Cathy Cooney

Cyclone Marching Band Oral History Project

Interviewed by Jay Chapman

2024-01-26

Time stamps reference the video interview.

**JC:** Jay Chapman

**CC**: Cathy Cooney

[00:00:00]

**JC:** This is Jay Chapman, an interviewer for the Iowa State University Special Collections and University Archives Iowa State University Cyclone Football Varsity Marching Band Oral History [Project]. Today is Friday, January 26, 2024. I'm interviewing Cathy Cooney. All right, well, thanks for joining us.

**CC:** Yes, thank you.

[00:00:26]

**JC:** Well, let's just start off, could you maybe tell me a little bit more about your early life, where you grew up, your family, that sort of thing?

**CC:** Yes, I grew up moving around a little bit, mostly in Missouri, a little bit of time in Massachusetts. I was an only child, so it was just mom and dad and me, bouncing around, having lots of experiences. I always wanted to play clarinet. I blame Lawrence Welk [mid-twentieth century band director and television personality]. [Chapman laughs] Like, I was fascinated. Yes, started doing music stuff in fifth grade or so, and I always knew that marching band was something that I wanted to *aim* for. It was something really excited about.

[00:01:06]

**JC:** Cool. So, how do you come to be at Iowa State, and what did you study when you came to Iowa State?

**CC:** Yes, so I studied history with a minor in anthropology, like an archaeology focus. I actually came to Iowa State, in part, because of the band. I live a very band centric life, which I'm sure you hear from a lot of folks who experienced that in college. I had always thought that I would go to Missouri State since that was where my dad went, and it was it was a big alumni connection, and like seems super cool, but then it turned out that half my high school was going there, and I thought, you know, I don't want to do that. I want to start again, do something different. My family suggested Iowa, and they said you need to pick though, because we only have time to visit one. Do you want to visit Iowa State, or do you want to visit Iowa? And I looked, and I was like, Iowa State’s band looks like what I want, so we are going to do Iowa State. [laughs] Then visited and fell in love with it and whatever.

[00:02:07]

**JC:** Great. So, you were a marching band. Were there any other bands that you were a part of?

**CC:** I did, I want to say it was symphonic, it was kind of the medium-tier band. I did pit orchestra for one of the Stars Over VEISHEA shows, as well.

[00:02:24]

**JC:** So, you mentioned clarinet. Is that what you played in the marching band? If so, what was your section like, and anything special about your group?

**CC:** Yes, I mean, my section was great. Clarinets are kind of an interesting animal because you can't really hear us in a marching band, unless you're like in the very, very, front of the of the stadium, but it does do well with a lot of, like, kind of showing off horn movements and parade marching and stuff. It's just a straight stick. You can do all kinds of things with that. My section was a lot of fun. I actually ended up meeting one of my very best friends to this day in band, and we were a pretty tight-knit section. We had a good culture of mentorship. My best friend was a junior when I was a freshman, and she adopted me. I adopted a freshman when I was a junior. I've been in the weddings of several people from my section, and we still chat.

[00:03:25]

**JC:** You said you kind of adopted someone, or they adopted you. What's that like? What's the communication? What wisdom do you impart on someone?

**CC:** [laughs] I honestly feel like it was much more informal. Like it wasn't like a formal adoption. But it was like a they'll show you the ropes and explain how things work, and make sure--because often as a freshman you don't have a car, so they'll get you and take you to the stadium for practice on Saturdays. Or if you're doing an away game or a bowl game, gives you somebody to room with if you don't have a lot of friends who are freshmen. So, I kind of hung out with them, and then when they graduated, the rest of the people in my age group kind of banded together and gathered some freshmen to us too.

[00:04:15]

**JC:** Can you talk a little bit about what it was like learning and performing a show, maybe how did you get from, “Hey, this is what we're going to do,” to the final product that you put on the field at the end of the week?

**CC:** Yes, absolutely. I mentioned to you before we started recording that I had been watching some videos with my partner of different games, and the skits, and things like that. I realize that not everyone understands what I mean when I say drill, or charts, or flip folder, or steps, or whatever. I remember we would pick up our music and our drill, and I would usually go through and highlight it myself. Sometimes if it was a particularly challenging show or a fast turnaround, I would highlight in my music also, like, Here's a little bit of code for how you get to where you're supposed to be. Here's how many counts. Are you marking time? What are you doing? Then, just you got to focus and come up with patterns in your mind to help yourself figure out where you are in space. [laughs] Like, about how far do I feel from this hash mark? Am I just following the person in front of me? Do I need to be slightly like shoulder off with them? Can I count my steps instead? Is that helpful? Or, like, is there a part in the music where it makes sense for a certain thing to happen, like when you park and blow, and you're just kind of showing off? I don't know if that really answered your question.

**JC:** Yes, it did.

**CC:** Lots of hard work and lots of mind tricks.

[00:05:54]

**JC:** Yes. So, where did you practice both for music, and then maybe for charts as well, marching?

**JC:** Yes, absolutely. I feel like it was rare for us to all be together in the music room and, like, playing there. We did most of our learning of the music on the field. I'm trying to remember what year we moved. When I first started, we were at the field between the design college and the engineering building [Hoover Hall]. So, you would have the four cardinal directions were like Titanic, because Hoover looks like Titanic, design, nuclear, because nuclear engineering was still there, and then I can't remember what the fourth direction was. I remember that field being such a mess because it had been a cow pasture at some point. So, as you're marching and it's raining, your shoes are slowly filling with black mud that smells like manure. Luckily my roommate was also in band, so we both just left our shoes in the hallway, and it was fine, but the whole dorm smelled like cow manure. I can't remember if it was sophomore or junior year that we moved to the field by Mole Bio, [Molecular Biology Building] which I think is where they still practice. Yes, that one didn't seem to have as much trouble with flooding or smell, so that was nice. [laughs]

[00:07:19]

**JC:** Good. So, how often did you practice, and how long were rehearsals?

**CC:** Great question. Rehearsals, if I remember correctly, were like four-thirty to six, or four-fifteen to six, or something like that. It was, at least, Monday through Thursday. I feel like it was Monday through Friday, but now in my post-college work mindset, I'm like, Friday night? Really? But I feel like it was Monday through Friday, four-thirty to six. I used to tell people that band took like eight to fifteen hours a week of time. It was essentially a part time job, depending on if it was a game week or not.

[00:08:00]

**JC:** So, was practice different if it was a game week versus non-game week?

**CC:** I think so. You could pick up on, like, the stress from the directors, and the staff, and the drum majors if it was a game week, especially if it was a tight turnaround game week. I remember being in band in high school thinking, I don't know how college bands put on a different show every week. But then, when I was in college, I was like, I don't know how high school bands only put on one show a season. [Chapman laughs] Because it didn't seem overwhelming to learn it, and I don't know if that's because they made shows easier for us when it was a tight turnaround, but just kind of a little bit more intensity, and then, of course, game day itself is so long. [laughs] Great.

[00:08:45]

**JC:** Certainly. Can you maybe talk in a little bit about game day, and maybe some of the shows that you performed?

**CC:** Yes, absolutely. As I was reviewing the videos, thinking about this, I remembered so many of the fun little traditions that we had. You have your morning practice, and then you all head out, and you bring all your equipment, and get ready to go. We had a little warm up type thing that we would do at Scheman [Scheman Building], then would all kind of hang out with our little sections, in our ranks within our sections. I have some pictures of my fellow rank members and I making the letters of our ranks with our clarinets and stuff like that. Then lining up and parade marching was one of my favorite parts, just because we had so many cool horn moves, and chants, and things that we would do as you're marching to the stadium and getting to interact with people along the way. We also had like our traditions, like we would do “woodie coasters.” I don't know if this is something that anyone else talks about, but the clarinet section--we were called “woodies”--and we did like a roller coaster when we got to the stadium. We would all sit down, and the section leader would be in the very front and kind of indicate, and so we would have our hands up on our clarinets and like--you know—

**JC:** Like you're on a roller coaster.

**CC:** Yes. Exactly, right! Up and down, and side to side. Yes, it was great. We would deal with raincoats if we had raincoats. Then it was time for everybody to kind of split off and get ready to do pregame. Even then, when you're lined up and ready to do pregame, we're bouncing in our spirals, getting ready to go on the field and all of that. I was an alternate my first two years, so I didn't always march pregame, but about half the time I did. In terms of memorable shows, I always think about our *Star Trek* show when we made the enterprise and blew up the Hawkeye ship. I remember we did one called “Women Who Rock.” We did one that was like classic video games like *Legend of Zelda.* We did *Pirates of the Caribbean*, which was always memorable because of the experience we had at Kansas [Kansas State University] of them been booing us on the field and cheering us off. I don't remember what the theme of it was, but I remember one of the years we did one where we did the “Single Ladies” dance, we all put down our instruments and fully did choreography for sixteen beats. So, yes. Those are the ones that stand out the most to me.

[00:11:30]

**JC:** You mentioned Kansas. What was it like going to a different university, performing in a different stadium as contrasting with what it's like to play at Jack Trice?

**CC:** Yes. I mean, I always feel like Jack Trice is so welcoming and so friendly. Not that the other places weren’t. I think it sometimes just made for a long day, like when we went to--I think it was the year we did K State maybe or University of Kansas, I'm not sure. I remember we sat in the bleachers of the stadium for like hours before the show because of game-day traffic. So, we were there for like three or four hours. Did the game day stuff. We were there for three or four hours. We got so bored we started, when people would walk by, we would start chanting left and right in sync with them to see if they noticed us doing it, and then we'd start changing the words and seeing if they would dance with us. You know, college kids keeping occupied. [both laugh] I remember playing at Arrowhead Stadium a couple of times with--I want to say those were K-state games. That was always just interesting because a pro stadium is so different than a college stadium. But the atmosphere was great. I remember playing at Iowa twice, and that not being that much different except that it just wasn't our home turf. The parade marching was a little intimidating there because I remember all of the upperclassmen being like, Keep your rank super tight, put your big people on the outside so nobody can run through, and just being really like, You have to be intense because it’s Iowa. [both laugh]

[00:13:16]

**JC:** You mentioned some traditions. You talked about the traditions, marching to the stadium. Were there any post-game traditions that you--

**CC:** Absolutely. You always wore your hat backwards if we won, I want to say. This makes me realize how long it's been since college. [both laugh] So you would wear your hat backwards if you won, you would line up, march back. Then once we got back to Scheman, we would all kind of gather around for the post-game debrief. The drum majors would have a thing that they would read, joking around. We would, of course, always sing our acapella version of “Bells of Iowa State” and then disperse afterward. It's funny because you don't think about how used to all of those traditions you are. Like, of course, after a game, this is what you would do. You do this, and this, this, this, this. I guess maybe you wouldn't have to, but that's what band is. You couldn't miss that.

[00:14:23]

**JC:** Maybe talk a little bit more about--you said you went to Kansas or whatever--outside of the game day, what was it like to take a band of that size down to a game?

**CC:** Wild. I know we did a bowl game once while I was in band, and that, in particular, was like thirty hours on buses. I remember one of the buses broke down. We were trying to figure out how to get everybody to where they needed to go. I'm sure it was a logistical challenge for whoever was assigning rooms and things because there was a mad scramble for us to figure out who we were rooming with. We had a per diem for our food. Trying to keep track of everybody in towns because usually we were in big towns like Tempe, or Kansas City, or--of course, I can't think of another one at the moment that we went to. I remember that they gave us, like, packets of activities that I think the staff had put together where it proved that Kansas was actually flatter than a pancake, and had some word searches and stuff like that that someone had put together. I remember the after-game chaos of all of us changing back out of uniform on the buses, getting everything stowed underneath, we're all crammed in the aisles trying to get everything situated. Then after, in an away game, it was special because your meal was always fried chicken. You always had a box meal with like KFC, or Popeyes, or whatever, people are swapping sides all over the place. That was the special treat for having played an away game. Then, all of us just exhaustedly getting back home.

[00:16:04]

**JC:** You mentioned the bowl game and, of course, the away games. Were there any other special events that you maybe played at, something for the university, or some other special occasion?

**CC:** Yes. I know we played on Central Campus a couple of times for homecoming rallies and things like that. I know that we played Band Extravaganza because trying to X up and down those stairs and then, oh my gosh, I always thought I was going to fall. [laughs] They're not evenly spaced, and you're trying to X up and down them, and it just doesn't quite work. Those are the big ones that I remember. I know that I also once played the fight song on a CyRide bus as it was going down Lincoln Way, but I don't think that was sanctioned. [both laugh]

**JC:** But it counts.

**CC:** It counts, right?

[00:17:03]

**JC:** Any other locations that kind of come to mind, or like you said, maybe some unsanctioned things that the band all got together and—

**CC:** Yes. I was a very, I guess, boring college student in that I never did bar fights, or I know they played at the athletic director's house or things like that. Although one of my friends actually was like, “Oh yeah, there was like once a year that everybody showed up and played in our neighborhood and I don't know why”

I was like, “Oh, well, I know why.” [both laugh] I don't think I participated in a lot of that, but it was a lot of fun just like playing the fight song anywhere and everywhere that we were all together. [laughs]

[00:17:50]

**JC:** Sure, sure. You mentioned earlier that band was like having a part-time job. How did you juggle being in marching band and the academics part of it, and just the fact of being a student and doing other things besides those? How did you balance all of that?

**CC:** I think one of the things that's super helpful is that for the people who *really* do band, like the people who are going to do it throughout their college career. It is your social life during the fall. It is all of your friends. It is your family. It is what you do on the weekends. It is your exercise. It's everything. It was really nice, honestly, having it be like part of your routine during the week. It was always my last class of the day. It was always my exercise. It was my friends. We would all just go to dinner from there. You always knew if somebody else on your dorm floor, in the dining hall, or in a class that you had was in band so you could stick to each other. It took a lot of time, but it was never a question of, Is anything else suffering because I'm in band? It was always something that added to my life, never something that I struggled to balance.

[00:19:22]

**JC:** Were there any cases where there are any sort of challenging or difficult times in the band, either you personally for trying to manage your time or just something that happened with the man that was a difficult or challenging thing?

**CC:** Yes, I know that it was challenging when we had directors change just because it kind of changed the tenor of the group, kind of the tone of practices and things like that. For me personally, one of the heartbreaking moments was trying to break out of being an alternate into being a permanent. My sophomore year, I tried band camp. I tried so hard, and still was alternate at the end of it. I remember just being heartbroken. But I can't think that there was any large-scale conflict or anything like that. I think we were a pretty harmonious group more or less, like certain people liked each other more than other people, but we all got along really well.

[00:20:30]

**JC:** How did your rank, the clarinets, maybe interact, more or less, with other ranks, other instrumentation? How did that dynamic work?

**CC:** Yes, I mean, I think we all kind of rolled our eyes at the trumpet players most of the time. [laughs] Just because they're off doing whatever they do. We spent a lot of time with the piccolos since they were usually by us on the field, and the sousas [sousaphones] because sometimes they were also by us. I think it was the baritones and mellies [mellophone] that were like next to where we put our cases. We all kind of claimed our spots. So, the clarinets had a certain tree, and then the barries and mellies were like right next to us. I feel like we pretty harmoniously with everyone. We definitely stuck to ourselves more than like, glomming on to other groups, like the clarinets were always with the clarinets. On bus trips and stuff like that, we were with the sousas a lot. I don't know how that happened, it just did. [laughs]

[00:21:33]

**JC:** What would you say the overall culture of the band was? You talked a little bit about what the clarinets were kind of like. What about the overall culture, just the band as a unit?

**CC:** Yes. I think it was a very like welcoming culture. At that point, people weren't as interested in it as they are now in the sense that everyone who auditioned, as long as they could play, was able to be in it. We had the alternates of course, but I don't know that very many people got turned away because of high interest or anything like that. I think it was very welcoming. I don't remember ever excluding anyone. I feel like we all looked out for each other, and made sure that everybody knew what they were doing, and that they were counted off correctly. I feel like we got along as a pretty big harmonious whole. And Band Banquet [end of the season ceremony held for the students] was always a great time.

[00:22:34]

**JC:** Which years were you in band at Iowa State?

**CC:** I was at Iowa State from 2007 to 2011, so my marching seasons were ‘07 through 2010.

[00:22:46]

**JC:** Okay, and you mentioned the Band Banquet. Can you talk a little bit more about what that was like?

**CC:** Yes. So, we did Band Banquet right after Thanksgiving, like the very end of Thanksgiving break every year. You would buy your ticket, though I don't know anyone who didn't go [laughs] that I can think of, usually at the Memorial Union. Although one year, I think it was somewhere else, like a hotel or something. I just can't remember. You would have your lovely dinner. You could bring a date or somebody from outside band if you wanted to. There would, of course, be speeches and awards for the best freshman marcher or whatever silly awards like No Shave November awards or something like that. Then we would have to do [a] slideshow. It's required, and just general wrap up things. We would end with dancing with the DJ and call it a night, but we always did lots of group photos, lots of section photos, lots of rank photos. Yes, just the chance to all be dressed up nicely and hanging out with each other.

[00:23:56]

**JC:** Can you talk a little bit more about what the slide show was?

**CC:** Slide Show was a collection of skits by seniors, usually or notable band personalities, drum majors, that kind of thing, staff, and interspersed with photos submitted by band members of us doing band things. Some of the skits are particularly memorable to me. I always think about my freshman year, “Joe P: Band Linebacker” based off of the *Terry Crews: Office Linebacker* [*Terry Tate: Office Linebacker* is a series of comedic Super Bowl commercials following a linebacker enforcing office policies]. Some of the ones that I was in my senior year, I remember like being in them, but not necessarily what they were about. It was that interspersed with photos, and then at the end of it would be baby pictures and current pictures of all the seniors and their names as we bid them farewell. I remember every year when I got the DVD, my parents were like, We have to watch this right now because they love the skits and just for ridiculous college kid antics. Having gone back and watched it, yes, I see it. [laughs]

[00:25:11]

**JC:** Those are kind of activities that seem to be going on when you started and are still going on today. How do you maybe feel on any of the things you've talked about that the band has perhaps changed or evolved over time?

**CC:** I think there's a bigger recognition now. People were always respectful, like would stay in the stands and watch us or film or like cheer us on when they saw us out and about at places. But I think there's even more recognition now of the talent and skill that's needed. People who are band groupies that specifically go to watch the Step Show, or to watch warmups, or to just support the band however they need to. That really appreciate the work and the dedication that goes into it. I think they did when I was in school too. Obviously, social media wasn't as big of a thing back then, and so it just wasn't as widely recognized in that way. I'm sure that that's different. I think having, is it Storm that's like the second group now, is obviously very different culturally as well. I did do Alumni Band once, and by in large, it feels much the same as it did. [laughs] Except just like, I'm not as into it anymore, and some of the new traditions don't make sense to me, but of course, they don't, right. They're not supposed to.

[00:26:39]

**JC:** Are there some of the traditions that when you did come back for an alumni band, you're like, Oh! I recognize that. I know that?

**CC:** Yes. A lot of the stuff you do as you're getting ready to get on the field and get off the field felt very much the same. Both Alumni Band members connecting to each other and connecting to current band members also felt very much the same. It's interesting now in my adult life to see people that I've connected with that I didn't necessarily know were affiliated with band, at Alumni Band, in Alumni Band with me. [laughs] It's still a bonding experience when you find somebody else who was in band even this many years out of school.

[00:27:23]

**JC:** Certainly, certainly. So, what would you say that the marching band really means to you?

**CC:** The marching band was my college experience. It was my first entry into social life, it was literally my family, was every waking minute of fall semester every year. I remember my roommates constantly being amazed at how much time and effort and really went into it, and how hard it really was because you are high-stepping pregame still, you're running on the field and off the field, you're parade marching, you're doing everything. But I can't imagine what my experience would have been without it. It was constantly enriching and I'm so emotional even now thinking about it.

[00:28:17]

**JC:** Are there any experiences or maybe some questions that I haven't asked that you thought I should have, that would have given some more information or more background about your experience and the band itself when you were there?

**CC:** I'm not sure. I know that for me, it's always been--I don't think of myself as a particularly over-sentimental person, but I know when I studied abroad, I was wildly homesick, and finding videos of us on YouTube helped with that. I was one of the last ones to wear the uniforms that we were wearing that I think were from the nineties. The white ones with the red pants. I have a laptop bag that's made of uniform parts that's very precious to me. It's just such a fundamental experience I wish everyone could have, but I also know that it takes a certain kind of person to want to be in it, and I'm so thankful that it was part of my experience. So, yes.

**JC:** Great. Well, I appreciate your time and you sharing your memories with us.