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Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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Oral History Number: 378-031

Interviewee: Louise Cross

Interviewer: Diane Sands

Date of Interview: March 8, 2001

Project: Montana Feminist History Oral History Collection

Diane Sands: —Sands with the Montana Feminist History Project recording Louise Cross of Glendive, Montana on the role of Louise as a member of the Con Con and as an activist in the Glendive women's community for many years including organizations such as the American Association of University Women. This recording is taking place in Helena, Montana at the Department of Labor.

Well Louise, as I said, there are several things that I want to talk to you about. Perhaps we should just start with the Con Con since we're looking at an article here is that when (unintelligible) talked about the [Montana] Constitutional Convention and the role of women in it, I think one thing that is so significant is that there were 19 women out of the 100 delegates. That clearly had an impact in what is both in the [Montana] Constitution but also, I think the legacy, in terms of the impact on women coming out of the Constitution has been pretty tremendous.

Louise Cross: I think you're right. I think, though, you should also understand that even though there were 19 women, it wasn't a case of one mind. Each one of us had things we were particularly interested in and we didn't always agree on them. We did have an influence on that and the writing of the Constitution.

DS: Well perhaps we could back it up and talk about the pre-constitutional efforts made primarily by the legal voters and others. Were you involved at all in the call for a constitutional convention?

LC: Not specifically. I became interested in the convention when it was called because I was primarily interested in the environment and the horrible possibility of strip mining of eastern Montana. I knew that there had been up to that point no other way that that ever could be addressed. Then the convention was called. I thought that this is a way we could get this in front of the public. I decided then to run for a position in the convention. I was lucky I won. I was one of four out of District Three.

DS: Well it certainly wasn't something you just did out of the clear blue. You actually had been quite active in a number of organizations and issues in Glendive and the eastern Montana area that gave you a platform to be able to do that. Why don't we talk some about that background?

LC: Yes. Well at that time I had been very active with the university women. I had held a state office and a local office and that group is intelligent and it was vocal. It had a lot of possibilities. We were an active group. It was kind of a springboard for me to get my message out, working

with the university women. It was through them that I really got going on it because I had managed to involve the state division, being interested in reclamation particularly. What might happen without reclamation that strip mining would pursue. I was still working with the university women, but I mailed out over 400 letters to legislators, groups of women, citizen's groups, anybody that would listen.

DS: So when you belonged to the American Association of University Women, which you still do, there is a very active branch of AAUW in Glendive.

LC: Yes. It's smaller than it used to be, but it's still active.

DS: Were you state president then?

LC: No I was a vice president.

DS: The position I now hold.

LC: Ordinarily they stay one term, but I was two terms on that as a vice president for membership.

DS: AAUW took reclamation as one of its policy areas that...

LC: At that time, yes it did. It did.

DS: How did you organize that within AAUW and how did you use AAUW's resources to push that issue?

LC: Well I think basically I was the key person. What I did was draw in others to spread the word, to get out the message. But there was actually no committee on it. I spearheaded one and I just went to the branch and asked them to help in any way they could.

DS: So did all of the branches around the state then do programming on reclamation?

LC: I'm not sure about that. They all got the information. I know the division was interested in it at the time, the state division.

DS: The state chapter basically. At that time there were at least 17 branches across the state, or perhaps more.

LC: Yes, probably. I don't remember those figures now, but there were that many. And they were throughout the state so there was a pretty good geographical cross-section.

DS: I've been often amazed and quite proud of AAUW's history. When you look back in that era, the role of many of the women who were leaders in the AAUW were also leaders in many other areas of public policy, Maxine Johnson, for example.

LC: Yes.

DS: Who had been on the Board of Montana Power, having a leadership role in the university system and others too. It has seemed to me, looking at it, that AAUW was one of the organizations that fostered that kind of leadership for women.

LC: Yes and I think they were more aggressive then than they are now.

DS: What would you mean by that?

LC: They took up policy issues much more readily than they seem to be doing now. At least that's my perception of it.

DS: Other issues that you recall that they championed at that time?

LC: Well of course education has always been one of their major things. Social justice was one. The welfare of women and children and the availability of education for women and girls. Those have been their key issues.

DS: I recall in a lot of the documents that even in the late '60, for example, I'm talking about social justice, AAUW was an advocate before the legislature on abortion rights. It was an advocate for kindergartens. It is an advocate in its lobbying capacities was actually much more vocal then than it is now.

LC: Yes I think that's true.

DS: Why do you think that is?

LC: I don't know. I think the world has changed. Of course, in my branch, I'm one of the older members. I will have to confess that I don't always see eye to eye with their thinking, but that's just me. I continue to be an activist. I was telling Bob when I came up here that it's about time I decided to back off some of this stuff but I don't think I will.

DS: I don't think you can, Louise. I think it is part of your nature. When you look at the role of AAUW at that point, particularly, is one of the few organizations that was, you say, politically active or interested in policy, or intellectual activities for women, particularly women who had an education. I think it was a venue that perhaps now was taken care of through other functions.

LC: Very probable. But I would like to mention a few other things that I've been involved in.

DS: Yes if you could.

LC: I've been the curator of our museum for, since 1964 or so. I was on the original group that got the whole thing started. We started with a one floor building, which has now developed into seven buildings on an acre of ground. We just put up our third addition to the main building. That's in the process of being finished. That's been a real plus for the community and it has saved a lot of the local history. It has saved a lot of stories about people. I'm real proud of that. Politically I'm still working with the Democratic Party, the Central Committee, the women's club. I think I end up, always, in somebody's campaign, trying to get them elected.

DS: How did you get involved in Democratic politics?

LC: It goes back to my childhood. It really does.

DS: Were you raised a Democrat?

LC: Yes I think so. My father used to really get upset about how minority groups were treated. So he was an immigrant. He used to think that the working class of people were never really given the full credit for what they did in the community. His feelings were such that it just fell into the Democratic philosophy. I guess that's where it kind of started.

DS: When you were first involved in Democratic politics, actually over all of these many years of being involved in, I know you ran for county commissioner—

LC: I was defeated.

DS: —back in '74 after this great experience with the Con Con. How would you talk about the role that women have played in the Democratic Party?

LC: Well the Democratic women have a slogan, and I have a button that has the slogan on it and it says, "Democratic women are the life of the party."

DS: How true.

LC: They're the ones that, though they're much more visible now than they have been, but they're the ones that do all of the grunt work. They make sure that things are put together, that dinners are arranged, that candidates are met, that they're shown around town, that they meet people. They do all the work that is behind the scenes. Without it, I don't think the part would be nearly as effective.

DS: Do you think that's still true given that so many more women are working outside the home and have, or seem to have, less time? Is that still the case?

LC: It has had an effect on it, that's for sure. Still, there are enough women that are helpful. Of course, many of them are running for office now, too.

DS: So when you ran, what was the support of the Democratic Party for your candidacy as a woman and how was that viewed?

LC: It was mixed. I'm going to be real frank about it. I had a terrible time raising money. They didn't want to give money to a woman because they figured she wouldn't win. Well, that wasn't my philosophy. I figured if I ran, I'd run hard and win if I possibly could. One of the members of our Democratic Central Committee whose wife had told me they'd be very willing to support me, I went to him and asked him, and told him, "Well your wife suggested I talk to you, that you'd be willing to support me." He said, "I can't do that." I said, "Why?" He said, "I have a lot of clients who are Republicans. If I were to support you, I would lose a good share of my business." I said, "Okay. I just asked you and that's your answer so I'll just go on without that."

My committee was mostly women. We had a terrible time raising money. Some of the men, I'm sure, supported me, but did so quietly. In a community like Glendive, everybody knows, they know what you do for a living and all that. I think you have to be a little more careful who you support than you'd be in a larger community. I ran and I ran hard. There was also a whispering campaign against me by my opponent, who was a man. He went around telling his friends and whoever would listen, "You don't want to vote for that radical."

Of course he had gone on five, worked in the constitutional convention. He also put out a false rumor that I was going to close the offices out in the Richie area where mechanical work was done on the highway. He got that story, I think, from a visit I had made out to Richie to see what was really done as far as the road work that was done and how the highways were maintained.

I got out there and it was kind of a wintry day. All of this county machinery was sitting out in the open. There was nothing out there to shield me from the weather. I said, "That can't continue." I felt there had to be some sheds or something to put those huge pieces of equipment in. Well, the story got out that I was going to close the shops down there entirely, which was not true.

Three days before the election, a lady from Richie came in to the headquarters. She said to me, "I want you to tell me the truth." I said, "Well what are you referring to?" She told me that story. I said, "That's absolutely false. I never made that statement. I would never shut those shops down. In fact, I had intended to improve them." Of course, by that time, it was too late.

DS: With your election to the Con Con, these days we would know the percentage of men and women that had voted for you. In those days, they didn't track the numbers quite that way. Clearly, you had to have had some male support as well with female support.

LC: I'm sure that I did.

DS: Since each district elected several candidates, where did you come in on the list of people elected from that area?

LC: You mean the number of votes I got? I'm not positive, but there were six running for those positions. I believe I was fourth in the total number of votes. It was well over the necessary number.

DS: Well Glendive had elected women before to office. You had a woman who was a legislator for a number of years. So there was some tradition of electing women.

LC: Yes, Catherine McCarty (?) was the one you're speaking of. She had been elected to the legislature. They've had some things. Now they've had two county commissioners who are women. They've come a long ways.

DS: Well it's always been quite a struggle I think to get women in the county commission level, to some degree, because of some preoccupation about equipment half of the time, and what do women know about that. My favorite story was that, I don't know if you remember when Jane Jelinski was first running for county commissioner in Gallatin County and the comments, of course, were that a woman couldn't drive the road grader. Well, she went and got a road grader and drove it and had all of the women supporters march with her. These days, there are women now, county commissioners across the state. In the 70s, even that was a fairly rare...

LC: Yes you wouldn't have seen that then. Though I will say this, one of my sons and I drove over every county road in Dawson County so that I knew what I was talking about. We had a little Volkswagen and we just went everywhere, places I had never been before.

DS: So how do you think the impact of everything from the Constitution's provision on equal rights and the general women's movement has affected the role of women in politics and the potential for women to run?

LC: Oh I think it's been really positive. I don't think they'll ever be able to turn that back. It's been set in motion and I think it's there to stay.

DS: When Dorothy Bradley ran for governor back in '91, she, of course, didn't win by a hair. How was that campaign as a woman running for statewide office?

LC: Well in our area, she did very well. She really did very well. I don't recall the number of votes she got because our area is really predominantly Republican. She did very well.

DS: Did you hear any of the kind of comments that you heard relative to your running about being a woman elected to that level of office?

LC: No I did not. I personally did not hear any of that. I don't think they say that too much anymore.

DS: And now we have a woman governor.

LC: Yes. Not of our party, but we have one.

DS: Well when you were elected to the Con Con, as you said, there were women who- I've always thought it was interesting of the 19, the majority belonged to the League of Women Voters, which I don't think has ever existed in Glendive or membership in the American Association of University Women, or in both. So I think one of the issues to look at there is how important those organizations were using their organizational resources to support this call and also a training ground for women, like yourself, who became delegates.

LC: Well it is important and I hope that they will not ever back away from that. They can make a difference. I know that, especially on things like school boards, they do have a very big influence within a community.

DS: Did AAUW state wide take a position advocating a call for Constitutional Convention and then for the passage of the Constitution as you recall?

LC: I'm not sure about the call for the convention. I know that the League of Women Voters did. They certainly did promote its passage.

DS: How did they do that?

LC: My communications with the members. They did have a news release on it too because one of the things that I have done on the Con Con, of course I'm its historian. I suppose I fell into that naturally. I have kept all of the clippings that were ever printed in the *Billings Gazette* on the Constitutional Convention. I have two big booklets. I also managed to get most of the clippings from the *Helena Independent*. They're all together. Among those releases, of course, were some clippings that showed who was promoting the constitution and AAUW was one of them. I haven't given those up to the Historical Society. One of these days, I will.

DS: One of these days you will, I'm sure. You have in front of you a letter that you wrote in response to Gretchen Billings' letter requesting a (unintelligible) and a questionnaire specifically about women and how they were- the women delegates in the Con Con itself and you were just

looking at parts of that. Her questions really were related to how you felt you had been treated as women to some degree.

LC: Yes she was interested in our personal opinions, why we ran, how we felt about various issues at the time, how we were treated, and so forth.

DS: I think as (unintelligible) has pointed out and you've pointed out in the beginning of this interview that it was the passion for certain issues that actually propelled individual men and women to run for the Con Con and their impact was because, like yourself, they had a passion for a certain issue, whether it was environmental—

LC: I think that's probably true.

DS: If it had been a decade before 1972, most of those women would not have run. They would have promoted men for those. Men would have probably been elected.

LC: I would not have been ready a decade before. I had a family to raise. I had six children. Some of them were still pretty young when I went to the convention. I could not possibly have done it ten years earlier.

DS: As a group, the early '70s was a period where the rise of the second wave of feminism and there was a lot of national press. There has been international (unintelligible). So there's a fair amount of discussion in the country about the roles of women in public life as well as in private life and a lot of social change going on during that period.

LC: Well I think the '70s were a unique decade besides what you're speaking of. In Montana, there was definitely a feeling that something had to be done about our state government. We had, I don't know how many boards and commissions, over 100, each one of them working independently from the other. Nobody knew what one department was doing or another. At that time, Governor Anderson came out with a slogan, "Twenty is plenty." When we wanted everything consolidated into 20 departments instead of 120 committees and groups that were doing their own thing. I think the state was right for that. A lot of progress was made in streamlining our government, making it more efficient. One of the things that I was particularly interested in was giving the people the power to know what was going on. If everything was done behind closed doors, we never knew who was voting for what or why. They can't do that now. And that's been a great bit of progress. I hope it doesn't ever get lost.

DS: I think those are issues are really reflective of that decade. I mean, coming out of the '60s and the right of the citizens to be involved in their government and to know what their government was doing was a very big part of this sort of national political changes that were going on and the questioning that was going on.

LC: There were other states in that time frame too that were also redoing constitutions. I don't think a single one of them ever really developed a better constitution. Montana was the only one, as far as I know, that absolutely rewrote its constitution and put in many of the progressive elements that it now has. *Time Magazine* now had an article about it too. They were literally, re-reading the article, it was almost like they were scratching their heads, wondering how this state of Montana was actually doing this thing. They were very complimentary.

DS: You're saying that as a historian yourself, that timing does make a difference. It would have been a different constitution in 1960 or 1980 than it was in 1972.

LC: And it would never have happened in 1980 or 1990. I'm sure it would not have happened.

DS: Because?

LC: The change and the thinking of people, the circumstances. We were ripe for it in the '70s. I think that was one of the big considerations and why it succeeded, though narrowly. But it did succeed.

DS: And we're so grateful for that. Thank you very much. When you're looking at this letter from, your letter back to Gretchen Billings about your experience specifically as a woman delegate within the Constitutional Convention and all of the activities that went on. You've answered one of these that, well there were no overt signs of discrimination, that there was in fact occasional attitudes that came forward about- directed toward the women specifically or as individuals. How was that?

LC: Well when I was campaigning in some of these outlying territories, you know, we had to campaign in four counties. Richland County-

DS: And that's a huge area in eastern Montana.

LC: McCone County, Dawson County, and Wibaux County. The smaller the community, the more you could all go see why they were wondering why this gal was out there running for something. I'll tell you an experience that I had in Sidney. I hope I'm not offending anybody by telling this story. My campaign manager who was my niece, well she wasn't manager, but she was working with me, went with me when I campaigned in Sidney. We had our posters and we went store to store down Main Street. Everybody took a poster and said they'd put it up. When we were finished, I said, "Let's go back and see if they actually put those posters up." We did not find a single store that had put my poster up. So I collected them out of the wastebaskets and decided I wasn't going to waste them and took them back with me.

DS: You said that when you were talking about the Democratic organizations and campaigns that women really are the backbone of the work. They do most of the grunt work and make

sure things get done and keep people working together. How was that in terms of the Con Con? Clearly in most of the day to day stuff, work was split between men and women, although women appeared to be most of the secretaries and those sorts of things. In terms of the delegates, did women see themselves do things differently at all in terms of the kind of work they had to do separate from the issues?

LC: Running for the Con Con was quite different than running for a political office because most people didn't really understand what writing a constitution was going to entail. They though, many of them, would go back up there and act just like they always did when they were elected as a senator or a representative. That wasn't the case at all. I don't think that too many people were really concerned about the type of candidate that ran as far as men or women. We had a more level playing field. It was a completely different type of election. Unless you were willing, and this came out in some of the material that was put out by the pre-convention group that did all of the study ahead of time, unless you were willing to do research and study, you probably wouldn't be interested in running.

DS: In that regard, it was somewhat different than the legislative—

LC: Yes very much so.

DS: Let me just push the tape over here.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

Note: Interview starts after a 1.4 minute pause.

LC: —but we had to run, the legislature set this up. We had to run on the two party system. Except for that fact, once we got up here, it was non-partisan. We were seated alphabetically. We were not seated by party.

DS: How was it in the actual Con Con in terms of workloads? I know Dorothy Eck commented at one point that while- she didn't particularly think there was a lot of overt discrimination, but the women spent a lot of time in the evening meeting and trying to make sure certain things got done in a different way than she thinks the men did.

LC: Well I think that's just women's nature.

DS: So tell me about that. Tell me about women's nature regarding that topic.

LC: I don't suppose it's true for all of them. Speaking for myself, I wanted to know what I was talking about. In order to do that, I had to study issues. I had to look information up. There was no way I could do it without some long hours and study. I think most of the women felt the same way. We would get together and compare how we were doing these. I can't speak for the men. I do know that the men on my committee, often went out and played handball when they were supposed to be inside studying something. We didn't do that. I didn't feel I could.

DS: This is sort of the women, to some degree, feeling like they have to be totally competent?

LC: Well perhaps.

DS: And you were.

LC: I just felt I had to be the best by nature. I don't ever do anything half work.

DS: Did the women meet on a regular basis?

LC: Not as a group, no. Once we got our committee assignments, we were all doing different things. We did enjoy getting together for coffee once in a while. Socially, I don't recall that we did a lot of social stuff as women, you know.

DS: There was a lot of work to do.

LC: A lot of work, yes.

[End of Interview]