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Oral History Number: 049-062  
Interviewee: Mary Wessel  
Interviewer: Mary Melcher  
Date of Interview: August 11, 1981  
Project: Montana Women’s Oral History Project

Biographical Statement: Mary Wessel was born in New York in 1882. After teaching school in Los Angeles, California she was married and moved to Montana with her husband who worked with the Forest Service. Later, she became active in the Unity Church, eventually serving as a minister of several different congregations throughout Montana.

Day of interview was conducted at Mary Wessel’s home in Bozeman, Montana.

Mary Melcher: Reverend Wessel, you were born in New York?

Mary Wessel: Yes.

MM: Is that true?

MW: In a little town called Amity which means peace.

MM: Did you have a large family? Did you come from a large family?

MW: My mother had five children, and I was the fourth child.

MM: Your health was poor while you were growing up?

MW: Yes.

[Break in tape]

In 1888 there was a great blizzard in New York, and that year I had scarlet fever followed by pneumonia and then eczema.

MM: How old were you then?

MW: Six.

MM: You were six in 1888? So you were born in 1882?

MW: Yes. My father decided that he was not the type to be a farmer. The farm had been given to them at their marriage by my mother’s father. He was not a farmer and he decided...He got
his inheritance from his father, and he decided that he would go to New York and build houses for the immigrants that were coming in. That’s the work he wanted to do, and he was very successful at that work. We lived then in New York City on Long Island.

MM: That’s where you went to school?

MW: That’s where I went to school—to both high school and college in the city. College was at Jamaica in New York, and I took that training for teaching.

MM: Was it called normal training there?


MM: So you wanted to be a teacher? Was that your goal?

MW: Oh, always. From the time I was five I wanted to teach and I taught because I had a brother who’d had 11 operations and sat in a wheelchair and couldn’t go to school. I took him with me through the eighth grade.

MM: You took him to school with you? Or you taught him at home?

MW: No, I came home and taught him everything that I’d learned.

MM: Wonderful.

MW: I just loved to teach and I learned to read from the Bible. My mother was a deep student of the Bible. She loved it and prayed very successfully. But she was blind and so we read to her, you see. I just learned quickly to read. Before I was five, I was reading second grade work.

MM: Did you learn by yourself or did one of your brothers...

MW: I would read the words that I knew and I would spell the words and she would tell them to me. I had a photographic mind. Once I saw a word, I knew it. I just didn’t lose it, see.

MM: Great.

MW: Wonderful words in the Psalms that I would read over and over and over as a child. So, I was a great lover of the Bible and read the Bible always—everyday—and taught my children to love it and to love God.

MM: Did you do chores while you were growing up or were you healthy enough to? Do chores around the house?
MW: My mother always had help, and I always had help in the home to do the heavier work, you see. I would tutor and pay for the work. I had more energy to give to the children and more mental help to them than if I was too tired out all the time doing heavy work in the house.

MM: Did your mother feel that same way? Was she involved in some work outside the home?

MW: No. She never had to, you know. The father supplied money for all the needs and...She always had help for the cooking and so on because she saw to get around pretty well in a home where she was familiar with everything. I think her sense of feeling was a great deal to her sigh, and she was up and around and did remarkable things that most people wouldn’t do. They’d think they were blind. She never thought of herself as blind, you see. She just did whatever she could possibly do. A wonderful spirit. She was always helping people and always a great lover of everybody. A wonderful soul to live with.

MM: Did you go to church with your family as a child growing up?

MW: Did I?

MM: Go to church?

MW: Go to church, yes. Yes, I was christened in the Methodist Church. That was the only church that there was in the community. We had to go five miles to go to church up to the time I was six. Then when we moved to the city, there wasn’t the transportation, you see, in those days. You walked everywhere. So the nearest church to us where the little ones could go to Sunday school was a Dutch Reformed Church. You see, the Dutch had settled New York, and there were many Dutch churches. She had gone and found the minister who was a New Loved God. He preached more God is love, you see. We never heard hellfire and damnation. She saw to that. She didn’t believe in it herself, and she didn’t except that idea. So we went to the Dutch Reformed Church there and when we went to California the nearer church...Well there were trolley cars some places. I walked to a Presbyterian Church and I liked the minister. He was the son of a very famous minister that time, T. DeWitt Chambers. My mother had heard him and taken me with her, and he put his hand on my head and blessed me—that famous man had. This was his son. His message too was the god of love. So I went there and taught in the Sunday school while I was teaching school.

MM: So what had drawn you to California?

MW: Well, when I had trouble in the school room, and the principal took me home in his horse and buggy.

MM: When you got sick in the schoolroom?
MW: Yes. That was the end of my teaching in New York. I got a year’s leave of absence. My aunt was a registered nurse and she suggested this. Well, first they thought they’d send me to Saranac where the hospital was for tuberculosis. They didn’t know it was that but they thought that it might be, you know, because of the frequent recurrence of these spells that I had. They didn’t know very much about tuberculosis in those days. But the cure for them was being out-of-doors—living out-of-doors. I had an aunt living in Roxbury, New York, in the Catskill Mountains, and she had a summer home. They lived there in the winter, but in the summer they took in boarders from New York. She said, “Oh, well, send her. Bring her up here, and we’ll take care of her.” They rigged up a place for me to live on a balcony—sleep on the balcony. Then on the daytime I sat on a bearskin rug out on the porch, went in for my meals and back outdoors again.

MM: How old were you then? About 20?

MW: I was 19 when I graduated and I taught that year and I went up there in May so I was still 19. My birthday is in September. I was there all that summer and that next winter. I lived out-of-doors. Then my aunt didn’t want me to go back into the rigors of the climate in Long Island—damp, very damp and the wind blows so. Oh, those cold winds, never a thing like them anywhere else. She thought I would stay well. I had gained up in the mountains 20 pounds, and I was able to walk quite a distance and felt good. Never had any of those spells, you see. So they thought that if I was in a milder climate I would probably not have those spells again. So she suggested that we go to California where we could be out in the sunshine, and she would nurse and I would teach. I was accepted right away at the schools, and when I had the oral examination one of the young men on the board said, “Did you come here for your health?” I said, “Do I look it?”

I didn’t want to say. I had you see, and they all laughed, you know, because I was brown as a berry (laughs) and looked very healthy. They could see that I was healthy so they didn’t press it any farther. But when I went home I said to my aunt, “Pack your trunk, I was a smart aleck. I just said the thing that came to my mouth first, and I said to them ‘Do I look it?’ I know that they’d think that I’m not a good teacher.” So I thought that I wouldn’t hear but the next morning they called and told me to report to a certain school (laughs).

MM: How had you traveled from New York to California?

MW: The train. We had four nights and three days on the train. All Pullman trains they had in those days, they were wonderful—really beautiful trains.

MM: Was there a place to eat on the train?

MW: Oh yes. A beautiful dining room. Marvelous food! We had berths. There were some drawing rooms too, you know, where you had little cubby holes. You had your own room. But
we were in a series of berths. One of the cars that had berths in them and then a restrooms at the end of the car. And we were very comfortable. I slept well in the berth.

MM: Were you sad to leave your family?

MW: Oh, it was not easy to leave Mother. And it wasn’t easy for her because she kept her eye on me. Oh, I didn’t tell you, she had a healing. She had a healing through Christian Science her healing came. Of course, I had weak eyes, but I wasn’t having any too serious difficulty with my eyes. I could see and read and write very well then. After years when I had been in the work a long time, my eyes didn’t do so well and then it was that I went through that experience of change—a new creature. I was born a new creature. I was reborn. That’s what actually does take place. I had new outlooks, new attitudes of mind. I thought differently, I felt differently. It was a though it was somebody else, not me. The old self was gone. Then it was that I dedicated my life to the Father. I said, “Father you have given me a new life, you’ve given me new opportunities to serve you and my life is yours and now you show me what you’d like to do.

MM: Now that was...

MW: I’d never dreamed I’d be a minister. It wasn’t in my object at all. I could be a teacher, I knew that.

MM: Let’s go back to California. You were teaching there for a couple of years?

MW: Yes. I taught there for six years.

MM: During that time you met your husband—the man who would become your husband?

MW: Yes. We were married then in California.

MM: What year were you married?

MW: We were married in 1909.

MM: He had a job with the Forest Service in Montana?

MW: Yes. And that was early years, you know. The days with [Gifford] Pinchot, the very first...They didn’t know in Washington. They didn’t know much about Montana, and they wanted to know where the grazing land was, where the streams were for homesteading, and where the timber was for sale, you see. So they gave him the job, that year, to map the boundaries of the Little Belt Mountains and the Castle Mountains. And so we started out from Neihart [Montana] and came over the mountains on horseback. Me! On horseback! (laughs)

MM: That’s how you got to Neihart? On horseback?
MW: To our home.

MM: Oh, how did you feel about moving to Montana? Had you ever been here?

MW: Yes. He was smart enough to not ask me to marry him until he’d said, “I wish you’d stop off on your way...” He’d come down to UCLA [University of California Los Angeles] to go to the University you see, to take courses, so that he could be near me. He’d met me in Yellowstone Park on our way home from the first year after we taught my aunt and I were going home and we went up to Seattle and got on the Northern Pacific which stopped on the cities on the way up because we wanted to see something of the West. We didn’t intend to come back. We’d taken our trunks, you see. We were going to live in New York again. So I thought. And we went then into the park, Yellowstone Park, when we came through here. And got off at Livingston and went up by train up to Gardiner and into the park, why there were no cars in the park in the early days and we went in one of those big tallyhos for 12 people.

MM: Was that a little cart of a train? What was the tallyho?

MW: That was six horses and a wagon. You’ve seen those old wagons they had, didn’t you, where the man sat up high and then these seats back here, open, and the driver choose me to sit up with him and use the megaphone and tell all of the lies he told he to tell (laughs)...

MM: Jokes?

MW: Well, he told this. When we were going up toward Gardiner there’s a neat eagle’s nest crag with an eagle’s nest on top of it. He told me to tell them that there were young eagles in the nest and of course to see a young eagle. They gave up binoculars to look at them. But in the back seat was a young man with big binoculars. He looked up at the nest and he said, “It is an eagle’s nest and a eagle had lived there, but they’d moved out because they’re too near civilization now and young osprey are in the nest now.” I thought, Smarts. (laughs) He spoiled my story. It wasn’t a young eagle. It was a young osprey, and I didn’t particularly like him (laughs). But he was my future husband.

MM: So you were traveling with him in that...

MW: He would not speak to me. He got acquainted with my aunt. He talked to her and they found that they loved botany. They’d get their heads together on a flower and I was interested in something else, the young people in the group. But when we got to Old Faithful...This is how romantic he is, he was, he didn’t want to meet me until he got to Old Faithful and then he asked my aunt to introduce me to him because he didn’t want a wife that was picked up (laughs).

MM: He wanted you to be his wife?
MW: The way he tells it, he knew I was to be his future wife. And I had no such ideas. He took three years to try to convince me. I think it was persistence that won in his case. He was a wonderful soul, really. Life was so different, you see, his kind of life. I couldn’t conceive it. I just couldn’t conceive it.

MM: You wanted to go back to New York?

MW: Yes.

MM: What brought you back again to the West?

MW: I had my extended leave of absence, so you see I was really a teacher in New York. And they reinstated me in the school and I started teaching and in six weeks these symptoms came back again. The wind. I could never seem to be warm. And it was the climate just could not take and so I phoned to the assistant superintendent of schools whom I knew best in California and asked him if there would be any chance of my being reinstated in the school there and he said, “Well, we told you not to pack your trunk, we expect you back. We put a substitute in your place.” They expected I’d come back. So I went back, but my aunt didn’t. I went back then, and I taught for the rest of the time.

MM: Was it in L.A. [Los Angeles] where you were teaching?

MW: Yes, Los Angeles.

MM: So it was a city at that time?

MW: Yes. The slogan was Los Angeles 250,000. They thought if they’d get to be that size of city they’d be pretty big. (laughs) So we’re two and a half million. Oh, I loved it in those days. It was a big overgrown town. I looked down upon it somewhat because it didn’t have opera and didn’t have this and that that we had, you know. New Yorkers feel that they’ve got everything. Many New Yorkers never travel at all because they thought, Well why? Everybody comes here. Why should we go anywhere?

MM: They don’t have the mountains though. Except for the mountains.

MW: Yeah, they had no concept. You know what, I’d taught geography in New York and when I got to Billings, Montana I got up early, five o’clock in the morning, so as not to miss the Rocky Mountains. (laughs) I didn’t know we’re going to all day long see them. You see, when you make a relief map it’s just up and down and that’s it. (laughs) And here all these bumps.

MM: And the vast distance.
MW: We couldn’t know there’s series a mountains, you see. You’ve got to travel, you know, to really be educated. To really understand. Now I was through college and I had that kind of conception about the Rocky Mountains. I couldn’t conceive of going through all day, through mountains.

MM: How were you traveling that day?

MW: On the train. When I first came out here. And listen, there was a brakeman in the back of the train and I got up early, you see, five, no one else was. I went in the observation car so I could see it well. He spoke to me without my speaking to him. Well, that was just awful. (laughs)

MM: That wasn’t done?

MW: That wasn’t done. No sir. (laughs) It wasn’t done. I had a lot to learn.

MM: That was one of the ways that the West was different?

MW: Yes.

MM: Because you had come with these ideas of how a lady acted and how people acted to a lady.

MW: Sure, sure, sure.

MM: What others sorts of things happened that were unusual?

MW: Well, the free and open comradeship of man and woman. I was always protected. I’d always had, a...What do you call it?

MM: A chaperon?

MW: Yes. Always. My aunt went with me everywhere. If a man asked me to dinner my aunt went too. If we went out for a ride in the country, she went along. I just couldn’t get it through my head that you could go out with a man alone, you know, and be safe (laughs).

MM: So, when came out here the second year you started dating alone?

MW: I had, you know, gotten rid of quite a bit when I saw my women friends, you see, that I made out West didn’t have a chaperon. Never had a chaperon. In those days it was quite pronounced the difference, but now of course they mingled so much, east and west, that New York has dropped a lot. I don’t think that the girls there have chaperones anymore.
MM: Did the men treat you differently here than on the East Coast?

MW: Not in a wrong way. But I always had that fear, you see. You were raised that you must always have a chaperone well there was reason for it, you see. And it was for your protection and here I found out that you didn’t really need a protection a man had a decent idea of a woman, or used to anyway, there’s a lot of stuff nowadays that isn’t the same as it used to be, and that’s universal, that’s all over, it isn’t just our country either. It is different all over. Different value.

MM: So you continued dating your future husband. He would come down to L.A.?

MW: I had other friends and he met the other friends, you see. I didn’t have any idea that it was ever going to be just him. Right up to almost the month or two before it. But on our way...I did stop off, though, to see...He praised the mountains and Montana so much, he said, “I just know that if you lived in the mountains of Montana you’d be well.” And he said, “I want you to see them anyway.” He arranged with the widow of the first territorial governor, Edgerton, to stay in her home. She had two girls about my age. And then I stayed here for two weeks. The lived near Monarch, in their summer home. And they taught me to ride horseback straddle. I’d never done that before. We went out camping and things which I never did in New York. I learned to...I loved the mountains and the beautiful flowers. There’s so much beauty here. You see, I’d more out-of-doors than I’d ever had in the East or in California either. I could see that there was lots of good things about life in the open country. Oh, I loved the sky, blue so blue and the white fleecy clouds and things like that that I didn’t see in California or in New York and so I began to think of the things that were worthwhile and then of his wonderfully clean mind. I never heard him say anything that was off color in anyway. He’s just clean, and I loved that about him. I began to see things that...and I compared him with other men, boys that I’d gone out with and well I’d never had...

[End of Side A]
MM: You came around to the idea of marrying your husband... (laughs)

MW: The wonderful letters he wrote. He was really a good writer. In fact, that year that he was...that we were in the Park, he was writing syndicated articles for the newspaper on Glacier [National] Park. He’d taken a group of people from Washington, D.C. to see it and show that this ought to be a park too and he was quite instrumental in getting public opinion for reserving that land.

MM: Great. That’s neat. Did you ever go back down to California after you’d been in Monarch [Montana] for a couple of weeks?

MW: Oh yes. I went back to school there and taught for a couple more years. He came down in the winter time, you see. And we got better acquainted, you see, all the time. I really then began to think more truly of him, you know. And so when he did ask me to marry him, I said yes (laughs). Of all those that I’d gone out with I saw the father of my children. I wanted children. I was not supposed to have any though, you see. The doctors told me I mustn’t have children because they’d inherit this ordeal that I’d had and while I was not having really definite outbreaks of it, I would have periods I’d have to rest a lot. And I learned to take care of my needs, you know. And when I needed rest...I nearly always rested after school until dinner time and those ways I kept my strength, you see, and I didn’t lose anytime from school and by proper diet—not eating any junk and that sort of thing—eating sensibly and plenty of sleep and resting when I needed rest I got along very well in those years until...In the mountains we lived out-of-doors a great deal too, so...That first summer we lived, we rode five hundred miles horseback mapping the boundaries of forests.

MM: You rode with him?

MW: Yes.

MM: Wonderful. So you moved to Neinhart [Montana] in 1909?

MW: No. We didn’t move there. We moved over King’s Hill, you see. And started out for Neinhart with all of our things that we needed to take. And we couldn’t stay in the cabins of the homesteaders because they had one room cabins. So we pitched our tent in their yards and we took meals with them—we could buy meals from them. And then sleep in our tent, you see. We did that all the way around that summer, from the middle of June until the first of October we never slept in a house.

MM: And you were traveling all around?

MW: Yes, yes.
MM: Great.

MW: It was a wonderful life for me, you see, to be out-of doors like that and have no heavy responsibilities of any kind. And it was really a beautiful summer, it was a very dry summer. So we had no problems at all with it.

MM: And you were newlyweds that summer?

MW: I was what?

MM: You had just been married before...

MW: Yes. We were married in May in California, in Los Angeles. My aunt came with us on our wedding trip. She had come out to stay with me. We had rented a little bungalow and she was teaching me to cook. I had never gone into the kitchen. If I did I’d smell the food and then I didn’t want to eat any food. I’d always had a problem eating. And of course that made me sort of anemic and added to my lack of strength. So I didn’t know how to cook. But my husband was a very good cook (laughs). He used to do the heavy work, scrub the floors and bring in...I never had to bring a pail of water in or bring in the wood, you know. But I did make the mistake of not putting the wood in when I was baking bread and the fire would go out in the midst of baking bread. I had lots of things to learn.

MM: When you were living in the cabin?

MW: In the mountains...

MM: So that fall you got a cabin? After you’d been living out of the tent, then you moved into your cabin?

MW: All the time, all that summer they were building this cabin for us, you see. And we moved in the first of October.

M.M.: Then you had your home party. What did you call the party where all the neighbors come?

MW: Oh yes. A house warming. House warming. I loved it too because we could have the magazines and books. There were always books that I’d wanted to read and never had time in the city. There was always magazines that I’d wanted to read. I’d take them but I didn’t get them read, you see. Never time, see. And here was all of those long winter evenings even though it was by kerosene lamp, we didn’t have electricity, you still could see. Some lamps gave very good light.
MM: How did you get these books and magazines?

MW: Well, I had many of them with me, you see. I kept them for that purpose. Someday I’d find time to read them. We had plenty of material that we both liked to read. Sometimes we’d read to each other or he’d read to me when I was getting a meal. It was really a nice life together. We were together more than people are in the city life.

MM: And then... You lived there about one year, is that true?

MW: Yes. We moved in in October and the next October, let me see. Let me get myself straight here. We moved in one October and we lived all that...The next May the baby was born.

MM: Did you have a midwife come and help?

MW: Oh, no. I went down to the city and stayed...went down three weeks early, and stayed with this family, this couple that was so good to us, you know, newspaperman. And I stayed in their home until I went to the hospital. Oh my, it had to be in the hospital (laughs). Never think of it any other way.

MM: Your orientation was toward doctors?

MW: Yes, yes. And I had also gotten weaned from doctors when I had these children and they were so healthy. Now I have fifty-one in my immediate family, for me. I had five children, all healthy. Sound minds and sound bodies. I had twelve grandchildren. All sound minds and sound bodies. I had eleven great-grandchildren. All sound, perfect children. I have five great-great grandchildren.

MM: Wonderful. And you had been told that you couldn’t have children because you had tuberculosis when you were young?

MW: I must not have children, the doctors had told me. Well, when this happened to me and I wasn’t so sure that the doctors were always right. I was being weaned you see.

MM: From the doctors?

MW: From the doctors’ way. And when I took that baby from Great Falls up to...I asked the doctor to tell me everything that I would need in case these things, anything, happen to the baby, you know, because I was 18 miles from the doctor. I had a well-stocked medicine closet because it was...Well, I thought medicine was so needful, you know. Never used one thing except for some milk of magnesium once in a while. Never anything else.

MM: Great.
MW: When this new idea of God came to me—the God of the presence, the omnipresence instead of a person way up in the sky there somewhere—he’s a very present with us. Life. Love. Light. Peace. Joy. Health. Strength. These ideas were coming to me. The baby was little, first baby was little, and I needed to need something myself, a little laxative of some kind, and I thought well I’ll take a little magnesium, some milk of magnesius and as I reached up into the closet to take this bottle down, the voice said to me, a voice said, just as curly as you can say it, there’s another way. I thought, of course there’s another way, and I put it back in the closet and shut the door and I went and sat down and just relaxed, you know, rested in the presence and in ten minutes I had much better results than I could have possibly have had. And I said thank you Father, thank you, you are the way, you are my way. And in my gratitude that afternoon I cleaned out all that stuff in the medicine closet. Put it away in the garbage. And that was the end of medicine for me.

MM: Totally?

MW: From that time to this. No pills. No plasters. No nothing. My health has been marvelous.

MM: Great. And you, when you continued to have your children did you go to the hospital?

MW: Yes. I went to the hospital with the children but that’s the only time. And always very normal. I thought of the Indian woman, how she’d go behind a bush and pick up her child and go on (laughs). How natural it should be, you see, and no difficulties of any kind. I’d heard old wives tales about what could happen, you know. But I’d brushed them aside, I wouldn’t think of that. Only health and only strength and vitality. Everything normal, everything working perfectly and divinely because that’s the way it was ordained from the beginning. And bit by bit the change was coming. But then that night, that terrific change that came then I was done, you know, with all the outer ways. God has the way and he did the work through me and all this work that was unfolded in Montana. Took the correspondence course and worked from ten o’clock at night until two in the morning on that course, I could be undisturbed then, you see. My friend stayed with the children while I went down to school for a month.

MM: In Bozeman?

MW: No. She stayed in Bozeman and I went down to Kansas City to take the training I had to in class work and in five or six years, in about six years, I was given a teacher’s license to teach unity and then I had classes here and I never sought any of the work. A school teacher in Butte asked me to come over there, she had heard about my work here. And she asked me to come over there and I said, “Oh, no. I couldn’t come there. I’ve got five children.” But she kept persisting and persisting and there’s a long story in there, but there was a very definite reason why I had to go to Butte. I sent someone else in my place and he went off with the money (laughs). He got pledges from them and went off with the money.

MM: Oh, no.
MW: And I had to go.

MM: You did.

MW: I had to go to make good.

MM: You went to school for five years? You would travel down to Kansas City?

MW: No. I didn’t go to school for five years. But by correspondence...

MM: And you took courses?

MW: And taking courses...

MM: And before that you had moved from Great Falls [Montana] to Bozeman [Montana] and your husband had been working in Bozeman and then he went down to Northern California and you were in Bozeman with your children? Is that right?

MW: Well, yes. He had gone down there and then he had...This is during my life here with the ten years that he was away in school and...He went also to school, you see. For the classes he had to have.

MM: And you were taking classes at the same time?

MW: It was about six years that I just studied, you see. And then became a licensed teacher and then I could advertise classes.

MM: Were these religious classes?

MW: Yes.

MM: In the Methodist Church?

MW: No, No. In unity.

MM: In unity?

MW: Unity is a way of life of the presence. You live in the presence. The presence lives in you and it is the presence doing the work through you. It’s not you doing it, you see. And myself. I do nothing, the Father in me, He doeth the work. And every step I took it was with that idea. And when I did go to Butte, well Father you are to speak the message through me. You’re to draw the people that you want to hear the message. You’re to do everything that is done here...
in Butte. And then the next year, I had been going to Butte for a year, and the next year Livingston, the Christian Science Church split over one of their leaders. And she was teaching them to help themselves and that wasn’t done, you see. You’d go to school and you’d learn that. You’d pay 100 dollars for a course in that. And her business was just to heal. And they were coming to her for healing and she was teaching them how to help themselves. So they “churched” her—threw her out of the church. And so half of the congregation believed in her, you see, believed in her way. And they left the church and they were a sheep without a shepherd and the asked me if I’d come teach them unity, which is along the same...unity was the same idea, you see, a little difference but it was the same idea as Christian Science had, I mean same God, the same kid of God. So then I went to Livingston every Monday and to Butte every Friday and the rest of the time I was with my children.

MM: Did you hire a babysitter when you were gone?

MW: I had a little Scotch neighbor who never had children—my children were over then a lot anyway—and she took care of them while I was doing...Then Billings called and I went to Billings and through the years they became established groups and we built a church in Billings first, and we were certainly shown, I could get into it, but it would be an all day job (laughs). So much to tell you. But we built a very interesting church there and contractor—we put the bids out you see—and he was so enamored of the style of church it was, the kind of building, that he wanted to build it and he’d never built such a small building before. He built high schools and courthouses and, you know, big buildings, and it intrigued him so that he wanted to build it and it was during the War and we couldn’t get the lumber that—in town—he couldn’t get the lumber that was specified for it, so he takes down his phone and calls Seattle [Washington] and he get the lumber he needs. He’s a big contractor, he could do it. A smaller one couldn’t.

MM: This was during World War II?

MW: Yes. And we were very well housed in that place, and they are still using that church.

MM: Were you the minister of that church?

MW: What?

Melcher? Were you the minister?

MW: Yes, I was the minister of all these places.

MM: It wasn’t just classes?

MW: It developed, you see. And I was ordained in 1933. When work had proved itself and they invited me to be ordained.
MM: I see. Was it unusual for women to be ordained into...?

MW: Well, they hadn’t ordained anybody for twelve years and I was disappointed. I didn’t want it to be like ministers of other churches. I wanted to be a teacher in a center. We called them centers we didn’t call them churches. I didn’t want to go the way that churches were, you see. Church has become big business, so much of it, you know. I wanted to keep it terribly spiritual. Just spiritual. God only. God in our lives in every way, and He makes us. He guides us into the thing we ought to be doing. You see, I thought I could not leave my home and leave my children. That was entirely wrong. But He showed me that it was right. He raised up, finally, the finest housekeeper I could possibly have who could do better for the children physically than I could do. And then I had more time with their mental life, too. In all the time that I was away from the children, they were leaning on God. They were taught take it to God first. If you need to bring it to me, if you need my help, they knew exactly where I’d be any hour of the day in any of these cities. And I was out from the home from Monday to Friday, all that time was taken up finally and I went to these cities every week for forty-three years.

MM: Wonderful

MW: Forty-three years.

MM: That was your work?

MW: Yeah. And I never missed a time that I was supposed to be schedule. Even God ran the trains. A conductor one time said, “Mrs. Wessel, could you tell me, we’ve had a discussion, two or three of the conductors, how is it that the train can be so late on Sunday night and on Tuesday and be on time on Monday? How do you account for that?” I used the train on Mondays. I said, “Well, God runs my trains and he is never late.”

MM: Great. What was the view of your church, The Unity Church, towards separation and divorce among couples? Did it have any stand on that? I know that among some churches it was considered terrible if a woman should, say divorce an alcoholic or divorce a man who beat her. How did your church look at that?

MW: I think that we felt that it would the guidance of God in every situation. We didn’t take a stand that this one thing is right and another is wrong. And it was always what God said to the individual in each individual case and He is our guide in every way. God is my help in every need. He does my every hunger feed. He is within me, guides my way through every moment of the day. I now am wise. I now am true, patient, kind, and loving, too. All things I am can do can be through Christ, the truth that is in me. All things I am, can do, can be through Christ, the truth that is in me. God is my health. I can’t stay sick. God is my strength, unfailing, quick. God is my awe, I know no fear since God and love and truth are here. And that’s the kind of thing. Each on has to be individually guided and we can pray for each other that they are guided by their on in-dwelling Christ as we are guided, you see. If I am lifted up, lift others up.
MM: So that would have been the attitude that if a woman felt she had to leave that would be...

MW: Yes. We would pray with her that she was guided, that God within her was telling her what is the right thing to do. God has nothing to do with the unhappiness, and the...say the beating, the hurts of any kind. God has all to do with peace and harmony and health and good will, you see. And if it can’t be worked out that way, then of course the separation was right, is what was right, you see. And He certainly lifts us out of all our troubles of every kind.

MM: Did you ever counsel any women about their marriages?


MM: So you’ve heard lots of problems in your lifetime?

MW: Oh, all kinds, every type and kind that there is. I’ve seen every kind of healing. I’ve seen cancer disappear. I’ve seen all...every kind but I didn’t do it. God does the work. He is the only healer, He is the only power there is. Of ourselves we can do nothing. But we can stand still and be the instrument through which God can work. And that’s what were are sent in the world for, each one of us. We’re sent in the world for that purpose. To be that instrument of his. God is invisible and we are to make God visible. That is what Jesus did. And if we follow in his footsteps and are believers in him, that’s what we have to do, become that which we are in reality. And I believed in that so firmly and believed in that and that’s how this unusual work could be done.

MM: How did people feel about having a woman be a minister? Was there any problem with that?

MW: Not a bit. Not a bit with me. I’ve heard other places that, other...you know, in the orthodox churches, that they have problems. But my work was so different, it was just so fascinating, I wasn’t a person. To them it was God speaking. I say this in all humility, it was not of myself, I have listened to that lesson that was given, it was not one that I’d premeditated, I have heard God speak to these people that he called together. And that’s the way that I felt of the work all the time. It was not mine but I was the instrument through which it became visible and heard, and to be heard, you see. I know that it was outstanding that I had such a marvelous new self. Not a lot of our ministers even, do not have that yet, haven’t experienced that and they’re quite human, you know, in their work, they do it their way and it doesn’t work so well. But my work was easy.

[End of Interview]