

Anthropologist Studies Life in the Rock House Dorm

BY AMY WILK



Dr. Hudepohl

IN AUGUST OF 2004, A GROUP OF WOMEN, FORMER WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY ALUMNI ATTENDING A CAMPUS REUNION, TOURED A SMALL STONE BUILDING CALLED THE ROCK HOUSE.

They had all lived at the Rock House when it was a dormitory for female students, most of them during the early 1950s. The building is now the base for the Anthropology program's laboratories, and although none of the faculty was available at that time of the year, alumni affairs staff members were able to arrange a tour. By the time the fall semester started, the women's stories began to trickle back to the program: memories of faculty and friends,

bobby socks, curfews, and sneaking out of windows after dark to meet their friends and beaux. Dr. Kate Hudepohl, an anthropology professor at WKU, was delighted and fascinated by the contrast of campus life then and now. And also by the women, most of them now in their seventies, giggling about their escapades at WKU. "I got to talking with my research assistant at the time, and we thought, this is really cool," said Hudepohl.

These images planted the seed of an idea which germinated into the Rock House Project. That fall Dr. Hudepohl and her students submitted a research proposal to the Kentucky Oral History Commission, a nationally recognized program affiliated with the Kentucky Historical Society, which collects oral history

interviews from across the state with the goal of preserving the history of Kentucky and its citizens' life experiences in their own words. By the spring of 2005, Dr. Hudepohl and her students received a grant which provided funding for the project.

For those not familiar with Western Kentucky University's campus, the Rock House sits on the top of a hill across the street from the venerable Cherry Hall, with the statue of Henry Hardin Cherry, one of the earliest administrators of the college, keeping an eye on it. According to the 1949 *Talisman* Yearbook, the Rock House had been a private home until purchased by WKU and was originally used to house the music department. After that it was used for housing, first for women, then, during World War II for military air cadets.



After that it served as an athlete's dorm managed by the campus legend Coach E.A. Diddle. The women returned in 1949, and it remained a dorm until 1959. It has been called by various names: The Little Dorm,

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International Center, and most recently, The Rock House, because of its distinctive stone façade.

Dr. Hudepohl and her students began by contacting the organizers of the reunion, who were kind enough to share their list of names, about forty in all. Thirty-eight of

those were viable, but some couldn't participate due to illness, and some had passed away. Eventually, twenty-eight women participated in the interview process. Each woman was interviewed by an anthropology

student asking the same set of questions. Many of them generously shared photos and even a diary about their experiences.

Many of the questions were about the women's backgrounds pertaining to their years at Western. Why did they choose WKU and how many

years did they attend? What was their major area of study? How long did they live at the Rock House? What were the house rules, and what kind of responsibilities did they have while staying there? The subjects were also asked questions about being a female college student in the 1950s. "We were just trying to get a general view of what it was like to live there, what campus life was like." What was their typical routine? Were male and female students treated more or less the same? They were asked to describe their social activities, and how living at the Rock House was a factor in those activities. Finally they were asked to share a few of their most memorable experiences they had had at WKU and at the Rock House. Hudepohl explained, "One of the most amazing things about



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Most of the women were interviewed elsewhere, but Dr. Hudepohl met with one of them on campus and they walked through the Rock House. About twenty-five girls could live there joined by the Resident Supervisor. One “dorm mother,” Dulcie Clark, lived there with her husband, a professor of industrial arts, and their two young sons. They shared two bedrooms and a little parlor on the first floor, and a dining room and kitchen in the basement. Some of the girls had dorm rooms in the basement as well, with the remainder of the rooms being on the first and second floors. Curtains were hung to separate parts of the residence. Some of the interviewees shared memories of Dr. Clark singing out, “man on the hall,” whenever he had to pass through some areas of the house. No other men were allowed beyond the small common parlor, and the women had to be in by curfew. A few shared how they sneaked out windows, and once they rolled in a keg even though they weren’t allowed to drink in the dorm.

Some of the ladies had lived in other dorms before and preferred the Rock House. It must not have looked like much compared to the other dorms, Potter Hall and West Hall. One student shared the moment when her parents almost didn’t let her stay because of how it looked. However, not only was it across the street from Cherry Hall where most of their classes were, it was also closer to the Goal Post, a local diner and hangout. If they had a choice the students preferred to eat there. Another common denominator among the residents was that many of them belonged to the Western Players, the theatre club.

While Dr. Hudepohl didn’t mean to just pick female students to do the

interviewing, it worked out that way, and for her one of the most interesting aspects was seeing the cycle of time — current student facing former student, exploring the contrasts between their generations. One of the things the students all had in common was the social network they developed while there. Connections that helped make it possible for over half of those interviewed to go on to graduate school, if not at WKU then elsewhere. “I think the current students were engaged by how charming some of the stories were, but also taken aback by the different expectations for the genders. It’s easy for younger people to forget that there was such a thing,” said Hudepohl. One former student recalled an incident that underscored those differences. On a cold winter day she wore a nice woolen pantsuit to the Kentucky building to do some research and was kicked out for



Weatherford Reunion

then. Were these rebels that were pushing the boundaries? Or were these women that were performing some norm?” Dr. Hudepohl felt that the stereotype of the young woman of that era going to college to catch a husband was disproved by the

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wearing pants because at that time only skirts or dresses were allowed in class and on campus, a far cry from today’s informal dress code. The women said that as soon as they got home they’d change into their ‘pegged up’ jeans and bobby socks.

While some of the former residents were uncomfortable answering questions about the gender discrimination, many admitted that they didn’t recognize it as such at the time. It wasn’t something they thought about much until the sixties. Hudepohl explained, “I didn’t know what to expect from women who had attended Western

research. “These were women who had come to school with the idea of educating themselves to go into a profession.” Many of them did not marry straight out of college, instead going on to careers. And regardless of the challenges, two of those interviewed went on to get their doctorates, one of those in anthropology.

Dr. Hudepohl defines anthropology as the biological and cultural study of people, anytime, anywhere in the world. When WKU students study anthropology, whether they are majors of that discipline, or undergraduates trying to meet a

general education requirement, they are being exposed to an expanded world view, vital in today’s global economy. “Finding out that there are very different people out there who make very different choices than you gives you a better understanding of yourself. Anthropology does that in particular because of its cross cultural and comparative approach.” This type of education creates more aware and engaged citizens. “It doesn’t mean that you have to decide to change your perspective,” she continued, “but if you learn there are other options out there, it helps you respect other people’s choices — that’s a place to start.”

Dr. Hudepohl, who earned her Ph.D. in anthropology at Tulane University in New Orleans, uses projects such as this one to give her students hands-on experience that will help them later in their own careers. As well as the Rock House project, they are working on local cemetery documentation, and she has taken one student to the Caribbean on a research trip to study the Caribs, one of the last indigenous groups of the area and her own special area of research. “It’s important to offer opportunities to apply some of what they’re learning

— to become more confident as young scholars — whether they go on to grad school in anthropology or do something totally different. WKU values and encourages this type of experiential learning.” Two conference papers have been read at state-level conferences based on the research gathered from the Rock House project and the students have put together a temporary exhibit at the Rock House. Currently Hudepohl is working on an article for a peer-reviewed journal about the subject as well.

When asked where she'd like to see this research go Dr. Hudepohl said, “I hope it continues indefinitely.” Especially since continuing research into the role of the dorms at WKU would offer more opportunities to involve the next generation of students. She's curious about the other dorms' residents, given how much the women loved the Rock House. Almost all the dorms were for the women since the men were considered to be better equipped to take care of themselves. It will be a challenge to track down many of these former students, particularly since many women change their names as they get married. But she hopes she and her students will be able to reach out to those who are still in the area, notably those who might still be working for Western and those who are descendents of former students.

On a personal level Dr. Hudepohl said this project gave her a deeper appreciation for local history. The ladies talked about knowing President Garrett, Coach Diddle, and Russell Miller, the theatre department head and sponsor of the Western Players. One woman told a story about Coach Diddle giving her a hard time in the hall for missing games, and she teased him back about missing plays. “That made the history of the campus more personal for me,” said Hudepohl. The interviews will all be transcribed and made accessible through the Kentucky Oral History Commission, so that future generations of scholars will be able to hear those stories.

Dr. Hudepohl concluded, “I think having a circle of memory is important about what things were like and because these are recorded oral histories, you give the people you're interviewing a chance to tell their stories. The heart and soul of this project is these women getting a chance to tell their stories in their own words.” ■

