

LIDA BARRETT INTERVIEW
August 11, 2006
(interviewed by Kenneth A. Ross)

This interview took place in Knoxville, Tennessee.

When did you join the MAA? Who influenced you in this decision?

I joined the MAA in 1955 while my husband, John, was visiting Yale and I was teaching at the University of Connecticut branch at Waterbury. Ed Begle told us that mathematicians ought to be MAA members.

How did you get actively involved in the MAA?

We went to meetings, and in the 1960s we both served as MAA Visiting Lecturers.

When did you get interested in mathematics? What were the circumstances?

In the fifth grade. I was bored in school and acted up, so I had to stay after school and do long division problems. I got really skilled at arithmetic in the process of doing problems as rapidly as possible. Later in junior high I was encouraged by Miss Emma French to try for the math team. I was selected for the team and we trained hard, learning lots of short cuts for calculations and properties of mathematics. I was barely 16 when I graduated; note that there were 11 grades in school at that time and I skipped one. At Rice I started out as a biology major but switched to math as a sophomore. Prof. Hubert Bray encouraged me to major in math and hired me to grade papers. I had a lousy calculus teacher, a graduate student who eventually became an outstanding mathematician, and I really learned calculus while taking advanced courses and grading papers.

Did you ever consider fields other than mathematics as a vocation?

When I started college I thought I'd be a librarian, primarily because a favorite older cousin was one. After getting my Bachelor's degree I planned to go back to graduate school in applied mathematics, though I got interested in psychology and for a time I considered that.

Where did you go to school?

I was born and grew up in Houston; I went to public schools, including San Jacinto High School. I went to Rice Institute (now Rice University), where I graduated at 18. I was encouraged to be a math major by the department chair, Hubert Evelyn Bray. After Rice, I worked as a mathematician for Schlumberger Oil Well Service. In order to get into their research division, I needed a graduate degree or experience working in the field, which at that time they would not let women do. In the summer of 1947, I was recruited to teach at the Texas State College for Women (TSCW). Bray recommended me when they were searching for someone that summer. The department head was Harlan C. Miller, a Moore Ph.D. She encouraged me to go to Texas for summer school in the summer of 1948. She had taught a course just for me on the number system using the Moore method, and she encouraged me to take a course with Moore that summer. I was offered a graduate assistantship, so I did not return to TSCW but stayed at Texas. I took courses from R. L. Moore every year. I received a Master's in 1949.

I married John Barrett in 1950 who I met in graduate school at Texas. John obtained his Ph.D. in 1951. John went to the University of Delaware, so Moore and J. R. Kline worked it out so I could study with Kline, who was Moore's first Ph.D. and department head at the University of Pennsylvania. I had to take comprehensive exams at Penn; there weren't any at Texas, where they used grades and class participation instead of comprehensives. I only took five courses at Penn, so I spent a summer cramming for the comprehensives.

The day after I turned in my thesis, Kline had a heart attack. His young colleague Dick Anderson took over and did the hard work of directing my work, editing and getting the thesis written up. I got my Ph.D. from Penn in 1954, and my official thesis advisor was J. R. Kline. But Dick Anderson deserves a lot of credit.

In 1954-1955, I attended seminars at Penn, and John continued teaching at Delaware. In 1955-1956, John was a visitor at Yale on NSF funding and worked with Einar Hille, and I taught at the University of Connecticut at Waterbury.

The most important mathematical support in my life came from my husband, John H. Barrett. After he completed his Ph.D., he insisted that I complete mine. During the three years I commuted from Newark, Delaware, to the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia, he did a major portion of the house work, had dinner ready when he picked me up at the train, and was totally supportive of my graduate study.

What did your parents do?

My father owned the Texas Artificial Limb Company, a maker of wooden legs, arms and also braces. My mother was a homemaker.

Did they influence your interest in math? How?

My father loved to play games with us and he liked mathematics, though he had dropped out of school after the eighth grade in the 1890s, which was not unusual then. My mother graduated from the University of Texas in 1912, which was unusual, and she was determined we would all go to college.

How many siblings did you have? What influence did they have on you?

I have an older brother, with whom I was very competitive and a younger sister. My sister was an excellent student and always made straight As, not something I aspired to do.

What accomplishments in the MAA are you especially proud of?

I had two agendas: improving the committee structure and broadening participation. I was involved in modifying the MAA's

process for choosing committee members and chairs so that we now have more diversity and broader participation. We instituted terms for committee members and limited the number of committees any individual could serve on. I worked hard to assure that the broader participation included more minorities. Ray Johnson, at the University of Maryland, was particularly helpful in identifying African-American mathematicians. I found Bob Megginson, a Native American, who was then on the faculty of Eastern Illinois.

I urged my successor, Debbie Haimo, toward the council concept that the MAA subsequently adopted.

Different MAA presidents had different strengths. Len Gillman focused on mathematics and publications. I served on the MAA Finance Committee for six years, including years when Len was president. So Gillman sent me to meetings of CSSP, the Council of Scientific Society Presidents. Incidentally, Dick Anderson was president of CSSP around 1984.

Let me explain why I was a different sort of MAA president. When I was an Associate Provost at Northern Illinois University, I was sent to a five-week seminar at the Harvard Institute of Educational Management. This experience sharpened my awareness and concerns of how organizations worked. This included committee structure and finances. The staffing of the finance division and of publications at MAA headquarters was modified. I'm pleased to take some credit for the changes that made it possible to bring Don Albers to the MAA.

Another accomplishment of mine is that I helped defeat a proposal for the MAA to move its headquarters to Alexandria, Virginia. [That was a key decision because some people, including Al Wilcox and Ken Ross, favored the move.]

One of my interests was the relationship between research in undergraduate education and teaching practice. I was interested in the MAA publications presenting some of this material. At one point an editor of the *Monthly* did not include anything on education. There was some discussion about a possible new journal in this area, but we generally agreed that there were not sufficient articles to justify a

journal. However, it was agreed that editors would be encouraged to consider quality education articles for inclusion in the MAA journals.

Finally, I served with Don Kreider on the MAA Staff and Services Committee that was involved in hiring Marcia Sward after Al Wilcox's retirement. Marcia had been an Associate Executive Director under Al Wilcox, and then she had worked for NRC and MSEB.

During my presidency I was actively involved in the twice-a-year meetings of the presidents of AMS, MAA, and SIAM that included the executive directors and one other representative. Also, in the Conference Board of Mathematical Science that included not only the three organizations above but NCTM and seven other societies related to mathematics education, statistics and operations research.

Earlier in the 1980s, Dick Anderson and I had worked with the director of CBMS to build more of a role for MAA in the organization's activities. I also participated in the Society of Scientific Society Presidents. I felt that the MAA gained by participation in the activities of the broader math and science communities.

During your career, what personalities have stood out in the mathematics community?

When my husband and I first started attending math meetings in the 1950s, they were much smaller. In fact, they used to list the names of those who attended meetings in the reports in the AMS Bulletin. It was wonderful to have direct contact with the leaders in the community. I remember meeting and talking with the presidents of MAA and AMS. The Moore Ph.D.s who were presidents of MAA (Ed Moise, Gail Young, RH Bing, G. T. Whyburn, Dick Anderson) were all leaders who I knew on a personal basis. Saunders MacLane was well spoken, sometime outspoken, with his ideas and leadership in math activities. Leon Cohen's work at NSF contributed to what was happening in research. Baley Price worked hard to make CBMS effective, and he led a move to have it more closely integrate the working of the math organizations. Shirley Hill, as the first head of the Mathematical Sciences Education Board at the National Academy of Sciences, was a force in bringing education to the attention of the whole mathematics community. The Secretaries of the MAA have all

played important roles. Presidents come and go. Secretaries provide continuity: Dave Roselle, Ken Ross, Jerry Alexanderson. Don Albers has done so much for MAA publications. Certainly all the presidents of the MAA during my years as a member have had an impact.