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Princetoniana Committee

Butler Apartments Oral History Project

Transcript of Recorded Interview

with David A. Baldwin *65, February 2014
DAVID BALDWIN: My name is David Baldwin. I was a graduate student in the department of politics, beginning in September, 1959, and stayed there until January of 1962, when I had to leave go to in the military. Then after two years in the army, I returned in October of ’63, and lived there until August of ’64. And my degree, then, the date of my degree was 1965.

Q: Did you say your department?

BALDWIN: The politics department, yes. One of my earliest memories of moving in there was we -- the walls were very thin in Butler; of course, the first thing I remember is they said, “well, these aren’t going to be here very long, this is temporary housing built during WWII, and they’re going to be tearing them down very soon.” They said that both times I moved in there, and I gather they are still saying that 50 years later, about the Butler houses, but they were very good in terms of cheap accommodations for married graduate students, and our bed abutted the bedroom of our neighbors on the other side, and the walls were so thin, we were good friends with them; he was also a graduate student in the politics department, and, so, both couples were friends, and we could lie in bed at night and carry on a conversation (laughs), so privacy was not that great, but there was a lot camaraderie and companionship. Another thing I remember was the -- people who lived there, there were a lot of small children, obviously, a lot of babies, so they had a cooperative babysitting arrangement that worked off of a book; no money changed hands, but you paid your babysitting debt in hours. If you received six hours of babysitting, that went in the book, and then the people you babysat for didn’t have to be the ones that you paid back, you paid back anybody in the community that was recorded in this book. And
my first -- our first experience with that was this young instructor in the economics department showed up, he didn’t live in Butler anymore, but he still had some hours to work off for babysitting that he owed, and so he babysat for us, and he introduced himself as Bill Bowen, who stayed on at Princeton, and the rest is history on that. Other stories -- my wife, when I moved in, was pregnant; we did not know that, and so that first spring we were here, we had our first child, and we were destitute, basically, and I do remember that the -- they had something -- they had a very active faculty wives group, that gathered stuff together for us, bassinettes and things, and it was very heartwarming, and made you feel very much part of a community.

Other Butler stories... I remember -- you made -- one of the nice things about it, you made a lot of friends in other departments, and so we had friends in just about every department imaginable, and I remember this -- the last six months I was here, the first time, I was basically -- I had passed my generals, and was waiting to go in the army, and I had a friend who was in physics, and he and I played a lot of chess, and so one time he asked me if I wanted to make a chess board, and he was quite adept, and he did a lot of work in the physics lab, and I was not that adept, so we went over there, and I still have, to this day, this very elaborate chess board that we made together, although it was mostly his handy work, in the Princeton physics lab. We’d go over in the evening when other people were not around. A lot of us -- I suppose it’s still the case, I’ve driven through there, it looks very much to me now the same way it did fifty years ago; bicycles sitting around, and a lot of us rode bicycles, back and forth, and I assume there’s probably also a lot of small children, as there were then. My wife was also a graduate student in English;
we had done one year at the University of Michigan before coming here, but of course at that time, Princeton was not admitting women to do graduate work, and so she commuted up to Rutgers to do her graduate work in English; she actually finished her PhD before I did, she finished while I was in the army. And then when we came back here, I was able to get out of the army, maybe a couple months early, to come back and finish a degree program, and that was the second time I moved into Butler, and actually, over the course of those years, we lived in three different Butler apartments.

The first time we moved into a very small one, the smallest one they had, one-bedroom, but they did have some two-bedrooms; I don’t know how they’re laid out now, but probably not much different. And then, after the baby was born, that second year we were here, we moved, we found out one was being vacated, and moved into it, a larger, two-bedroom apartment, which was, again, that one thing I remember about that, this was our first child, and one time she had a very high fever, and went into convulsions, which scared me, I had never seen this before, I had no idea that high fevers could cause this, I thought, oh, she’s -- I just didn’t know what was wrong, it was very scary, I was home with her by myself, my wife was up at Rutgers. And I just sort of pounded on the wall between me and our next door neighbor, and within minutes, she was over there, and helping me to get calmed down, and get call the doctor, and find out what to do, and so on. So the closeness was -- I actually had more fond memories than unpleasant memories of living closely with other people that were all in the same boat, in a sense, all graduate students, all married, all, well, mostly the same age, and -- well, not everybody that lived there was a married graduate student, some of the people living there were staff members
at the university -- I don’t know how they arranged that, but like, they might be a technician in the engineering department, or something like that, they weren’t faculty, they weren’t students, but they worked for Princeton in some capacity. I remember -- and they were -- they tended to be a little older than the rest of us, and one family, I remember, from the first year, we used to joke about them, oh, they were probably in their forties, and had children a little older, but they had boxers, the dog, the breed, I mean, and they sort of bred them, so they didn’t just have one boxer, they had litters, and when they finally moved out, the people that moved in said that they had found a hole in the floor, where they used to, like, house these litters of boxer puppies -- it was a subject of conversation around the Butler apartments for some time. There were people who had dogs, but mostly they just had single dogs, and I don’t remember -- there weren’t a lot of dogs there, I don’t know if they have any dogs living there now. Dogs could be a problem, living in such close -- so many families living in such close proximity. Other stories...

Q: Tell me about the washing machine problem.

Baldwin: The washing machine problem. I don’t remember so much a washing machine problem; I remember we had a washing machine, I think it was the first time -- that was our first washing machine. Used furniture re-circulated there, people did not buy new furniture, you bought furniture and appliances from people that were moving out, so we bought -- had our first washing machine, you know, we bought it used from somebody who was moving out, I don’t remember much about it, but I remember it was -- we thought that was really a step up in terms of luxury, but I’m not sure. Other things that would circulate -- refrigerators, furniture, washing machines -- I don’t know if anybody
had a dishwasher, there might have been a few people that had dishwashers at that time, and I don’t remember the heat, I don’t know what the heating situation is now, but what we had were gas, I assume, natural gas, or propane heaters, a sort of -- what I would call a space heater, that just sat in the living room, and then you set it at a certain point, and when it came on, heat would come out, straight from the top, and I do remember when my newly born daughter would -- she would sometimes get the hiccups, and we had been told by the doctor that that could be caused by being cold, and I could remember several times holding her directly over this heating unit, trying to warm her up so she would stop hiccuppimg. But we didn’t know --

Q: Did it work?

BALDWIN: It seemed to, we didn’t know much about babies, you know, when you have the first, I was always waking her up just to see if she was still breathing, which is not a good idea, but we didn’t really know what we were doing. We didn’t really plan to combine starting a family with our graduate work, but it all worked out all right, and we still have many -- are in contact with many friends from those days.

Q: Wow, really? Butler people?

BALDWIN: Yes.

Q: Wow.

BALDWIN: Some of the couples that we met then --

Q: Would they come and give us interviews? We’re done, actually.

BALDWIN: You know --

END OF AUDIO FILE