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Interviewee: Evelyn Swant

Interviewer: Gladys Peterson

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Project: Women in the Workplace Oral History Project

Gladys Peterson: —get started on this. [unintelligible sentence] This is an interview with Helen Swant. I'm sorry, Evelyn Swant. I was thinking of Helen Bolle. Today our topic is women in the labor force in the Missoula area, and the date is February 11, 1986. Evelyn, first excuse me for calling you Helen. Too many things on my mind this morning. I know that you have been a lifelong resident of Missoula and, therefore, have been in a position to observe women in the labor force for some time, and you were part of it. Maybe we can go back into your memory and talk first of all about the '20s. You were in college in the late '20s, is that correct?

Evelyn Swant: Yes, I finished out the University [of Montana] in '31 and started in '26. I was five years in college.

GP: Now, going back to the '20s, I already asked you this about the flappers in Missoula, and we decided that there weren't many or any flappers in Missoula. What I would like to ask you is when you were at the University, did you find that the girls there were intending to work when they got out of college?

ES: Yes, I think they were very serious about their work that they were getting into. As far as I was concerned, I had started to work at the public library as a student. Then as I finished school, I did some part-time work before I was hired on a full time basis. I had to put in 300 hours of apprentice time before I could do loan desk work or be involved with the public while I still was secretary to the librarian. Then after the 300 hours were completed, I was given an offer of full-time work at 85 dollars a month.

GP: Oh my. That was in 1931?

ES: '31, yes.

GP: That you took a full-time job? Was the librarian at the time a man?

ES: No, it was Elizabeth B. Powell (?). She was the librarian for the city library, and Ruth Verden (?) was the county librarian. She had her facilities in the basement of the public library. Shortly after I started to work, Ms. Verden retired and left Missoula. That was in...let's see...about '34. I'm not sure.

GP: Well that's all right. It doesn't matter.

ES: Yes, Ms. Powell retired and resigned, and then [unintelligible] was appointed librarian.

GP: Was the entire staff female?

ES: Yes, yes. I don't think they ever had a public librarian, a man, this last...let's see...until about 1970. [unintelligible sentence]

GP: I don't think he stayed very long, did he?

ES: I think he was there about ten years.

GP: Oh, yes. I know who you're referring to now. Sure.

ES: He was the first one.

GP: He was the first man?

ES: Yes.

GP: That's kind of a reverse situation, isn't it?

ES: Yes. The men just didn't seem to go into library work. It was more of a woman's field. The University librarian was a woman, Gertrude Buckhous. The teaching staff were women.

GP: Now, you mentioned your beginning salary of 85 a month. Do you suppose that men weren't interested in library work because the salaries were not very good?

ES: I think that was definitely one reason for it. With a family to support, most men just couldn't manage on that. The women that were mostly girls that could live at home—the young ones particularly—didn't need that government support.

GP: Going back, then, to your college days, I suppose that most of your friends were in the library school, but I was wondering if you remember that those who entered the job market stayed in the job market after they married?

ES: I don't think many of them did. I think they just didn't continue in their work, so far as the touch that I had with most of them. They may have left here and taken library work jobs, but I don't think they [unintelligible].

GP: This, then, would get us into the '30s. Do you think that that was kind of the general feeling about women, even college graduates at the time, that they worked until they got married, for the most part?

ES: Well, I think that would be my impression of it, yes.

GP: Then as we talk now about the '30s and the Depression, did you pick up at that time, or do you recall that there was a feeling against women working in Missoula at that time?

ES: No, I don't recall anyone feeling against that except that in my field, particularly, well you might call a civil servant or—

GP: Public service.

ES: —public service, yes, that there were no funds to really encourage anyone—anyone that didn't like their work and had to support themselves to apply. They just stayed with it if they had no alternatives. The women, I think they didn't protest the wages so far as I know. We just took what was offered to us.

GP: In the library do you know or remember, whether there was any kind of a policy during the Depression of hiring married women?

ES: No, I don't know that there was any policy. I think they were hired.

GP: They were hired?

ES: Yes.

GP: There was no feeling that you're taking the job away from somebody who needs it worse?

ES: I don't recall, although in my field I don't think there were many married women. They were mostly young girls.

GP: Supporting themselves.

ES: Supporting themselves, yes.

GP: Well then, I suppose you were aware that there were women in other jobs, too, let's say in downtown Missoula or around Missoula in...Well, I don't know if trades is the right word. Services: perhaps laundry workers, waitresses, cooks, people like that. Were you aware that women were in those jobs during the '30s?

ES: Oh yes. Yes, they were. They were involved in secretarial work, and of course, the Forest Service was a good field for taking on young people. They offered their examinations, and I know several high school graduates that went into Forest Service.

GP: Into secretarial work?

ES: Secretarial work, yes.

GP: Do you remember that there were women looking for jobs who couldn't find them?

ES: Well, I think there probably was because we had to be WPA [Works Progress Administration] employees at the library during that time. Women would mend books and come in on that sort of an arrangement.

GP: I'm so glad you mentioned that because I've been trying to find more information about the WPA in Missoula at that time. Do you know what their training was that they were not getting jobs in?

ES: No. I couldn't say. They were probably not skilled in any particular field.

GP: I see. They just needed work.

ES: Needed the w.

GP: Were they young girls for the most part—

ES: Yes.

GP: —or married women?

ES: I recall one woman that lived at Milltown. She would come in, and of course, I don't think we had many. Most of our WPA work was in the painting and cleaning up of the library. The painters came in and then redecorated. But there were a few women that worked behind the scenes you might say.

GP: Then—

I'm afraid this is going to run out [referring to the tape].

As the war came on, Evelyn, did you notice any difference in the trend of women's employment in Missoula?

ES: No, I can't say that I was involved enough to know.

GP: Did you notice that there was a demand for women employees at that time?

ES: No.

GP: Were they taking over any jobs that normally would have been given to men?

ES: No, I don't think so. Women in Missoula left to go to the coast [West Coast] and work in the ship yards and along coastal areas where they needed the help.

GP: I'm glad to find that out, too. I was wondering if Missoula women did that. Now, did they go alone or did they go with their husbands? Do you have any idea about that?

ES: Well, I think they went mostly on their own.

GP: They did?

ES: I think so.

GP: Well, that's interesting.

ES: [unintelligible] factories, I guess. Boeing and also on ships, yes.

GP: Well, I'm glad to learn that. I was wondering if they did that. I know, of course, that a lot of women were employed in industries like that in the cities, but I didn't know how it affected Missoula women.

ES: I think that I know of one or two instances, but I don't know how generally, how many really did go [unintelligible] at all.

GP: Well, then as we move into the post-World War Two times, do you remember anything about women leaving jobs because men were coming back and needing jobs?

ES: No, no, I don't...It could have been, maybe some women employees that worked on the railroad during that time, may have been laid off and the men given their former jobs. I think that was typical also of the White Pine Sash and Door Company [White Pine and Sash Company] known at that time employed women. Some stayed on, and then some of them didn't.

GP: Now, they were working in the plant?

ES: In the plants.

GP: At White Pine?

ES: At White Pine, yes.

GP: Do you know whether they were working out in Bonner in the plant at that time, too?

ES: No, I couldn't say that I knew very many in the plant itself.

GP: Well, you really are giving me some valuable information because I didn't know that women worked at White Pine in the plant. I would have expected them to be in the office but not the plant, so I'm glad to find that out.

ES: They ran the machinery and [unintelligible] sash and doors was their business. I know women that worked there on the engines—cleaning the engines and cleaning the cars [unintelligible].

GP: For the BN.

ES: Cars for the Northern Pacific.

GP: Northern Pacific at the time. You didn't know of any who were engineers?

ES: No, I don't think they would have got up to that. No, it was mostly...Probably, they didn't stay with it long enough to train [unintelligible].

GP: Sure. I suspect that maybe the unions wouldn't have welcomed them. I don't know that.

ES: I don't know that any of them belonged to the union, anyway. [unintelligible sentence]

GP: Do you remember, then speaking of the '50s again, it was a time from what I've read when a number of things were happening. Some women were leaving the workforce to have families, and there was a feeling—and still is of course—that women with children should be in the home. At the same time, from what I've been able to figure out, there were women who had been working and they liked it. They liked the money, and they wanted to stay in the workforce. Do you remember that there seemed to be more Missoula women working in the '50s and from then on? Did the picture seem to be changing?

ES: Oh, I suppose in Missoula I do. There were more women required in the different jobs to take over and stay with them. But as far as my knowledge, I couldn't say that more were employed or stayed home.

GP: You just didn't notice any trend there?

ES: No.

GP: At all.

ES: No, I don't think I could say that I did.

GP: I suppose it's not even a question worth asking, but I'm going to ask it anyhow. Surely, you must believe that librarians working today are getting a far better job package than you did—benefits and so forth, wages.

ES: Yes, that has been a...The public library work...It's always, of course, dependent on the budget and on the board and on the city council and the country commissioners to provide the funds. Even though the board wanted to raise wages, they were handicapped by not enough funds. So I would say it was almost up until the '70s that really was no great recognition of the head people in the library work—the professional.

GP: Well. I appreciate all of this information. Can you think of any other anecdotes or information that you'd like to add?

ES: No, I don't know that I can think of anything.

GP: Perhaps I could ask you, then, a little bit about Margaret's employment with the phone company. The years, for instance, when she began working with the phone company.

ES: She finished high school in '27 and went into the telephone work then. She was just hired on a temporary basis. Then they had a layoff or they had a switch over of type of equipment that they were putting out, and then she was called back to work. Stayed with it then, until she retired. She was in that [unintelligible] all the different phases and the changes. You know, the dial system and all of that phase. Her last employment was as a supervisor for the operators [unintelligible].

GP: I see. I imagine it was almost totally women employees, wasn't it?

ES: Definitely, yes. All the operators were women. The only men were the ones that were in the plant that did the repairs [unintelligible].

GP: As I remember, looking back in a different community, it wasn't even that easy to get a job with the phone company, was it? You were pretty well screened, weren't you?

ES: Yes, I think so. They started out, I think, at ten dollars a week.

GP: That was '30s? Around 1930, late '20s?

ES: Yes.

GP: Ten dollars a week?

ES: Ten dollars a week. No benefits. They gradually worked into...If they worked at night, the company provided a taxi service for the girls to go home. Not sure at the beginning [unintelligible] fringe benefits at all.

GP: Did they have a pension plan? Eventually they did.

ES: Yes, yes, they did.

GP: I don't know if they did back that early but eventually they got pretty good benefits, didn't they?

ES: Yes. They had their own union—the operators union.

GP: Oh yeah, that's right. Do you think that, as a whole, Margaret regarded the phone company as a good employer?

ES: Oh, yes. She said that everything that they did, they did with the employee in mind. A good pension and their increases in wages that they got over a period of years. She felt they were a really good company to work for—very [unintelligible].

GP: Now, as I look back...I don't know this. I only had a little information about the phone company, but they had married phone operators for a long time, going way back, didn't they? I don't think there was any discrimination there at all.

ES: No, I don't know that there was.

GP: I don't know whether they hired them if they were married, but they didn't fire them when they got married, did they?

ES: No, no, I don't think that they ever did.

GP: I know that when I graduated from high school, I know girls who were talking about going to work for the phone company. Of course, they weren't married so I don't really know whether they would have hired married women right at that time.

ES: I kind of doubt it. I don't know. But they might have if they were divorced or on their own, but [unintelligible].

GP: I don't know whether you know this answer or not, but I wonder if there was a layoff during the Depression among the telephone operators?

ES: I don't know. I don't think so. I don't recall it being cut out.

GP: I know of a woman whose father owned a phone company in Southern Indiana, and she told me that people couldn't afford their phones, so they would be disconnected. Or, if they couldn't pay their bills any other way, they would bring her father a chicken or something like that. I don't imagine, [unintelligible] Bell would have taken a chicken for a telephone bill.

ES: [laughs] No, I doubt it too. I just don't know whether they cut back on help or anything like that.

GP: I might give your neighbor a ring, and maybe she could answer one—

[End of Interview]