1-26-1977

Macilwain, Marilyn Oral History Interview: Class Projects

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Kelly McLain and Cathy Steiner, Interviewers

Mrs. Marilyn Macilwain, Owner of The Shutters, Interviewee

January 26, 1977

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Interviewee: Mrs. Marilyn Macilwain, Owner of The Shutters
Interviewers: Cathy Steiner and Kelly McLain
January 26, 1977

(K) When did you start the shop?

(M) Well, basically, uh, the shop uh opened November 10, 1975 and uh we purchased the house in late June of '75 and it took us, well, all of July, August, September, and October to remodel, move and everything else that's needed for the shop and plan exactly what kind of merchandise we were going to put in the shop, uh, shop New York and find our sources. We had three trips to New York before we opened, spending a week at each trip. Fun, but lots of work, uh, when you uh look for sources on Seventh Avenue and Fifth Avenue. Seventh Avenue is where you find all the clothing manufacturers and Fifth Avenue is where you find the people who make gloves and uh hats and scarves and so you have to look and look and look and you look for something that isn't sold, uh, you know, the shops up and down Eighth Street, uh, the shops in Grand Rapids, you're looking for something different because, after all, you have to market something else in order to get your customers to come into the shop. And, of course, we uh, uh, designed our shop to have a little different marketing idea in that we modeled it after a little old English tea room effect. We always felt that uh if people came in and were comfortable and not obligated we would first make friends and then you would find that your friends would be -- become your customers.

(K) So, you serve lunches here?

(M) Yes, every noon from 11:30 til 2:00, we serve lunch and then and uh we're baking fresh breads and rolls in the morning, so often we find uh a few people around here know what time the rolls and breads are going to be done, so they are in for coffee, particularly the young girls who work next door for the lawyers will often send over for, I call them sticky buns -- that's what my grandmother used to make, you know, the old cinnamon rolls and so uh they will come over for those and uh we'll have people who'll drop in in the afternoon uh for tea. Uh, as I told you when you walked in, I should have made you some red zinger or something like that. We do have about 15 varieties of tea. We found that every place we went, uh, no one served anything but just tea tea, you know, just plain ordinary Lipton's tea or something like that. And, uh, we have a daughter who uh went to Ann Arbor and so uh we got into the habit of shopping, you know, the shops in Ann Arbor and buying tea, so we thought that's one of the things we can have for lunch.
What do you serve for lunch, just like soup and sandwiches or something?

We always have a pot of soup and uh maybe two, uh, a good casserole, uh, sometimes the casseroles are strictly vegetable casseroles because one of our cooks is a vegetarian, and uh uh often uh we always have fresh breads, and uh some gooey dessert, homemade cookies, uh really not too much ---and of course, sandwiches, we always have different types of sandwiches.

Yeah, I remember my roommate used to come here with her mother once in a while last semester. I always wanted my mom to come up and take me here, but she lives a little farther away than Grand Rapids, so we never made it.

That's too bad.

One of these days she'll make it. Probably in the spring. She doesn't like snow.

We have quite a few customers from Hope College.

I imagine, because Saga just doesn't make it, you know.

Except, I do like Saga. Saga works, uh, works for uh me, at Hayworth's, where I have another job.

Oh, well, really? Well, there are different plans of Saga. Hope has the low one!

No, the Saga at Hope; comes out -- You'd be surprised -- and caters lunches.

When they cater, or give a party, they have extra money to work with and what they do is they go all out for that, but they don't go all out everyday. So, what else do you um, what do you sell, obviously sweaters is one thing ...

Yes, since I just put one on. We have all kinds of womehs clothing, very contemporary clothing, that appeal to the college age crowd, when mother comes as you say, and has extra bucks. And, uh, we have clothes for uh the woman my age. Uh, we sell dresses, skirts, and blouses, and slacks and coats. Almost anything.

Do you have any long dresses?

Umhum.

We'll have to keep this in mind.

We sell about practically everything. We have uh, we do a very contemporary business, a contemporary line of long dresses for the high school - college aged child.
(K) That's really nice.

(M) Something different, uh, we specialize, uh, in the California lines, because they're the more in or, you know, fashion for today's contemporary, you know, look.

(K) How did you ever decide on uh doing something like this?

(M) When I was in college, uh, my future sister-in-law took me to a shop like this and uh it was something I always wanted to do.

(K) So, you just one day decided to do it?

(M) Well, uh, my husband had been in several businesses and uh made a success of many of them and uh he was semi-retired and I'd always talked of wanting to do this and uh he said, "Well," uh when this house was for sale, "Well, let's try your idea this time." And so, this is what we're doing. If we make it in five years, maybe it'll be a success, you never know, you know, you're trying, you work very hard, and of course it's a family business. Our daughter, who is your age, manages the shop.

(K) Oh, how old is she? Nineteen?

(M) She's twenty. She had one year of college and decided she didn't want to return for her, uh, second year of college and she thought she'd like to do some retailing and this is how we sort of worked it out as a family experiment.

(K) That's really neat. How's it been working out?

(M) Not bad, we've been open a little over a year and we're still solvent.

(K) Well, that's good.

(M) We hope we stay that way.

(K) Isn't it hard to start out like the first couple years in a business? Isn't it quite an accomplishment to stay solvent?

(M) Ah, I, I hope we can. That's where my husband went tonight, to uh, talk some things over with uh our accountant. But, uh, he does the books. We try to uh do as much as we can ourselves. My husband does all the decorating, all the painting, and uh all the sanding, and Susan worked with him and uh they cleaned off layers and layers of paper and you know, sanded and cleaned, painted and everything, so uh they really did it by the sweat of their brow.

(C) Yeah, that's alot of hard work.

(M) Yes, it was alot of hard work, and uh, alot of these old antiques we've collected over the years, and uh we just sort of
put it together and we'd like it as a family business.

(K) What do you see it turning into in the future? Do you see any expansion?

(M) Well, uh, I would like to see, uh, a development of this part of town. Uh, sort of an urban, uh urban renewal. If you'll notice around here some people take care of their property and some people don't. And, uh, we hope that The Shutters will, uh, expand to a certain extent and uh become a very gracious looking uh area in, you know, an oasis in the spot. I'd like to keep it looking as it did in 1950, when it was originally built. Uh, maybe you don't know, but this used to be the Third Reformed Church parsonage.

(K) Really?

(C) Really?

(M) They moved it in 1912 to this spot, it used to be right next to the church.

(K) You mean like where the church is now?

(M) Yes. On Twelfth Street.

(K) Twelfth and Maple or something?

(M) Yes. Right. Right. They moved it in the middle of winter ... moved it to this spot.

(K) Wow.

(M) It was before any telephone wires were around.

(K) Why did they move it?

(M) The church sold it, they wanted to expand and so they sold it and the only way the people uh could have the house was uh to move it to their piece of property.

(K) That's unique.

(M) So, they moved it over there. But, I would like to see it uh expanded and uh have pretty gardens, maybe a wrought iron fence around it, and rolling green lawns, you know, these are things that you would like to do. I'd love to see uh, a green house on the property so that we could grow plants, you know, that would be for sale, you know, I'd like to have many different shopping areas. Uh, we make our own ice cream here so I would like to develop a little uh area in the back where you could sit and have an ice cream sundae and so forth, in the summer-time or take your lunch outside. There are many ways which we could go. But, it all takes what is known as MONEY...
So, we'll have to work very hard and expand this as we have the funds to do so.

(K) That sounds very nice though. Your future dreams.

(M) Oh yes, this -- these are all dreams, you know, and uh I think there's a place in the world for little businesses, yet.

(K) Oh, I do too. Especially unique things like this because they make life more special. Better than your basic shop.

(M) This is what we're trying to do, I'll show you something (goes and gets a clipping from the Grand Rapids Press) We had uh a visit from the uh the Grand Rapids Press, which helps. And they uh brought their artist along, who sat and drew a picture of us, sitting by the fireplace, right where you're looking there. This is our logee and uh this, of course, is the outside of the house. And then she wrote the article about us.

(K) That's nice. That will give you some publicity.

(M) That was very good publicity and you will see uh little old ladies from Grand Rapids with this article in their hand, walking in the front door, still today, saying, "That really looks like this." They really follow this lady and they go wheretherever she suggests, they seem to look up and uh this is marvelous publicity for all of us.

(K) That is really nice.

(M) It is and people still even last week were talking about it.

(K) How long ago was that in there?

(M) It was in June; the end of June. So, people are still, uh, talking about the place. I think word of mouth is your, your biggest uh uh pusher as far as ...

(K) I know that's how I heard of this, because my roommate, her mother is from Grand Rapids and she found out from some of her friends and brought Cathy down here and I heard from Cathy. She told me it was very nice. So, I guess that is how things pass around.

(M) Yes, uh, we advertise in the Anchor, did you know that?

(K) I think I've seen it a couple of times. It has like this deal right here (pointing to picture).

(M) We've advertised I think every time it came out. I've seen the bill going through here, so we must advertise every time the Anchor comes out. But, we do have quite a few students from Hope College who come over for tea and for dessert or
just for lunch. And, of course, a lot of professors come over.

(K) So, like -- This is going to be a weird question, but do you have a lot of males of mostly females?

(M) We have a lot of males.

(K) Really?

(M) How about that?

(K) Ah, good, I'm gonna drag Bill here then.

(M) Ah, we have uh, we have a regular business clientele. And, of course, Dr. Huttar comes here quite often. Dr. Kooiker comes here, you know, from the music department. And, uh, Dr. Marker, the dean and uh uh friend of mine who has left, you were talking about Saga, and that was Dave Van Dellen, who had the coffee, you know, the coffee shop.

(K) The Kletz

(M) Yes. And uh, of course, he was an antique hound, just like me. And so uh he would come over a lot. He did a lot to help me, since he's been in the food business and he knew the ins and outs, and he knew who to contact and to you know you've gotta find a good source for all your, you know, canned goods that you need, all your fresh produce, all your meats, uh your cleaning supplies, so there's a lot of things to do when you run a restaurant.

(K) Man, you just don't realize how much goes into it.

(M) You have to pass all the city laws of cleanliness and inspection.

(C) How do you know like how many people to plan for?

(M) That's the hard part, the hardest part we probably have, we don't know. Uh, we'll look in the paper and all the different clubs are having a luncheon and we'll say nobody is going to come for lunch and that's the day we run out of food. Or, the day we make a double batch of everything, and we won't uh have anybody come through, you know, not too many. 10 or 15 and then there was the day that Hope College had their Village Square and Hope College ran out of food, so did the Shutters. Cause some of the women over at Hope College were sending all the people over here when they ran out of food. I've never seen so many women in all my life, as I did that day.

(K) My mother is on, is in charge of the Kalamazoo sector for that this year.

(M) Oh, that's great.

(K) She's not thrilled.
It's a lot of hard work.

Yeah.

So, you never know how much food.

It would seem awful hard to plan for something like that.

It is.

I just, just from things that I have done, it's hard to figure out how much for how many people when you never know.

Well, we can seat fifty people here. We have uh the dining room and the living room and that's the part. We have private parties at night uh often and uh so we feel that we with all our chairs and tables we can seat about fifty. And often we will turn over, we'll turn it twice. That means we'll serve about one hundred people.

Oh, wow. So where are all the clothes and stuff like that?

The clothes are all around the shop. Some of them are hanging on the walls and we do that to give you ideas of how to put things together, to whet your appetite. We've got two rooms upstairs full of clothes. Uh, off the living room there is a room with uh dresses and coats and there are some sweaters and um gifts in the parlor.

Hum. That's really nice. So there just like all around. Does anybody ever show them?

We give style shows.

That would be interesting.

We've had style shows here, we've had trunk shows, that means when someone comes here with uh designs that are one of a kind. And uh, not knowing what the customer will buy, you uh have special orders. Uh, we will hire two or three models and people will come for lunch and we'll advertise this and send out brochures and so forth in the mail and it's very successful. People will see the clothes and order them specially to fit them.

Hum. That sound very nice.

It uh works very well for us. But when you look at everything around here, alot of people think we have it on consignment. We own everything you see. We've paid for everything. So, we have to sell everything.

So it has to go.

It has to go. That's why they have sales, in January. It has
to move. That's exactly why. Now, we have a basement full of spring and summer clothes that we're just unpacking. And, uh, we want to get rid of our winter clothes...this month, so we can start putting our spring clothes out.

(K) Do you have ski jackets on sale?

(M) This we do not deal in. That's too difficult.

(K) I would imagine. There's many places downtown, like sports stores that carry them...

(M) It's really, uh, it's really difficult to try to compete with someone else. But, I think it's best when you can offer a special service that no one else offers. These are things you have to market. You have to be a little commercial. You have to think of the money you have invested, what you're trying to sell, and how you're going to sell it. And you have to be just a little bit different than anyone else. Now you will find clothes here that could be purchased at Jacobson's, or Ganto's or you know, small specialty stores. We do not carry what you call department store merchandise, which can be purchased in Steketee's or the larger stores, because we don't buy in that type of quantity. But we have to offer a special service to our customers so that they'll shop here rather than go to Grand Rapids or someplace.

(K) Yeah, Grand Rapids is far to go sometimes when you need something.

(M) Well, yes, and another thing, some people think that they get a better deal by going to Grand Rapids.

(K) I don't know whether you do. You have to spend money for gas and...

(M) That's true. But, the grass always... this is very corny, but it's very true. The grass is always greener on the other side. For some reason or another they think that it's true that perhaps they can get... I have a story to tell you about this woman................(Phone rings... she answers and talks for a while) What I was going to tell you was about the lady who wrote this article. The lady who wrote the article is the fashion editor for the Grand Rapids Press. And, uh, she liked our clothes and everything and uh after she had uh written the article, she came back a couple times for lunch. So, we've enjoyed quite a friendship. And, uh, one day when she was here, she purchased a dress that she liked particularly well and she appeared on the stage in a large town, addressing all retail merchants for about a six state area. And that is quite a large group. One of the first questions that they asked was where did she buy her dress. Uh, and they all thought, normally, it was bought in New York. And what they were going to ask her
was if she got it at a discount. And, she said, "NO!" She bought it in Holland, Michigan. And a woman said, "Where can you buy a dress like that in Holland, Michigan?" You know, very disparagingly. And she says, "Why, at The Shutters, of course!"

(K) That's nice.

(M) Wasn't that nice. So, I, I uh, think if we can develop an image and develop a clientele, and have fun doing it, and uh, keep it as a family business, then we will have succeeded, ... a great deal.

(K) Do you get alot of your stuff from New York?

(M) Yes.

(K) Do you know like if the other clothing stores downtown, where they get their stuff? Some of it just seems so out of it.

(M) Well, I have no ideas where other people go. You can, we uh were recently in Chicago. They opened up the new apparel center, which is owned by the Kennedy family. And it was opened uh, well, last Saturday. And, uh, Susan, our daughter, and my husband, Paul, went down to shop sources and all. The people from New York were there. And uh uh alot of our sources are coming in from New York and opening up special offices in Chicago, which will make it a great deal cheaper for us, you know, to uh buy there, now I have a daughter who was in Dr. Huttar's class in English a few years ago, and she went to the University of Michigan uh after spending a summer at Hope College and uh she was a musician and uh she, in order to live in New York, started working for Lord and Taylor and now she's also uh running switchboard at Union Theological Seminary, is married to a seminary student, she's a busy gal, and uh you have to work hard in order to pay for your lessons and everything, but she's learning a great deal about fashion work and she's doing a little buying for us.

(K) Oh, that's nice.

(M) It is kind of nice to have your own resident buyer in New York. She can save us uh uh several hundred dollars just by purchasing for us. And so uh, we're doing a little training of Chris and so she's having a good time doing that for us, so with Chicago and New York we'll be able to uh you know buy some things. If we can find the little sources, the new little designers, and keep our prices down, and still have something interesting... That's what we're trying to do. And uh, we'll see if we can succeed.
(C) I noticed you have like these little things on the table and other stuff. Did you make those er?

(M) No, these are done by uh Mrs. Mac Intyre, who husband is Dr. Mac Intyre.

(K) Oh, Dr. Mac Intyre!

(M) And, did you know that uh he is a gardener and grows most of these flowers and uh his wife uh dries them and uh some of them have to be uh spraypainted to get a color she wants and she designs all these for us. She does a beautiful job.

(K) Wow, they're just beautiful.

(M) And, a very hard working gal. She uh, uh is very proud, she worked very hard and saved her money and was able to take her husband for a weekend vacation at Grand Canan Islands... over the Christmas Holidays. Her brother just moved there and uh they wanted to go down to the Grand Canans, which are south of Cuba.

(K) Oh... I like Dr. Mac Intyre, he's one of my favorite profs. He's my advisor.

(M) Oh, well, you'll have to tell him that you saw his wife's designs. He works very hard and grows allot of these flowers for her. You'll have to go over to her -- their house and see all the beautiful flowers drying in their garage and in her kitchen. It's just beautiful. It's a real experience.

(K) That could be something for another interview.

(M) That would be an excellant interview. She's a marvelous woman. Just absolutely marvelous. And, you'd enjoy meeting her. Just being in her house is an experience. It really is. It's just like being in another world, because when you come in, she has all these flowers hanging all over the place. It's just really beautiful.

(K) I had Dr. Mac Intyre for Soc of the Family class, and he, he would tell us the greatest stories about their family life, and stuff, it was really neat. He had all these little anecdotes for everything -- it was good. He always told us what his wife thought about this, that and the other thing.

(M) It's a wonderful family. And, uh, I think it's the only family with -- I know, that has what? Three or four cats?

(K) I don't know...

(M) I'm a particular cat lover and uh they have the cutest cats. Just absolutely adorable cats.

(K) I think Holland is unique in itself, anyway.
(M) Where are you from?

(K) I'm from Kalamazoo.

(M) Oh, but Kalamazoo has such a beautiful art center, has a marvelous symphony...

(K) It's got alot of the fine arts. It's good for that.

(M) It has alot of money and people who support the fine arts. And, where are you from?

(C) Midland.

(M) Oh, yes, that's a tremendous place, too.

(C) Well...

(M) The symphony...

(C) They've got alot of the fine arts, too.

(M) A really fabulous symphony.

(K) I don't know, I think Holland is so cute. An interesting little place... it has all little interesting little things like this shop. I think it's really neat.

(M) It is. And Hope College.

(K) It's really a unique place. How long have you lived in Holland?

(M) 18 years.

(K) Where did you live before?

(M) Rockford, Illinois.

(K) Oh, really?

(M) Umhum.

(K) That's another big Reformed Church center isn't it?

(M) No, it isn't.

(K) Alot of kids from Hope are from Rockford.

(M) I think there's only one church there. Ah, it's Swedish Lutheran. It's a Lutheran community. And, a Swedish community and uh my husband is from uh Rockford, uh, I went to Rockford College. And, uh I met my husband while I was in college, and I am originally from Omaha, Nebraska. Which, is further west.

(K) There's alot of kids that go to Hope, though, from Rockford.
Umhum. Uh, I was just trying to think, uh, one of the coaches at Hope College is married to uh uh uh I'm trying to think of her name, her maiden name. Her father used to be our dentist in Rockford, I can't ... it slips my mind, naturally, since your recording, I can't remember.

So, so like do you live in the house?

We are now. We are, um, it's a nine room house. And, one of the rooms upstairs uh is our combination bedroom and sitting room. Uh, we hope to, are in the process of purchasing a house at Port Sheldon, which is right on Lake Michigan. And uh we hope to live there starting June.

Nice time to move in.

Right, right! We bought an old house, another old house.

Are you going to fix it up?

Yes. Right.

How long does it take to fix up an old house? A long time?

Depending upon uh, well, this one we worked ... hard and hired alot of help, in order to get this done, uh, in order to do the uh heavy stuff, uh we had, uh, had all new lighting put in, a new boiler put in, um had to bring everything up to standards. Otherwise, you'd be a fire hazard and you couldn't have people in here. Do you realize that there was no plug in this house?

Not one?

Not one. And so we had to put all plugs, you know, they would have had to use the center fixtures. But, really, very little was done to this house, to make it what you call modern. It has probably the biggest bathtub in town. A man six feet can lay down in it. We have some cute stories. A lady about 92 walked in one day when we first opened and she said, "Could I see your bathroom?" and we thought, you know, that she wanted to use the bathroom and I showed her where it was and she said, "I have to see this, I had my very first bath in your bathtub when I was a young girl."

Oh, you're kidding.

She said, "I wanted to see if this was the same bathtub." Another lady stopped in to see us, an elderly lady, and she said uh, "I used to babysit here when I was a young girl and the minister's family had four or five children and I used to put them all in the bathtub at the same time on Saturday nights. So that bathtub, I think it was a case of uh maybe uh a rich uh parishoner uh gave the church uh a bathtub and uh it was an
unusual thing to have something like that at that time. I'll have to show that to you when we get through.

(K) Okay. Do you have anymore questions you can think of Cath?

(C) Um, um, I don't know, ... you have just two girls then?

(M) Yes, we have two daughters. Christine and Susan.

(C) Are all these dishes antique and stuff?

(M) No, but they don't match, do they? Did you notice that? Nothing matches.

(K) Why is that?

(M) Well, it's another marketing idea. It's like uh, it makes it inexpensive for us. We go to all the old sales and buy all the old china up -- the odds and ends. None of the silverware matches. And it's just like going to Grandma's house -- nothing matches. And it's a conversational piece. And everybody will look at it and say, "Gee, this is like something my mother used to have." You know, or, "I should use that because my mother had it." We had one lady, I'll never forget. I asked her what she was doing. You help yourself out in the kitchen, when you eat. She was sorting all the dishes, so she could have everything that matched. It bothered her to use dishes that didn't match. So, you run in to all kinds.

(C) That's interesting.

(M) But, this is one thing that we did. We thought it would be just a little different, a conversation piece.

(C) Do you go to alot of antique shows and stuff?

(M) All of them.

(C) All of them.

(M) And the auctions. You'll see us there.

(C) Yeah, I noticed the little wash thing outside.

(M) Yeah, that's a really oldie, too. That's a very very old one. I really shouldn't let it sit out in the snow. But, that's where they sat, you know, uh there's a natural tilt to all back porches, you know, so the water can run off, and uh they always put the wash machine uh uh out on the back porch. Those are run by hand.

(C) Yeah.

(K) This place just looks so interesting to me.

(C) I know it.
(M) I'll take you on a tour.

(K) Okay.

(M) When we're through.

(C) Where did you get that, those things? Did someone make them?

(M) Well, uh no a friend of mine uh teaches art at DeKalb University in Illinois and I have his work here. And uh, I have uh a friend who does macrame and I have her work. And um, there's a young photographer who uh displays his work here. So, uh, besides having uh, you know, clothes for sale, uh I have other things. I have a very very old scrimshaw for sale. Scrimshaw is the old sailors art. Drawing on ivory.

(C) Oh, yeah.

(M) And uh, I have some soapstone sculpture, done by an Eskimo tribe. It's a very old collection. So, I have some, you know, different things, you know, for sale, other than just clothes. And, of course, a lot of our antiques are for sale. We'll often sell furniture. So, you know, someone will come in and bargain for something. You never know uh what you have for sale.

(C) Well, interesting...

(K) That makes it unique, too, doesn't it? Having a lot of different things for sale.

(M) It's fun, too. I think half the fun really that both my husband and I have is making something from nothing. Now, the piece of furniture behind you, uh, we found in a little chicken yard, with the chickens roosting in the drawers. Now that's a beautiful piece of old furniture, but it was old fashioned to the family that put it out in the chicken coop. Whereas, I love old furniture because it's solid oak. And uh, so, we had a lot of fun cleaning that up and uh getting it presentable to use and it's a beautiful old piece. So, we have a lot of fun doing that.

(K) Let's see the shop. I'm ready for that.