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Interviewee: Guy C. Rogers

Interviewer: Gladys Peterson

Date of Interview: February 11, 1986

Project: Women in the Workplace Oral History Project

Gladys Peterson: This is yet another interview with Guy Rogers on a different topic and on a different day. This is February 11, 1986, and I'm going to ask Guy some questions about women in the labor force in Missoula in kind of a general way and then zero in on women employees in the post office. So Guy, if you don't mind, I'd like to go back and find out what you remember about women working from earlier in your life. First of all, did your mother work?

Guy Rogers: No, my mother never did work. I had three older sisters. One of them was the only one that worked. The other two were married quite early, and the one who worked, worked as a teacher—schoolteacher. Surprisingly enough in the country school up Miller Creek. Just above the K-O Rodeo.

GP: I remember you telling about her.

GR: Yes. She was the only one in the family, of the girls, that worked.

GP: Now, did the others go to college?

GR: No, neither of them did. She did, of course. Actually she went to Dillon Normal [Montana State Normal School] which was the teacher's college in Montana.

GP: I suppose the others got married soon after they graduated from high school, something like that?

GR: Yes, yes, they did. They did, yes.

GP: They played more the traditional role.

GR: Yes, you bet.

GP: What about your sister who taught? Did she get married and quit teaching or what?

GR: Yes, eventually she did. She taught in that country school up there, and it seems weird now that Miller Creek is as close as it is today. At that time was so far away that she had to board and room with a family on the farm in Miller Creek. [laughs]

GP: About what year would that have been?

GR: Oh boy, that would have been back about 1922, maybe 1923, somewhere in there. Her husband was a friend of the family with whom she boarded. He came over visiting from the Big Hole country over around Dillon, and they got acquainted and subsequently got married.

GP: Then she quit teaching.

GR: Then she quit teaching.

GP: That was the end of her teaching career.

GR: That's right, yes. However, after that, due to economic conditions in the family, she did work intermittently and I can recall when she worked for Sears and Roebuck, it was, at that time.

GP: In Missoula?

GR: In Missoula, yes, as a clerk.

GP: As a clerk.

GR: Yes.

GP: Sears, let's see. Where were they located?

GR: They were located kitty-corner from what was the Angelo's (?) building.

GP: They were downtown?

GR: They were right downtown, yes. Right where the bank is now.

GP: Oh, that wasn't Ward's, was it?

GR: Yes it was Ward's. That's right. That's right. It was Ward's.

GP: Yes, that's why I was surprised. I didn't ever...Of course, I'm a relative newcomer to Missoula.

GR: Yes. You seem to know more about that than I remember. Yes, it was Ward's.

GP: Well, I the only Sear's I remembered was the catalog store on Stephen's Avenue, you know.

GR: Yes, yes, yes. No, it was Ward's where she worked. They had that big store at that time.

GP: Yes, it was a nice store. When we moved here in 1965, it was a nice store. Well, did she go to work then during the Depression for Ward's?

GR: Yes, she worked for Ward's during the Depression. They had two boys, and her husband was very much of a handyman but not the best worker in the world—a little bit fly-by-night. I can recall at one particular time after they had been married for just a few years, he decided that being married was too constricting, and he decided he didn't want to be married anymore. So he took off, and he was gone for about a year. During which time she did what most women did at that time who were married and the husband took off—came back and moved in with Mom and Dad. We remodeled a garage on the back of the property so she and her two kids could stay there.

GP: Had they been living in the Big Hole or something?

GR: No, they had been living in Missoula. Then after a year, he came back. They got together, and from that point on they were inseparable. They were almost like two men friends. You know? They just didn't do anything without the other. But I guess he had to get that out of his system first. When he left, why of course, her support was gone. She had to stay home with the kids. At that time, as I say women with families like that had no recourse but to come back home.

GP: Sure, well, that's an interesting point. At least, that's a story with a happy ending, isn't it?

GR: Yes, you bet it is. You bet.

GP: Well, then during the Depression, Guy, what do you remember about women working in general? Do you remember that there was any animosity about them going to work?

GR: Oh yes. Yes, there was because there was a great feeling—an unshakeable feeling it seemed at that time—that the provider was the man, and that when a woman was hired she took the place of some man who was supporting his family. They failed to recognize that, undoubtedly, most of those women were supporting families too. Some of them had men that left. So she was the sole support. Where dollars were short, there were two of them working, although I don't recall this as much as I do single-member parents working.

GP: What kind of work were they in?

GR: Almost exclusively the type of work that we thought of as women's work for years and years. There was very little crossing over to hard labor. Although certainly in some instances, if there was a dollar to be made, there were some women who had to have the money. Certainly they're not having those jobs was not because they wouldn't take them, but because they were offered to them.

GP: They couldn't get them.

GR: That's right.

GP: You say women's work. What would that have been?

GR: Oh, clerking or sewing or house cleaning or cooking for other families. Stenographic, although the ability, I guess, to type wasn't that broad. At least, I don't recall an awful lot of women had that particular skill. Undoubtedly, there were some.

GP: We're talking now about the '30s, aren't we?

GR: Yes.

GP: I've been told, too, that once a woman married, she was expected to get out of the labor force in a lot of cases, at least.

GR: Yes, that's right. Yes. That's true because this feeling that women were taking men's job was very prevalent for years and years and years. Of course to a lesser degree, during that particular period, it carried even farther to the degree that the employer, when looking to hire, say, five people and he had 40 applicants, would pretty much hire men and pretty much married men. The single man had kind of a rough go during that period too because everybody was having trouble feeding their family. This was recognized by employers that they should give preference to married people.

GP: Well then, I guess that the war [World War 2] probably changed that. I know you weren't here during a lot of the war, but you might know from your acquaintances where women went to work if they went to work during the war.

GR: I'm sure they did. I'm sure they just took...I know they took places wherever there was a job, really. There were women hired because they were really about the only workforce that was available other than the real young or the real old. They went into bakeries, and they went into clothing stores. They went into really almost any job that was open at that particular time for two reasons, of course. One, as you know, during that particular period of time there was a great feeling of patriotism. Any time a woman could step in and free a man to go to war, she was willing to work at anything. And they did.

GP: I heard that from somebody recently that they were working in the plant at White Pine—

GR: Oh yes, they were.

GP: Sash.

GR: They were. Yes, you bet.

GP: I haven't been able to find out yet if they were working out at the Bonner Mill.

GR: Oh, I'm sure they were.

GP: They were.

GR: I'm sure they were, yes. Yes, you bet. Well, there just weren't that many able-bodied men around at that particular time, and there was a great need for the products. As I say, women for the first time, well, many of them were without the backup income too that the husband had because, you know, if you went to work for the service, you went into service...I can recall I made 75 dollars a month as an aviation cadet, and that was a well-paying military job. So they didn't have much financial support. They needed the job.

GP: I think my husband, when we got married, was making 150.

GR: Yes, you bet.

GP: He was a lieutenant when we got married.

GR: Yes, you bet.

GP: I think that's what he got.

GR: I think that's right. I know when I was commissioned second lieutenant I made 175 dollars a month. That was the going pay.

GP: Well then, after the war, there were a lot of servicemen coming back including you, and we're getting now into your post office days perhaps. Do you remember that the feeling persisted that women should not be occupying jobs that men could get?

GR: Yes, it did. Yes, it did. One other thing [unintelligible] at that particular time, and that was the fact that when you left the job to go to the Army in most instances, you retain the right to resume that job when we came back.

GP: That's right. There was a name for that, wasn't there?

GR: Yes, yes.

GP: I forgot what that was called.

GR: Yes, it was job security probably.

GP: Yes, right. So women got bumped out of those jobs then?

GR: Yes, yes. As a matter of fact, it was kind of interesting. I went directly from driving a bus into the service. So when I came back, I could have returned to that same job that I had. However, with one leg, you don't return to the bus driving. [laughs] They overlooked a lot of things but not that. But it was interesting. At that time, this was city bus in Missoula. Had I returned, I would have been the senior man on the force.

GP: Is that right?

GR: There had been that much turnover in four years.

GP: That's interesting. Well, I know that you did a lot of things. I think you told me you were in the automobile business for a while, and eventually you ended up with the post office in the early '50s, right?

GR: Yes, yes.

GP: '54, was it?

GR: Right, right.

GP: What I'm interested in this afternoon is finding out about women in the post office. How did you find that situation when you first went to work there?

GR: Well, as I said, there were many post offices without women—large post offices.

GP: Is that right?

GR: Right. As I recall, when I went to work, I know there was one woman clerk in a work force of 150.

GP: The Missoula main post office?

GR: The Missoula main post office, right. There were women who were carrying rural routes—one woman carrying rural route. Most substitutes for rural carriers were women. I make a differentiation between city carriers and rural carriers, because the rural carrier has the job of carrying his route and delivering mail six days a week. The city carrier delivers mail on five days, and you have to put a substitute on there the sixth day. So they're two different...Well, they're two different crafts really. The post office was quite highly organized, although at that particular plan not to the degree that it ultimately became. As such, there was that feeling against women employees. Let me say at the outset, we hired a lot of them over the 18 years

that I was there, and they fell in about the same category as men or veterans. There were good ones, and there were bad ones. I'd say to about the same degree.

GP: Is that right? That's interesting.

GR: They were human beings. They were very much like that, but there was still the feeling that we're better off the fewer that we had.

GP: The men resented them?

GR: Yes, they did. They did resent them, and they resented them for some reasons that are good and some that are bad. Things I can think of—the complaints that I heard—is that if you've got a woman working here she has to have Friday off because she's got to cook dinner for relatives that are going to be in town. When we asked to get off, we can't get off, but because she is a woman and the homemaker, then she's allowed to get off and we can't. She's assigned all of the light duty which, let's face it, is preferential duty, and we're then resigned to all of the heavy duty. We don't think that's fair. She has more of a tendency to call in sick primarily probably because one of her youngsters is sick. Then one of us who was given the day off so we could go fishing is called back and we have to work. This type of thing you've heard all over. I suppose the need to watch the language a little bit was part of it in some areas of the post office.

In looking back, I can recall that one time that we did have this one woman working for the post office who was a clerk—she was a window clerk intermittently. She sorted mail and then intermittently, she filled in for the window clerk who was a male when he was off. A strange thing always happened. I would start getting complaints in my office about not being treated the way they felt they should be treated, and 99 percent of these complaints were from women. They were more prone to accept the statements from a man clerk than they would a woman clerk at that time. They would argue with the woman clerk. But they would take the word of the man, and of course, in all bureaucracies there's a great shield that the federal employees or city employees or county employees hide behind—the book says this. The public has never seen the book. They don't know whether it says that or not, but they're told in an authoritative kind of a voice that you can't do that and so they have to accept it. On these cases, if it was a woman, as I say—woman customer—she'd have more of a tendency to accept that without argument from a man. But she'd come into the post master to find out if that was really true if a woman told her that. I could never figure out why this existed, but it was a very evident thing.

Then, of course, over the years as I say there were some things happened really at the federal level. During President John Kennedy's administration, the craft unions were given the same status as all other private unions in the United States. This, then, said that now you don't just call them in and listen to and say, "Well, I'm glad to get your ideas and I'll go ahead and do what I want."

GP: Craft union including what?

GR: Clerks, postal clerks, postal carriers, postal supervisors, postal rural carriers. These were all different unions. As it finally evolved, and they still are, they negotiate, and the word negotiate means exactly that. You give something to get something. You don't just set your feet and say, "I'm not going to do it." Remember that at the time this started all of the power that the postmaster had was his. All of the power. He could do anything that he wanted.

GP: Is that right?

GR: Right.

GP: You had government regulations, of course?

GR: Yes, yes, right, right. But at that time then the federal government had to start sending people out and talking to managers, stating that now you're going to have to function differently. We're going to have to meet with these people and we're going to have to negotiate a contract every year. They negotiated a national contract each year. Then, each office in the United States had to flesh that out. For instance, as it affected sick leave or annual leave or shifts. This had to be done by the individual office, and it had to be done through negotiation, not the postmaster saying, "Well, now, this is what we'll do."

Yet at the same time, the postal manual said that the postmaster, it shall be his responsibility to determine the number of jobs, the number of duties that they shall perform and the hours by which they will perform. Well, this had to be reconciled with negotiations. Such things as...The reason I'm saying this is leading into the other, but the reason for this being that we had to, for instance, determine how many people we could let off at any one time and still have the post office staffed.

Now then, in addition to that, we had substitutes. We had one substitute for every five employees because remember again, the sixth day, not for every five employees, but the sixth day had to be carried by a substitute because the regular carriers worked only five days. So we had to have substitutes and people to call in when somebody got sick. So substitutes never knew when they were going to work or how long—how often or how long. This became effective about the time it came when we were urged to consider hiring women where the jobs were such that they could handle it.

Then the question arises, where do you put that woman who doesn't know anything and is not as strong as anybody else in the post office? This got us in some difficulties. We had been operating an outside parcel post facility in a building about four blocks from the post office. When we brought a substitute in, he didn't know anything about sorting mail. The only thing they could do really was work with their back until they saw what was going on in the post

office. We could start recovering from their knowledge and their labor only by having them down in the parcel post facilities, unloading big semis full of mail sacks with parcels on it that could weigh up to 70 pounds. We did this with all our substitutes to begin with because we could start recovering something from them. Now, we're faced with bringing a young lady in that weighs about 98 pounds, to get down there and carry those 70-pound sacks in an eight-hour shift. We got in a lot of trouble over this. But we got some great employees too. There were many women that said, "That's just too heavy. We can't handle that." And they quit.

GP: But they were given that job.

GR: Oh, yes. This was at the insistence of the male employees too. This is where we started. Well, if everything's equal, she should start there too.

GP: Now, did the women join the union too?

GR: They did eventually, yes. To begin with, they didn't because they were on probation. They had a year probation. All substitutes came in with a year's probation. They could be separated with no action all during that period. After the year, then they could be separated only for cause.

GP: I see. Now, these women had obtained those jobs through civil service exams too.

GR: Right.

GP: So they did qualify, except they weren't big enough.

GR: Right, right. They had to perform. Well, many of them were big enough. Of course, the first thing that came up again—and you can understand this too—is, "I can't handle this parcel post, but I can stand up there and face those letters as good as anybody you've got in the office." But the fellow facing letters had already put in his time unloading the parcels, and he didn't want to back to loading and unloading parcels and give her his spot.

Many things came from this. It was interesting to watch it change over the years. Because initially, there was a great resistance. "See? Women can't handle the job." There were some women who proved that they couldn't. But there were a few that came down there, they'd go to work. They'd wrastle that sack and it'd fall on their toes and they'd drag it across the floor, and after this had gone on for about two, three days, there'd be a man step up and say, "I'll take that. You take this little one." But she first had to demonstrate her willingness to do the very best that she could to put out every bit as much effort as he was putting out.

The first time one came in there and said, "That sack's too heavy for me, why don't you take it?"

They'd say, "Take it yourself. You're getting the same pay I am."

GP: They were getting the same pay?

GR: Yes, exactly, and doing the same work. This was a problem, however, because we were subject, too, to productivity goals. Now, this little woman that comes in there, regardless of how willing she is, is not going to handle as many sacks as a 230-pound man. We couldn't take a crew of men out and put a crew of women in because our productivity would go right up the chimney. They had to be blended into the workforce. This wasn't always done without somebody complaining on either side—the women and the men. Some strange things happened. I know one night [laughs], the supervisor...This is a night...That was another thing. This was a night tour down at the parcel post facility. They worked 12, midnight to 8 o'clock in the morning. He called me, and he said, "Did you hire anybody new down there today to come to work on my crew?"

I said, "No, I didn't."

Well, he said, "I've got a guy with a great big full beard on, working down here that I've never seen before."

So I said, "No, he's not hired."

So he said, "Well, I'm going to check him out." So he checked with him. He was the husband of a woman that was working on that.

He said, "This is too heavy for my wife." It's heavy stuff. He said, "I'm going to handle the heavy sacks, and she'll handle the light ones." [laughs]

Of course, the supervisor said, "You get out that door as fast as you can. If you get hurt on the job, and you're not even a postal employee, we're in for a suit." But it was interesting.

GP: That's a good story.

GR: And it varied so much with the women. Some of them, there again, wanted to work down there because they'd always wanted to work in the post office and everybody, in these mind's eyes, see people sitting there shuffling little letters around; it doesn't seem like very much work.

GP: Well, how has that changed? That policy can't still be going on.

GR: Well, it became more mechanized. But there are still women that work in the post office that unload parcel post out of those trucks. But there's a lot of mechanization in the picture now that wasn't there originally. Because, you know, you'd have...

An interesting thing incidentally, is it we always receive far more parcel post than we sent out. This puzzled me for a long time. Here's the problem that occurs too. All that parcel post comes in sacks like Santa Claus with a bag of toys. You dump those sacks and disperse the packages, then you've got a pile of empty sacks. What do you do with them? There were more sacks coming in every day. So you have to ship them out, and we ship them out back East because this is where all of the parcels originated. For two reasons. One, of course, we were receiving parcels from clear across the country from the East to the West, and that was certainly more than we were receiving from the West to us. Secondly, all of the big stores and manufacturing plants were in the East. So they were producing the stuff and shipping it West. We were continually shipping sacks back, bundle after bundle of them every day. Here again. You bundle 30 heavy canvas sacks together, it takes a pretty strong individual to handle that bundle of sacks. Women did this too. Some reluctantly. I don't know any of them that really loved it, but I know very few men that did either.

GP: Now, when you take the exam today to work in the post office, would you still have to go through steps like that to earn some kind of a coveted spot?

GR: Yes, you do. The whole post office operates on this kind of a basis.

GP: I see.

GR: This, of course, creates many problems later on, too. The thing is that you have to be a substitute before you can be a regular. The substitute is one who you can call in to fill in for anybody who all of a sudden gets sick. Can't work? You have to call that substitute in, and you have them capable of performing that task, whatever it is. Whether it's working on a window, selling stamps or whether it's on the general delivery window, delivering parcels through the window to people, or distributing the outgoing mail, or distributing the incoming mail, or maybe carrying a carrier route. They have to do all of this. Here again, the carrier goes out carrying that sack of mail. It's not tremendously heavy, but it weighs around 50-60 pounds, hanging on your shoulder all day. That's a big job.

This is the entry, actually, in the post office. They take the examination from which they are scored. Then five points is added to the score of all veterans—any veteran. Ten points is added to the score of disabled veterans. This becomes a register from which all federal agencies—in this case post office—would draw from. The hiring officer has his choice of any one of the top three. They're deemed to be equal. Now then, you've got one woman who is number two on there, he's got a man that's number one, and another man that's number three. He can choose any one of the three. But he better do it carefully. I say, they're all deemed to be equal. Whichever one he picks will come in as a substitute, never having been inside a post office before, not knowing what's going on. Come in and [unintelligible] time clock and their salary already. By the hour, of course. Then they are assigned to the simplest job, the job requiring the least knowledge, and they're brought in on the clerk side.

They could be brought in now as a substitute carrier or a substitute clerk. If they're brought in as a substitute clerk, then they are assigned a scheme to learn...a distribution scheme on a...It's like an egg crate turned up on its side with all these separations in there. Then you put the mail into all of these different separations, and they have to do it with a certain agility. So many letters, so many minutes, and they have to pass that scheme. They have to study that scheme, and you practice it. Then when they pass that scheme, then they're a substitute to become more valuable. They don't get any more pay, but they can be assigned on an intermittent basis to one of these cushier jobs.

In this instance, in some cases, women are better at this. I often wonder if it's right because when it's all said and done let's face it, you're better off, I think, in some cases bringing a woman in off the street and training her to sort those letters and bringing a man in to handle the heavier parcels. From a managerial standpoint, that's where I'm going to get the most productivity.

GP: But the men didn't like it.

GR: No, no, and I can understand that. I can understand it. I think that—

[Break in audio]

GP: —that you saw an increase in female employees.

GR: Oh, yes, yes. Well, you couldn't shut them out, and at the present time, there are many good managerial women employees. One of them, as a matter of fact, is in charge of Hellgate Station downtown. She's the head man in that station.

GP: Who is that, do you know?

GR: Roberta...oh, her last name is—

GP: Oh, that's okay. I just wondered if it was my friend Mary Wiggstrom (?). I think she's still at the other post office, but I know she's got a top job. Up there, it was some kind.

GR: Yes, you can't discriminate. You can't discriminate at all, and this is good. This is good.

GP: Now, Mary, I had her daughter in my room out at Bonner School, and I know her family. I know her sister who also has children up there. I'm wondering now how Mary made it. I know she's a terrific person, but I'm wondering what kind of a route she would have taken. Did she have to do this by exam to get where she is?

GR: Yes, the only way you can get a job with the post office.

GP: A promotion?

GR: Other than the temporary work or at Christmas time for ten days.

GP: Sure. Well, she was in the system here.

GR: Yes. Well, she had to take a civil service examination, and then—

GP: Then you have to apply when you want a promotion, you have to take another exam?

GR: Yes, yes. In most instances, you do. As a matter of fact, what you have to do is to take a supervisory exam. Therein is created another list. Then again, the postmaster has the option of picking any one of the top three. There is a little weight given to seniority and quite a little given to the score on the examination, quite a little given to the judgment of your previous supervisor. Then the postmaster has the option of choosing the top three as I say. We always pretty much went down the line unless there was some reason to believe that there was somebody who was particularly outstanding, and we would accelerate along that. That's how they all got there, through that postal service exam.

GP: Well, can you think of any other things you can recall about women in the post office?

GR: Well, yes, I can. Some things that you wouldn't expect. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of one; we hired a woman, a carrier substitute. She didn't make it, and surprisingly, she didn't make it because she couldn't work mail fast enough.

GP: On the street?

GR: No, it the office.

GP: Oh, in the office.

GR: See, when a carrier comes to work in the morning, faced in front of him is a pile of mail for a geographical area that he covers, and he has to put them in delivery sequence in that case. He has to do this in a certain amount of time because his eight-hour shift is set up that this much is allocated for putting his mail up in his case and this much is allocated for street time and delivery. She had no problem at all with delivering the mail. Most women had the problem out on the street. There again, and ironically, they encountered more difficulty from people than the men did. I think in part because it was new to see a woman coming along delivering mail. It's not new anymore [unintelligible].

GP: It's accepted.

GR: However, as an aside, something that comes to my mind and psychologically I don't understand it, but I used to get phone calls from somebody on the route saying, "That so-and-so is late today, and he's late every day. He's scattered mail all over the area, and I wish you'd do something about it." But if they knew his name, they were still mad, but they'd call up and say, "John missed my house this morning, and I know I had a letter coming. He very rarely makes a mistake, but would you check with the man?" They treated them better if they knew his name. I think, as a result of this, this is why you go to grocery stores and that type of thing and see name plates on all the clerks.

GP: That could be.

GR: It's a strange thing, but it was just as true as it could be where they didn't know him, they were free to call him "that stupid so-and-so that delivers the mails."

Now, as I say you've got women carrying the mail, and nobody questions it. But this one girl, she was a big strong girl. She was an outdoor-hiking type. She did that part of it fine, but she just never could meet the mail handling standard that she had to make.

Many others came in there, and we lost some of them due the rigors of fighting the weather. One of them, I can recall, we lost that quit delivering mail up in the Rattlesnake. We had a real bad winter that year with a tremendous amount of snow. The people that lived up there never cleaned their sidewalks out front. They just cleaned a path out the back of the garage to drive the cars down the alley to work. But the carriers, they had to walk down the sidewalks and up to the front of each house. At one time we had three carriers on one route up there, and she was one of them. She came in and said, "I give up. I quit, I just can't handle this job."

They quit for various reasons. They quit...Oh, if they get married, many times they'd quit. Although there were some that when they got married, I'm sure that was kind of a dowry that the man they married got that she had a good steady job and she worked hard.

But over the years, it became more common in post offices. I think most of them—at least the majority of them—would step up and say, "I'm here to work. Whatever job you've got, give me a shot at it, and I'll do the best I can." If they did, almost universally the complaints against them stopped, and somebody would start to help.

GP: They were willing workers.

GR: You bet. You bet. As long as they indicated that they weren't asking any special favors and would try, not immediately, but they'd slug it out for maybe a week. Here another thing with these shifts that I was talking about that were so tough in the parcel post. They were nighttime shifts all night long. They were out on the loading dock where the wind was blowing at 20 below. It was a miserable place to work. Like they say, it's a tough job, but somebody's got to do it. They were the ones that had to do it along with the men who did the same thing.

GP: Well, I appreciate your remarks. I think this is a subject that's never been covered before.

GR: No, I'm sure that's right.

GP: Okay, well, thank you very much.

[End of Interview]