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Interview with Alice Straus

Sarah Bush

Alice Straus

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Interviewer: Sarah Bush

Interviewee: Alice Straus

Date: February 15th, 2012

Place: Kenyon College Admissions Office

Sarah Bush: And here we go. So if I could just have you tell me your name and today's date.

Alice Straus: Ok. My name is Alice Straus and today is the fifteenth of February.

SB: Great. So how long have you been in Gambier?

AS: I came here as a student in 1971 and graduated in 1975, came back to work in 1979 and have been here off and on since then. Um most recently I came back to work at the college in 1997.

SB: How often do you go to the post office?

AS: Daily.

SB: Every single day?

AS: Ummhmm.

SB: Do you usually go about the same time?

AS: Uh, during the weekdays I try to go not at noon, because that's when the students are there, but sometime in the middle of the day. On Saturdays it's usually sort of the middle of the morning.

SB: What kinds of reactions do you have with other people in the post office or with the postal employees?

AS: I have a wonderful anecdote about the post employees, in fact. When I came back to work here in 1979, having been gone for four years, the postmaster, Chuck Woolison, asked me if I would like to have my old box, 321, back. So he not only recognized me, which was pretty good for 1500 students plus the 500 villagers or so that use the post office, but the fact that he remembered after four years what my post office box was after four years I thought was pretty impressive. I continue to have really good relations with the people, they call me by name, I know who they are, they get treats at Christmas, they give me little valentines, things like that. It's very nice to have that kind of personal relationship. I also think that helps because it's such a small post office that having a personal rapport with the people means that the service is more flexible and adapted to students and the people who use the post office. Um, which means it's a whole lot more convenient, I think, than going into Mount Vernon to a larger, more business-like post

office. So, that's what the employees. In terms of the other people that you run into at the post office, as I said I try to avoid noon-time at the post office because that's when all the students are there at lunch time trying to get their packages and the lines are just too long. I only have an hour for lunch, and I don't want to spend a third of it standing in line. Um, but it is a good substitute for a student union or a village center, since we don't have anything like that either at Kenyon or in Gambier. Um, it, the bulletin boards certainly function as a news center. It's where the village council puts up all the minutes of their meeting and the notices of things that are coming up like boil alerts for the water, things you need to know. But the biggest, for me, the biggest source of news is seeing other people at the post office. I tend to run into a lot of the same people who are on the same schedule I am and you get accustomed to that. But also if you stand around at the post office long enough on a Saturday morning, for instance, you'll see almost everybody you know coming through. And it's a nice, informal way to run across people. The postal employees are also very good about, for instance if you have Gambier mail, there used to be a slot just for Gambier mail and it would get sorted through the day and put in the mailboxes. Now, the Gambier mail has to go to Columbus and back again, so it takes a day or two to have something delivered to the box right next to yours. Sometimes the postal employees will go against the postal regulations and actually put the letter in the box for you, which is a very nice thing for them to do. Um, but just seeing folks regularly at the post office, I see a lot of people who live outside of town that I would not normally run across walking through the village. So, it's a nexus for me.

SB: Do you think a lot of people feel the same way you do?

AS: Certainly the people my age and older. As a student I grew up with two deliveries of mail a day, so I was used to going in the daytime and then going again in the evening to get the second delivery of mail. I miss that evening socializing after dinner, but I do find that a lot of the people who were employees are still in the habit of going to the post office around noon to pick up their mail and I think they would feel the same way, that you often run into folks at the post office, you can rely on running into people at the post office. Or, if you put up a sign there, it's more likely to be seen by people who don't have access to Newscope or any of the college publications but if you're a community member you know that everyone at the college will see the sign if it's up at the post office. So I do think a lot of people rely on it as the place for exchanges.

SB: And how does that compare to your experience when you weren't in Gambier?

AS: Well, I was startled to find out that the postal service would pick up mail out of a mailbox, because I hadn't ever had a mailbox. I guess I must've gone to a big post office to buy stamps, but I have no memory of being connected to a post office at all, I mean I just expected the mail to arrive in the mailbox at the house. If it didn't, or if a package appeared to have gone missing, or something, I had no personal connection with the people at the post office when I went to ask about things. Um, so, it just seems like night and day to me. I suppose the convenience of having the mail come to your house instead of you having to go to the post office might be preferable for some people, but for me I

much prefer the personal contact with human beings at the Gambier post office as opposed to getting mail delivered at my home.

SB: How do you think having a post office in a small town in a rural setting is different from having a post office in a city or bigger town?

AS: Um, we have an unusual situation because of the college being here. I think that if the college were not here just the 500 or so residents of Gambier, or the 1000 residents of College Township probably would have been sucked up into the Mount Vernon Post Office a long time ago. Um, so I think Kenyon, Gambier, has an odd postal situation. I forgot the point of the question. Tell me again?

SB: What makes, what's the difference between rural and small town-

AS: Oh, a rural post office. Well, I guess you get more personal attention. The same services are available, it's just that you have a human being that you're dealing with. There is the social aspect of going to the post office, it's a meeting place. The physical location of the post office in Gambier I think is crucial because it is the center of the village. So it also becomes the center of social activity as well. That and the bookstore. Also, I don't know how many people really care about their post offices, but I also buy a lot of my stamps from the tiny little post office in New Mexico that is threatened with being closed because they don't do enough business. I realize that it's just a small number of employees, but I think it's crucial that we keep the Gambier post office open to keep the local people employed. I also can't imagine how the college would go about getting the U.S. Postal Service to deliver mail to all the dormitories, so it seems to me that it's critical to have a little post office here in Gambier. Um, I also think it's important that it be a community post office and not the Gambier post office and then the college having its own mail service. It's a good way for the students and the community members to mix.

SB: So, what do you think about other post office closing other places in Knox County or in Ohio?

AS: It's difficult to make the economic argument to keep places open if they aren't doing sufficient business, the problem is that in the smaller communities of course you know the people who are losing their jobs, the people who are going to be inconvenienced by not being able to get to a local post office, the elderly people who can walk to the Gambier post office who would then have to drive, or be driven, into Mount Vernon to get to a post office. But, you can't argue with the fact that the post office appears not to be an efficient business model. I don't know if privatizing it has done any good, but it seems to me that the postal rates keep increasing and the service is declining, so if all they can do is close post offices to try to be more efficient, I guess that's what they have to do. But I would be very sorry to see Gambier lose our post office. And New Part, New Mexico lose theirs.

SB: So how do you see the post office's role changing, this kind of goes along with the last question, but how do you see the post office changing as kind of technologies become more prevalent with email and everything else?

AS: I'm still of a pre-email life. I still read my magazines in paper. I guess the only lessening of postal service that I have is that I pay most of my bills online. Otherwise I still handwrite letters and send paper cards and, as I say, get paper magazines. So I still use the post office a lot. Um, I do tend to use delivery services like UPS and FedEx as much as a use the Postal Service, so that's kind of a trade-off. I think that younger people are much more accustomed to electronic communication, so they probably don't use a post office as much. But you still have to get your Amazon book order delivered somewhere. So I think the post office is not in the mail delivery business the way it used to be. I think it's more one of several content-delivery places. They're becoming more like a place like PakMail, where you can send letters but you can also get packages. Our post office doesn't have a photocopy machine, but I know some that do and provide sort of office support services. I don't know if that's the direction they'd like to go, but it seems to me at least that's what the Gambier post office ends up doing.

SB: I think that about covers my questions. Is there anything that I haven't asked that you'd like to mention?

AS: No. I'd like to give a shout-out to the local postal people. I think they're great folks and as I said they really bend over backwards to be helpful and good citizens in Gambier and make things as easy as possible for the residents here. I like the fact that the lobby is open, so you can go get your mail any time. And I do think they try hard to provide a good service.