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Interviewee: Bessie K. Monroe
Interviewer: Eleanor Wend
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Eleanor Wend: I'm Eleanor Wend and I'm speaking with Bessie K. Monroe in Hamilton, Montana, on July 29, 1977. You were a correspondent for the *Missoulian*. Is this where you began your work with newspapers?

Bessie Monroe: No. Actually I began about 1917. No, 1918, I guess it was, in Twin Bridges in Madison County, Montana. My husband was ill with a heart condition, and I felt the need to do something. He was working part-time but anyway I began working as a correspondent for the *Butte Miner*. That was then a Clark paper, you know, before the consolidation with the *Anaconda Standard* with the *Montana Standard*.

Then in 1920 we came back to the valley, and my husband died. I stayed at Darby two years but I got the job of corresponding for the *Missoulian* there, and I still wrote things to the *Montana Standard* which the consolidation took place just before that. I did some work for the *Ravalli Republic*, a weekly down here. He sent me two dollars a month in postage. That went right along with my *Missoulian* work, of course, but after two years he offered me a job down here in Hamilton on his weekly newspaper, the *Ravalli Republican*—

EW: This was what time?

BM: I've been here ever since, and my children—my six children—were all graduated from the high school here. I kept working when...I worked for the Associated Press, and I worked for a long time for the *Spokesman Review*. Did wire service for them. This Dick Potter who was recently killed in a plane crash was a telegraph operator in Hamilton for two years, and an out-of-state paper wanted telegraph news from here every day. He and I were quite...he was a wonderful young man. Always called me Mom. (laughs) Anyway he sent lots of press for me.

News work is very, very interesting because it concerns people. If you're not interested in people, you just as well not be interested in anything because they are the world, you know. So I don't know. It's always been so interesting, and I find it hard to quit. In fact, I haven't. But there's no reason. (laughs) No reason, no reason to quit.

I do resent very strongly the attitude so many young workers have toward the aging. They...Well, why don't they get off the job and let some young person have it. I don't think that's right at all. I can't do foot work anymore, of course, but I can still do head and finger work. And I am still just as keenly interested in people as I ever was, and I expect to keep it on. I like that little checks, that come in every month, but that isn't it. It's the fact that you're

contributing. When you stop wanting to contribute, well, you might just as well call up Mr. Dahle or whatever undertaker you're good and near to and say, "Well, I'm about to quit. You better come over here, and we'll make arrangements."

EW: Well, I hope that isn't soon at all. Butte. Did you write before you started working for the newspapers? Did you write independently in any way?

BM: No, no, I'd write a few generals, but after I got...They didn't amount to anything. I'd write things for the little...for the high school classes, you know, just generals about the different members of the class.

EW: Oh, were you teaching? Before that?

BM: No, no. I was never qualified to teach because I wasn't even a high school graduate. But I did teach three months in a family through one winter at Medicine Springs because their children were so far from school. There were three of them, and they were in the first elementary grades, of course. I did teach them things like...well, first and second and third.

EW: Was this before you were married?

BM: Yes, I was 16. Sixteen and totally...

EW: You started working very early in your life then, actually.

BM: I worked my way through what high school I did get.

EW: You did.

BM: I always worked.

EW: And was that around Hamilton?

BM: That was because I was one of 11, and of course my older brothers and sisters were married and gone. I still made my way, well, because I loved people and I wanted to be among people.

EW: You knew that from the very start?

BM: Yes.

EW: That's very important because I know that many times you may have a desire like that and then not be able to work with it for various reasons like—

BM: Oh, oh, you can—

EW: —early marriage

BM: —you can go a long way if you want to bad enough that's for sure. Life isn't a bed of roses for a country newspaper worker. I'll tell you that, but that's all the reason more for keeping at it. Course I wanted to see all my children, to see them get high school diplomas, and I did, all six of them. They were good. They were, and I had lots of good friends and, of course, some fine family people and relatives.

The main thing is if you aren't interested in the now there's no use in fooling with the past. I love the past. I love to...what I want to do in my writing is to make the people of today realize how much the past meant to them, how much it brought to them. If we didn't have something to look back to then we wouldn't know about the building of...where it comes from. Like in this valley now, there are only six principal schools, the high schools too. There used to be a district school every four or five miles, you know, just a little one room district school.

EW: Really?

BM: That's where I got most of my education because we had a wonderful little teachers. They'd come from Iowa and from Michigan and different Midwest states in the U.S. They would teach us classics, and we would be reciting at school day programs, you know, and, oh, every holiday. We didn't have too much school at a time—one in the spring and one in the fall—but anyway, those little teachers hammered it home.

It was really a primal education, and it was really...I know I have a lot to be thankful for, and I know—I'm sure the rest of them do too—but I wish I had had a college education. I hope the AAUW [American Association of University Women] won't hold it against me that I haven't, but I have known so many people, so many university faculty at different times have been my friends. We had at one time here what they call a Montana study, and the different university leaders came out and took part in it, you know. It was a kind of state-wide thing...and counties. It was really quite a wonderful thing, but a lot of that was concerned with the history.

You know, as far as history is concerned this Bitterroot Valley is the starting point for every bit of Montana's history. There was no name Montana. There was just a great big, unknown wilderness that was a part of the Washington Territory, which includes Idaho too. Later it was just a part of Idaho territory, but not until 1864 was it named Montana territory. You see, the covered wagons had been coming since in the [18]40s. Of course, the Jesuit missionaries are to be credited with bringing us civilization into this valley, and of course, that was the first in Montana. They started farming. They started everything—fruit trees and even manufacturing. Why, a flour mill and a saw mill, and that was the first manufacturing. The first crops as well as the first church and the first school and first farming and agriculture and manufacture, irrigation—everything in the way of the first started right here in this Bitterroot Valley.

EW: How did your parents find out about this area?

BM: Well, I studied, I've lived, I was born here.

EW: But I mean how did your family happen to move to this valley?

BM: Oh, my parents were born in Missouri, and my five older brothers and sisters were born in Missouri. Then they came by covered wagon to Arkansas. In Arkansas they lived there three or four years and farmed and found out from a man who had drifted out here and come back about this Bitterroot Valley. So they came by emigrant train to the Bitterroot Valley in April 1888. I was born in September 1888 so first arrival in a new place.

Well, I don't know I could be an Arkanser or a Montanan. Anyway I was born in Montana, and I'm very glad of it. But Arkansas was a wonderful state too. Then my people—my father—took homestead up in Tin Cup Canyon southwest of Darby, and he was there until 1896. They proved up on it then 160 acres, and he traded it to Nathaniel Wilkerson who by the way was one of the very first forest rangers in the Bitterroot Valley and moved then to just north of the town of Darby. Before that we had walked two miles and a half to the district school just north of Darby—a one room district school and the one teacher. It was a good life. It was a real, it was a rich life because we made so much of everything.

EW: Yes. What kind of farming? What did you grow, and did you have fruit trees and animals and everything like that?

BM: Why, of course, how else could we have lived, child?

EW: Some people didn't grow everything though.

BM: Well, listen in those days when people came to a new country, they took up land, and they built a cabin and dug a well and planted a garden and planted wheat and oats. They started from scratch. They had to gain subsistence for their families, and that was it but they kept on. From one year to the next everything was better. I mean they worked harder and worked for improvement. There was no such thing as just plain everyday savage living. It wasn't hand to mouth. It was guided by the Lord himself because these I can't help but—whether they were highly educated or not—these covered wagon pioneers had sensitivity. They weren't just common every day scrubs. They were people with brains and they wanted better things and they worked hard to get them. That's why things are like they are today because lots of people had before it those people who grubbed out homesteads and they fought for schools. I remember how my mother and father fought for better schools, and eventually at Darby the present school buildings are all on land that my father once owned that was a red clover field. So anyway...

EW: Did you have apples?

BM: Oh, of course. I said they planted a garden, and they planted apple trees.

EW: Oh, and they planted apple trees.

BM: Oh, this has always been an apple tree country. Of course, the orchard boom wasn't supposed to. That was just a promotion deal and but it teach the people something. That this was a diversified farming valley not just a one crop, but they still grow apples. It's good apple country, too. Of course, you had apple trees and good berry and currant bushes—raspberry and blackberry bushes. They put everything they had back home they put into production right here out on our homestead. They made it pay. Course my father would be working winters in the logging camps in those early years.

EW: Oh really?

BM: For the cash, of course, but it was a good life.

EW: Did you actively work all the time as a child? When you went to school, did you have chores?

BM: There was no such thing as child labor. Don't get that idea in your head.

EW: No, but with the homestead?

BM: We lived normal family lives. The children had their tasks—their chores to do—but they had time to play too.

[Telephone rings; break in audio]

EW: We were talking about childhood on the homestead.

BM: Oh, I used to go with my brother trapping squirrels. They made skis out of barrel staves. You know, open barrels were not so hard to come by in those days, and we were largely dependent on own resources. But we had a good life—a very good life—not in terms they call a good life today for the young people. But the young people today aren't satisfied with...all they want more of everything.

EW: It seems like it.

BM: But it was fun to get into the wagon and go places with our parents, you know, and so we had good lives and we learned a lot. As far as women voting and all of that...I married a young man in 1907 at Christmas time, and in 1910 I went with him to Idaho to take his first ranger's

position. I didn't go with him. He went in June, but I didn't go until October because of the severe fires of course. There in 1912 I voted because the Idaho women had the vote, but I voted for Woodrow Wilson because I married a Democrat. I thought, "Love me; love my politics," but my father was a Republican.

When my husband came over here to see his father who was dying in Missoula—Doctor Munroe. While he was over here, he went up to Darby, and my brothers converted him to the Progressive Party of Theodore Roosevelt. He voted for Theodore Roosevelt, and I didn't know but I killed his vote or he killed mine or something. Anyway, my man got in, but after that I went back to the Republican ticket. I thought faith of my fathers, but then I...

EW: You mentioned you were friends with Jeanette Rankin and I was wondering if you could tell me how you met her and...

BM: Well, of course, in Madison County I was writing for the paper when she ran for...when she was in Congress the first time, you know. Of course, I had seen her at various times, but I got better acquainted with her after I came back to the Bitterroot Valley. Course she had lived in the lower Bitterroot Valley, you know, and this was her valley as well as mine. She would come up here and stop by. One day she came by, and my daughter and I—my daughter was about 18 then—we went with her out...She had a ranch property out in the Charlos Heights country, and we went out there with her. She was just a common everyday Montana woman.

EW: Except she was in the legislature.

BM: Well, I think the fact that she went to Congress twice is something for Montana and the first Congress woman. She was the first.

EW: Well then did you work for women's suffrage before it was passed in Montana?

BM: Worked for women's suffrage? I helped in MT what with my newspaper work. Sure I did, and I liked to see better times for women workers. My goodness, when I went to work for the paper here in Hamilton, I got ten dollars a week, but the printers back in the back offices were union and they got 40 and 45 dollars a week. I had to go out nights and cover meetings and all that. Course then I kept up my *Missoulian* correspondence too, so that was only space rates and nobody got rich. Did you know...there was a liar's club once among newspaper men, and the first one who got up to speak said, "Once upon a time there was a rich editor," and the whole thing stopped and they gave him a prize. (laughs)

EW: Oh my, did you immediately involve in the various newspaper organizations? That all correspondents and reporters.

BM: I never belonged to any newspaper association. I did belong to the Montana Women's Press Association though, but I couldn't keep up with it because I couldn't go to their meetings.

All I did go to the one meeting in Helena, but it was kind of a flop so not anything special that I remember. You can't keep up with state-wide things like that, but I belonged to all the...I was secretary of the Chamber of Commerce then for a few years in the 1920s. I don't know how I got work. I wasn't working for the weekly anymore, but I kept up my daily paper work.

All together it's been a very eventful, interesting life. Hard work, and I think probably the average amount of sorrow and one thing and another but you have to live. You have to triumph over these things.

EW: I wanted to ask you about the Chamber of Commerce. How I think that it was different the role of Chamber of Commerce in those years seems different than what it is today. I wonder if you could describe some of the activities.

BM: Well of course, it has changed a lot in the years since then. I think it was 1924. It was very active in that time. That was when we...the Skalkaho road went through and the Big Hole road was the second Big Hole Road was built and all of that. I've seen all the roadmaking in the Bitterroot Valley. When I came to Hamilton, there wasn't a foot of paving in the whole Bitterroot Valley. I don't know as there was much in the whole state for that matter, but I remember the paved road between Butte and Anaconda stood out for years as the only paved road in the state. We had there was so much live work and action in the hard-working Chambers of Commerce in those early times. They really set their goals high and worked hard. Course I had to go around and do a lot of footwork collecting dues, but it was really interesting work.

EW: When everyone was involved in the Chamber of Commerce then?

BM: No, just the people who signed up and payed dues. It wasn't everyone.

EW: It was a civic organization.

BM: Oh, it was a good civic organization, but now you have so many civic organizations. Course the women's club here has been a marvelous civic organization always.

EW: Is that the Hamilton...?

BM: The Women's Club got the Carnegie Library here in 1911, and they've always kept up with drinking problems and different things. I don't know. I'm out of touch with pretty much now, but I think they're still striving but that old pioneer touch is gone. That's the trouble in so many things that urge to start something new and do it the hard way—

EW: Well, too many people want to do things the easy way.

BM: —and follow it through and see it happen. But it's a good world after all, and it's because it's people. It's not the boundaries or the cities. Course the boundaries have something to do too with it—with one group getting along with another—but I don't know...

EW: Do you have any feelings about the present situation of the Equal Rights Amendments and the relation to women's work in this world?

BM: Oh, I think it's fine that women are taking such an interest in trying to get more on their side and all that, but I think they've got to remember that after all there too women and men are different. There's where the sex deal comes in. Men have always been the strongest physically and mentally probably mentally because for so long women were...well they did what their men told them to do. They don't do that anymore. Sometimes they better. I don't know, I still think that there's some things that are better for the man to do than so many things that women aren't exactly physically...I don't believe in women...I think the organization like the WAC [Women's Army Corps Veterans' Association] and the WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] were all right, but I don't see women in combat. I think so many of them have had chances to show their bravery in the front lines as nurses and all that and that's marvelous, but I can't see women in combat.

EW: You can't possibly tell me that as far as the mental aspect you must feel that you write as well as men do

BM: That I like what?

EW: You must feel that you write as well as men do in your newspaper work.

BM: I'd rather work with men as far as newspapers are concerned than with women.

EW: Really?

BM: But then I think it's because men have been the leaders for so long. Men have minds that they don't fritter away time with little, oh, the silly things or anything like that. I think this business of...for instance, this chairperson deal, I think that's idiotic because in the United States government men and women who cares who man the post offices. To use the work man as it should be. Well, women are postmasters as well as men. There's no such thing as a postmistress in the herbal manner, in the postal department. A woman is a postmaster and the man is a postmaster, and that's the way it should be. This Madam Chairperson, Mister Chairperson—that's idiotic. They're not persons; they're still mankind. They still belong to mankind. Mankind means women and children and men. It means all of us.

EW: Some people believe that the verbal...that many changes begin with the words and their use.

BM: I think that's idiotic.

EW: You don't go along with that?

BM: No. I don't go along with that at all. I still think there' are some things that women should keep out of, and I still think that when they...of course any of these might in the teaching profession—the educators and all of that. I think that's wonderful. They have some wonderful women. There are some wonderful women doctors. We have women in every profession. I've known lawyers and doctors and teachers, professors. Why, I've just known so many of them in my work of 50 years, and it's wonderful. I admire the women, and there's so many strong-minded women that you're amazed at how much they think like men do because they have that ability. They know enough to abolish the trivial. They don't deal in trivia.

EW: You find that women deal in trivia more?

BM: Of course they do. It's been part of their makeup so long.

EW: Well, but you did mention the idea about equal pay for equal work which seems to be very—

BM: That I've criticized always, and I think maybe that that's better now. I think it's a great deal better. The hourly wage—the daily wage—when I worked for the paper I was paid by the week. Ten dollars a week that first week, but eventually I got seventeen and a half, but the men in the back office the printers quit at five o'clock. Didn't come back until 8 o'clock the next morning. They continued to get union wages. There it is, you see. They were in the union. But still I was learning, and I was actually going to school when I was working. I mean, my own kind of school. I know Dean Stone of the University [of Montana], the first dean of journalism, you know. He often came up here. He was my good friend, and I told him one day, “Dean Stone, if I ever get my kids raised, I sure would like to come down there and take some more from you.”

He said, “Bessie, you're getting the best education anybody can get right here in this county seat.”

He talked so I gave up then. I knew had to work harder than ever to learn the job and I have. I still probably couldn't get any great big diploma or anything of the kind, but I I'm still trying. I'm still learning too. Now, now I think that's all honey. That's it.

[End of Interview]