

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Literary Writers Project

Biography of Leigh Brackett

O.H. 785

BRUCE BIRRELL

Interviewed

by

Donna DeBlasio

on

November 7, 1983

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: BRUCE BIRRELL

INTERVIEWER: Donna DeBlasio

SUBJECT: acquaintance with Brackett as a friend and attorney

DATE: November 7, 1983

D: This is an interview with Attorney Bruce Birrell for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Leigh Brackett, by Donna DeBlasio, on November 7, 1983.

Mr. Birrell, can you tell me a little about your background?

B: I am a practicing attorney in Warren, Ohio. I have been practicing here since 1953 as my recollection. I served two terms as city solicitor of the city of Warren back in the late 1950's and early 1960's. Since that time I've devoted my time to private practice of law.

D: Are you married?

B: Yes. I have two daughters.

D: This interview is about Leigh Brackett. Can you tell me how you met her?

B: Yes. Leigh Brackett spent her summers in Kinsman with her husband. My father was born and raised in Kinsman, Ohio. We spent our summers before World War II in Kinsman in the old family farm. Consequently, I go back to Kinsman. Actually, I go back to Kinsman every Friday afternoon and practice law up there. In going to Kinsman on Fridays I got acquainted with Leigh Brackett and she asked me to do some legal work for her. That's how I became acquainted with her.

D: Had you met Ed, Leigh's husband, before that?

B: Yes, I knew him in the same capacity because they were in Kinsman and we would see them during the summer months. Actually they spent six months of the year in Kinsman and on several occasions

- I had seen them out mowing their yard. I don't know if anyone has mentioned to you that they had this century house which has since been renovated by the new owners. They had three or four acres of lawn and they used to get out and mow it regularly on their riding mower. His sister was Adeline Sherwood, who was a teacher in Kinsman. I have done legal work for her as well as for them.
- D: Do you recall what year that was that you met them first?
- B: I would guess it was some time in the early 1970's. I really couldn't give you a year. I may have known who they were before that. But probably after his death is when I got to know Leigh best because I took care of his estate.
- D: What were your first impressions of her?
- B: I never saw her in a dress; I never would have guessed that they lived on the edge of Hollywood or in the California area. They looked like people who might live on a farm. She wore slacks; he wore slacks. I never saw him in a coat and tie, things like that. They fit into the atmosphere of Kinsman and did not stand out as being city slickers. If you saw her on the street in Kinsman you would have never known that she was anybody but the wife of a local farmer.
- D: How was her personality? What was your first impression of that?
- B: A very gentle person, very likeable, easy to know. He was a little more reserved, but just as likeable. I don't think you would ever have guessed that she was an author. She was very friendly. Maybe my first impression was surprise when I realized that she was an author and that she was not extreme in any way. If you saw her you didn't think it was extreme dress or extreme hairdo or anything. She was a very natural person. I was very much surprised to see a picture that Mrs. Sherwood had after she died. She was wearing a black dress with a string of pearls and her hair had been done professionally. It was a Leigh Brackett that I had never seen in Kinsman. She was very much the stately lady in that picture. The picture showed her as being a very sophisticated person, and to meet her you would not have guessed that.
- D: How would you characterize her as a person? Is there anything outstanding about her as you got to know her over the years?
- B: I guess you would say she was very easy to know or very easy for me to know. We sat down and talked. We would talk about things she had done or written, her experiences in California; we talked about the house they lived in which was not in the L. A. area; it was about 100 miles north of Los Angeles. We talked occasionally about the people that had played parts in some of the books that she had written. She did not appear to

be somebody who was trying to impress me with people she knew.

D: Have you ever read anything she has written?

B: Yes. I may have read her books before I met her. I've always thought I was going to go back and read them again, but there are things you don't get done.

D: What did you think of them?

B: I liked them. Sometimes the author is entirely different from the book that they've written.

D: Do you have any particular stories about her that you recall, incidents that happened to her?

B: I thought their house in Kinsman was a very interesting house. I'm assuming it was a house that was built sometime in the 1800's, so remember this house was not a large house; it was quite a small house. They actually had to add on a kitchen. She put in a modern kitchen because I'm assuming she liked to cook. The rest of the house consisted of a very nice, screened in porch on the back, but rustic. They had a living room with very, very comfortable chairs, not anything elaborate; comfortable, ones that you could sit down in. My recollection is that the living room was paneled, but I may be wrong in that. Then there was one bedroom on the first floor, then a kitchen, and she had a laundry area. I recollect there was an open fireplace in that kitchen. On the second floor of the house were basically about two rooms, no bathroom on the second floor. This was a pre-bathroom built house. Up there they had desks with typewriters, two typewriters, and bookshelves lined with all kinds of books. That is where she would go up and write. It was not fancy in any way, just very basic. She never seemed to require elaborate furniture, ornate furniture. I think one of the things that may have surprised me the most was that she had inherited some jewelry from her mother. I had never seen that jewelry until after she died and inventoried her safety deposit box. It was very beautiful jewelry. She never wore it. It was locked in a safety deposit box.

D: Do you recall what the house looked like on the outside?

B: It was a white house, wood. I guess she liked to cook and they both liked to work in the yard. They closed up the house when they left for California in the fall and opened it up when they came back in the spring. They used to have an apple orchard on the north side of the house.

One year they came back and purchased a new Mustang when they were first introduced in 1965 or 1966. They bought a Mustang for Adeline Sherwood. Adeline was not a young lady at that time and it was sort of amusing to see this older lady driving

around in this yellow Mustang. I understood that was a gift from Ed.

D: Did they have a car in town?

B: Yes. At the end they had a little Porsche.

D: Who drove it, Leigh or Ed?

B: Both of them. It was just a small one with one seat; they could only take two people. After he died she bought herself a four door sedan with air conditioning and an automatic transmission. In talking to Ned Brown, who was her literary agent, she talked about how much pleasure she had gotten out of that car. The Porsche was a very basic automobile with not a great deal of comfort. She had now owned a four door sedan with air conditioning and all those comforts which they had never had before. She got a great kick out of driving that. It was an Audi or something like that.

D: What did you do for her as a lawyer?

B: I probably talked to her about income tax problems, discussed what she should do. I did not do her taxes for her though. Actually for many years Ed did the tax returns himself. Then of course I handled her estate, drew up her will. I also handled his estate.

D: Apparently you are acquainted with some members of Leigh's and Ed's family. How did she get along with them?

B: Very well. She was very fond of Adeline. She was very much concerned with providing for Adeline. Her estate was administered by the Mahoning National Bank.

D: I know that Adeline was the main recipient.

B: Yes, of the benefits of the trust agreement. After her death it would go to her two cousins in California.

D: I understand she gave them money, very well-to-do.

B: There is no question about that.

Adeline probably described to you her early childhood. Somebody influenced her in writing; I'm thinking it was somebody in a private school she went to or in California that thought she had a talent.

You probably knew her script for "The Empire Strikes Back," and how she had finished that script and submitted it. The understanding with a writer is that when you do a screenplay you write the script and then you are available

during filming for polishing or changing something that you have written when they find that it doesn't work out. She had finished the script and delivered it and went in the hospital. She must have known she had the cancer for some time because she was in the hospital and died there. She had not finished her contract, so to speak, of polishing the script. That's when they hired a man to do the polishing. There was a great deal of discussion from the legal standpoint and the literary standpoint as to whether she would get any credit for the work she had done on the screenplay on the screen when it was finally presented. They did recognize her as being the writer along with the other gentleman who did the polishing.

D: I understand too that Leigh was an avid moviegoer. Did she have any favorite movies?

B: That I wasn't aware of.

D: She was a big fan of Douglas Fairbanks.

B: I was not aware that she liked to go to the movies, because Kinsman is not a town that has a movie theater.

D: Did she ever mention anything of her own that she was particularly pleased with?

B: She was not one to dwell on her own accomplishments or whether she was a good writer or bad.

D: I take it she rarely talked about her own work?

B: Occasionally, only when you asked her.

D: How did she feel about our space program?

B: She never discussed that.

I always thought it was too bad that she never lived to enjoy the adulation which the writing of "The Empire Strikes Back" would have given her. I think it's so ironic that she just didn't live that long. I'm positive she was aware of her condition the last summer that I saw her before she went back to California and before she died, because she was very anxious to get things in order and be sure everything was in order as far as her estate. She had sold her house and had done the apartment there, Adeline's. She was very specific about that being Adeline's when she was gone. She commented--I have thought since how stupid I was--that she had some health problems. I can't remember whether that is the exact term she used, but she alluded to having some problems. I did not go ahead and question her because I didn't think it was appropriate for me to ask her problem. I did not and of course never saw her again;

she died March of the following year.

D: How would you describe their marriage?

B: It would probably be cruel to say that Ed was a male chauvinist, but I would say that maybe they did what he wanted to do rather than a fifty-fifty partnership. Of course, that is probably very typical of the men that grew up of the men of his age. I would almost say that maybe Leigh played down her accomplishments so that Ed would always be at the forefront.

D: I've had the impression that they did get along.

B: Yes, very well. I think basically because she deferred to his wishes.

D: Did they go out much in Kinsman?

B: I think they spent their time with the family.

D: Did you go to the memorial service for Ed?

B: No.

D: Where are they buried?

B: I'm sure they're buried in Kinsman. They maintained their Ohio residence always.

D: For tax purposes?

B: Yes, for tax and business purposes.

D: Are there any other comments you would like to make about Leigh and Ed?

B: No.

D: I would like to thank you for your time.

END OF INTERVIEW