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## Betty Woods Memoir

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**SPRINGFIELD INTERNATIONAL VISITORS COMMISSION**

Betty Woods, executive director of the Springfield International Visitors Commission, discusses its creation and organization as well as her duties at the Commission.

Interview by Byron Booth, 1990

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Betty Woods Memoir

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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 28, 1990. Margaret Reeder also transcribed the tapes and Linda S. Jett edited the transcripts.

Betty Woods is the executive director of the Springfield International Visitors Commission. In this memoir she describes how the Commission was created and how she became associated with the Commission.

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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Betty Woods, April 28, 1990, Springfield, Illinois.

Byron Booth, Interviewer.

Q: Are you a native of Springfield?

A: I am, I'm a lifelong resident of Springfield.

Q: Were your parents natives?

A: My father was originally from Athens and came here as a young boy, sixteen years old and has resided here for his lifetime, my mother as well. Yes, we have deep roots in Springfield, as a family.

Q: Your maiden name was Tabor, right?

A: Right.

Q: What did he do?

A: My father was the owner, manager of Maldaner's Restaurant and he began his career there as a young boy at sixteen years old. He was there longer than any Maldaner but upheld the Maldaner tradition of serving good food and maintained their special recipes and catering service.

Q: Oh course, Maldaner's is a great tradition in Springfield and always will be.

A: Thank you.

Q: Tell me about your schooling.

A: I attended St. Agnes Grade School and then went to Springfield High School for one year and the remainder of my high school years was spent at Sacred Heart Academy. From there I went to Cincinnati, Ohio for combined study at the Schuster Martin School of Arts and the University of Cincinnati.

Q: I see. Well when you were finished there, you came home and went to work somewhere. Where was that?

A: I returned home and I opened a little dance studio, a short term operation due to war years and marriage.

Q: And you married who?

A: Married Edward English Woods. English Woods was also a lifelong resident of Springfield. We knew each other through the high school years, married during the war years. My volunteer experience with the Junior League of Springfield led me to my staff positions. I became active as a volunteer at the YWCA and then became program director there. Then from there I moved to the Commission.

Q: What year was that?

A: 1974 was when I began my career with the Commission on International Visitors.

Q: In talking to others who are combined into this review of the history of the Commission, I've learned that the Commission began in 1961 as a result of a lot of work that the Junior League did prior to 1961.

A: That's right.

Q: And I have that recorded here. So you went to work for the Commission as a full-time employee.

A: The network of associations is interesting because at the YWCA there was an annual World Fellowship Celebration Day involving many ethnic groups and new residents who were formerly from foreign countries who come to the YWCA to become acquainted in our city. Exploring other opportunities, I met Clascenna Harvey and Louise Murphy, both well known for their city-state endeavors. Clascenna, Chairman of the Commission, held an administrative position with the State of Illinois and Louise, a member of the Commission held an administrative position with the Springfield Convention and Visitors Bureau. The former Executive Director had resigned from the Commission and Clascenna recommended me to Mayor Telford to fill the position.

Q: I take it then that Clascenna Harvey was chairman of the Commission at that time and was for many years?

A: Yes, I would say for fifteen years or more she was chairman and she actually directed the Commission. Everyone relied upon Clascenna because of her expertise. Clascenna really was a marvelous administrator and it was a wonderful experience for me to have been under her wing for a number of years to witness her procedures for the organization.

Q: Was she an employee of the city then?

A: No, she was employed by the State of Illinois. She was with the Division of Tourism and they acknowledged her civic volunteer duties with the Commission. So they permitted, with the Mayor's approval, my moving into her office with the records of the Commission. It was a combined effort of state and city at that time. And it was really worthwhile for me to be trained under Clascenna because she really had the outreach through the state as well as through the city. So this introduced me to her procedures.

Q: So you had a lot of guidance from her although you were a city employee and she was a state employee?

A: Yes, also, I would like to accredit Clascenna's secretary who guided my recordkeeping for the Commission.

Q: Who was she?

A: Kay Isaacson. She really was just an asset too not only for the State but to the Commission for devising plans for recordkeeping on International Visitors served.

Q: Prior to the interest in founding this Commission by the Junior League who was taking care of visitors that wanted to come to Springfield? Was this handled by the state or by various offices?

A: Well the Junior League was contacted by the State of Illinois government officials who discovered the need for Springfield volunteers to assist with foreign dignitaries by providing escorted site tours, transportation and home hospitality. Most likely, Annabelle Patton, first chairman of the Springfield Commission on International Visitors, explained this fully to you.

Q: Back to the time that the Commission was created there were some people who were active then who were early members of the Commission and some of whom are still members of the Commission. Who were some of those people?

A: Annabelle Patton (Donald R.), Doris Bucari (James E.), Maralee Lindley (Perry), Anita Walbaum (Robert C.), Betty Boardman (Robert L.), Louise Wollen (L. A.), Theo E. Finley, Jane Becker (Charles P.), Helen Harper (Ivan C.), Wilma Beatty (David E.), Mary L. Bernardi, Jane E. Mullett, Carroll C. Hall, Naomi Fowler (Robert C.), Cecile Meiers (Clyde A.), Imogene Schneider, Clascenna Harvey, Louise Murphy.

Following Clascenna's resignation as chairman, an Ad Hoc committee, chaired by Maralee Lindley with members, Doris Bucari, Naomi Fowler, Anita Walbaum, revised the By-Laws to allow rotation of members and new appointments. Former members are given the opportunity to continue as active sustaining members. This has proven beneficial to the Commission.

Q: In addition to Doris Bucari, Louise Murphy was a member back in the earliest days and she still is, at least a sustaining a member I guess you would call her.

A: Yes, we fully realize the importance of those who have served as long as Louise and Clascenna. Mayor Huston was so kind because he knew that Clascenna deserved very special recognition for all that she had done and she was given the title of Chairman Emeritus. So Clascenna is always welcome at our meetings and Louise as well is still serving as a Commission member and eventually will become a sustaining member. Those who have served and have enjoyed being a part of it, will always be a participant. So it's really growing to

new numbers of people as well as using our experienced Commission members.

Q: I have noticed that Cecile Meiers is still active also?

A: Cecile Meiers is now serving as Escort/Transportation Chairman providing the assistance of contacting volunteer escorts to meet visitors upon arrival, accompany them to appointments and escort their historic site tours. It is most important for the Oral History to include Darrell D. Carter, present Chairman, who formerly served in the U.S. Embassy in Peru, a former USIA Bureau Chief, United States Information Agency. The Commission has greatly benefited by his direction and is fortified by his expertise.

Q: Was that in the State Department?

A: Yes, so through Daryl, he's the appointed chairman, he has devised a plan for a committee structure that involves many participating volunteers, such as you, Mr. Booth. You serve on our Public Relations Committee and this is really an important support to the Commission for our outreach in the community as well as serving the needs for sponsored visitors. Mr. George Dietz, a newly appointed member, served as a foreign service officer in the U.S. Embassies in Poland and Czechoslovakia and several other countries. It's really an advantage for the Commission to have these key persons to advise and take part in our endeavors.

Q: Of course, also you have another advantage, our present mayor is a native of Austria and a very important booster for your activities.

A: We are so grateful. Actually all the mayors have been very supportive and have enjoyed and acknowledged the importance of the Commission. However, Mayor Langfelder is extra special because of his being formerly from Vienna, Austria. He has been very sensitive to the purpose of the Commission and is overly supportive. We are grateful and can see the great strides that have been made due to his very kind support. His assistant also as well, Robert Church, deserves mention, who has been very supportive.

Q: Tell us how you operate along these lines, such as what are the organizations that feed visitors to you and what are your ways of keeping in contact with them? There must be several organizations.

A: Yes, there are several organizations. Mainly the leading agencies who call us regularly are the Institute for International Education, Visitor Program Service of Meridian House International, Delphi International Educational Training, U.S.D.A. Graduate School, African American Institute.

Q: What's that part of?

A: National Counsel for International Visitors. The commission is an affiliate member organization of the National Counsel for International Visitors. The agencies who call us to program visitors

are under the umbrella of the National Council for International Visitors.

Q: Is that part of the State Department?

A: Yes, foreign visitors are sponsored by United States Information Agency. The USIA is the abbreviation of the sponsored visitors who come to the United States and the USIA chooses the agency to plan their U.S. itinerary. Springfield is among one hundred and nine cities chosen to serve the needs of these visitors, to fulfill their objectives and their goals. Springfield is often called because of our government, an agriculture center, centrally located in Illinois. It's an opportunity for them to come to the heartland, as they really experience the friendship and hospitality of many people that they would not be able to experience in a metropolitan city. This is really to our advantage for hosting the many numbers that we do.

Q: You mentioned the phrase "the sponsored people" in here. How do they know who to sponsor? How do they get these names? Do other governments apply to the United States?

A: The U.S. Embassies with foreign governments choose the sponsored visitors to visit the U.S. with the private agency chosen by USIA to plan the sponsored international visitors' itinerary throughout the United States to fulfill the objectives of the visitor or groups coming. It could be for journalists, educators, or government officials.

Q: Well how do they find out who wants to come? Is that through their government?

A: Oh that's through the U.S. Embassies in their countries.

Q: The embassies, they feed that in, I see.

A: They are chosen to apply in their own respective countries.

Q: Recently you had a group of economists that came here and there were seven or eight in the group as I recall but they were from seven or eight different countries.

A: That's right.

Q: So how were they put together? Who created this program, or do you know?

A: A theme or special project proposal is created by either the USIA or other agencies. The project proposal is submitted to the U.S. Embassies in foreign countries for them to select the sponsored visitors who qualify.

Q: So the others that feed you names operate in the same way? Like a group of educators or agricultural people or people interested in mining?

A: That's right. There are so many examples but there is one that I would like to mention, a group of journalists that came from the Middle East. Do you have time for me to tell this story?

Q: Oh yes, in fact any of these things that stand out back over the years will be perfect.

A: There were a group of journalists who came from the Middle East. Arrangements were complete in readiness for their arrival. Shortly before their expected arrival a horrible massacre occurred in Beirut. We thought this would cancel all their plans. Unbelievably, they arrived in the United States and came to Springfield. I escorted them to the Mayor's Prayer Breakfast and sat at one of the tables with some of the visitors. They were so impressed with being able to be here. Having had this dreadful experience, the prayer breakfast was very meaningful to them. A woman reporter from Jordan remarked, "It is only in the United States that we would have the opportunity to meet each other from surrounding borders only a few miles apart. We have met each other in the United States and have become friends." Her remark made an indelible impression. It truly revealed the importance of foreign exchange, sharing with one another.

Q: Do you work with other organizations besides the Washington offices?

A: Being with the city, of course, there are many groups who come who register at the Visitors' Center at Lincoln's Home. Besides being the tourism center, many foreign people will write to Springfield for information. So if there are student groups coming they will call upon us for assistance. We'll provide with them with special packets. If they are in need of translators, interpreters, we call on foreign residents to assist with them. So, we're more or less becoming a catalyst in this respect, that we really do reach out to other groups and in the tourism department of the Springfield Convention and Visitors' Bureau, there are many foreign groups referred to the Commission. In particular, I remember a group of cattle ranchers from Australia. It was their tour agency that planned their trip in Australia and someone was exploiting their own personal interests for this trip. They were merely passing through Springfield. A request came to me to arrange a meeting dinner with farmers for friendly exchange and then to depart for the East Coast. They were totally exhausted by their bus trip throughout the United States, a stereo type view was not giving them the true image of the United States. I was able to convince them to remain in Springfield for rest and to visit our historic sites, they enjoyed a three day visit. This exemplifies our services are needed for other foreign tour groups.

Q: I recall that you called me one time a couple of years ago to help with three or four people from the Soviet Union that were brought here by Mrs. Dixon.

A: Yes, at Sangamon State.

Q: Through a connections that she had which was outside your usual source. What organization was that?

A: She was representing the Cross Cultural Association, that's the United States and Soviet Union Relations Office that's located in San Francisco. Mary Lou, as I understand, has taught at the university.

Q: Lou, that's who?

A: Mary Lou Burnett-Dixon, a professor at Sangamon State, had a month leave and taught at the University of Moscow. She met many people from Moscow, this was before this Peristroika and Glasnost and I believe this group came before all that happened. So it meant a lot to have someone as you to volunteer for this group. But now they are coming in great numbers and we're wondering how we can continue to cooperate because to include all the sponsored visitors that we are responsible for as well as the many Soviets who are coming through this particular agency.

Q: That leads me to another question. Some of these people that come require lodging and how do you handle this? I know that many that come in like big groups of students and things like that, they come through a different program than what you are talking about. But your visitors frequently require lodging. How do you handle that?

A: Of course their per diem, the United States Information Agency, there are moneys for the sponsored visitors but now for instance the Soviets who are coming as I understand from New York City to Springfield, their way must be paid so there is fund raising that goes on to raise money for their coming to Springfield. We as an organization are not allowed to do fund raising. We are under the city, the municipal budget and of course it is limited. In fact, much in-kind is given to the Commission! Office space, equipment, paper and supplies by the Springfield convention and Visitors Buruea. We are able to cooperate and offer volunteer assistance to other organizations.

Q: I see, but for example these eight economists we were referring to, did they pay their own way, pay their own hotel bills and things like that?

A: They are given a per diem, with expenses paid.

Q: By our government?

A: By our government but there are the voluntary visitors. Now for instance there are voluntary visitors who choose to pay their way but they are permitted through the USIA and the private agencies to plan their itinerary and they come to Springfield as well. But this particular group of European economists, it was paid for by the USIA.

Q: Well, many of the people stay at hotels but in many cases you program for them to stay at private homes, different groups of visitors?

A: That's right.

Q: How do you handle that?

A: It is seldom that we plan for the homestays. Occasionally, homestays with farm families and Springfield families are arranged for particular groups who are visiting only for a few days. There is no measurement accountable for the expenses of the short term sponsored visitors due to the hosted dinners, luncheons, escorted tours provided to them.

Q: Well then private homes serve dinners frequently?

A: They serve dinners, right.

Q: Are these people that register with you or do you just happen to know them?

A: Through the Commission, Volunteer Committee, Public Relations Committee and the Speaker's Bureau, volunteers are assimilated. Participating volunteers invite their friends who become future volunteers. The Speaker's Bureau's presentation to various clubs and civic groups increases volunteer interest. Daily information is received from people who are wanting to participate. Volunteer Committee, headed by Barbara Burris, is diligently working with her committee to rotate and to give those interested an experience in hosting and escorting. Volunteers are interviewed before assignments. Annual orientations are held for volunteers.

Q: So there are times that your office is called upon to assist in furnishing just literature or information to large visiting groups?

A: Yes.

Q: That really otherwise you don't handle?

A: That's right. We have special packets that we give welcoming them with the mayor's personal welcome and then brochures. Then we have language brochures, in most languages to inform them about the community and any questions that they have or any particular guidance we offer or extend our services.

Q: Well this would add considerably to your annual load of people that come in from foreign countries. About how many do you serve a year?

A: Actually with the count of people who register at the Visitors' Center whom we partially serve, it amounts to near five thousand. We program for USIA sponsored visitors around two hundred or so in that category. They are now coming in groups. It used to be they came as individuals and now there are groups of five to eight people. In fact we have a group of African journalists who are coming in May and there are fifteen in this group. So it's growing in numbers more than individual visitors. But there is much required, of course that means more volunteers, more paper work. Also we are responsible for an annual report and this is given every January. We calculate all the numbers that we serve and how many nights were spent in a hotel and really it tells the story of what the Commission has done throughout

the year. So this information is submitted to NCTV and is available to share in our community.

Q: How many foreign visitors were served in 1989?

A: Five thousand and seventy-eight total, two hundred and thirty-six were program sponsored international visitors.

Q: Well you certainly have a vacation coming, an extended one. Thank you very much for this very valuable information. I know it helps our relationships as a country to have people come here which is such a great focal point of our history. Everyone knows Abraham Lincoln. Thank you, Betty, very much.

A: You are welcome.

End of Side One, Tape One