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Summer 2000
Kathy White: This is Kathy White interviewing Rhoda Richardson at her home in Missoula, Montana. The date is March 24, 1977.

Rhoda Richardson: Mother was born in Rochester, New York in 1856, 1859.

KW: Good memory.

RR: She had several sisters and two brothers, and her father was a dentist. He came from Manchester, England and my grandmother came from Oldham, England. Grandfather was a wanderer. He thought the next place was always better, so he ended up in Tacoma, Washington. But mother had a good childhood, I think. The older brother went to the Civil War and was killed in action. They never did know where he buried or anything about him. Mother used to tell me how sad Grandmother was because she didn’t know where he was. The other boy was headstrong. He moved from Rochester to Galena, Illinois and that was lead-mining country. The second brother was five years younger than the brother...got the mining fever. They used to think he was going to school and finally one day the teacher got in touch with grandfather, and he said: "Where’s Jim? He hasn’t been to school for weeks." Jim was pretending to go to school, and he went out near Galena to the mining camp and was mining, helping the men and all that. So Father [Grandfather] and Jim had a terrible row. Grandfather was a terribly stern Englishman, and he just talked so bad to Jim and all, Jim ran away from home. That was heartache for Mother. He been out to South Dakota out near Rapid City somewhere, and he lived there all his life. He never did make his fortune, but he was mining in South Dakota all the days of his life. He finally died there. Then Mother came to Galena, and then Grandfather thought that Lancaster would be better. So they moved to Lancaster, which was just across the river on the Mississippi River...I think that’s right. Mother would—

KW: That’s Lancaster, Wisconsin, right?

RR: What?

KW: Lancaster, Wisconsin?
RR: Yes. Mother was a young woman, about 18 or 20. And so Father...I can’t really tell you much about my father’s young manhood, because I never did ask him any about it. But he was a young man in Lancaster. Oh, they used to have great times in Lancaster, the young people. They had lovely dances and good times. They got together, and Father fell in love with Mother and she with him. So then they decided they’d get married. Mother had a sister in Galena, Illinois—a Mrs. Striker. They thought they’d go over there and be married, and they were married in 1883 in Mother’s sister’s home—Dr. and Mrs. Franklin Striker. Father had evidently gotten a job through some friend or something way out in Jamestown, North Dakota. So he took poor Mother as a bride to Jamestown, North Dakota. She had never been out in this wild, crazy country, and oh, they had a hard time. Father had this job in this little lumberyard. He was the bookkeeper and kind of the manager, I guess. Poor Mother was so lonesome and so scared. Of course, being a conscientious bookkeeper, Father went back every night to work at the books and so on, and Mother was so frightened. She used to follow him down there, and one night he found her sitting on the steps of the office wrapped up in an Indian blanket. He said, “What are you doing here?” and she said: “Well, I’m just too afraid to stay alone.”

KW: Now, was she afraid because it was a rough lumber town?

RR: Yes, she was afraid. She didn’t know anybody hardly, and it was frontier town then, 1884 and ’85 was pretty rough.

KW: Where is Jamestown?

RR: It’s near Bismarck and Fargo and around those places.

KW: That was a lumber town? What timber did they cut?

RR: I can’t imagine. I can’t imagine where they got the timber, but it was called the Gull River Lumber Company. I had a picture once but I destroyed it—of Father standing on the steps. Well, then Mother couldn’t stand North Dakota. The wind blew all the time, and the winters were so terrible. She decided that she’d go crazy if they stayed there. So Father had friend who he had grown up with Lancaster, who had come out here to Montana, W.H. Snead. He was a lumberman. So Father wrote to him and asked him if he could get a job somewhere with him, and he wrote back and said if they’d come to Dillon, Montana, he’d give him a job. So they moved to Dillon.

KW: How did they get there? Did they take the train?

RR: On the train. On the train. I don’t know how long...Mother used to tell killing yarns about Dillon. There was a funny old woman they rented a house from, and, of course, in those days there was a lot a prospecting and mining around Dillon, and Mother said that every once in a while she would pack up her stuff and put it on her back and say, “I’m going over to the Grasshopper.” The Grasshopper was a mining place not far from Dillon where they prospected.

Rhoda Richardson Interview, OH 049-037, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
Mother thought that was the funniest thing that she'd ever heard. Well, I don't know how long they were in Dillon. I really don't know. But, finally there were some more boys—young men—who had been in Lancaster and grew up with Father, and they had a dry goods store in Butte. Butte was wild. That must've been 1889 or so. So Father thought, well he'd like to go to Butte and see what was going on in the wildest town in the West. So they moved to Butte, and I was born in Butte in 1892. And Father got a job with these Lewis brothers that had originally come from Lancaster, Wisconsin. They had a lovely dry goods store, and Father was the bookkeeper. They had a beautiful dress department in the store that Mother used to tell me about—the elegant clothes that people had. The women used to go back to New York and bring back some of the clothes back with them—clothes made by people in Paris and all. Money was wild—diamonds and beautiful parties. They had this lovely dress department, and they had a lovely woman that ran the department, Mrs. Miles, and she was designer, a dress designer. A doubt if there is one in the world anymore...a dress designer. But she would take these beautiful fabrics that the women would bring from New York and drape them all over them and make them beautiful gowns. Oh, the parties they had in Butte were wild and beautiful. Mother used to tell me about...she got in with some of the nicer parties. But Father was only a bookkeeper, so she couldn't go too much.

KW: She couldn't afford the extra?

RR: She couldn’t afford upper crust.

KW: But she was asked to...?

RR: But she was asked to parties. She’d played cards, and they had elegant prizes. They had card parties, and they gave beautiful china and glassware and everything as prizes. I had a lot of Mother’s beautiful things that she won at the parties, beautiful plates and glassware and so on. Well then, that was the time that Father got this offer to work for Senator Clark. So then, we were sent back to Grandfather Richardson’s while Father was getting settled there at Lothrop. We had a happy year back there. I was eight-years old. This grandfather had this invalid daughter who sat in the chair. It was pitiful. I don’t think the woman had anything really the matter with her. But her mother had been an invalid and sat in a chair and was waited on for years, and as soon as the mother died this daughter moved right into the chair and sat there. Oh, Father used to just rail about how terrible it was that Lydia just quit living and sat down in that chair. They got this housekeeper...Oh, those darling Wenscal girls. Christie Wenscal was the housekeeper, and she waited on that woman hand and foot. For 32 years, she sat in that chair. It was terrible.

KW: There was nothing wrong with her, as far you know?

RR: Oh, she claimed she had terrible back trouble. I figured it was because she didn’t move around and be alive.
KW: Had she been active before her mother died?

RR: Not very. I think she was lazy to begin with. That’s an awful thing to say.

KW: Was the mother a legitimate invalid?

RR: Oh, yes. The mother did have spinal trouble of some bad kind. But, I don’t think that the daughter did at all.

KW: Had the mother been sick most of the daughter’s life?

RR: Yes, an invalid. Glad they don’t have those anymore.

KW: Not so much. You don’t hear about it as much.

RR: Well then, we made lots of friends back there. Of course, Mother lived there as a young woman, you see. So she fell right back into it, and I made some friends. Then we came to Missoula. Father sent for us. He said he had rented a house in Missoula, and we could come and we would see about going to Lothrop—if we liked it or not. So we rented a little house, and we were so lonesome. We didn’t know a soul in this town. That was about 1902. We could see the train going out to the East everyday. We could see that North Coast Line, and we’d stand at the gate and cry. I almost cry when I think of it now. We were so lonesome. We wanted our old friends, back in Lancaster. So Mother said: “Now this has got to stop. We can’t go on this way. We’ll go to church, and there we’ll meet some nice people.”

KW: How long did this last, by the way, this lonesome unhappiness?

RR: Several months. Several months of unhappiness.

KW: Several months?

RR: Oh, not really months, I guess a couple of months maybe. But Mother realized that we couldn’t go on like that. It was terrible. We didn’t know anybody. So we went to church. The little Episcopal Church was over where the central school is now.

KW: Downtown?

RR: Downtown. We had a darling English minister, Mr. Linley. He got up to make some announcements, and he said, “Now, next Thursday we’re going to have a silver tea at Mrs. C.H. McLeod’s, and everybody is invited.” Mrs. McLeod lived on Fruit Street, and they had the whole block where the Thorton Hospital is and where the new library is now. That whole block belonged to C.H. McLeod. So we dressed all up and walked down to the McLeod house. It was a long walk up to the place. Up to house, it was a long walk. Beautiful yellow rose bushes in
bloom on both sides. Just as we got to the door—I was only eight and so scared and so lonesome and everything—the cutest little girl came out of the door. She was about my age, and she took me by the hand and said, “You don’t want to go in there with all those old women. Come on out in the yard, and I’ll show you where I play.” It was Helen McLeod, Mrs. McLeod’s daughter. We went out in the yard, and right from then, we were just like sisters. She loved me, and I loved her. Mother went on in the house, and she met all the nice ladies, Helen’s mother and all her aunts. So then, we were set. We weren’t lonesome anymore. Everything started up, and we went to church regularly. They had beautiful parties in homes in those days. They just went all out for parties—beautiful table clothes set in silver, and everything. It was lots of fun. Well then, we moved to Lothrop not long after.

KW: Did you go to school in Missoula?

RR: No. Yes, I went one year here in Missoula.

KW: What school did you go to while you were here in Missoula?

RR: The Central School.

KW: So, the Central School was right near the church?

RR: Yes.

KW: Where were you living?

RR: We lived on Jefferson Street? It’s not a very good street anymore, but it was all right in those days.

KW: It was very nice then, and real close too to where you went to school.

RR: Yes. Well then, I went to the country school at Lothrop. Oh my, that was a new experience. Lothrop was this place and then there was a bridge across the river, and the ranch was about two and half miles up the river.

KW: Now, you lived on the ranch, is that right?

RR: We lived on the ranch—lovely ranch house, but we had a hired man, and we had lovely jersey cows and chickens and horses. I had a pony to ride.

KW: Did the hired man take care of the ranch itself while your father was working at this mill, which was down the road?
RR: Yes, right. Father didn’t have much to do at the ranch. Mother was more interested in the ranch as time went on, and she was a wonderful manager and kept things going.

KW: Now, was this a ranch with cattle?

RR: Well, not especially, no. It was more of a... We raised wheat and oats and everything.

KW: And so, your mother was involved in keeping the ranch going?

RR: Yes.

KW: Did she hire people...like harvesters?

RR: Yes, she hired people. You see the logs for the mill came from the Nine Mile country, which was up north, I guess north of Lothrop. They’d have great logging camps, two or three great big logging camps. I used to ride up there with Father in the wintertime. I can remember the big, old bobsled and the horses with the sleigh bells jingling. Oh, I loved it. We raised the vegetables. Had a huge vegetable garden, and we raised things for the cookhouse over at Lothrop. They had about a 100 men or more working in the mill. At one time, there were about 400 people in Lothrop. They lived up on different hills around the town... awfully nice people.

KW: So you and your mother worked the vegetable garden?

RR: No, the hired man. He’d get extra help when we needed it to take care of the garden. We had a big root house. You know what a root house is? We made lots of cabbage and lots of sauerkraut. Mother used to superintend the sauerkraut. We made ten or 12 barrels of kraut for the lumber camps every fall when the cabbage was ready, and then, we had lots of company come down to see us. All the people came down. They loved it. They’d come on the train, and then we’d meet them at the train with horse and buggy, and they’d stay two or three days and have fun. So we weren’t isolated, but we had no phone and no lights—no electric lights. We had kerosene lamps. It was my job to keep those dumb lamps clean.

KW: What would you think that your mother’s duties were regarding the ranch then? How did she see herself and her job on that place?

RR: Well, she was a very outgoing woman. I used to worry about her, because she was so much fun and she loved company and all. I used to think, “Oh, Mother is isolated down here.” We didn’t see much of the people from Lothrop. They were awfully good people and we liked them all, but we were kind of off of the beaten track. Mother was interested, and she wanted to help Father out. He was interested in his part of the making of a living. I think they worked it out pretty well.

KW: With her managing the ranch and him managing the lumber?
RR: Yes. I remember W.A. Clark came to see us one time, and he just praised Mother to the skies for the way she had been running the ranch. Said she’d made such a success of it and everything. So I know she did a good job. We lived there for 17 years, and I had lots of experiences. I don’t know how much more you want me to tell.

KW: Well, did you go school there?

RR: I went to the country school. It was a cute little country school up on the hillside, and we had a one-armed man school teacher. His name was Lathrop—wasn’t that funny? I learned more from that man than I learned all the rest of my school. He had time to give us individual attention. We’d bring our lunch, of course. I had to bring my lunch, and I had good lunches, you know—chicken and nice white bread and all that stuff. The poor little mill workers kids didn’t have very good lunches sometimes. We’d sit out in the cloakroom and eat our lunch. Well, after a while they said, “I’ll trade you your lunch. I’ll trade you your lunch,” and I thought, “Oh well, I’ll be a good sport. I’ll trade for their lunch.” So I’d give them my nice lunch, and they’d give me some cold pancakes or cold venison or something. I couldn’t eat it. So one night I said to Mother, “I don’t like this trading lunches,” and Mother said, “What do you mean, trading lunches?” I said, “Well, the kids want to trade lunches, and I give them mine and theirs aren’t very nice.” She said, “Well, this is stopping right now.” She said, “No more trading lunches.” So then, I quit doing that. I said, “Oh, I can’t. I’d rather have my own lunch.”

Mr. Lathrop would have a lot of young men—really were young men—that worked in the mill: Swedes and Finns and Norwegians. They hadn’t had any schooling at all. So they’d come to school. I imagine they were 16 or 17 years old. They’d get to acting up so bad, and Mr. Lathrop would grab them by the back of the neck and take them to the cloakroom and just tar them—just beat them. Oh, the first time he did that I said, “I’m not ever going back to that school again. Mother came to meet me that night, and I was crying and screaming. I said, “That awful man, he’s just killing those boys, and I’m not going back. I won’t stand it.” Mother said, “Well, you know, you’re going back tomorrow.” When my mother said no or something, that was it. But we had beautiful times together Mother and I. We used to read—I wouldn’t take anything for that reading. Now, kids don’t get a chance to that anymore. She would be sewing or embroidering, or something, and I would read out loud all of Dickens and those beautiful stories.

KW: That was good for your reading.

RR: It was part of my education. Oh, it was lovely.

KW: Your mother was...Let me phrase this again. Was your mother the one who spent most of her time disciplining you?

RR: Yes.
KW: She was the one who was in charge of your upbringing?

RR: Yes. I can’t remember my father ever picking me up and loving me or saying anything. He was that English --- children were seen and not heard --- and stern. But as I grew up, and he was proud me, he would stand on the street corner and tell anybody how smart I was and how much he loved me. But he never told me.

KW: He never told you?

RR: Isn’t that odd.

KW: But your mother did?

RR: But Mother did. Oh, yes, Mother was warm and loving. I think she was sorry because I didn’t have any brothers or sisters, but I didn’t miss them.

KW: Had your mother tried to have more children?

RR: Well, I don’t know.

KW: She never mentioned that to you?

RR: She never mentioned it.

KW: Did she mention being sad that there weren’t other children in the family?

RR: No, I don’t think so.

KW: So that wasn’t discussed?

RR: Maybe we were very selfish. I don’t know.

KW: You mean that others—?

RR: We seemed to be happy together.

KW: You lived Lancaster...I’m getting Lancaster and Lothrop mixed up now. You lived there in that town for 17 years?

RR: Yes.

KW: So you were a teenager in that town then too?

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RR: Yes.

KW: What was it like being teenager?

RR: I didn’t even know I was a teenager.

KW: You didn’t know.

RR: No, there weren’t any problems or anything.

KW: Were there dances, parties?

RR: Yes. There was dances and parties around Lothrop at all, but they didn’t seem to be any trouble.

KW: When did you start going to dances and parties and doing...courtship kinds of things?

RR: Well, when I was about 15 or 16. Then, I had to come to school to Missoula when I got through with the Lothrop school and got to high school age.

KW: Oh, I see.

RR: Mother said, “Well, now you’ve got to go to Missoula. You’ll have to find a place to live, because I’ve got to stay on the ranch and run things a little bit.” So she came to town with me, and we said, “Where in the world is Rhoda going to stay?”

“Well, go down to Mrs. John Rankin, she’ll take you in—Jeanette Rankin’s mother. She’ll take you in.” So, Mother went down and Mrs. Rankin was cute. She came to the door in all white. She always wore white, and she was quite a large woman. She had 14 girls in that house that winter, and she did every bit of the work. We had excellent meals, but the house was like a barn. It was an old house, and, oh, that bedroom was so cold. I can feel it now, how cold that bedroom was.

KW: She took in those girls and did all the work herself? She didn’t have household help.

RR: Well, one girl was there that helped her some, but very little, and she took care of the furnace. It was way down in the cellar somewhere. I never did see the furnace. I don’t know how that woman did it, and always happy.

KW: You paid as a regular boarder?

RR: Yes. I don’t remember how much we paid or anything about that.
KW: So you were living in Missoula and going to high school then?

RR: Yes.

KW: When did you start high school, do you remember? How old were you?

RR: Oh, gosh, I suppose maybe 16. That was kind of old – Wasn’t it?

KW: Well, it seems to vary a lot depending on when you were able to start school. A lot of people that I’ve talked to have had a real varied time period for when they started high school. When did you graduate from high school?

RR: Well, that was about maybe about four years later. I graduated from high school here in town.

KW: You went to Hellgate?

RR: Yes.

KW: Did you have chums, then, in the social life in Missoula?

RR: Oh, yes. I had lots of friends. But, you see, I missed all the university part because then I stayed down in Lothrop with Mother. That was the end of my school, because Mother got really sick with a bad heart and all. So, I thought I had just better quit school.

KW: You didn’t go to the university?

RR: No, and Father didn’t approve of the university, anyway. I don’t why. But he said, “Now, you’re not going to.”

KW: Did he think that an education for a young woman was unimportant?

RR: I guess—not too important, no.

KW: Did he have plans that you would marry?

RR: I wonder. He never said.

KW: Were you encouraged to marry?

RR: No.
KW: Was there ever any idea that maybe you wouldn’t marry? I mean, how was that handled in your family? I know in my own life, it was always assumed that I would marry and have children.

RR: Well, they probably thought I’d marry someday, but not at that time. But then, you see, Mother and Father passed away. Well, they’ve been gone 50 years—think of that. So there wasn’t much said about marriage, I guess.

KW: Your mother never mentioned to you that by living with her on the ranch when you were a young adult woman that you might missing a courtship?

RR: No, she didn’t. That’s funny isn’t it?

KW: It is interesting because you were so close to her.

RR: Yes, it is a wonder that she didn’t try to fix up something for me.

KW: Or at least discuss with you whether or not you wanted to marry, or if you thought you were missing out on courtship opportunities. Did you have beaus in Lothrop?

RR: I had some beaus down there. I had some forest rangers beaus. There was a forest station, and we used to go horseback riding, and that was kind of fun. But, it didn’t amount to anything much.

KW: There was never an offer of marriage from one of the forest rangers?

RR: No.

KW: Would your father have approved?

RR: I don’t suppose so. I don’t know what Father would have thought about my getting married. I suppose nobody would’ve suited him. Most men are like that about their daughters—never good enough, you know.

KW: Did your mother ever prepare you for marriage by explaining sexuality to you?

RR: Oh, yes. She did explain things, and I’m awfully glad because...Now, Helen’s mother never told her a thing.

KW: Helen McLeod’s mother?

RR: Never told her a single thing.
KW: Did you have to tell her then?

RR: No, she found it out with somebody.

KW: When did your mother tell you about the facts of life?

RR: When I was about twelve-years old she started in telling me about it?

KW: Before you started menstruation then? So she prepared you for menstruation?

RR: I was all prepared, so it was no shocker or anything.

KW: What did you use for menstruation in those days?

RR: Oh, terrible old cloths that had to be washed out, and mercy, that was barbarous.

KW: Did you do it, or did your mother do it?

RR: Oh, Mother and I together would do it.

KW: And you washed them—?

RR: Washed them and boiled them—

KW: —and boiled them.

RR: —and had them ready again. Oh, dear, dear.

KW: Did you keep them in a separate...in their own place in a drawer?

RR: Yes.

KW: Did you have to use a belt?

RR: A belt. It was awkward.

KW: With pins or hooks?

RR: Yeah pins.

KW: When Kotex and other modern conveniences came along were you grateful for that?

RR: Yes, I should say so.
KW: So you think it’s much better?

RR: That was terribly unsanitary the way we did, I think.

KW: You think it was unsanitary?

RR: Well, don’t you think it was.

KW: I don’t know, if they were boiled I suppose it...It might have been rather uncomfortable wearing that.

RR: Messy on a hot summer day. Oh, lord.

KW: How did you take care of yourself then? Did you have to be really careful during your menstrual period?

RR: Oh, sure. Had to be careful about your bathing and everything.

KW: Did your mother tell you anything that you should avoid during your menstrual period? There’s some superstitions that used to be real common. One woman told me that her mother told her never to get her feet wet.

RR: Well, I don’t remember that.

KW: She never told you anything like that.

RR: No, I don’t think so.

KW: Or, don’t pet a dog. I don’t know what they are. There’s some real goofy ones.

RR: No, I think Mother was a little more sensible than that.

KW: It sounds as though she was, preparing you and all, which sometimes didn’t happen.

RR: Yeah, she was a smart woman.

KW: What kind of an education had she had herself? Had she gone to high school?

RR: Yes, I think she had went to high school, and probably to a finishing school of some kind, back in the East there somewhere. You know they had what they called finishing schools.

KW: So she was quite well polished and comfortable in social—
RR: Yes, I would say she had a very good education.

KW: —and she was comfortable in social circles?

RR: Oh, very. Mother was wonderful. She could to Lothrop and mingle with those mill people and just give them a grand time and be one of them, and she could come to town and go to the president of the university and be perfectly at home and get along beautifully. Everybody loved her.

[End of Side A]
KW: You said that your mother was sick with heart disease did this come on while you were in Missoula in high school, or had you known about it for a long time?

RR: Well, she had always...It seems to me, she always had a bad heart. She didn’t let it stop her, especially, but it grew worse as she got older. By the time we were living in Lothrop she used to have—I think it’s called angina pectoris, or however you pronounce it—terrible spells. I was down there alone with her, no phone or anything. You know, that was pretty hard sometimes.

KW: Did it really worry you?

RR: Yes, it worried me terribly. I used to think I’d come home from somewhere and find her dead on the floor or something. It was a worry.

KW: Did you think she was working too hard and putting too much responsibility on you for that?

RR: No, I think she did worry and work too hard down there. She had lots of hard times, and they had lots of crisis. She had to make big decisions and all, you know. Father would be off in Butte at the lumberyard or up here or somewhere, and we couldn’t always get in touch with him.

KW: So there was a lot of responsibility on her all the time?

RR: And on me too, you know. I had to look after her.

KW: Did you ever start making responsibilities...Did you start taking responsibility for the ranch and helping your mother make decisions about business affairs then, when you started taking care of her?

RR: Yes, we did. Something would come up, and the hired man would walk away and leave us in the middle of the summer or something. I would say to Mother, “Mother, what in the world will we do? We’ll never get out of this trouble.” She always said: “Now, remember nothing lasts. We’ll get out of this.” Wasn’t that a wonderful philosophy?

I remember once...Well, this is kind of a long-winded story, but the hired man got cross at Father. Father was too picky with people. He was a perfectionist, I guess, you’d call him nowadays. He’d come home for the weekend or something, and he’d look all around and say, “Well, I see you didn’t cut that clover patch that I told you last week.” He never praised him for anything, and we had a marvelous hired man. We had him for years, and we all admired him because he could come in the house and fry the chicken and help set the table, and he could go out and do all the farm work. Father didn’t appreciate him. His name was Henry Fox. So one
day, he came home and started picking at Henry. Monday came, and he said, “Well, I’m quitting. I’m going away. I can’t stand this any longer.” He packed up and went and left us in the middle of everything. It was horrible. Well, we didn’t know what to do. So we sent to Lothrop and got some miserable help, lumber workers wouldn’t know about the farm, you know. Henry had come from the farming country in Iowa or Illinois or somewhere there.

Well, Mother said, “Well, Henry’s gone, and I don’t know what we’re going to do.” But she said, “He has a pal that he came out here from Illinois with, Jim Kelly, and he’s working up at the Nine Mile on the farm.” She said: “If anybody knows where Henry is, it will be Jim.” So she had this man from Lothrop, whoever he was, hitch up the team, and Mother went way up the Nine Mile and up to this farm where Jim was working. She went out in the field. You know, that was kind of hard for a woman to do all that. Father should have been doing that. He was off somewhere else making a living, I guess. So she went over and found Jim. They were putting up the hay, and she said, “Jim, Henry’s left us, and we’re just desperate. Now, do you know where he is?”

“Yes,” he said, “I know where he is, but he didn’t want anybody to know it.”

Well, Mother said, “We’ve got to have him come back if he will.”

So Jim said, “Well, I’ll write to Henry and tell him that you’re just desperate.” So he did, and Henry came back. So that was one bad time we had.

Then we had a gasoline pump that always getting out of order. It was connected to the Missoula River. We lived on the bank of the river. This darn pump—gasoline pumps in those days weren’t worth anything—it was always getting out of order when we should have been pumping water on the garden. Then we’d have to send from Missoula, and drive to Lothrop—one phone in Lothrop—and call up the M.M. [Missoula Mercantile?] and say, “Send somebody out to get the pump going.” Well, that was a hard time. So, it wasn’t all easy.

KW: The two of you had a lot.

RR: We had a lot to put up with.

KW: When did your mother die then?

RR: Then we came to Missoula, you see they moved the mill, and we came to Missoula.

KW: Did you live in Missoula when they moved the mill to Milltown?

RR: Well, not right at first. Senator Clark said we could stay there as long as we wanted to, because he knew Mother loved it. Even though the mill was gone, he said, “If you want to continue living at Lothrop, well that’s fine. I know you love it and all.” So we stayed there.

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several years, even after the mill was closed. Then we came to Missoula and rented an apartment. Mother got worse and her heart got worse, and Father got so helpless he had to have a boy take care of him. He still went to the mill everyday and gave orders. He was long on giving orders. But, he was a good businessman. Business was his life. I remember Mother saying once when he was bookkeeping in Butte, she said, “We’re going to a party tonight.” “Oh,” he says, “I can’t it’s the first of the month. I have to make the balance.” She said, “I wish just once in my life I’d come ahead of the first of month.”

KW: Did they get along pretty well though, generally?

RR: Yes, oh yes. They understood each other.

KW: It sounds like they sort of left each other alone in a way, each their own sphere. That your father did his work and your mother did her work.

RR: Father was as proud of her. I remember the First World War, Senator Clark owned the flour mill here in Missoula, and it was the time they were just trying out hard wheat—hard Montana wheat. People didn’t know much about it. So they ground some up and Senator asked Mother if she’d make some bread out of this new wheat they were using. It turned out just beautifully. Well, they were all so proud of her, they just didn’t know what to do—very cooperative.

KW: How long did you live in Missoula before your mother passed away?

RR: Oh, I have lived here ever since. She died in ’24, and I’ve been here ever since.

KW: You moved to Missoula in what year?

RR: We moved here in about 1920.

KW: And your mother lived...?

RR: Mother lived until ’25, and she got very sick. So Father said, “I want to take her over to Spokane to a specialist.” There was a Dr. Eplin there that was supposed to be a heart surgeon, an excellent specialist. So we went over to Spokane. I went with him. I went to the Davenport Hotel, and I called the doctor that night. Mother was so sick. She had a terrible cold, and he said, “Oh, my goodness we got to get this woman to the hospital.” So they took her up to the Deaconess Hospital, and she was there three months, lost her senses and just went all to pieces but lived. That old heart kept beating for three months. Then Father kept coming, and I stayed all that time with her. That was wonderful of Father to let me do that, and it was awful expense, I expect, but he never complained or anything. Now he said, “If your mother isn’t going to get well, I want her to be back in Missoula.” So we arranged everything and brought Mother back to Missoula. Some friends in Spokane helped us get ready, and she only lived five days, but she died in Missoula. I think that’s what Father wanted.
KW: In her own home?

RR: Yes.

KW: Now, your father was ill at this time too, and so you were sort of going back and forth between both of your parents?

RR: Yes.

KW: What was wrong with your father?

RR: Well, he had nervous back trouble. It was sort of like...I think they used to call it locomotor ataxia. It was nervous. I think he was a very nervous man and worrier and in the business all these years, and he couldn’t walk. He couldn’t dress himself very well. So we got a young man to take care of him, and he was only in the hospital two weeks.

KW: And then he passed away?

RR: Then he passed away.

KW: In a hospital in Missoula?

RR: Yes.

KW: That was in about 1927?

RR: 1927.

KW: What did you do then at that point? You were left alone?

RR: Well, then I just kept on in the apartment. It was an apartment, and I stayed there, living off all these nice dividends I was getting. Until the Depression came, and everything was called in.

KW: So that was only two years, really that you were living comfortably?

RR: Yes.

KW: What did you do with your time during that period? Do you remember?

RR: Oh, gee. I don’t remember. I suppose I fooled around with my friends and reading a lot and keeping the apartment. Nothing special.
KW: What happened then after the Crash and your dividends were called in? What did you do?

RR: Well now, then I said, “I’d have to go to work.” I asked some friends. Somebody said, “Why don’t you go to the Northern Pacific and see. They’re always wanting help.” I’ve never been near a railroad, except to get on a train. So I went out and talked to the superintendent, and he said, “Well, if you want to try it, you can get a job as a night...night work for nights.” I said, “Oh, I can’t do that.”

Well, he said, “Try it. You’ve got to do something.” So I went up and went to...I used to go to work at 11:00 at night and work straight through until 7:00 in the morning. Well, it was awful. I kept that up for five or six years.

KW: What were you doing?

RR: Well, I was a stenographer, taking messages at night and answering the switchboard and stuff like that.

KW: Did you get paid a decent wage?

RR: Well, I thought it was pretty good. I forget what it was, but it was nothing like they’re getting nowadays.

KW: But you were able to keep the same apartment?

RR: Yes. I kept going, and I enjoyed it.

KW: Were you thought of as an old maid?

RR: Well, I suppose so.

KW: How did people react to the fact that...You were in your mid-thirties by this time—

RR: Yes.

KW: —and you were unmarried?

RR: Nobody ever said you’re an old maid or anything, you know. They never threw it up at me.

KW: Were your girlfriends...Did they do things to try to encourage you to meet men and get married?

RR: No, no they didn’t. Isn’t that funny?
KW: People pretty much left you alone then about it?

RR: I guess they did.

KW: You weren’t thought of as an odd duck?

RR: Well maybe, but nobody ever said so.

KW: You kept up your social life at the Episcopal Church, is that right?

RR: Yes, I loved the Episcopal Church. I worked in the church and later, a longtime later, I got on the Salvation Army Board, and that was nice. I was interested in that.

KW: You worked as the night stenographer and switchboard operator for how long? Two years?

RR: Five or six years I did that. I don’t know how I ever did that. Then they had different bids open for different jobs, you know for day jobs and so on. So then, you bid in on that, and I bid in on a day job about the same kind of work. But I got off that awful night business.

KW: Then you kept that day job for how long? Since 1952, until 1952?


KW: How old were you when you retired?

RR: How old?

KW: Yes.

RR: Well, I think I was 65. Let me see...I’m 84 now. I can’t—

KW: So you worked a full retirement?

RR: I think that I worked a little past retirement age, but I’ve been retired for 18 years.

KW: All of that time that you were working for Northern Pacific you stayed in the same apartment?

RR: Yes. Oh, not all the time. No, later on I bought a little house.

KW: Oh that’s right. You were telling me that you had bought your own house.
RR: Yeah, I bought a cute little house about 19...when was it? ’39 or ’40, along in there. I bought this little house, awful cute, on Florence Street. Then, I lived there until I got sick with this hip. So then I sold everything off and came into this one room, and I like it. I’m lazy by nature I think.

KW: It’s a nice apartment.

RR: Indolent—kind of let the world slide along.

KW: When you were growing up the Montana Women’s Suffrage campaign was on. Do you remember people working for suffrage? Did your mother ever participate in that?

RR: I remember Jeanette Rankin, you know, was the great suffragette, and she came down to Lothrop and asked if she could bring a friend from New York. Oh, that woman. I’m sure she was a factory worker on the East Side or wherever they had the factories. She was a terrible Irish woman, and we had them for lunch. Jeanette went down to Alberton and talked...I don’t know what. We weren’t interested in suffrage.

KW: You weren’t?

RR: We were getting along all right.

KW: Your mother didn’t have the least bit interest in it?

RR: Mother did care, but we had all kinds of fun with that woman from New York. She was so terrible. No, we didn’t care.

KW: Were you familiar with the kind of political things that were going on with women at that time. For instance, with the whole controversy over birth control that was going on in the early ’20s?

RR: No, I’m afraid to say we didn’t take any interest in it. That’s terrible.

KW: Do you remember anything about it?

RR: I remember it was going on, and everybody talking about birth control and women’s suffrage, and I suppose we didn’t approve of women voting—old old English stock, you know—women weren’t doing that.

KW: Did your mother start voting when she could?

RR: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

KW: So she did take it up?
RR: Oh, yes.

KW: I think that’s interesting, because I think the pattern...once it was made available, people didn’t reject it.

RR: They didn’t vote all out like they do now.

KW: How old were you when...You must have been of voting age too?
RR: I was trying to think the other day who I voted for first, but it was at Lothrop, I remember. Now, when would that be...You had to be 21 didn’t you?

KW: Yes, you had to be 21. You were, I take it, raised as a lady?

RR: Oh, yes.

KW: Did your mother try to give you the same kind of information that she got at finishing school...give you the same kind of social appointment?

RR: Yes, I think so. A little broader scope, maybe, but the same being a lady. You wore gloves always, and you wrote little notes to everybody that had done anything for you. You sat right down and wrote a thank you note. They don’t do that anymore. When you were invited out, you thanked the hostess and then you were indebted. If you could, you had them back to something. That kind of stuff?

KW: How did you dress when you were a young woman? Now you lived on a ranch?

RR: We didn’t wear pants.

KW: Did you ever wear pants?

RR: No.

KW: You never wore overalls or anything?

RR: No, never did.

KW: Did you ever do very much of the farm work that got in the way of...?

RR: No, no. We didn’t have to do that. We had Henry.

KW: So, what was the mode of dress that you wore just on the ranch?
RR: Just ordinary house dresses around the house, you know. Then my pretty, silk dresses when we went out somewhere or suits. Women wore suits in those days, and oh, they looked so nice—tailored suits. I wish they’d go back to them. Then, of course, when we got to town...and we had hobble skirts—terrible hobble skirts—long and fastened. You couldn’t take a step hardly, but you had to wear a hobble skirt.

KW: Right at the calf, right? Or right next to it? They were getting a little bit shorter, and they were about calf length or mid-calf?

RR: Yes. Wonder we didn’t kill each other falling down, and we couldn’t take a decent step. Then when the clothes began to get shorter...Oh that was shocking.

KW: How did you react to that?

RR: Well, I thought it was kind of odd, but I got used to it.

KW: Did you shorten your skirts right along with everybody else?

RR: Oh sure.

KW: Did you feel uncomfortable with your legs showing?

RR: Yeah, I didn’t like it at first.

KW: How about your mother?

RR: My what?

KW: Your mother. How did she...?

RR: Oh, Mother kept up with the styles. She always looked fine—good-looking woman and kept herself up well.

KW: Did you ever start wearing pants?

RR: No.

KW: You never wore pants?

RR: Never had a pantsuit in my life.

KW: How about your corset? How long did that last in your life?
RR: What?

KW: Wearing a corset. How long did that last?

RR: Oh, that was quite a while. I wore a stiff corset. Oh murder, I’m glad we got rid of those.

KW: When did you get rid of that, you think?

RR: Oh, it must have been 1918 or along in there.

KW: Oh, that was quite...I was thinking that you were going to say in the late ‘20s.

RR: No, I don’t just remember about that.

KW: Did your mother ever throw her corset out?

RR: No, I don’t. She always wore a corset, I think.

KW: But you were glad to see it go?

RR: Oh glad, yes. Those terrible corsets.

KW: You mentioned horseback riding. What sports were acceptable for you to partake in?

RR: What sports?

KW: Yes. Were girls allowed to participate in sports? Or were there only certain sports that women participated in?

RR: I guess in town here they had basketball and bowling for girls. Young girls like to bowl, but that was about it and basketball. They had basketball, girls’ basketball games.

KW: Did you play?

RR: I never did.

KW: You never did.

RR: Because I was down in Lothrop.

KW: When you were here for high school did you play any kind of sport games?

RR: No. I don’t remember what we did.
KW: At Lothrop you horseback rode, is that right?

RR: I loved horseback riding, and I had a cute pony.

KW: Did you ride a lot?

RR: Yes, quite a lot. I liked to ride.

KW: Did you ride sidesaddle?

RR: (laughs) Don’t ask me that.

KW: Did you ride straddle?

RR: Oh, yes.

KW: And what did you wear?

RR: Oh, I had beautiful designer skirt. Mother had it made for me, beautiful, and a cute little jacket.

KW: And leather boots?

RR: And leather boots and gouaches with fringe. Oh my, all dressed up and no place to go.

KW: There must have been picnics and fishing expeditions and all that sort of thing?

RR: Yes, quite a bit of fishing.

KW: Did you fish?

RR: I used to try to fish, but I never had any luck, so I quit that. We had nice near stream near Lothrop, and it had lots of nice fish. I loved to fish, but I wasn’t so hot as a fisherman.

KW: What kind of parties and dances were there? We talked about that a little bit earlier.

RR: Oh, dancing parties.

KW: Were they fancy or were they sort of country type dances with fiddle music and...?

RR: No, they were kind of fancy and nice music, very nice music, and pretty dances.
KW: At Lothrop this was?

RR: Yes.

KW: Did the musicians come from Missoula?

RR: Yes. They used to come down on the train. We had a funny little train that ran from Missoula to Wallace, Idaho. They called it the snake branch, because it had so many twists and turns and everything.

KW: That’s an incredible trip too.

RR: Yes.

KW: What happened to Lothrop?

RR: Well, just the mill moved away, and the people had to go with it. So it just dwindled away to nothing.

KW: Was there a general store?

RR: There was a general store and office there. It was together, but then it was divided. There was a wall between them, but it was the same building. Then there was a big cookhouse where they cooked for all the men that worked in mill that weren’t married. Most of the men were single men, and boy, they had some histories in back of them. I remember one. There was one—I’ve forgotten his name—and he’d come from New York State. He had been washed up in an ocean wreck, and he was the only little baby that was saved. He used to tell me this story. He just was a wanderer on the earth, but he was smart. He used to tell about somebody had adopted him, and he had good home with them and everything. Then when he was about 20 they told him he was adopted, and he got so furiously mad he ran away. I said, “Oh my, that was awful thing for you to do, after they’d raised you for 20 years, then to run away.” Well, he said, “I couldn’t stand the idea.” He ended up as a lumberjack, and he used to get terribly drunk, but then he’d be so sorry. I’ll tell you, those old lumberjacks were something all among themselves. They were wonderful people and big hearted—give you anything they had, you know.

KW: Was there ever a doctor at Lothrop?

RR: A doctor, no. We had to send for the doctor sometimes for Mother, and they’d come from Missoula in a horse and buggy. She could’ve died 40 times.

KW: They didn’t come on the train?
RR: No, I remember once we drove there. It must’ve taken him a long, long time. It was 30 miles. Oh, that was kind of primitive living.

KW: How long did it take you to get in and out of Missoula?

RR: On the train?

KW: On the train.

RR: Oh, a couple of hours.

KW: That’s not a bad trip then. Did you used to come into town fairly often?

RR: Quite often.

KW: Once a week?

RR: Oh, no. Once a month, probably, was enough.

KW: For a whole day or did you stay overnight and make an expedition of it?

RR: Oh, we’d stay two or three days. Then, all my friends would fight because I didn’t stay with them—you know how that is—when you couldn’t stay with everybody. Oh dear, I think I’ve had a pretty good life.

KW: You did have lots of girlfriends, in spite of the fact that you lived so far out of town?

RR: Yes. I had fun.

KW: What did girls, young girls, do together in those days to entertain yourselves?

RR: Well, I don’t know what we did. We played cards. There was a club here in town. I didn’t belong, but I used to be asked a lot, because I was down at Lothrop. It was called the Brownies—all the nice girls in town. They had two tables of bridge, and we played bridge. We always went to the movies. That was great, going to movies. I don’t know what else.

KW: Was that at the Wilma Theater? Was that where you went to the movies?

RR: Well, it wasn’t built then. It was the theater where Wiseburg’s jewelry store is, and there was one down in the street called the Bijou. Oh, they were terrible, I guess, but...There was one where the Higgins Avenue bridge is. I remember I used come in...In the First World War, we were all doing war work, and kids would get together—Dorothy Sterling and Helen McLeod and
my pals—and we’d go to the movies. They’d sit in the dark and knit socks for the soldiers. It made me so mad. It still makes me mad that I couldn’t do that.

KW: You couldn’t knit?

RR: Well, not in the dark like that, and never look what you were doing. Gee, that used to make me mad. Now that’s a silly thing to remember.

KW: Did you used to come into town and do war work a lot?

RR: Well, we had a place in Alberton that did war work. You see Lothrop was gone practically then, and they had a station in Alberton. Mother made beautiful shirts for the soldiers. I knit...Oh, I guess the knitting was kind of funny, but anyway, we were doing war work.

KW: How much time did you spend doing that?

RR: Oh, we’d go down twice a week to Alberton to this room and knit and work and roll bandages.

KW: Spend most of the day?

RR: Yes.

KW: So just about two whole days a week.

RR: I remember the war was getting to a close, and they had what they called Liberty Bonds sales. People bought Liberty Bonds. Mr. McLeod asked Mother if she would go around the country down there to the different farms and see if she could raise enough money, some money for the Liberty Bonds—if people would buy them. So we hitched up the old horse, and we went out and we went to several farms, and we had very good luck. People were interested. Then, on the way home, we met somebody on horseback from Alberton, and he said, “Well, the war is over. The armistice has been declared.” Oh, we were so happy. That was in 1919. Oh, that was great. Mother had a 100% record for the bond drive she’d made, so that was good. But we kind of made our own life. We didn’t know any better.

KW: How about the flu epidemic did it hit pretty hard?

RR: Oh, that was bad. We were at Lothrop, and people died like flies.

KW: Were you pretty scared?

RR: Yes, we were scared. No phone and Mother with this bad heart. SHe got sick one Sunday, and oh, she was just awfully sick. I thought: “Oh now, this is going to be it.” She knew she was
awfully sick. She couldn’t breathe, and her lungs were all congested from pneumonia, probably. She said: “Now, go out in the kitchen and get that old cookbook, and in the back there’s a recipe for making poultices for people with terrible chest colds. It was sliced up onions in the frying pan and mixed with corn meal and cooked awhile and made into a bag, and you put it on your chest. So I went out and did that and put them on her for several hours, changing them off and on. And, by gosh, it broke up the cold. Now that was pretty smart.

KW: Had you ever done that kind of medicinal thing before? Used old time remedies on each other?

RR: No.

KW: That was sort of uncommon for you to use an old-fashioned remedy like that?

RR: We had to do old-fashioned things and things she knew about and all.

KW: Had she nursed you that way before, by old-fashioned remedies?

RR: I suppose so. Some of them are pretty good.

KW: Do you ever use any of them now?

RR: Oh, no.

KW: But you do eat yogurt and wheat germ?

RR: That’s easier than making an onion poultices.

KW: More general too. Well, Rhoda, this has been a very nice hour.

RR: Well, I hope I’ve told you a few things you wanted to know.

KW: We’re about to the end of the tape. You’ve lived a long time. Do you have any advice for young women who might be listening to this or reading this tape in 50 or 60 years from now?

RR: Oh dear, I don’t know what the world will be then. No, I think they’ll have to go on their own.

KW: What about the changes that you’ve seen in women’s lives?

RR: Well, it’s remarkable. My goodness, women did nothing when I was born but stay home and slave and wash and iron and cook, and some of them belonged to a literary club. But
goodness, they were dull compared to what people are doing now. Now just think of the people flying through the air at my age and all that stuff.

[End of Interview]