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Oral History Number: 104-003
Interviewee: Tom Haines
Interviewer: Helen Bonner
Date of Interview: July 8, 1980
Project: Jeannette Rankin Oral History Project

TH: I was involved in politics here for years and years and years and she was too.

HB: So that's how you got to know her?

TH: So that's how I got to know her through politics and her brother, Wellington.

HB: You got to know Wellington pretty well too?

TH: Oh, yes. and their sister, Mrs. Sedman.

HB: Which sister was that?

TH: Mrs. Sedman, who was the Dean of Women at the University of Montana. I think her name was Harriet Sedman and she was Dean of Women and of course, at that time I didn't know Jeannette. I worked the chemistry, carried water for the chemistry class out there. That was a long time ago.

HB: Oh!

TH: But anyway, my family was here in the territory and we later stayed them. About the only experience I've had with her was in a beautiful way. Other than that, why, I think it was Wellington was running—it was in '46 or '48—and he was running for something, and of course she was one of the ablest campaigners that I ever saw.

HB: She must have been.

TH: If she heard of a vote a hundred miles up in the mountains and in some isolated canyon up there, she would go up and see them, drive up there and it didn't make any difference about the roads for the condition, she would just go anywhere and it didn't matter .

HB: She usually got it too, didn't she?

TH: Yes. She was a tough person, you know. I mean by tough—nothing phased her when she was after something.

HB: No.

TH: I remember one time she and I were visiting [telephone rings] something came up about — Wellington was running and I said something about Wellington wasn't too successful being elected. He was a brilliant man too. Well, she said the trouble with Wellington is, he's shy, he's timid. I had never thought of him that way before, that he was shy or timid because he was always so aggressive.

HB: He's a big man, wasn't he?

TH: He's a dam, big man, aggressive especially in the court or anywhere why he always was the leader, you see, and one of the most successful lawyers in Montana. Now, I have heard other lawyers say he really was successful and he went into the court well prepared, better prepared than anybody else on a case. There was always the story that he had the standard fee of \$5000 for getting anybody off on a rape charge.

HB: [Laughter] Five thousand!! And he always got them off the case if they could pay it?
[Laughter]

TH: Yes, if they could pay it. There's tremendous stories about Wellington. You could write a book about Wellington, several of them.

HB: Well, I am going to try and put a lot of Wellington in because, like I say, I want her as a person. Evidently, he was central to her life.

TH: He was and I always thought that he was sort of — guided her. That she didn't move unless he made the decision - the command decision. I recall one time here in town. We had a rally at the hotel room, the Florence Hotel over here, and our speaker didn't show up and a big truck out front of the hotel, and right away Wellington got right up and made a speech there right now, just off the cuff and they had to pull the crowd around to see, just to show his visibility. She could do the same thing, she had the same ability - to right now just start talking and didn't have to be prepared. She always made me think of the Toastmasters, they teach to stand up, speak up and shut up, but she would get up and talk and talk and not shut up.

HB: [Laughter]

TH: What she said made sense. It was always right to the point. I always admired her very much. Her ability as a campaigner, a political campaigner. I was never involved with her in anything else outside of politics, no other things that she was involved in.

HB: It's a personal question, but do you know, was she was ever involved with any man in a way that wasn't political?

TH: No! Nobody.

HB: Nobody knew of any, she was a strictly a political woman?

TH: No, I don't think there was ever any man in her life.

HB: As far as I can tell, there wasn't. I researched and researched.

No man in her life. And that's rather strange too in view of the fact that she was so involved in politics. And generally-speaking if you were involved in politics sooner or later they fall for some man or some man falls for her and tries to pursue her and (court) her and make hay with her.

HB: She liked men!!

TH: Yes, she like men very much. She liked to visit with them and talk with them. I wish I could remember the things we talked about now, but I visited with her many, many times, you know.

HB: She was very comfortable with men around her, not man to man because she was very feminine, wasn't she?

TH: Yes, very feminine, but there was just something about her that attracted people, and men would get aroused, they felt—they sort of pay court like a queen. They managed to get around to pay court to her. They didn't have any feelings that they wanted to make time with her or things like that. They just admired her and wanted to be around where she was—sort of like bask in her radiance or something to that effect. I don't know if that was expressive or not.

HB: That's beautiful! I understand, that's beautiful!

TH: Yes, she was quite a person. It's just too bad that we don't remember those things and then jot those things down at the time. At the time it's just one of those things.

HB: We are trying to get it now. It's getting harder to get.

TH: It's getting harder and harder to get.

HB: Do you have any idea why Mr. Brown disliked her so much?

TH: Which Brown is that?

HB: Walter Brown, that was her sister's ex-husband. [niece' s ex-husband]

TH: No, I don't. I don't know anything about the family affairs. I've been told that there was a time there was quite a dissention among the family and I don't know anything about them at all.

HB: I called him, that's her sister's ex-husband. He said, "I really don't have anything to say. I can't think of very much to talk about." I thought maybe there was some rumors that went around that would give me some clues to that, but it's settled. I don't know.

TH: I don't know anything about it.

HB: Probably if there was were a divorce in the family, that had something to do with it.

TH: Something! I don't know who would be able to tell you. Is Mrs. Sedman still living?

HB: I don't know! I can't find out. She maybe, she is the one that may be in Manhattan.

TH: Well, have you visited with Mrs. Gait?

HB: She's away from Helena, but she'll be back in two weeks and I may be able to visit with her in two weeks.

TH: Of course, she married Wellington, she could probably tell you.

HB: It didn't last very long, did it?

TH: Well, he died.

HB: Oh! He did? This is fascinating because I have done a lot of research in Berkeley and some of it is wrong because it says in that, that it didn't last very long.

TH: He was married before and they probably mixed up with that, with a former marriage. I don't know anything about the former marriage of Wellington, but this marriage lasted until he died and she inherited his property.

HB: So she'll know a lot.

TH: So she'll know a lot about it. I recall...

HB: Twenty-four years and you know all about the things that used to happen, Anaconda Copper and all of that. Are they still in politics like they used to be? Or what's happened to them?

TH: Well, it's just been a different ball game, of course the new constitution changed things a lot and then of course, they did get out of the picture. They don't have the production, they sold out, Atlantic Richfield owns them. They don't exert the influence they used to have. There's been a different bunch of people, the MEA, and the Farmer's Union.

HB: Did that change the state then?

TH: Oh, yes! They're the ones that exert the power in the state of Montana now. The nature figures and the Labor figures. They're all environmentalists and labor unions, they're the ones that exert power in the state now. Many years ago, there was Anaconda, and the railroad, and the ranchers and those people—they ran the state of Montana.

HB: They were running it when Jeannette first ran.

TH: That's correct.

HB: What years were you in the legislature?

TH: From '51 through 1974. I was elected in '50.

HB: So you went in right after she finished the second term in Congress. How did Montana people treat her after she voted no on World War II?

TH: [Laughter] They just kind of shrugged their shoulders and said, "Well, a woman, she..."

HB: She's a woman! [Laughter]

TH: They didn't think much about it, you know, you know how they are in this state.

HB: [Laughter] Isn't that wonderful! Oh well!

TH: I was county chairman here in the county in '46 and '48 campaign and then in '50 I ran for legislature. Of course, I resigned as county chairman and I was in the legislature until 1974.

HB: Uh, uh!

TH: Of course, Louise and Wellington got married. I don't remember when they got married or anything.

HB: That must have been a big wedding.

TH: I don't know anything about it, whether it was...amounted to anything or not, but anyway they got married and he died and as far as I know it was a very successful marriage. Louise is a lovely girl, very beautiful women!

HB: As far as you know, he was... what would you call it, a legitimate attorney. He wasn't doing anything wrong.

TH: Oh, yes. He was one of the ablest attorneys that ever hit the turnpike.

HB: Is that right? That's wonderful to hear, because people make these cracks about attorneys.

TH: Well, they talk about Wellington, there's all kinds of stories about Wellington. Like that he sued the telephone company so many times that they finally gave him a telephone free to use without paying...and all those kind of stories. [Laughter] Stuff just like that, you know.

HB: It's just funny little stories.

TH: He would go down on Skid Row on Sunday morning in Helena and get all the bums out of jail and everything, send them out to ranches, and wouldn't pay them.

HB: Oh!

TH: And send them out to work and that kind of stuff. You could write a book about Wellington, the stories they tell about Wellington.

HB: Yes, I like those stories. I think we could use a little bit of that for character.

TH: But Wellington apparently was a great influence in her life.

HB: But he was younger than she was. She was born first.

TH: First? Uh huh. I don't know about her birth date.

HB: He came along second. Evidently, they were just like this. He's a big, good-looking man.

TH: Very, very handsome, very handsome, big man.

HB: Liked to dress well.

TH: [inaudible]

HB: And so did she, didn't she?

TH: Ya, they just looked very nice. I'll tell you another person who would probably give you a lot of information about her would be Winfield Page. Has anyone told you about Winfield Page?

HB: No one has told me about Winfield Page.

TH: Winfield Page is a former longtime legislator. He served in the Legislature before me and he knew the Rankins and he followed them very well.

HB: Urn hm.

TH: He lives here in town, he lives out on North Avenue, I think.

HB: I'll give him a call.

TH: You can call him, tell him that I suggested that you call.

HB: Well, all this is so valuable because people are just beginning to realize who she was and how valuable she was.

TH: That's right.

HB: To have the nerve to vote No!

TH: Twice!

HB: Twice, and especially the second time when that bomb went down on Pearl Harbor and to do that. It seems the picture of her where she went to the phone to get help, she just looks like she is not upset at all.

TH: Well, she wouldn't have been. No, nothing would have phased her, see one thing was, she had that same characteristic as Wellington only she was a woman and he was a man, but they had that same characteristic that nothing would phase them. Nothing would phase them at all. If you ever said anything about the family...

HB: Yes, the father, I have read a lot about the father.

TH: If you read the territory newspapers here, there was mention quite often here in Missoula.

HB: I think I understand!!!!

TH: Over there in the library they have a lot of, deal with the Missoulian—various...Missoula Pioneer and papers there.

HB: In the City Library — not the University -- the City Library.

TH: The City Library you can read them, they're not on micro film and you can read them. They have some mention of the Rankin family and there are ads and things in there and whether or not the back-ground would interest you or not, I have done the history of Montana Territory flouring mills, and of course I have read every territory newspaper.

HB: He had a lumber mill for a while, right?

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TH: That's right. I see the Rankin family mentioned, but of course, I wasn't in it at that time.

HB: Is their home still standing?

TH: No, it's been torn down.

HB: Oh, it has! And what about the ranch that they used to go out to, is that gone too?

TH: I don't know if it is or not.

HB: I read somewhere that the ranch was about six miles out of town.

TH: It's up Grant Creek.

HB: It's up Grant Creek?

TH: I'm not sure about that now, don't quote me on that.

HB: Well, but it gives us something to look for. I read somewhere it was about six miles out.

TH: I believe the school that she originally went to...of course, her first school was the Montana Historical Society at Fort Missoula.

HB: Oh!

TH: I think it's been moved out there. I am not positive about that; you might investigate and check it.

HB: OK. I'll check it. Good. When she was in Congress and at that time you were a committeeman for the Republican Party.

TH: Well, I was probably a precinct committeeman then. Yes, it was during the war.

HB: So at that time, she tried to get nominated again for the Senate after that, didn't she and she couldn't get that nomination. Am I right?

TH: I can't recall. I can't recall that. I'll tell you who could tell you, give you all the dope on that would be Ellis Waldron. Ellis has written two books: Montana Politics, 1864 to whatever it was. The books list everything. He recently published a book on Montana politics. He is a retired professor at the University in Political Science.

Now, he can tell all about her when she ran, when the Rankins ran.

HB: Yes!

TH: When Wellington ran and, Wellington of course at one time was Attorney General here in the state. I believe that's the only public office he ever held.

HB: Yes, he ran for national, but he never made it.

TH: He never made it. Yes, he'd run and couldn't make it.

HB: Why do you think that is?

TH: Like she said, he was shy and timid. (Laughter)

HB: But he never came across like he was shy and timid.

TH: I know it didn't come across, but she would go down the street and bump into everybody and solicit their votes. Wellington was an aristocrat. He couldn't do that.

HB: (Laughter)

TH: He couldn't do that; he couldn't rub elbows with the common herd but she could. She would go anywhere.

HB: She would go into a bar, I understand.

TH: Anywhere—a house of prostitution—it didn't make any difference to her what it was, would make herself at home.

HB: Yes, I have the feeling as I talk to the Missoula people that a lot of them don't think very much of her. One man in the library said, "She didn't do anything for Montana."

TH: Well, I don't know what he meant, unless he meant something on the type of—well, to get right down to that, Mike Mansfield didn't do anything for Montana if you want to get right down to the nitty-gritty.

HB: He was more interested in the national.

TH: National, that's right. If you want to get down to a man who did something for the state look at Johnson. President Johnson, what he did when he was in the Senate, all the industry and everything to Texas to be expected. He actually did something. Mansfield never did anything for Montana. Or if they want to go that route, compare it with [inaudible], he was a great man.

HB: I wondered if there was some sort of feeling of resentment about her, local people?

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TH: Well, I don't know. I never felt that way about her, and I've never particularly heard it discussed. Of course, she was gone from here for many years, you see, and people just lost track of her.

HB: And some didn't even know who she was.

TH: No, didn't even know who she was.

HB: She was down in Georgia.

TH: In Georgia for years and years and a new crop of people came on and a younger generation.

HB: Who's she? Because that's the way people feel all over. Who's that? They never heard of her before. I would have liked for them to have heard of her. It's very important.

TH: Like the first woman legislator in Montana, some people have said. The person I said, Maggie Smith Hathaway, up to the Bitter Root Valley. Well, who's ever heard of Maggie Smith Hathaway.

HB: I haven't.

TH: In fact, there has been a biography written about Maggie Smith Hathaway.

HB: There has been? Who was she?

TH: She was a legislator from Ravalli County. The valley here, Bitter Root. Anyway, when I first went in to the legislature, she had been in there and she used to come over to the legislature, to the House, and they'd show her every courtesy, ask her to get up and make a speech. People would stand, she'd get up, and nobody no way to shut her up. She would talk and talk and talk.

HB: [Laughter].

TH: So we Republicans talked really nice to her and gracious and tried to be gentlemen. Well, the next time the Democrats were in control and Maggie Smith comes over to make a speech. They told her, "You talk so long. If you don't shut up, we'll gavel you down." And they did. They shut her up.

HB: How did she know about that? Did she know when to stop?

TH: Well, she liked to talk. She liked to talk. She'd just on and on and on.

HB: Ah, so you have to stop her. You would of had to if she had been there too long.

TH: Probably. I don't know whether she ever appeared to the legislature or not.

HB: Earlier she did.

TH: She may have probably.

HB: I read that.

TH: But not in my time. I have no recollection of her in my time.

HB: In an earlier one of my stories that I read about when she first made the pitch on vote for women and how all of the legislators—they were pretty rough in those days. Right, they were all pretty rowdy guys in those days. They all pitched in and sent a fifty cents a piece for flowers for the chambers when she was coming to speak. I thought that was such a nice thing, those guys must have been in 1916, they came right off the land, didn't they?

TH: Well, of course, when I first went into the legislature, you see, we had the counties...each county had one Representative and one Senator regardless of population. Of course, eastern Montana was all ranchers and they got control pretty much of the Legislature.

HB: Ranchers and Anaconda Copper Company.

TH: And of course, they worked hand in glove with the Anaconda and the railroads and everybody else slept together, you see. I found out the hard way about [how] the ranchers controlled things. In my first session as legislator I introduced a bill [to] permit the sale of colored margarine in Montana. The ranchers took after it and the trouble went down right now.

HB: I can see—

TH: They didn't produce butter either, but they decided they would work for butter power.

HB: Yes, they take care of...

TH: That's things of the past now.

HB: Can you remember like any little incident that might make her real to people like stories that people tell. Something that happened when she was around you, anything that helps you know what kind of person she was.

TH: [Laughter]. Not off hand, just outside of the fact that she would always love to have men around her, had nothing to do with them, and men liked to be around her and visit with her and—

HB: That's pretty important, I think, we need to express that, just right.

TH: Not that they wanted to make a pass at her or anything. In fact, I never thought she had any particular sex appeal for men.

HB: That's my feeling to.

TH: She was a woman that they respected, but there was no sex appeal there.

HB: I listened to a tape that she made when she was 92 just before she died and she was talking about how she influenced a Congressman to vote a certain way and the interviewer made a mistake by saying something like "Oh, using womanly wiles. And she went," That's not womanly wiles, that's good politics! She didn't like that at all.

TH: I don't blame her, when you take around a legislative body, a woman that tries to use her sex to get around, she doesn't last too long.

HB: That's right.

TH: Maybe for a little while.

HB: That would finish her off.

TH: Finish her off like a woman lobbyist. A woman lobbyist who would try to use her sex.

HB: She better play it straight.

TH: She better play it straight if she wants to stay.

HB: That's right and it's only right!

TH: That's the only way it can be.

HB: It's a disadvantage, it's not fair. Let's see, I want to make sure I got everything I really wanted to know.

TH: Are you any relation to the Bonner family...

HB: Yes, my mother-in-law's uncle [laughter] was related to that Bonner family and one of the legislators up there was a Bonner. He was related to her; I can't remember exactly what the connection was.

TH: Relation of John Bonner, the Governor?

HB: Yes, John Bonner, you bet, but that's by marriage.

TH: Marriage? Sure. Of course, I knew John very well.

HB: Was he a good governor?

TH: Yes, yes!

HB: That's a challenge!

TH: I always thought he was a good governor. John's problem was his jug.

HB: Is that right?

TH: Yes, he was an alcoholic.

HB: Oh!!

TH: He couldn't control it. But he was a good governor, I always thought.

HB: So often it seems like...

TH: Prior to this association, he was council of the association before he was ever Governor of Montana. That's how I first got to know him. John and... I wasn't running association then, I was in the grocery business, that's how I got to know John. In fact, he was council for the association, then of course after he was governor, he couldn't be.

HB: Yes!

TH: I always thought he was a good governor if he could have stayed sober.

HB: It seems like there are so many people who are very good people, just can't handle the kind of things that go on and they drink a lot. I heard that called...they are called the beautiful alcoholics.

TH: [Laughter]

HB: The ones that are that way because they can't stand reality What I would like to do, Tom, if it's all right with you, I would like to call in a couple of days before...we'll be leaving in a couple of days, so that if you have thought of anything else .

TH: OK.

HB: Will you jot it down?

TH: You bet!

HB: Like I said, I think this is awfully important, everything we can find on her, everything, anything because it's going to be gone.

TH: You be sure and go to see Winfield Page.

HB: I will, I'll go see Winfield.

TH: He served in the Legislature, well, I served with him, but he served before I did. I think he went in about 1940, when he served.

ANOTHER VOICE: He was a personal friend of the family you said, I think, didn't you?

TH: Pardon!

ANOTHER VOICE: He was a personal friend of the Rankin family.

TH: Well, I don't know how friendly he was with them or anything, but he knew them quite well. Go see him. Tell him that I suggested you come.

HB: I sure will. And that's the end of the interview with Tom Haines of Missoula, Montana, former Assemblyman and acquaintance of Jeannette Rankin back in the World War II years. The interview was between Helen Bonner and Mr. Tom Haines and also present was Jed Tiff who was doing the taping and it occurred in Mr. Haines' business office on July 8th, 1980. Mr. Haines, a very active person still, in his 70's, courtly person, running a food distribution business, also puts out a magazine on food distribution that includes a page of literature and poetry.

[End of interview]