

Bloomsburg University

The History of Bloomsburg University as told to Patchwork by Jimmy Gilliland.

Interviewed by Catherine Parker, Rebecca Edwards and Nina Schwartzman in the spring of 2003

The Bloomsburg University grown a lot from when it was created and was only two buildings that the students lived and learned in. It was created to educate people to be teachers. Students at the school did not have many social activities and had to follow a curfew. The University had a budget of about \$15,000.

Jimmy Gilliland has been working at Bloomsburg University for twenty years. He is the Director of Student Activities in Kehr Union.

PATCHWORK: Who founded Bloomsburg University?

GILLILAND: Bloomsburg University was founded back in 1839 as the Bloomsburg Literary Institute. There were some people in town that wanted to form it and it was built primarily for learning, for preparing people to teach at that time. From there, the idea was to enlarge it, so they bought three acres at the end of Main Street. You kind of have to imagine Bloomsburg without most of the buildings that are in it now. There were a few in it, like the area we're in now is the campus, it was kind of all just blank area, it was open fields; things like that. In 1869, it was purchased to become Bloomsburg Normal School and they selected Henry Carver as the principal. Back then; there wasn't a president of a college or anything like that. Henry Carver was the principal of Bloomsburg Normal School. After Bloomsburg Literary Institute, that's when it kind of got started to become what it is today. What they did was, they purchased three acres up here and they gave Mr. Carver the money or the go-ahead to build two buildings to make the Bloomsburg Normal School. Of course they gave them a budget back then of only \$15,000. Now most budgets are in the millions, so you see the difference.

PATCHWORK: What were some of the first buildings?

GILLILAND: The first building was Carver Hall, which still sits where it is today. The other building was Institute Hall. Those were the first two buildings on campus. So everything kind of took place there. Institute Hall is where students lived and where they had what they called a "Model Classroom". Because again, why students were here was to become teachers. So, they had a model classroom there that they would actually have the students practice in. So those were the first two buildings. After that, in 1876, Waller Hall was built,

which actually is where the University Store and the Scranton Commons are, in that area right there, was one of the first buildings, of course, that building's not there anymore.

PATCHWORK: What were some of the classes you could take back when the college first became?

GILLILAND: Well, you didn't really have a choice like you do today. You weren't allowed to select your schedule and you weren't allowed to select your major. You came here to become a teacher, that's what you came here for. They primarily gave you classes to become a teacher and back then; it was reading, writing and arithmetic. So, the classes focused on preparing people to be teachers in those areas. Back then, they probably even had a class on discipline because discipline was very, very strict back then. Back in those days, they learned how to be teachers.

PATCHWORK: How many students were there in the first years?

GILLILAND: When it first started, you probably had less than 100 students. Again, it was small. It was one building that the students were taught in, so it started out very small. The idea was just, again, preparing people to be teachers.

PATCHWORK: How many professors were there?

GILLILAND: That I don't know the answer to. Henry Carver was the principal. My guess, with the number of students they had, they probably had like, six.

PATCHWORK: Did most of the students come from around this area or did they come from all over the place?

GILLILAND: That was this area. At that time, when they were building places called "Normal Schools," the idea was to prepare teachers just for this area, so it was probably even closer than it is now. If you think about back in that time in the late 1800's, how you got around, you didn't have cars that drive sixty miles an hour. Most people were driving horses and buggies then. It was primarily people that were even closer than it is today. Most students today still live within an hour and a half to two hours of Bloomsburg. Then, my guess is, they lived within ten minutes. Horse and buggy ride though.

PATCHWORK: What are some of the traditional celebrations or events that happen at Bloomsburg University?

GILLILAND: One that happens now is homecoming, and that has been going on for a while. Homecoming was designed so people that have left here can come back and remember the days when they were here and participate in celebrations. Back when the school

started, social life wasn't a big thing for students that age. They were here to learn. They had curfews. They had to be in bed by a certain time, lights out by a certain time. There were only certain things they could do; there wasn't a Union, there was a lounge. Their activities were just sitting around and talking with each other, things like that. They might play chess or cards. It was much different than it is today. As you went through the 1900's, the campus grew since then, obviously more land was purchased, more buildings were built; there were more chances for social interaction among the students, athletics. They did have a football team way back in the early 1900's. Of course, they didn't wear helmets or anything back then. Those opportunities came later and then the first real thing they made was at Waller Hall, they made the Husky Lounge, in the early 1900's. That kind of became the place where students had dances. Of course, they were probably over by eleven o'clock at night; everybody went back to their dormitories. They did bed checks, so it was a much different atmosphere back then. But that was kind of the beginning of the gradual move to college being more than just going to classes all the time; participating in other things. They put in the Scranton Commons in the 60's and that was kind of a temporary union where kids would hang out. Then they built the Kehr Union. If you think about it, it wasn't until 1973. So it wasn't that long ago that a union was built and there could be a lot more activities. This doubled in size in 1993. Now opportunities for students are tremendous. There's lots of choices to do, whether it's intramural sports if you're involved in intercollegiate athletics, there is just a wealth of activities outside of the classroom, which wasn't much different than when it first started.

PATCHWORK: When did women start attending BU?

GILLILAND: Well, if you think about it, women were teachers. So women started just the same time as men did; of course they kept them pretty separate back then. There were dress codes for both the men and the women. For probably into the mid-1900's, men were required to wear jackets, women were required to wear dresses to the evening meal. You had to be dressed up when you went in. But again, since it started, as a teachers' college, the teaching profession traditionally was that women were involved in it.

PATCHWORK: So would you say there were more women or more men attending at the time?

GILLILAND: Well I don't know the exact ratio at that time; exactly when it started, whether it was more or less. I know today there are more women that attend Bloomsburg University; it's about a two-third ratio of women to men. The ratio is that way, and it has been that way for a while. It was probably different right after World War II. You had a large number of PI's get back and go to school. For a while there were more men than women.

PATCHWORK: And what about African-Americans, when did they start?

GILLILAND: Well, that I don't know the answer to. My guess would have been it wouldn't have been until after the Civil Rights movements in the 1960's. I mean where we're located, there's not a large African population in Bloomsburg. So it might not have been until after the Civil Rights movements in the 1960's. That made a lot of places change with regulations where you can't discriminate and things like that.

PATCHWORK: How has BU been affected by the wars?

GILLILAND: Of course during the wars, men would leave college to go off and fight in those wars. Actually in World War I, Bloomsburg was used as a training site for aviators. They actually used normal schools and places like that for training the military. World War II, same thing. There were no colleges for anything like that, especially after World War II. A large number of men left campus to fight the war. Of course, they would come back afterwards. There was a big expansion after World War II, not so much World War I. In the 1940's timeframe, right in there, was another big time for expansion. Of course, it was the Bloomsburg State College; it wasn't the Bloomsburg Normal School anymore. Those were just the big ones, any war affects it. World War I and World War II, those were the big ones.

PATCHWORK: What about the Great Depression?

GILLILAND: Probably the attendance dipped a little bit, just because of the depression. But after the depression when there was Franklin Roosevelt and the new deal came in, a lot of the funding came from the federal government. A lot of the programs just came out of the federal government, so there was a lot of expansion at the University in the 1930's, right after the Great Depression was over, because that money was available. If you think about it in gross terms, the University got a little over \$500,000 for buildings and things and for expanding the campus; this was in the 1940's. If you translate that into today's dollar, we'd be getting a little over ten million comparable. So if you think about it, the Great Depression wasn't good for the University, but what came after that was and that's because of the federal government being involved and giving money to colleges and things like that.

PATCHWORK: How has the University affected the town of Bloomsburg?

GILLILAND: Well, one is the employment. Seemingly now it's a lot different from when it started. Back when it started, there was a lot of open land so it didn't really affect the town. It was started by people in the town so they could train teachers. Over the years it's expanded so it's brought a lot of employment to the area. Now the University has about 800 employees. It also gives a lot of other people work in Bloomsburg and the surrounding areas. Obviously, they purchased a lot of things. Now over seven thousand colleges look to

here for they're purchasing a lot of things. There's kind of a give and take between the town and the college; it's not all a garden of roses. Overall, the town and the University benefit each other. You'll find that a lot of students that graduate from here like it and if they had choice or there were enough jobs here, they'd probably stay here. But there's no way you can employ that many college students in this town. It's too rural of an environment. It's surprising the number of students that graduate here and end up liking it and would want to come back. It keeps the town a little younger, a little louder.

PATCHWORK: Centennial used to be a gym, but what is it now?

GILLILAND: Centennial is now a classroom building with departments of exercise science and things. They took Centennial Gymnasium and that was actually one of the older buildings in the early 1900's. And they almost doubled it in size and put in classrooms. Now it houses the exercise sciences and other science curriculum, there is a small gym and a weight room. If you would have seen the building and how it was, and what it is now, it's almost totally different. It's a different building.