and I see it's a session on Chinese rhetoric that I'm chairing. So I went to the session and quadrupled my knowledge of Chinese rhetoric, which wasn't hard to do. [laughs] And then I remember the conference that Michael Leff organized in D.C.,⁷ which had a very spiffy program but was also quite small. Those early conferences, they were very intimate. There was not much distance between the stars of the field and somebody who'd just wandered in because she was depressed teaching summer school. You could have real conversations about your work. You could have utterly *silly* conversations. The conference in [Las Vegas]—and by that point I was on the board, so I was there for a while—it was in one of the two nongaming hotels in [Las Vegas].⁸ This was after Jerry Hauser had really—he'd run a bunch of board retreats, and we were sort

² Conference on College Composition and Communication.

³ Modern Language Association.

⁴ I.e., the Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition.

⁵ RSA was held in Pittsburgh in 1998.

⁶ See Royster's “When the First Voice You Hear Is Not Your Own,” published in issue 47.1 of *College Composition and Communication*.

⁷ RSA was held in D.C. in 2000.

⁸ RSA was held in Las Vegas in 2002.

of making moves to try to grow RSA. I mean, backtracking, there was that ARS⁹ conference in Chicago, I think, and that was an interesting conference even though the organization lasted about five minutes. But it sort of established more common ground between communication scholars and English-side rhetoricians. And that, to me, has always been one of the strengths of the organization: that it was disciplinary rather than professional. So it wasn't a place where you hired, it wasn't a place where you looked for a job, it wasn't a place where you were entirely in the company of other English-department folk who had similar problems that you would be drawn into talking about. This is a place where you would go to one session and you would hear about, "We have discovered a fourth scroll of Dionysius of Halicarnassus's whatever," and then you'd go to the next session and you'd hear a talk about black women preachers and the epideictic in a midwestern city. And *both* talks would be really, really good. I also like that unlike Cs, which—it's very easy to get lazy at Cs. And especially in the 80s and 90s, people in my cohort normally wrote their papers for Cs on the plane. I don't think that happens anymore. But the standard of actual paper was *laughable* at Cs. And I would go, and I'd be spending a fortune, and there would be three or four sessions that I found interesting. But at RSA, everything was interesting, and you didn't want to be dumb around these people. So people brought their good stuff. So anyhow, the [Las Vegas] conference, I remember sitting at a table with Michael Leff, and he started singing rhetoric songs. [laughs] Like [singing Cicero's name] Marcus Tullius Cicero to the tune of "Bingo Was His Name-O." And we were talking about sort of looking for structures of tropes in texts, and he said, "Oh, yes. Scope the trope." And every graduate class I had after that, every intro to rhetoric, I had a little ten-minute segment of the class called "Scope the Trope." [laughs] 'Cause nobody can look at a list of tropes and remember—you have to cumulate it. So that, I guess, takes me from the intimate, egalitarian phase to the organization-building phase.

B: So you were part of the organization building as well?

W: Yeah.

B: Can you tell me how did it start?

[09:31]

W: Yeah. Well, I think I would—the first step, maybe, was at ARS conference. Because that sort of was an attempt to feel out what might be a place, the need for an intellectual home for rhetoric study. Communication scholars were really feeling a lot of pressure 'cause this was about the time that a lot of large universities started dropping their speech-communication requirement—which was their bread and butter—and also closing whole departments. It was really rough for them. And it's always rough for rhetoric people in English, less so at different places and different times, but it's never simple. And ARS made it clear that there was a need for that kind of home, but it wasn't going to be ARS because it was just too amorphous and unstructured. And the leadership of ARS was really the leadership of RSA, and they didn't have time to run

⁹ Alliance of Rhetoric Societies.

two organizations, thank you very much. So Jerry Hauser called this retreat of the RSA board in Evanston, and we needed to figure out a way to have a yearly meeting, among other things, so that we could become a member of ACLS.¹⁰ So I had been a member of the Marxist Literary Group, formerly the Marxist Literary Guild, which had a summer camp that was called Marxist Summer Camp—Commie Summer Camp, actually, it was called. And Fred Jameson ran this ten years running. It was a heroic labor. I mean, it would be a *full* week he would be there, he would be on. He would give one talk, but he was there. And I mean, this was *Jameson*. He had other things to do. And this was a place where anybody who was in literary study in any modern language and wanted to learn Marxism would go. They would make their program the first night. Everybody would sit in a room and schedule. And really, a lot of the sort of prominence of Marxism as a critical method in literary study came from those summer camps. I mean, when I was in that camp, there was Jameson, and you had to bow before that shrine. And rightly so. But also Laura Kipnis. Also a woman named Tricia Mann, who's a philosopher who's not well known, but she was a great presence. And also bell hooks. And we hung out—a lot. And made fun of people and bonded. It was a great experience. So I sort of offered that as a model and some other people took it up, and that's sort of what led to the summer workshops—and also with the sense that Thomas Kuhn pointed out: that if you want to produce any sort of paradigm change, you don't do it by converting people with established careers. You do it by changing the orientation of people just entering the field. At that point, RSA began to really get serious about providing services to graduate students, and the summer institute was seen as a way to really draw in and professionalize, or give disciplinary formation, to assistant professors, or retooling people in later stages—

B: Not just graduate students?

W: And a lot of graduate students. I think it's been pretty successful at that.

B: Yeah, it was my first year, last year, here in the US, and I participated in RSA's non-Western rhetoric workshop,¹¹ and it was really great. I had never—it was me being introduced to the field and me being introduced to all of these scholars, me getting first networking opportunities to all of the other scholars, and it was really great. I am so grateful.

W: Yeah.

B: I have another question: How do you describe the organization when you first joined, and how do you see how far it has come?

W: Well I didn't understand much about the organization when I first joined. For me, it was a meeting and a publication. And it was a meeting where I was going to see good people and hear good papers, and a publication that was sort of pretty useful. Then

¹⁰ American Council of Learned Societies.

¹¹ I.e., *The Rest of the World: Recognizing Non-Western Rhetorical Traditions*, a workshop led by Arabella Lyon and LuMing Mao at the 2017 RSA summer institute at Indiana University.

when I came onto the board, I was seeing another side of it. And I can't tell you the years that I was on the board.

B: That's okay.

[14:42]

W: I think it was in the 90s sometime, after '93. Between '93 and 2000 somewhere. I mean, we were doing very basic stuff, like filing the papers to become a nonprofit, establishing more bylaws than we had 'cause we had hardly any, figuring out the summer meeting. And there had been a meeting of the RSA at that first ARS meeting—or maybe it was at a Cs—where a large number of people said, “Look, let's make this our primary professional organization. I would be willing to pay substantially more in dues.” Dues use to be 25 dollars a year. “It's worth it.” And then when I got on the board was when we began to hire an executive director, which meant that you actually got a notice when your membership expired. [chuckles] And before, truly, I mean, you know, who says, “Oh geez, my membership expired!” So you would renew it when it was time to register for the conference which meant the membership went [makes sounds indicating rapid upticks and downticks] boop boop boop boop boop boop boop. [laughs]

B: So it has all of these waves of membership changes.

W: Yeah. So the late 90s was really a time of building organizational infrastructure.

B: So that was the major goal then. What were other goals when you first joined?

W: Well, other goals were to begin to develop scholarship in contemporary rhetorics, to move beyond the Greco-Roman canon into other sort of national traditions and also to include more of the rhetorics of, you know, American disenfranchised and marginalized groups. And there were *a lot* of people interested in doing that in a lot of different ways. And it was done well and poorly, as you might imagine. And that also changed the way that the rhetorics of Greek and Roman antiquity were understood. You know, Susan Jarratt came along, and suddenly those Romans were not the same old Romans that we knew. [chuckles] She was amazing. She was also in the Marxist Literary Group summer camp because often it was held in Miami, and she taught at Miami [University in Ohio] for a long time. It was a deeply networked set of groups, you know? And then my involvement then turned to what I was beginning to see as a kind of long-term specialization within rhetoric, namely medical rhetoric. And I convinced Ellen Barton to come with me and do a summer workshop on medical rhetoric. We did two of them. I don't remember where the first one was.¹² The second one—oh, god—was at RPI.¹³ We stayed in a dorm room. It was absolutely the nastiest room I have ever stayed in in a college. The shower was *repulsive*, and it was cold as shit. It was 50 degrees out, and

¹² In addition to the workshop at the 2007 RSA summer institute at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, Wells and Barton led a workshop entitled Medical Rhetoric: Ethical Issues, Archival Concepts, and Imaginative Writing at the 2009 institute at Penn State University.

¹³ Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute.

we were shivering under these tiny little blankets. But we had forty people in that room. It included Colleen Derkatch, Jenell Johnson, Lisa Keränen, people doing ongoing work in medical communication at various hospitals. Sara Sliter-Hays, whose work is coming back. It was a great group. It was so intense. We were just *on*, that group. Oh, that's right. That was the first one. We were on, that group, for three straight days. And then we did it again at Penn State—at the very last Penn State conference, which was also an RSA workshop, an RSA summer institute. And that was a slightly bigger group. [laughs] And things like the medical rhetoric interest group here, and Lisa Melonçon's project of the every-other-year medical rhetoric symposium, and the journal of *Rhetoric of Medicine & Health*—that was kind of the seed bed for a lot of that stuff. Or one of the seed beds. I mean, people like Barbara Heifferon really put in a lot of organizational time with that kind of thing. So that was when—I kind of lost track of the infrastructure of RSA during that time, except for 2012 when I was a local arrangements chair for the conference. And I produced a damn good restaurant guide to Philadelphia. [laughs] The problem was I took it personally when people didn't follow my recommendations. "Why did you go *there*? Didn't you see that I—"

[both chuckle]

[20:20]

B: So I have another question. I know you have already mentioned a lot of people. Who are the key people you remember meeting or working with during your early years of RSA?

W: Yeah. Well, Jan was the first, and I mean, Jan's relationship to RSA was complicated. She was not—she was a many-dimensional person, and she recently died, so. Toward the end she had a kind of love-hate relationship, but it was fine. And then Michael Leff, who was amazing. And for me, one of the most difficult to negotiate moments of RSA was—I think it was two RSAs back. That would be 2014, maybe? There was a memorial for Leff at RSA, and Leff had asked that it be scheduled at a reception at a party, which is very Michael Leff. But also, as a result of the incredible growth of the organization, there were all these young people who had no idea who Michael Leff was and didn't care, and they had drinks in their hands and friends to meet and things to say. So this memorial is going on while nobody is listening to it. It was very—you know how in Hamlet when Ophelia's carried to her grave, Hamlet says, "Why these maimed rites?" It seemed like maimed rites to me, and I wish he had been remembered with a little more dignity.

B: I'm so sorry to hear that.

W: Well, it was what he wanted. And I left because I couldn't quite deal with it. But I understand from other people that it eventually turned into a real memorial for him. At other times, there'd be these young people who had *no idea* who I was and were doing fancy work in digital rhetoric, and I would just say, "Dammit, if I talked to Michael Leff, I could talk to them!" So I'd go to the bar, sit down next to them, and they'd say, "Who is

this old lady sitting next to me?" I would order a drink, buy a drink for them, ask them about their work, have a conversation. [laughs] And we had something to say to each other, okay.

B: That's awesome. So what are your most important or prominent memories related to RSA? I know you have talked a lot, in bits and pieces, but what do you think are the most prominent memories?

W: Well, one of them is Jackie Royster's talk that year in Pittsburgh.

B: Do you want to say how?

W: I had no idea you could do that kind of work academically. That was *amazing*. It was transformative. I mean, not only—you can tell from reading it, it was a very good talk. But her presence—her incredible calm, reasoned presence presenting it was such a model, you know? And any talk by Jeff Walker ever. I'd look at the program, I'd find his name. He would say, "something something a person's name you never heard of." You would go to the talk and find out this person has been part of the Western canon for a mere eleven centuries, and then he would give a sort of analysis of what it what that they'd, which was also a critique of the invasion of Iraq. And about two minutes into the talk you'd realize what was going on, and it would be wild. [laughs] And I remember hanging out with Michael Leff and his silly songs at that crazy nongaming resort in Las Vegas. I had my husband and my child with me, and they were—our room, because I was on the board, we had these super fancy rooms. It was a board meeting; it wasn't a conference. And it had a jacuzzi at the stop of a spiral staircase? [laughs] I mean, what is this? I would never had seen such a place if it weren't for RSA!

B: So how do you think the organization has changed through all the time you have been part of it? From a small—

[24:58]

W: Yeah. It is less intimate. It is less egalitarian. It is likelier to survive. I mean, I eventually became the RSA delegate to ACLS, the most boring meeting on the face of the earth. But ACLS did a study of learned organizations, 'cause that's what they do, and RSA was one of the ones they studied. And our growth from maybe three or four hundred people to twelve to fourteen hundred at that time, that was actually not untypical. Many learned societies lost membership in the aughts and the early teens. But the ones that grew were organizations that had a critical mass of members and decided to expand, and that was the sweet spot we were in. So I don't think we were a unique organization in having taken that leap into a more inclusive and less personal structure at that time. That was happening all over the place, like at the church history society or the—you would not believe the number—the antique musical instrument group. These groups also grew from two hundred to a thousand or eight hundred or twelve hundred. And when I started to be in RSA, it was an organization that studied the rhetorics of Greek and Roman antiquity and the American and British speech traditions.

And that is no longer true. There was minimal scientific rhetoric, there was really no medical rhetoric, and that is no longer true. So it's more interesting, and, you know, before, I thought it was incredibly broad and surprising, and now it's much more broader and much more surprising. It's much easier to go and hear a talk where—I now know a little bit about Chinese rhetoric, but I can always go to a talk where I know *nothing* about the subject and learn something. So I guess that would be the biggest change.

B: Yeah, and my next question is how do you think RSA will change over the years to come? Do you think it will expand more and invite more international and global rhetorics or nontraditional rhetorical traditions?

W: Well, there are trends inside and outside the organization that make that very likely. I mean, the other question to me is how RSA responds to the crisis to democracy that we're seeing now in this country. And since my retirement, I've been more politically active than when I was working full-time. And as a rhetorician what I see worries me a lot, and I'm kind of frustrated that after a lifetime of studying rhetoric, the tools that I have to address this situation are—I can do stuff, but I feel like I should know more about what I'm doing. I should be able to sort of fine-tune the rhetorical message a little better. I should understand why what happened happened more. And I think if RSA can address this, that would be such a *profound* service. That would be *such* important intellectual work. So that's a question. And there are a lot of people working on it. There are a lot of panels around these topics. So we'll see.

B: I think this is very intriguing to me, especially coming from somewhere other, another country: coming from Nepal to here and then entering this completely new field, and kind of this turnover in the political system here and witnessing this and, like you said, again, trying to learn new things and seeing how rhetoric works out in the world in a completely different way. It's kind of fascinating to me.

W: Yeah.

B: I would ask a follow-up question: How do you see, as a member of RSA and a rhetorician, how do you see we young rhetoricians could try to understand or address—not *address* address, but try to understand and try to negotiate whatever knowledge is produced in the university and try to take it back to the community?

[30:06]

W: Yeah. That's a question all right. Well, I mean, part of what needs to happen is to have some understanding of why people were persuaded to vote for Donald Trump. And a friend of mine, a sociologist, she contributes a lot of money to the d-triple-c, the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee. And a year ago, she was going to their annual meeting, and they always have it in some really fancy place, it was in Martha's Vineyard, and she said, "Well, you know, people are beginning to think"—this was in 2016—"people are beginning to think that there may be identity issues and issues of self-esteem and affirmation that were behind the reasons for why people

maybe voted for Trump, so I'm trying to present some information about how to address that." And I said to her, "Gee, wouldn't it be nice if there were an academic discipline that addressed things like this? Haven't you been having lunch with me every month for six years now?" [laughs] You know? And it's interesting that a sociologist or a political scientist would be the person that would be chosen to supply that information. So maybe we develop some working relationships with those social scientists. Or maybe people spend some time, in the same way that rhetoricians have always spent time, with communities they wanted to understand. To me, that would be extremely difficult, but it *probably* can be done, and sort of see if we can tease out, what are the means of persuasion that are operating here? What are the levers that perhaps can be moved in one direction or another? I don't know. I'm no longer teaching, so I keep in touch with my old graduate students and some people are still in graduate school. But I'm not as much in tune with that as I would have been a year ago.

B: So last question: what are your hopes for the organization's future?

W: Ah. Well, we're living in a time when a lot of people are talking about a crisis in the humanities. And in all my three meetings with the ACLS, I became allergic to "crisis of humanities" discourse. It just seemed useless. But my hope is that the Rhetoric Society becomes a place where very traditional forms of research can be enlivened by new kinds of research and also have something else to offer. And where that research, not immediately and not in any silly, "What do you teach your class on Monday?" kind of way, we figure out ways to make that available to people who need it. That's it.

B: Well thank you so much for your time.

W: Thank you!