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## Naomi Fowler Memoir

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Interview and memoir

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**SPRINGFIELD INTERNATIONAL VISITORS COMMISSION**

Fowler, a member of the Commission, recalls her co-workers, the Commission's goals, as well as the work they performed in Springfield.

Interview by Byron Booth, 1991

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## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a series of tape-recorded interviews on the Springfield International Visitors Commission conducted by Byron Booth for the Oral History Office, Sangamon State University on April 26, 1991. Margaret Reader also transcribed the tapes and Linda S. Jett edited the transcripts.

Naomi Fowler's life overseas as the wife of an Air Force officer made her a natural candidate for involvement with the International Visitors Commission in Springfield.

She played an active role in updating the Commission including the creation of a working mailing list, the procurement of grants for orientations and receptions for international students of local universities.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Nacmi Fowler, April 26, 1991.

Byron Booth, Interviewer.

Q: Nacmi, tell us a little bit about your early history so we can orient you to Springfield.

A: Well, Springfield is home.

Q: You were born and raised here?

A: I don't have to tell you the date do I? Springfield is home, I went through Butler Grade School all eight years, went on to Springfield High School for four years and then I left Springfield and went to MacMurray College for Women in Jacksonville. After college I met and married a young man who made the Air Force his career. I followed him around, overseas, we had a three year tour in England and Europe. Then we came back here when he retired in 1965. People often say, "But why of all the places you've lived in the world would you come back to Springfield?" Well I think those of us who live here know why.

Q: That's right.

A: It's a nice town and he has since retired after twenty years with the State of Illinois. He was the Chief Pilot in the Division of Aeronautics and when Sangamon State University opened here in 1970 I grasped that opportunity to go back to school and took my Master's Degree and then entered officially into the work force. I went to Lincoln Land Community College as an Administrator and retired from there two years ago. So Springfield sort of keeps calling you back home.

Q: Well how did you get interested in or why are you interested in civic things such as the Visitors' Commission? Do you think this is due to something that rubbed off on you from your mother or father or a teacher, somewhere?

A: Oh, I think a lot of it is when I look at my value system as it relates to my upbringing with my mother and father. My father was very involved in civic organizations, so the public has been part of my life. My mother was a homemaker of her generation but very strong in church volunteer work and other organizations, women's clubs and that sort of thing. So I think with my parents being involved people and being told at a very early age, "If you do something, Nacmi, it's worth doing well and if you belong you contribute, you do not just take from something, you give back." So I think a lot of that has been very instrumental in how I feel about it.

Q: When did you become a member of the International Visitors Commission?

A: We were trying to recall the exact dates but I think around the early 1980s. At that time I was at Lincoln Land Community College and I think International Visitors has always had a very strong attraction because of my husband's involvement with the service and as an officer's wife certain things were expected of us and we responded to any community in which we lived but particularly when we were overseas. It was, I think, instilled upon us as to the role model that we were supposed to portray in our involvement with the English.

Q: Your first association with the Commission, were you a committee member on a particular committee?

A: Well when I first came on to the Commission at the invitation of Clascenna Harvey, who was then the Executive Director and Chair, and Clascenna has always been somewhat viewed as a mentor. I think she's an exceptional woman and has given a lot to the community. My involvement with her led me into the Commission. Clascenna was nearing retirement at that time and Betty Woods, who officially on paper is the Executive Director was working with Clascenna at that time, and Betty and I attended a workshop up in Pheasant Run that was hosted by the National Council of International Visitors, sort of a regional meeting. At that time we were very aware of the uniqueness of the Commission and I assume that has been discussed in other tapes as to how the Commission was founded and why we are in the mayor's office. But it is very, very unique. There is not another Community International Visitor Center like ours. It was becoming very clear that we needed to restructure the Commission in the sense of its committee members, the commission members and how they functioned. Clascenna being the type woman that she has been, very strong and very involved, it was her style to not only be executive director chair of the Commission but also to pretty much take care of everything that needed to be done. As a result the Commission members had been led into a feeling of, "Oh we'll just go and Clascenna reports what's happened," and some were involved in the visitations but not too terribly much.

Q: This visit that you made with Betty to Pheasant Run was a rather key thing for you?

A: Right, very much so.

Q: Was there anything particular about Pheasant Run that opened your eyes to the need of this Commission?

A: I think for me it was my first meeting to be involved with other organizations and it was apparent to me that we had more potential perhaps as members of the Commission than what was being exercised. So Betty's and my primary concern was that the impending retirement, if you will, of Clascenna, "How could we delicately introduce some of the new ideas that we brought back from Pheasant Run?" Pheasant Run was a lot of workshops, interaction with other people who were involved in the same thing we were involved in. We had been doing an

exceptional job under Clascenna's leadership. Clascenna took me with several others to the National meeting in Washington D. C. and that was my first opportunity to be on the national scope and we couldn't go anywhere but someone didn't know Clascenna. Springfield has such an outstanding reputation for International Visitors. So we came back and worked on the premise that Clascenna would be retiring and how could we then introduce some of the committee structure to the Commission that we saw working in other organizations. After that Clascenna did retire and I think we spoke of the wonderful reception that was given for her out at the Brinkerhoff Home and the four mayors under which she had served all attended and had pictures taken and it was quite a gala affair. We had several other kind of occasions like that and Clascenna then became somewhat of an emeritus executive director. Betty assumed her proper role then at that time and because I had been involved with Betty at meetings and we worked very closely together I became chair of the Commission and served with Doris Bucari. One of the things that we needed desperately was the resource list from which Clascenna had worked. How do we know who all these people were out in the community? She had it at her fingertips and just off of the top of her head if you will.

Q: She had been doing it for years.

A: Absolutely, and I think we talked briefly about her affiliation to the Governor's office because she really was with the State of Illinois, so she had the Governor's Office and a lot of things there that she could work with that we did not have. So we asked Clascenna for her directory and it reminded me of my aunt's recipe book. You know how you find a good recipe and you just tuck it in there? Some were handwritten in pencil and whatever, but it was a start for us. We took that and developed a mailing list from all of those people. We didn't know whether they were still at the same address. We didn't have any idea but at that time I put it into the computer and we sent all of these people a letter asking them if they were still interested in being volunteers serving with the Commission, what was their status, do they have a change of address and would they send us back the enclosed card and yes or no. We received a number of those back and as a result of that then we sent a questionnaire to these people. Some people, as you might have guessed, were deceased, some had moved away, some were no longer capable of being involved. But those that expressed interest we sent a rather extensive questionnaire, wanting to know when they were available, did they speak other languages, all that sort of information and how would they like to be involved. We then structured committees, we had an Escort and Transportation Committee, we had a Home Hospitality Committee, we had various committees.

Q: More or less like you have today?

A: Yes, it was. It's exactly the same. So then as those people responded we could assign them to the various committees and at that time we had chairpeople of each committee meet with these people from the community who had responded. At the same time we asked the commission members to be assigned to the Public Relations Committee or whatever committee they would like to serve. As you might guess we

had some people on the Commission who had been with the Commission for years and years and years, probably from its inception.

Q: Which so frequently happens?

A: Yes, and they are so vital to an organization as it's growing but just because of their restrictions and the needs of a commission, sometimes it doesn't always work for those people to continue indefinitely and our by-laws needed to be looked at. So Maralee Lindley chaired the Ad Hoc Committee for the by-laws or we call them our by-laws, they are really statements of purpose I guess. And we rewrote those to restate that members would come on for two years, they could be reappointed for two years and at such time they must rotate off.

Q: I would assume that technically, from a legal viewpoint, that a more or less volunteer commission with one city employee whether it's legal for you to have true by-laws. Your statement of purpose I think is a good thing to call that.

A: Yes, and of course that was presented to the mayor's office and accepted through him, so anything we do like that of course must be with the mayor's office approval or sanction. But we felt we needed something so that we could move on, to have our commission grow with new membership. What happened were the people who were rotating off become sustaining members.

Q: They'd be pretty badly hurt if they had to take off.

A: Absolutely, yes, so those people are still included. However it allows us then to add new members to the Commission. Now that's another somewhat different way in which we've approached that. You know in the past the mayor, and of course the mayor still does appoint the Commission members, but when I was chair, Mayor Michael Huston was in office and we submitted to him our recommendations, a list of names from which he could choose if he wanted to do so, and of course add some of his own if he wanted to. But that began with Mayor Huston and it has continued on through Mayor Langfelder, who has been very supportive and involved with the commission, very much so and we've been appreciative of that. So that laid another kind of level. If I use the word control that sounds too strong, but it allows you to at least give a better direction I think to the Commission and it's purpose. So we now have a way of rotating members, making recommendations for new members. Betty is in place as the Executive Director and then we felt there needed to be an orientation for some of the new people, particularly the Commission members and volunteers of the community. We held an orientation, we've had several now. We just completed one recently where it introduces to the new members and the volunteers how they fit into the big picture. Sometimes if you are sitting in Springfield, Illinois and you entertain a judge with his interpreter or someone from Uganda you thing, "Well now when he moves on the next day, did I make a difference?" So in this orientation we attempted to give them the information, how is a person selected, how do they come to the United States, how do they choose Springfield, Illinois and where do they go from here? So you get the

big picture and also for them to have a better understanding how important it is for them to fulfill their role as volunteers, whether they're an escort or having a home hospitality or whatever. So that has proven to be very fruitful for us to have an orientation.

One of the other things that surfaced during this transition time was because of Clascenna's involvement with the state and with the city and with so many facets of the community, people would say, "Oh, International Visitors, you must be with DCCA," or "Are you out of the Governor's office?" "No, we are the Mayor's Commission on International Visitors." So it seemed apparent that we needed something like a brochure or something of that nature to identify us. So when I was chair I was able to recruit a student from Sangamon State University in the communications program who was looking for an internship and I took her and worked with her for the semester.

Q: That's called using the community is it?

A: That's right and she received credit for it at the University and she worked down in the office some but primarily her purpose was to design this brochure. So she and I worked very closely together and I think it turned out rather nicely.

Q: It's a real neat presentation.

A: We took the national logo and did the overlay of our Old State Capitol and anyway we felt that that gave us an identity. So when someone says, "Who are you?" that explains who we are. And there was a tear-off if someone wanted to volunteer to be involved with the Commission. It gave them an opportunity to be in touch with the office. Those were some things that sort of moved through the years that I chaired. We also made applications for national grants.

Q: Yes, I wanted to touch on that because in talking to you previously I felt that was very important.

A: Clascenna had been very conscientious about applying for smaller grants whenever she had the opportunity and I think the concept that I brought was that there were training dollars available through the national office. We applied and did receive money to support these orientations. We've also moved into having a wonderful reception for international students that were in the community through SIU or Sangamon State and Lincoln Land. We had that at the Brinkerhoff home and we are continuing to do that now for the students. I think we try to have it in the fall, once they get settled and it gives them opportunity to sort of meet each other too and know who we are. And they are good resources when we have an international visitor perhaps from their country or we can involve them in an activity with the international visitor. So we've used the moneys that way.

Q: Also, hasn't your influence on other members of the Commission and Betty and the other lady and her staff, hasn't the whole organization benefited from your experience and don't they now compare it with back say 1980 or 1985, aren't they attending more national and regional meetings than they used too?

A: Well I don't know that we are attending more, I think as I stated earlier, Clascenna was very conscientious about taking new members if she could to a national meeting and she also took me to a regional meeting in Dallas. But I think because of making application for some of the grant moneys, that has expanded maybe to more members being able to participate. What's happening now is characteristic of a lot of organizations because the dollars are harder to come by first of all, to put on a conference and secondly, for the attendee to find the money to attend. The most recent conference in Albuquerque, New Mexico, they combined two regions and I believe that's the first time they had done that. So that was the Midwest and the West as far as Hawaii. So that way more delegates can go and take in a bigger conference. A National Conference is only held every three years and it's always held in Washington D.C. and it's rather awesome in my opinion. It's very large, you are mixing with large cities, San Francisco, Chicago or Houston, Oklahoma City or Tulsa I believe was such a big one at the last meeting, that you glean from those organizations but you still have to bring it back and make it fit into what you do. I think one of the things we do best is so characteristic of a Midwest city like Springfield is our genuineness and our ability to extend hospitality. A lot of our visitors reflect back that this was the only chance that they had for home hospitality. We put them in the car and take them out New Salem and I remember a group of Chinese we had. They were so taken with our our fields, it was in the summer when our soybean and cornfields were just at their peak and they grow similar crops, but to see the acres and acres and acres that we have is just overwhelming to them. When we got to New Salem and they had the oxen up there, the one gentleman there, because this was quite a large Chinese delegation, he was telling us how they still use the oxen in their rice paddies. He was so thrilled to see something like that and here we were depicting it in New Salem, you know, of those times. I think we touched upon this that a concern I have is that we show a cross culture and that we show a cross section of our community. It's wonderful that say a person is affluent and wants to participate in and does home hospitality but I think it's very important that the international visitor sees the cross section of our lifestyles. I don't think any of us would want them to go back believing that everyone lives in that one lifestyle.

Q: Well from a personal viewpoint I've done some escorting which I did enjoy but I always make certain that they see the so-called other side of town and I've found that other escorts do the same thing.

A: Yes, and I think that's very important, because we don't want the old "ugly American" kind of thing to continue to sift through to the rest of the world.

Q: Nacmi, I think that's a great contribution you've made to this history which is what all this series of tapes amounts too. And thank you very much.

A: You are very welcome and it's my pleasure.

End of Tape