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Interviewee: Kathryn H. “Kay” Roberts
Interviewer: Mary Melcher
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Mary Melcher: Kay, you were born in Iowa?

Kay Roberts: Yes, Des Moines, Iowa.

MM: And then you moved to Missouri with your family?

KR: Yes.

MM: What took your parents to Missouri?

KR: My father had been with the Morrell Packing Company and he was interested in farm work and he went down there with a company that was plating peach orchards and he was with them for two or three years and when he gave that up he went into managing a lumber yard and from then on he was in the lumber business and moved -- the reason he moved to Idaho, he was offered a job with the Idaho Lumber Company, which later became the Boise-Peat (?) Lumber Company and he managed a lumber yard always after that. But he wanted to have this job and then pick up the homestead as well and so he came to Idaho to homestead and did homestead out of Roberts, Idaho.

MM: Did your mother want to move to Idaho? Did she like it out here in the West?

KR: Well, she was always interested in anything that he was. And she just went right along with him with any proposition that he had. She worked very hard as a pioneer woman, really, on a...It was a farm we called then a “dry farm” it wasn’t irrigated even though that land is now irrigated and they raise potatoes. It was wheat farming. But we had to break the ground and get the sage brush off it and plant wheat.

MM: Did you work outside?

KR: Well, I was pretty small; I was only 11 or 12 but I did what a child that age would do.

MM: And did you mother work outside with your dad?

KR: Yes. She helped to break the sagebrush and my brother plowed and dragged the sage brush off and broke the ground and...You see, my father was working in town so we had the actual work on the farm to do.
MM: Did your mother oversee that? Was your mother like the manager of the homestead?

KR: Well, no, my father did it. They did it together. It wasn’t any one person doing it, it was by family agreement. But, of course, my father and my mother were the mature ones and they made the decisions. Well, my brother was...Well, he was 14 when we came and so during his teenage years, why, he did this plowing and actual breaking of the land and planting and so on.

MM: Did you go to a country school?

KR: No. The first year we were in Ucon, Idaho, and went to school there and then in the summer then we were out on a dry farm. We went back to Ucon in the fall...Oh, before we went though there was what they called a school wagon. It wasn’t a school bus. It was horse drawn wagon kind of like an old covered wagon. It didn’t have a round top, it had a square top but it was canvas sides. We walked a mile to get to the end of where the school wagon came and then the school wagon drove into Roberts—we had moved to Roberts in the meantime and had a house in town—and my brother and I rode that school wagon everyday back and forth to Roberts. Then we’d walk home from the house—the mile as far as the school wagon came. We did that until about Thanksgiving time, and then we moved back to Ucon where my father was still stationed. My brother then went to...He was in high school at that time, and he rode a train on the Oregon Short Line to Idaho Falls. It was only six miles, but he went by train to Idaho Falls to high school and back in the evening. I went to school there for the rest of the year—of the school year.

MM: You went to Idaho Falls?

KR: No, he went to Idaho Falls. I went to school in Ucon until the end of the year, which was just a couple of months because my father, then, was transferred to Roberts and that’s when we had the house in town and we lived in this house and went to school right in town the rest of that year. Well, after that since my father was working in Roberts he drove back and forth in a car and we went with him to school until we finished high school.

MM: And then your house was where when you were going to school in Roberts?

KR: It was in Roberts.

MM: It was.

KR: We had a house in Roberts, but with these dry farms you lived on then five months a year, and so we had to go out in the spring and stay for the five months but then we went back. But we kept this house all the time in town.

MM: You always went to school.
KR: Oh, yes, always. Never missed a day [laughs].

MM: Now, I understand that sometimes kids did miss school to work on their farms and ranches?

KR: We never did.

MM: Do you remember your classmates being absent to work on farms and ranches?

KR: No. Because they were in town, you see.

MM: They were in town.

KR: We never went to a country school, you see. And they were town kids.

MM: Did your parents ever have to hire help on the homestead?

KR: Only during harvest time. We all helped. I remember shoveling wheat up in the...I was just very young, about 12 or 13 by that time, but I worked in a wagon. The wheat would come down a trough into the wagon bed, and I had to shovel it back so there’d be room for more wheat to pour in. Then my brother worked right along with the trashing crew.

MM: Would you wear overalls when you worked outside?

KR: No. Not in those days. I never wore pants. In fact, when I was a senior in high school the teachers were beginning—

What’s the matter? Is it rubbing off?

MM: No, it’s okay.

KR: The teachers were wearing hiking pants and bobbed their hair much to the astonishment of the people in this little town. Excuse me, I’ve got to sneeze—

[Break in audio]

 Didn’t approve of it.

MM: You wanted hiking pants because you’d seen the teachers—

KR: And boots. Yes, that was the in thing just as kids do, they want the in thing. I remember these hiking pants just came down, they laced below the knee and then you had high boots. I wanted a pair of hiking pants, and no sir, that wasn’t modest. Well, he finally gave in by saying

Kathryn H. “Kay” Roberts Interview, OH 049-060, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
that I could have the boots and the hiking trousers if I would wear them only for hiking in the country. I had to come home the back way because there were a bunch of fellows that sat out in front of the pool hall and he didn’t want them to make smart remarks about me in pants coming down the main street. I remember—it’s a wonder he didn’t clobber me, I think I would have—I said, “Well, the day will come when girls will wear pants even to school!” Many times I’ve looked at my classes at the University and the girls all in slacks, and I thought, well, I was right. I didn’t know how right I was going to be but—

MM: Yes, premonition.

KR: But at that town, oh, that was very much frowned on.

MM: Was it considered immodest?

KR: Oh yes. Immodest. And bobbed hair. I wanted bobbed hair so much, but only prostitutes had bobbed hair.

MM: You’re kidding?

KR: No, that’s right.

MM: How long was your hair?

KR: Oh, it was about...my hair was—

MM: Before you bobbed it.

KR: It was down—

MM: About the middle of your back.

KR: It was never very long but I wore it in a braid and then the braid pinned up or however the style was but it...I didn’t bob it until I went away to college at 16. When I came home, oh, he was...my father was very much shocked. But it was done so finally then everybody got to bobbing their hair. It was the style. It became stylish just as slacks became stylish for women. My father even wanted my mother to bob her hair, and she did eventually.

MM: What sort of other things were immodest for young girls to do? Did your father have rules that you were supposed to go by if you went out?

KR: Well, we had to be in by a certain time, and of course my mother was even more strict than he was. They were very careful with whom I had dates, and I didn’t go with boys very much. See, I was only 16 when I left home for college.
MM: Did you finish high school early?

KR: Yes. I was only 16, just barely 16, when I finished high school.

MM: Had you done two years in one?

KR: Well, I started early. That was back in Missouri. We had moved to a little town, and there was no house for us in this town. My father had to be there for his job and so we lived at a hotel. My brother was staying with our grandmother so he wasn’t there, and I was alone with my parents and was so lonely at the hotel—no children to play with. It wasn’t a very nice environment for a child, and I already knew how to read. I had taught myself to read, and I’d spell out words—“Mama, what does this spell? Mama, what does this spell?” So I could read and so my mother thought if I could go to school it would be good babysitting. They didn’t have the word babysitting then, of course. She asked the teacher if I could, and she said that I could if I didn’t cause any trouble. They had no school regulations then about the age or anything and so I went to school. I guess I was the best youngster she had in class because I was so afraid that I wouldn’t get to go. But that threw me into the first grade, and at the end of the year then I was promoted to the second grade so all along I was two years ahead of the rest of the youngsters.

MM: Was that hard socially?

KR: Socially, yes. But academically I always had top grades. But I was, you wouldn’t believe it now, but I was a scrawny little kid [laughs]. I was little, and the rest of the kids were bigger and more sophisticated. Where I noticed it particularly was when I got into college and here these 18 year olds—18 and 19—oh, they’d had so much experience, social experience than I’d had, and especially those that had come from places like Boise [Idaho] and Pocatello [Idaho]. Teas and dates and things like that. It took me about two years to catch up. I just don’t...don’t approve of that at all, of having a child out of her regular class. As I said, academically it was fine, but socially it was really difficult. Then going from a little tiny town into a...probably considered quite a city—Pocatello was so much bigger than the little town where I’d lived—made a difference too, so it was difficult.

MM: Did you go to The University of Idaho? Was that what it was called?

KR: It now is called Idaho State University, just like this one here in Montana. But at that time it was called the Idaho Technical Institute, and later it became part of the University system. So I went two years. They had only two years of college then. Then I went to the University of Idaho at Moscow [Idaho] the last two years.

MM: Where did you live? Where did you live while you went to college?
KR: In a dormitory. They didn’t have sororities then. They do now, I think, in Pocatello. And then the last two years I also lived in a dormitory in Moscow.

MM: Did you have pretty strict rules about when to be in the dorms and..?

KR: Oh, Yes! [laughs] You had to be at 9:30 or 10 o’clock on weekdays and you had later permission until 12 o’clock on Saturdays and then you had to be in at about 8:30 on Sundays. You couldn’t ride in cars. When we were six weeks before we graduated we could ride in cars without permission.

MM: Otherwise you had to have permission?

KR: Even to ride from the University to downtown and we had a sort of a taxi and you could ride down for a dime but you had to have permission.

MM: Did the young men have to be in at a certain time too?

KR: I don’t think so. I don’t remember.

MM: Did you have proctors that looked after...Did the students look after each other and take turns doing that?

KR: No, they had someone on the regular pay role who did that. They had a dean over all the girls and then they had in each dormitory a woman who was like a housemother. Then there would be a reliable senior that would check girls in and out. If you went out to the library, you had to check out and that kind of thing, and then you had to check in—that kind of thing.

MM: Did you ever talk among yourselves about it being a bother, and did you resent it?

KR: No, I think we generally accepted it. It wasn’t just on that campus, you see, it was nationwide. That was just the way things were at colleges and universities. So we accepted it. We didn’t feel it was a hardship.

MM: And at that time you bobbed your hair?

KR: Well, when I first went away, see, it was becoming the thing to do. It was just like any style of dress or anything that kids do. They always have to do some revolutionary thing, and the style was to wear bobbed hair and so I bobbed my hair.

MM: It wasn’t because the hair was a bother to you or anything it was just—

KR: Oh, no. It was just the style. It was the in thing to do. I bobbed my hair, and I came home at Thanksgiving time with bobbed hair much to the disapproval of my father [laughs].

Kathryn H. “Kay” Roberts Interview, OH 049-060, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
MM: Did he threaten to cut off the funds for college or anything?

KR: Oh, no. He just didn’t like it [laughs]

MM: So, did you like being away at college? Did you enjoy it?

KR: Oh, very much. I was eager I think, like most young people. They want to be grown up. They want their independence. By being ahead academically—and I’d had a lot of responsibility—and so from that standpoint, I wanted to be on my own, and one thing that I particularly wanted was to be in charge of my money. My father didn’t believe in an allowance so if we wanted anything we told him we’d like to have it and he would give us the money to go buy it. We didn’t have very much, but this was the way our money was spent. I thought it would be wonderful to have my own money, and so he gave me so much each month, which wasn’t very much, and I worked for my board and room. So I had a little bit of money, and both my mother and father thought I did very well in the way I spent my money. I was very careful about how I spent it and made what little I had do. I never over spent or anything of that sort. In fact, I saved up a little bit and bought my mother material for a dress and brought it home and made it.

MM: So where did you work while you were in college?

KR: In the school cafeteria the first year. The second year I worked for my room and board in a private home, and then those people moved to California in February so I went back to the dormitory and I didn’t work for the rest of that year. Then when I went to Moscow I borrowed money, and also I learned to Marcel hair. Do you know what Marcelling is? Well, you have an iron, a certain kind of an iron, and it makes the hair in very pronounced waves. That became the style for the short bobbed hair to be Marcelled. I would shampoo and Marcel hair in my dormitory room and when there was a dance...I charged a quarter. I wasn’t licensed or anything, but a lot of the girls would come in and have me do it. So every weekend I Marcelled hair. I also borrowed money to get me through that last two years, and I paid that back, then, my first two years of teaching.

MM: Were you studying education?

KR: Well, my major was in English, but of course, I had to have some education courses in order to teach.

MM: But you didn’t have to major in it.

KR: No, I didn’t major in it. I majored in English. Then later I went back and got a master’s in literature and a master’s in speech pathology. I told you that earlier. I went back—that was after I was teaching here—I was going to get my doctorate, and they asked me when I could go
here, what was the purpose of getting a doctorate. Well, I was going to get this in speech path and they don’t have a department here. They had a number of courses but no department so I could never work up to be the head of the department. When I explained what the situation was, they said, well, you’d be better off if you’d just take more courses and not get the doctorate. For one thing I would have to stay the whole year in residence and I was married, of course, by that time, and I didn’t want to be away from my husband because we’d been separated a good deal in the first years of our marriage. So that’s what I did. I went to summer school for several summers, and I took medical courses over in the medical school at The University of Washington. I got my graduate degrees from the University of Washington.

I started to tell you about my husband, whether he wanted to... It was my suggestion that he go to school here—

MM: I think we should go back to when you were just finishing with college because we’re starting to jump ahead.

KR: Oh, okay. You didn’t have that on tape anyway.

MM: No, well get to that part because you hadn’t met your husband yet when you were finishing college? Is that true?

KR: No, I met him the very first hour I was in Kellogg [Idaho]. At that time, he was assistant cashier of a bank, and I had borrowed 50 dollars to get me through the first month so I... to establish my credit. I put the 50 dollars into the bank. I opened up a bank account. It was right at noon, and another girl that I’d known in college was starting out to teach too. So I went into this bank and I put my money in, and he was the one who waited on me. He said, “Usually teachers came in to borrow money instead of to put money in the bank,” and that was when I met him.

MM: That was your first teaching job, in Kellogg?

KR: Yes, However, I didn’t marry him... We didn’t start going together until a year later.

MM: And he was living there working in the bank.

KR: He left Kellogg, and he went back to Chicago to study. He stayed for several months on this job that I was telling you about, putting on plays and putting up backdrops and then was when we started going together—the second year that I was in Kellogg.

MM: Could you tell me a little bit about his job with the plays?

KR: Well, he would negotiate with a club of some kind like Rotary Club or American Legion or Boy Scouts or whatever club was interested. Well, they had a contract that he would...he
already had the books and had chosen the play, and he would play the lead and he would play a lead that he was...That carried most of it so that the amateurs drawn from the community didn’t have so much to learn, you see. They could get up in their parts very quickly. For instance he played The Old Soap and he played Friend and The Enemies and plays where there would be a central man character that carried the whole play. He would cast the play from the people that were interested and wanted to be in it. He directed the play, he took care of advertising and the whole production of it. Then this company—that organization that he worked with—would sell the tickets and do whatever they needed to do to produce the thing, but he was in charge of the whole production. After the play was over—and sometimes they’d play two or three night because they had a good response to this—after all the bills were paid, then they divided the profits between the organization and my husband. Sometimes there would be men go in and they’d try to rip, kind of a rip-off, and people were a little skeptical. Well, they had faith in my husband, and they liked the production because he turned out very professional amateur plays and they’d have him come back year after year.

MM: In Idaho?


MM: So he traveled quite a bit?

KR: Yes. I told you that we were married after I came to...I taught two years in Kellogg, and then I came to Bozeman. I’d just been here six weeks when he came through, and we were married. Well, I continued to teach and continued to go around and put on these plays.

MM: What year was this?


MM: You were married in ‘27. At that time, you had signed a contract that didn’t specify you couldn’t be married.

KR: Yes, that’s right.

MM: So they had no way to fire you, and they didn’t really want to fire you either?

KR: Except that they knew they would be criticized by the community if they didn’t ask me to leave, you see. The community felt that no man...no married woman should continue to work after she was married.

MM: Because it was a man’s duty to support her?
KR: Yes. That was the thinking all over the United States. It wasn’t just here, it was everywhere.

MM: What if a woman wanted to work? What if she enjoyed her work?

KR: Well that didn’t make any difference. It was frowned on. Once in a great while you’d find that...And particularly here, there was a situation. There were three women whose husbands were living, and they had taught for many years. They were teaching at country schools, and they were very fine teachers, really, the old fashioned, good old country school teachers. The county continued to hire them, and they were very much criticized by the community. Well, then to have a young girl come in to teach as a married woman, why, the school board would have been just very much criticized. But now that they’d asked me to leave, they could say, well, we asked her to leave but it wasn’t in her contract so we couldn’t make her. So anyway, I continued to teach. Well, then...Am I jumping ahead too fast here?

MM: They hired you again the next year.

KR: They hired me the next year, and I didn’t know what was going to happen after then. But at that time, then, he and I made a decision, and I thought that he should get out of what he was doing and go to school and work for the theaters. That was what he wanted to do as a life work. I suggested that while I was...I had my contract for the...my second time...my contract for the third year then. So I suggested that he go to school here for two years, and then go back to Cornell where they had this fine drama department which was watched by Broadway and they would pick from that group, very often, young actors, that would get jobs on Broadway. So he had a lot of correspondence with the head of the department who was interested in his coming, and he suggested that he take all of the basics here at Montana State and then come back at the end of two years. Well, that was in ’29, the fall of ’29. That’s what he decided to do. I just left the decision up to him. I said, “I’m willing to be the breadwinner for the time needed and but it’s up to you.” Well he was reluctant to do it after all he still had some of this idea that a man should support his wife, you see, and it was an unusual situation. But anyway, he decided that he would.

MM: What was your feeling around all of this business that a women should stay home and make a home?

KR: Well, I didn’t see why I should because I didn’t have children, and I wanted to teach and I felt that I was doing a good job teaching. I couldn’t see where my being married interfered with my teaching at all. I wanted to teach and regardless of the money—of course, I wanted the money too—but I was a liberated women for those days.

MM: Did you talk to other women about how you felt?

KR: Oh yes, there was much talk about this because—
MM: Did you argue? Did you have any friends that agreed with you or—

KR: Oh, sure.

MM: You did.

KR: Yes. A lot of the young women in the teaching profession did. Sure, if you wanted to teach, why can’t you teach? As you don’t let it interfere with your teaching, and I was very idealistic. I thought a teacher should be dedicated to her teaching. That’s what I’m afraid is kind of out of the minds of some of our present day teachers. Anyway, this was pretty much the thing, if you taught you didn’t do it just to make money because if you wanted more money you went into something else. You became a stenographer or something else.

Anyway, he started that fall. We’d been working in Yellowstone Park in the summers, and so I came down a week early because school started and he stayed up there for a week. Well, when he came down I said, “Have you decided what you want to do?”

He said, well, he’d given it a lot of thought. He just didn’t know. He’d always wanted to go to college. He hadn’t gone. He’d been in the First World War and that had interfered, and then he and his brother had supported his mother. There were various things that kept him from going to college, but this really appealed to him that he’d have the chance then to find out if he had it for the theater. So he said, “Well, let’s go up and see what they have to offer.” We went up and looked at the catalogue, and he talked to some of the professors and registered. He decided that he would, but he had contracted to put on a play down in Idaho and so he had this one more play to do. He explained he would have to be late coming to class. Well, there was a week of orientation, and then there was a week of class that he missed. He did that one in a hurry. Usually, he didn’t do them that fast. He’d take at least three weeks for rehearsals and so on. But anyway he went down there and so he came back and went into class late. Now, you can picture that the time is so important here. So it was about the second week of October when he started to class so we went the second, third, and the end of the third week...the end of the fourth week was...he was only in class.

Then three weeks, October 29, the crash came—1929. Everything just...Well, you’ve heard about it no doubt. That just upset everything. Here the theaters were closing on Broadway, and actors were out of jobs. They were selling apples on the street, and everybody was closed. It was a terrible, terrible time, and here he was going to school. So before Christmas, before the vacation, they were supposed to register for the winter quarter. You do that in Missoula too don’t you? He came home one day, and he said, “Well, I’ve been looking through the catalogue, and I’ve been thinking this over and I see the writing on the wall. This is a bad thing.” He was very well informed, very knowledgeable about world affairs, national affairs, and so on. He said, “I think that I should take all the education I can up here, go to Missoula, major in history and dramatics, and teach.” Well, I nearly fell over because I had never pictured him as a teacher at all, but that’s what he did.

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When the school board, then, knew that he was planning to teach, there was no question at all of their giving me my job because they knew that I was planning to resign as soon as he was through college. So he went to school two years up here. He went to school three years in Missoula and got his master’s, and then I resigned and he was hired in the vacancy I left—the only vacancy there was.

MM: Well, why would they want to hire...Why did you resign?

KR: We were so deep in the Depression they wouldn’t have hired two people from a family, the matter of nepotism too.

MM: But you had the experience. I would think that you would be the teacher that would continue teaching rather than them hiring a young...a man who hadn’t had any experience?

KR: But he had had. He had his master’s, and one thing in his favor was...of course, he had business experience. He was a little older than I, too. I was very young, and he was a few years older than I. When he took his practice teaching up here the principal, Mr. Woodard...certain teachers are assigned to oversee the practice teachers, and Mr. Woodard did this for him. He asked him to take over a class in sociology and he did his practice teaching by taking the principal’s class. Then he observed him and graded him and he thought he did such a good job. He thought he was well-equipped to teach that sort of thing. So he didn’t teach English, he taught social science and history and dramatics, which he knew very well. He was an excellent teacher, and he taught there until he died—22 years. He was a very fine teacher.

MM: So you quit teaching—

KR: I resigned, and he was hired in the vacancy that I left.

MM: Did you want to resign in order to give him a place to start working in teaching?

KR: Well, I just went along with the thinking of the whole country. I knew we couldn’t both teach, and that was just a natural thing to do. He wanted to teach, and so he would get the job and I would be the housewife. It was just a natural thing. There was never any protest on my part or his or anything. It was just the way it should have been.

MM: Because at that time, it was unusual for married women to be working, wasn’t it?

KR: Especially with the Depression. Many families they didn’t even have one breadwinner let alone two. So it would have just been out of the question. We wouldn’t have both been hired in that...when the Depression...We were deep in the Depression in ‘34 when he was...when he started teaching. There never was any question. It was just what you do, you know. You
wouldn’t expect to have two teachers in the family or two breadwinners.

MM: What year was this?

KR: ’34.

MM: ’34. Then you didn’t teach for how many years?

KR: Twelve years.

MM: Twelve years. Did you have any children during that time?

KR: No, we never had children.

MM: Did you choose not to have children?

KR: No. No. I had an operation and probably wouldn’t have had children anyway. I went back to Mayo’s in the fall then after he started teaching in the fall. You see, every summer we worked in Yellowstone Park—for 19 summers.

MM: Oh. What work did you do there?

KR: Well, for many years I was the housekeeper at Old Faithful Lodge, and he was the manager of what they called at that time the Old Faithful Housekeeping Cabins. People would take their own bedding and their cooking and so on and cook in the cabins. They had some furnished cabins, but they had 450 cabins. Are you acquainted with Old Faithful?

MM: Yes.

KR: Well, his cabins were all around the big store and a lot of where the museum is now. All that was filled up with his cabins. The office later burned down after we were gone, but we were there until ’49. Now, I didn’t go the last three summers, I guess, because I would go up early and stay for a week or two, but I didn’t work. I’d go out to Seattle and go to summer school, and then I’d go up for a week or so before my school started in...So anyway, we did it that way and I was the...just a housewife. Just. [laughs]

Then there was a war and I never dreamed...I never intended to teach again, but there was a war that no one had ever dreamed we’d have and I did start working during the war. I went down to get my watch fixed at a jewelry store and man said, “Do you want a job?” It was just the owner and watch maker were all they had, and it was during Christmas trade and all and I said, “Sure.” I thought he was kidding, but it turned out he wasn’t and I worked for three years with him during the war in the jewelry store. He couldn’t get help. You just couldn’t get help in those days because people had gone off to war plants. Like in Seattle they were doing welding...
and all kinds of things, so local people had a hard time finding anyone who would take their jobs for necessary. Then when the war was over all the GI’s came back, and they just came in swarms and the various educational institutions just didn’t have enough teachers...They were just...They didn’t have room, they didn’t have class rooms, they didn’t have teachers, they didn’t have housing facilities. They asked me, as they asked some other housewives, if I would take some classes—as many as I could. Well, I’d had a very, a difficult operation, and the doctor said I could go half time if I’d lie down between classes. So I went Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, and they put a cot in another professor’s office and I’d lay down between classes. Well, I got better very fast. It was a very interesting time, and my mind was on something beside myself and it was all very interesting so I went up for one quarter half time and I stayed 25 years! So you never know what your life is going to turn into.

MM: Did you get your master’s at that time?

KR: Yes. Before I was married I had started my master’s out at the University of Washington in literature. I got into short stories some too, so when this happened I hadn’t completed my master’s. They said now we’d like to have you on our faculty, but you’ll have to complete your master’s. So I went out in the summers then and they needed here, someone in what they called, at that time...What did they call it? Speech...not defective speech, speech correction. It’s had so many different names. It was speech correction and then it was speech therapy and then it was remedial speech. Now they call it speech pathology because it has broadened out. It isn’t just the speech, it’s, oh, a lot of related fields too. It goes into the physical and the psychological aspects and the neurological aspects of it too. So speech pathology is much more comprehensive. But they needed someone in that field. They didn’t have anyone. So the head of the department suggested I would go into that. So I got my master’s in literature with a minor in...and my thesis in short story writing and then with this other. Then I kept going back afterwards, and I told you about the thinking that I would get a doctorate in it and then I got sidetracked into this. I took quite a number of courses at the medical school. Oh, diseases of the ear and that kind of thing.

MM: So you got into this—

KR: Speech pathology.

MM: —Into a new career after the war.

KR: Yes.

MM: You probably never would have gotten into that if someone hadn’t asked you, is that true?

KR: That’s right. That’s right because it was a new field. I didn’t know anything about it.
MM: What about the fact that you went back to teaching? Had you had any desire to go back on your own without having someone ask you?

KR: No, no, I’d never intended to. That first year when he was teaching and I said I’d gone back to Mayo’s and I’d had an operation, and so after I got to feeling better we lived very close to the University. So many housewives in Bozeman would take a course now and then. Pretty soon they’d have a whole bunch of credits, and it turns into a degree or something. I thought, well, it is so close here, why don’t I just take some courses. So I went up...the only department that I was really interested in at that time was art—that they had up here if their English department had been—

[End of Side A]
KR: —the different life I would have had because I would never have got into speech pathology. It was just a peculiar set of circumstances that got me into that, and it was the most rewarding thing I...I even went to University of Denver to the Medical School—The Colorado Medical School in Denver and Denver University—for training in rehabilitation of laryngectomy and things of that sort that just reached out in so many...related areas that were—

[Break in audio]

MM: Into a field that reached out into lots of different areas?

KR: Yes. Because of that training in Denver when the laryngectomies, I was out on a reference for the Cancer Society and I was put on a...well, there was a staff for...the county had a, has a very fine health program. When Medicare came in, they wanted to set up a program. Now this was with the county health people. They wanted to set a program for home care that would come under Medicare, and in order to that they had to have a nationally certified...two therapists, that is therapists from two fields—a physical therapist and occupational therapist and a speech therapist. Since I was nationally qualified now through the National Association of Speech and Hearing, they asked me to be on the staff of their program in the county. See, I would never have had contacts like that if I had gone into the art field. So I often think how different my life would have been if I had chosen to go on and got my degree in art. The whole circumstance would have been different.

MM: Well, I’m a little surprised that you didn’t think of going back to teaching after the Depression because you had said you loved teaching, right? You really liked it? Why didn’t—

KR: I loved being a housewife, too.

MM: Oh, you did. You liked that a lot too.

KR: Oh, yes. The community work—I did a lot of that...people that have homes and do community work, they don’t have dull lives if they aren’t dull people. So there were 12 years where I had a very interesting life. For three of those, I worked in a jewelry store because the war came along. But I had a very interesting life during that time. I just loved it. And I had a very happy marriage so—

MM: What was your community work?

KR: Well, I did a lot of things—women’s clubs—and I was always called on for making speeches on various things and things of that sort.

MM: Were you writing at that time?
KR: Yes, quite a bit. As a matter of fact, I had been doing writing at the University...No, that was later that I went into University. Through those years, I was doing quite a lot of writing.

MM: And publishing some of your—

KR: Some of it. I had a few in the big markets but not many. But anyway—

[Break in audio]

MM: And so you were doing writing and your husband was teaching?

KR: He was teaching at McGowan County High School (?). He taught there all the time—for 22 years—and then he put on plays and he did lots of things. We had a very interesting life. Then we were going up to Yellowstone Park in the summertime, and that made it interesting too.

MM: You were gone some summers? You went to school in Seattle, is that true?

KR: I went half the term in ’46, ’47, ’48, ’49, and then I went back in ’54. I went to school in San Diego one summer—that was ’53...I can’t remember the date, the year, but I did a lot of graduate work at that time.

MM: When you started teaching again at the University, had the feeling changed in the community about married women working?

KR: Oh, yes. All together. The war made a lot of difference because they needed teachers, and it didn’t matter if you were married or not. That was all changed. A lot of things were changed so far as teachers were concerned. You were expected to live such a virtuous life, and you had a lot more freedom after that. But anyway, I taught about, well, 10 years when my husband died, and I felt very lucky in that so many of my friends over the years, their husbands have died and they don’t know what to do. They have to support themselves, and they don’t know where to turn. Maybe they go back to school for a year and see if they can learn to teach—brush up and so on. I already had my job. He died on Wednesday, and I was back teaching on Monday in summer school. I was teaching in summer school.

I just continued then until ’70, and I was going to teach another year but I developed osteoarthritis in my hips. I got so I couldn’t drive my car and I couldn’t walk and I was on crutches and a wheelchair. So in the summer of ’69 I went back to Mayo’s, and they had a new operation—at that time it was new—of replacing the hips. They thought that I was a candidate for it so they sent me home and I taught that next year with great pain—great inconvenience. They said they would operate when the time was right. I kept sending in reports, and they decided the time would be right any time after New Year’s so I decided to try to stick it out for
the rest of the year and I did. I had a taxi come to the front door and take me to my office, and then he’d call for me and bring me home. I went here on a wheelchair and then got off the wheelchair and onto canes for teaching. I left here the 6th of June—finished up my teaching and flew back to Mayo’s. On the 8th, I was in the hospital getting ready for surgery [laughs].

So I had two total replacements—hip replacements—there. Somebody suggested that I just take a sick leave, but I didn’t know how this was going to turn out or anything and I was so near time for retirement that I could retire—that I just retired then. Actually, my contact was up in October even though I was...in June I had terminal leave then. So I retired the first of October in ’70, 1970. I’ve been retired almost 11 years now. Since that time, I’ve spent a lot of time traveling—world traveling—and I had some before too. I’d gone around the world. I’d gone to Europe several times. I moved up here four years before I retired. Sold my house and went into an apartment for several years, three years. Then I had the chance to move here so I moved up here. I drove back and forth during that time—

MM: Well, when you were a young woman, do you remember how people viewed women who were getting into politics?

KR: Well, there weren’t many doing that. Jeanette Rankin was one. You know who she is?

MM: Yes, there were some state legislators in Montana that were women.

KR: Well that was Jeannette Rankin. The one. She was the only one.

MM: No, state legislators.

KR: Oh, the state not the national. Well, it was very unusual for a woman to be.

MM: Did you talk about that with your friends?

KR: Not particularly. We thought she was a little unusual.

MM: You thought Jeannette was unusual?

KR: Yes. It was very strange for women to go into that or engineering or a lot of the things that they’ve gone into now. That they think nothing of. Medicine, things of that sort. We have a lot of women, of course, in those fields now.

MM: Did women just think that men should be the ones that were controlling things politically?

KR: I think they just accepted it. For one thing, it was so hard for a woman to break into a field like that. You just weren’t expected to do it. Men didn’t think they should, and they didn’t treat her the way they would treat a fellow doing the same work.
KR: —it was an engineering school. It was a man’s school, and there was a difference in our wages. We were doing exactly the same work. I never got as much as the men who went in the same time I did, and yet, I was doing everything as much as they were on committees and all those things. Well, here’s another thing about the situation over here, it’s an engineering school—it’s a scientific school—and so those people have another field, “If you don’t pay me enough here, I’ll go into industry.” And they did, so they had to compete with industry. Whereas the women such as I was and some other wives, or whoever else it was, I couldn’t find it. Further than that, my husband had a job, we owned our home, so “If you don’t want to take what we’ll offer you, why, that’s fine. We’ll get somebody else.”

MM: That was their attitude.

KR: That was their attitude.

MM: Did you ever talk to them about it?

KR: No, no. One time I didn’t sign the contract because I didn’t think they gave me a comparable raise. They didn’t. I went to the President, through channels, of course. They had a department and all that, and they came up some but never, I felt, as much as they should have in comparison with what they paid the head of the family. See, I wasn’t the head of the family. My husband was.

MM: Did you make decisions together with your husband?

KR: Oh, certainly.

MM: So you headed the family together, didn’t you?

KR: Yes! Actually, that’s what happened because we had that kind of a marriage. Neither one dominated the other.

MM: But it was just thought that he was the head.

KR: But the way they thought, you see, “he’s the head of the family. He’s the breadwinner. Then you just come along and take what pickings we choose to give you.” See, they knew they couldn’t bargain with me, or with any other wife, where they had their roots here. Whereas with a man, he’d say, “All right, I’ll sell my house, and I’ll go into industry and they’ll pay me more than what you do.”

MM: What about after your husband died? Was the situation different?
KR: Only in one case did I find it. By that time they had started giving percentage wages pretty much. We were getting farther and farther away from the Depression, and at one time, my mother had come here to live. My father had died...

I’m looking at the clock. I’m supposed to be at the hospital.

She had come to Bozeman, and while she had a little apartment and didn’t live with me, I was pretty much responsible for her and looked after her and all. I had an opportunity to teach in San Diego at a higher salary from what I was getting here. But it would have meant I’d have to sell my house—this was after my husband had died—and she would go with me and live with me in San Diego. Well, she’d already made one move, from where she and my father lived, to come to Bozeman. She had to make new friends, and it would have meant she didn’t know a soul there. She would have had to make new friends, but she was willing to do that and I was too. It was a good situation going to San Diego. So I started asking for references, which I had to send in, and as soon as they found out I was really serious about making the move they upped my salary enough so I couldn't afford to go.

You know, there wasn’t the difference in the remuneration that there would’ve been if they hadn't upped my salary.

Well, from then on, my salary...The base wasn't as good as the base of these other men, so the percentage didn’t amount to as much as the percentage of this salary. The percentage of this salary wasn’t as much as the percentage of this salary. Yes, percentage-wise, why, it went up reasonably. So I was satisfied, and then of course, I didn’t have to go through the business of selling my house or of Mother having to move again.

MM: What do you think about the changes that have come about like affirmative action and equal pay for equal work, do you think that—

KR: Equal pay, I've always been for that. Equal pay for equal work, and I think there’s no argument against it. I can’t see why there should be any difference at all. Now, if one person isn’t producing or if there are problems with this person, who’s a woman, then she shouldn’t be rewarded as much as this person who doesn't have the problems. But for equal pay, equal work, I think it should definitely be equal, equal pay, and I’ve always, always felt that. I don’t go in for a lot of extreme...the ERA [Equal Rights Amendment] type of thing, but I certainly think that it should be equal pay for equal work.

MM: How do you see women’s lives have changed...how have they changed throughout your lifetime? The lives of women.

KR: Well, they’re much freer, of course.

Kathryn H. “Kay” Roberts Interview, OH 049-060, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
MM: Much freer?

KR: Yes, and I’ve always been pretty much of a loner, maybe. Pretty aggressive. I’ve done pretty much what I wanted to do. If I thought it was common sense. I don’t mean that I would flaunt...the mores (?) and things of that sort. I’ve always been pretty conforming to what’s considered good taste and good morals and honesty and integrity and that kind of thing. But, I’ve been pretty independent. If I think something is right and I want to do it, that’s what I’ll do.

MM: Whether some people would frown on it or not.

KR: Yes. Well, for instance with my travel, I have been most places people go in the world now. I haven’t been to Korea, I haven’t been to Vietnam, I haven’t been to a few places, but I’ve been to all the continents and many others several times. Since I’ve retired and had more time, even before I retired, I took foreign trips every year on my time off. My husband and I traveled a lot when we had time and could do it like at Christmas time and summers and so on. But I’ve taken two or three trips a year, since I’ve retired—foreign trips, [unintelligible] long trips.

MM: Is that unusual? To travel alone? Do people look at that as—

KR: Well, some people say, how on earth do you do it? You dare to go off without a partner, I go to the group. I’ve done some travel by myself, quite a little of it in fact, but it’s more enjoyable to go with a group. It’s easier, you see more, and it’s less expensive, I think. But I dare to do things like that that a lot of people wouldn’t. For instance, I went to Russia twice—two consecutive years. I’ve been to China three times. They say, why do you want to go back to China? I have reasons. I’m very much interested in other people, just people.

One of the courses I taught was English for Foreign Students, and I got to know many of the foreign students. I had a Chinese girl who lived with me off and on for five years when she was taking nursing up here. We still are very close. Her children call me Grandma Kay, and we visit back and forth and so on. When I went to China, I got to go to the Tiananmen Square where she was born! I saw where she’d gone to school as a little girl back in communist China. There are many reasons why I want to go. I think the world is interesting and people are interesting and their cultures are interesting and their histories are interesting. So you don’t just sit and stagnate.

MM: No. Did you teach any foreign-born children?

KR: Oh yes, plenty of them.

MM: Was there a language difficulty? Say, in high school, when you were high school teacher?

KR: Well, I didn’t have many in high school, but see, we didn’t have many foreigners then. It’s only since the war, and since ‘49 when the Communists took over that they started coming

Kathryn H. “Kay” Roberts Interview, OH 049-060, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
from Taiwan. In these classes of English for Foreign Students, I’d have kids from all over the world in the same class. So of course, that’s difficult, naturally. They were studying English as a second language. I’d had them in my home, really got to know a lot of them, but I went around the world in ’58. Nearly every place I went, I either had former students meet me and take me to their homes, or if they were still here, they’d have their family meet me. That was a wonderful experience.

MM: Neat, that’s nice.

KR: I spent three months on that trip. Saw a lot of people, met a lot of people all over the world through my students. That was fun.

MM: Great! Well we’ll stop there. Thank you.

[End of Interview]