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## Oral Interview of Norma Keim by Jenny Meagher for a Project on Activist Women in South Berwick, Maine

Norma Keim

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**University of Maine Raymond H. Fogler Library Special Collections Department**

Oral interviews for a project on the history of activist women in South Berwick, Maine

Interviewer: Jenny Meagher (JM)

Photographer: Susanna Ross (SR)

Interviewee: Norma Keim (NK)

Date: June 25, 1992

Recording number: 1992.2.8.c4.a

Length of recording: 32:16

[transcript begins]

NK: I'm from New York so I talk fast. I'll have to try and motormouth it.

JM: That's okay, that's fine actually. Um, that's why it's good to have a tape recorder so I can get everything down.

NK: You're right.

JM: I'm just gonna slate the tape and say that Jenny Meagher is in South Berwick at 2:00 pm on the 25th of June. Interviewing Norma Keim. And I just wanted to ask you about the Strawberry Festival.

NK: Mm-hmm.

JM: As you know, and I'm just wondering, um, how you first, since you've mentioned that you're from away, how you got involved in the Strawberry Festival.

NK: Um, about six years ago, the Strawberry Festival Committee decided it was getting so big and complicated that they had to break it up into parts. Break it up into parts and you know, bring more people into it because it's very complicated. It's incredibly complicated to pull this off. And I worked in the flower shop over here and they used the copy machine and once, out of desperation, the chairperson said, we could really use somebody to take care of the volunteers. And so, I was feeling, why not, and the trouble is once you get on this

committee like the only way off is to move or die, you know. It's just, it really takes a lot of dedication to stay on it 'cause it takes a lot of time. And you don't, there isn't any particularly tangible reward for it, you know.

SR: How early in the year do you have to start working on it?

NK: Um, we really start in January because there's, there's crafts judging, that they have like a jury for crafts, and that is pretty well taken care of by March. Just decided who's going to have tables here. Um, and then very quickly we've got, we have entertainment to arrange. Um, trolley, you have to, you know, a lot of these things take six to eight weeks free ranging. Um, the, each, the organizations that they're selling food has to start planning, you know, several months ahead of time. What ends up happening is that there's always this core of volunteers in town and they are all stretched to the limit on Saturday because they've got, they help the Strawberry Festival Committee plus they do their own, um, fundraising. You know, food selling activity or whatever it is. So, it's, get's kind of tense. But, so far we've been able to pull it off.

JM: So, what is your particular, do you have a particular job? Cause you work with volunteers.

NK: Yeah. I'm volunteer coordinator. And I have to line up, I figure it's really around two-hundred and fifty people between Thursday and Saturday to be at specific places and specific times.

JM: So, what are the volunteer events? I know there's the strawberry shortcake assembly line and the hulling.

NK: Well we have, um, I could just actually go through my schedule here. Like this afternoon I have to make sure that tables are moved down from Berwick Academy. We need about a dozen tables. Get the sign out announcing that on Thursday. Also, we have equipment

stored in a barn. I have to make sure that equipment gets from the barn down here. That means getting trucks and men. Um, Friday, I, we have 115 people so far who've signed up to help hull strawberries. That means, you know, beheading them, but also putting them into the food processor. I need people to load, to take strawberries off the, it's about three tons of strawberries, off the truck into the cafeteria. Um, the people to haul them, then another set of people remanded to get them back into the truck. Um, that happens pretty much on Friday. Saturday their shifts, people who actually build and sell the strawberry shortcakes. We need crews of fairly strong people to carry whipped cream and strawberries from the refrigerated truck to the strawberry shortcake tent and to the kitchen. We need a crew in the kitchen to be washing. Then everything has to go back Friday, Saturday afternoon. Back to Berwick Academy, the tables. Back to the barn, the equipment. And, what's really kind of miraculous about this is by, by about five o'clock you'd never think anything ever happened in this town. I mean there's, you know, at noon there's about 15,000 people and a carnival and, and by five o'clock it's, it's all gone. You know, it's just, that always gets me. It's, it's so, it's such a complete process. We have bleachers to get here, we have stages to set up, we have flags to hang out.

JM: This sounds very involved.

NK: It is. It's terribly involved.

JM: Well, I'm wondering how the Strawberry Festival began. Do you know who the original—

NK: Um-hmm. It started in 1976 when all the towns had their events. And, um, they were fishing around town for what to do here and the one thing that was really organically local was strawberry socials in June. Apparently, each little neighborhood got together sometime in June and had a strawberry party, you know.

JM: So that's been going on for a long time—

NK: Since 1976.

JM: But the strawberry socials has been around—

NK: Oh, they were just around for generations, you know.

JM: I see. But, are strawberries are local fruit—

NK: Mm-hmm.

JM: —in South Berwick?

NK: Mm-hmm.

JM: But the ones that are coming in this week are from California, is that right?

NK: Some of them, some of them are. Um, what is the, there's a carefully worked out formula of, I think it's like two thirds are California berries and one third are local berries. The California berries have a good firm body. The local berries are sweet, you know. And it's a mixture of the two. It also guarantees if we have a crop failure that we'll have most of the berries that are almost guaranteed from California, you know.

JM: A crop failure this year?

NK: If we did.

JM: Oh, if you did, I see.

NK: If we did, we'd have, we'd have to order the berries quite a bit ahead of time.

JM: I see. And is, when is strawberry season? It's in June?

NK: No, right now berries are local. You can pick them around here in fields.

JM: And I was just, I was wondering about the community aspect of this. Someone had told me that they thought the Strawberry Festival was the one time of the year when the whole community in South Berwick got together. Do you feel that that's true?

NK: Oh yeah. Yeah. Everything is geared, everything is geared to this weekend. Um, it's sort of, I have a feeling it's sort of we kind of neaten up and straighten up for this especially, you know. I mean it's sort of like we have company coming and you give the town a once-over. it's kind of encourages roadside pickups, sweeping the streets, you know, kind of straightening up your storefront or your lawn, you know. It, uh, and there's so many organizations that are involved also, peripherally, that they're all—I decided, I thought, well you're gonna ask me some questions about why we do this to ourselves, you know. And I decided really, it's, it's almost like a process of teamwork, you know.

JM: What are some of the organizations—

NK: [sound of flipping pages] Some day when they see how disorganized I am they're going to take his job away from me. People who are contributing, we've got the fire department, the Rotary [Club], a couple of businesses, For Your Plumbing always help out every year. The rescue squad, ski club, a church women's guild, senior citizens, Knights of Columbus, Teachers Association QTA [Quamphegan Teachers Association], [unclear] of the mind from school, [The] Friends of the [South Berwick] Library, [Old Berwick] Historical Society, Agamenticus Land Trust, Republican Party, the junior wrestling team, Tri-Berwick Lions, Girl Scout Troop 1034, they're gonna babysit tomorrow. Uh, I've been taking care of, pretty much myself with a couple of other people, about 30 kids between the ages of 3 and 5 and it's been truly a nightmare so I'm so happy about that. They're going to do it for a public service. The Masons, senior wrestlers, the Rollinsford-South Berwick Lions, Baptist church, youth soccer, Rod & Gun Club. They're all doing things that are fundraisers for their

organizations. It's really kind of a neat thing 'cause it brings a lot of people into town and they spend money at the festival and have a good time and the money isn't necessarily in the town. We're not really a, we're, we're not a wealthy town. We're not a poor town but we're, there isn't a lot of money here. A lot of old families, kind of, um, a lot of elderly who lived here and are really feeling the pressure of property taxes. Which I think is a shame because people have to move. I mean they've been here generations and they have to move because they can't pay their taxes.

JM: That's really too bad. (?)

JM: It's, you know, and yet we fall into the Boston commuting area now. My husband travels to Boston every day. You know, so that kind of jacks up everything.

JM: And you said you work as a florist, you were saying?

NK: I used to work in the flower shop. Um-hmm. Clerk.

JM: Do you work now?

NK: I work as a teacher's aide over at the Central School.

JM: Oh really?

NK: Resources. (?)

JM: So, you're doing this on top of that but school's out now?

NK: School's out now. Yeah.

JM: That allows you to—

NK: Yeah.

JM: —do all the, wow.

NK: [laugh]

JM: —wanting to take a vacation.

NK: Yeah. It helps.

JM: So, can you tell me about some of the events that will be happening tomorrow and the next day? And especially the difference between the two. I'm interested in the difference between the two days.

NK: Um, tomorrow is pretty much a workday. It's just the hulling in the morning. You'd have to take the events schedule off the front of the library 'cause I think I left it at home.

JM: That's fine. Just off the top of your head. I don't need a full list because I do have the—

NK: Yeah, alright. Tomorrow we have three, the, I mean on Saturday, so tomorrow morning is just the hulling. That's pretty much over with by noon time. Everything goes in the truck and there's kind of uh, and then tomorrow night there's the night of music. Which is really nice, it's a combination local Dixieland band and local chorus which does a really good. Both of them do. And that's sort of like a thank you event to everybody. Um, just free. They're encouraged, people are encouraged to bring a snack or something to drink with lawn chair and just relax. And then Saturday morning the set up really starts around 6:30 because we have all the craps people bringing their things in and all their booths. It gets to be rather zoo-y at 6:30 in the morning. But by the time it opens up at ten everything should be in place. Um, the strawberry tent opens up and people really fight to get there. It's a good shortcake and it's not expensive. We've kept the price you know, there for years now.

JM: Who makes the shortcakes?

NK: The, short, the, bakes the shortcakes? We have a bakery do it. We used to, originally, everyone in town brought it but what we do now is have the bakery follow a recipe so it's a real shortcake biscuit.

JM: So, it's a local bakery that, which bakery is this that?

NK: Harvey's Bakery.

JM: That's great.

NK: And um, we got real cream, real whipped cream.

SR: Wow.

JM: Who does the creaming?

NK: They do it for us, Harvey's. We used to do ourselves but what a mess. It was all over everything. But they have a machine, you know, that they use in it, so we've decided why not let them use their massive machine and then we move it over and store it in a refrigerated truck and—

JM: Is there a special recipe? Whose recipe is this?

NK: Um, it's just one that was around town. No, it's a good shortcake biscuit.

JM: And is there a special, is there a special process? What's this assembly line going to be like?

NK: [laugh] Um, let me see. I, I can't say exactly because I usually do the cashier. They're behind me. I'm going crazy, well, doing the money thing. But, um, I think it's a biscuit and, a biscuit passed on, slap of strawberries, biscuit on top, another strawberries and whipped cream. That's it.

JM: That's great. 'Cause I, I was wondering with the strawberry festival, I, I've been told that for people who have been here all their lives, they feel that community has lessened a fair amount since the time when they were growing up, say, say pretty much after the Second World War. And I don't know, you haven't been here that long but, have you heard people talking about, have you felt that yourself? That, with this becoming more of a commuter town that it's becoming an increasing problem that community is not as strong in South Berwick?

NK: Um, hmm. Well, there's one underlying theme here and I blame it on the water. [laugh] And that is this this town loves children. It's a very nurturing town. And I say I blame it on the water because of uh, an article I read once in *Scientific American* where they're experimenting with manganese and they deprived monkeys of manganese and they found the result was when they deprived, you know, them of manganese in their diet they lost their nurturing abilities and I thought that was really interesting. And then we had our water tested 'cause I thought we had all this iron in our water. What it is, it's manganese. I thought wow, you know. We have super manganese in this water and this town is big on children and family. They really are. And I thought, it's got to be the water. I mean I always joked about something being in the water in there. I thought maybe it's true, you know. I don't know. I'd like to get—I'd like to locate that article sometime and just have them come and do a water sample. But this was years ago. But I think there's a, regarding community, is, um, I think we probably have more of a sense of community here than a lot of places. Also, because we have a working downtown which I value highly. There aren't many small grocery stores left in the country. You know, and this one here has been in the family for two or three generations. Um, we have a hardware store, and we have a florist and this is just a little town, you know. We're really lucky to have those, that center, you know?

JM: So you feel like people have stuck pretty closely together throughout the changes that have happened in South Berwick?

NK: I think so. There's, there, there are different groupings of people within the community, you know. But, boy, we have an event at school and we've run out of room. We have people standing, you know. It's not just, its everybody, it's right across the, right across the board. It's sophisticated newly arrived people and Yankee families who have been here for generations, you know.

JM: Where are you originally from?

NK: Um, I'm from New York State via University of New Hampshire.

JM, Um-hmm. And why did you move to South Berwick?

NK: Pure chance. It's, my husband has a friend who bought property here and we bought a piece of property from him and it happened to fall in South Berwick. But, um, I used to travel, you know this is back in 1960, I used to travel through here a lot. And I always liked the town. It just felt good, you know. And I had no idea that we'd end up living here. It was just chance.

JM: And you mentioned that this is a children's town. Do you have children here?

NK: Do I? Um-hmm, um-hmm.

JM: And have you found this to be a good place for them?

NK: Oh yeah.

JM: What is it? Why is this town a children's town? What is it about it?

NK: Um, well, the pace is kind of slow, you know. You can, you can, if you live in town here you can send your child down the street, downtown on a bike and you don't have to worry about, nope, everybody's always kind of watching out for everybody. Oh, what else? It's a hard one.

JM: You work in this—

NK: Yeah, it's like, it's like the games, their games or events, anything is well supported by the parents. I sometimes think, the town became a dry town in the late 1800s. There's no alcohol served in town. I sometimes think that that has a lot to do with it. You know you can kind of trust the people that are around. People go to bed early. They get up early. The place really kind of closes down around seven. That's, you know, that's good, that's healthy. Um, if you want night entertainment you go to Portsmouth or Dover, the beach area. But, you know, it's kind of a nicely—I don't know if you ever read *Her Land*, it's a book written by this woman in the early 1900s and she kind of proposes an idealistic society for how children are raised and the whole thing is geared towards what's good for kids. And it's really amazing. Um, you know how fast-paced kind of destroys it. How, you know, you have to move slowly with kids. So, they can see things, so they can, you know they can't learn if they can't count steps or look at things carefully at their speed, you know. And it's, I don't know, it's just kind of a nice slow-going town.

JM: I'm also interested about the women in South Berwick since they're doing [unclear] on that. And I'm wondering if you were to characterize the women in South Berwick how would you describe them?

NK: Characterize. Hmm. I don't know if you could—there are lots of different kinds of people here, you know. Um, child-oriented, surely—

JM: Are there any outstanding women figures?

NK: Um, well, we have in our, our author here who's now all of a sudden famous [laugh]— Sarah Orne Jewett. The woman who, reminds me, but I can't remember name, but the woman who bought the Hamilton House back in the turn of the century and restored it. It was a Boston figure. This was her summer house. She bought that house at the urging of Sarah Jewett. It's a beautiful place. Lovely place. And she and her daughter lived there. Til—Tilson Bond, something like that. Um, we have, we have Gladys Hasty Carroll, still lives out, she's queen of the country. I don't think you'd better quote that in an article because, I don't know, that's my own private classification. But she, she, she was, but she used to really be very active in town politics. And it was like there's a rural area and a town area and she's, she's a really, kind of a neat friend of mine. Um, very private person though. She likes to communicate over her desk. She's just, she's very private in that way. But she's written some really interesting books. [unclear] living, growing up in an area like this. *Dunnybrook, As the Earth Turns. A Few Foolish Ones*. Um, and she's still here, like I think I told someone, they're having an open house in July. The dates are on the board in the local market here if you want to get it.

JM: Right, yeah. I've heard about that. That sounds great. Um, I'm wondering, with the Strawberry Festival, it seems like there are a lot of women here involved in organizing that. Is that primarily a woman's kind of—it was begun by two women, wasn't it?

NK: I'm not sure. I'm not sure how. You might know more about that than I do.

JM: I believe Margaret Stevens was one of the first to get it going. But it seems like there are a lot of women involved.

NK: Actually, in the library I think they have a little paper from that, they put together a newspaper of that Bicentennial event and you might find something in there on it on the first one.

JM: That's interesting.

NK: Um. I don't, I think it's probably evolved to be mostly women because, originally, they would have been the ones who'd have the time to pull it together because they wouldn't have been working back then. Now most of them are working anyhow and they're still trying to pull it together. Um, but, it also, there are a lot of things that we couldn't do without the help of the men and the muscle, you know. We wouldn't be able to pull it off by ourselves. And we have, what, we've got three people on list, on the festival committee, three men. So, it's not, it's not 100% women.

JM: What do you think is the best part of the festival is? What's your favorite part?

NK: Ah, best part. Well I guess to me, I'm the oldest of six and I'm, I just cannot avoid enjoying teamwork because that's the way I grew up. And I think the neatest part is just the massive teamwork that's involved in this. I get a high from it. You know everything, everything has to be just so and people have to show up and they have to, you know they, have to work together to put it up and to disappear it again, you know. I, I kind of compared it once to this, you know how they have in, what was the musical? Um, where the town appeared every hundred years? Um, oh, *Brigadoon*. It's like this thing appears once a year and then it disappears again and like I said five o'clock, six o'clock, everybody's gone, it's all cleaned up, and there's just a few bleachers around and it's all gone again. It's, you know, it's amazing. I, I think I, I don't really wander around to the crafts myself. I don't, I, I'm at an age

where I decided I don't want to accumulate things. I want to get rid of things. I don't want more things and so I don't do that that much.

JM: Where are the crafts from or who? What kinds of things?

NK: They're from all over New England. And we've got a name, really, for having very nice quality crafts, nice range, nice price range.

JM: So, things like quilts and pottery?

NK: Um-hmm. Wrought iron and all sorts of things. Now also, at the same time, I didn't mean to admit it, but we have three places of entertainment for entertainments going all the time. Throughout the day. And that's all free. I like that. I especially like the cloggers. I don't know if you've seen them. They have the cutest, I don't know maybe a dozen girls, maybe 12 to 15, 16. And they're just so, they're just so cute and exciting. It's just, I don't know. Do you know clogging?

SR: Yeah.

NK: It's, you've got to see it. And we will see it on Saturday. It's, it's just so bubbly and lively and it's really fun to watch.

JM: Great. Um, I'm just wondering mostly with—I think—Do you have any questions?

SR: No. I was just trying to think. I can't think of anything right now.

JM: I think that's—Basically what I wanted to know, um, just about the special parts of the festival. Um, oh, I know what it was. About the carnival aspect. I was interested in what you said about that. Is that rides or is it a traditional carn— You're just saying it was gonna be kind of like a carnival. Do me just like a fair or are there gonna be rides going on?

NK: Um.

JM: Maybe I misunderstood.

NK: I don't know if you got that from me. I'm not sure.

JM: Oh.

NK: That's all right. Um, though this year, for the first time we're having a children's carnival.

Maybe that's what they're talking about. There hasn't been a lot for the kids, for little kids to do and so for the past couple of years we've been trying to encourage things in, pricewise, that they can buy. You know it's been adult-level purchases. We've been trying to get more things in that kid, little kids can buy little, a kids' table. And the PTO, the parent teacher organization, decided they'd like to try and get some kind of fundraiser going and they landed on a carnival-type thing that they can lease. It's, and I have no idea what it is because it's brand-new, but it's going to be behind the school and things are going to be [unclear] and you know rides and things like that. Not, not, not mechanical rides but um, one of these balloon, one of these ball jumping places that they can, things like that. So, I don't know how that's gonna work out.

JM: Is that during the Strawberry Festival or is this later in the summer?

NK: During. Behind the school. So, they're going to be moving in tomorrow morning too. That's going to be brand new. I mean I'd like to really sit out here in the square at six o'clock and watch tomorrow morning. I might do that. That's gonna be interesting. I think we have ponies coming too. And they all have to go in an order 'cause if we get one thing in too soon, then others can't get by them, you know. [laugh] It is a scheduling miracle. But you were asking about the women. I guess, I think one, one thing about this town is they're very hardworking. People are very hardworking here, you know. It's a part of real ethic is work

ethic. Um, and very school centered. We also have, it's, we have three schools here, it occurred to me. We've got a Bible Speaks which is a Bible School, a residential Bible school. We have Berwick Academy, which is a private school from kindergarten to graduation, and our own public school system. And then four or five churches. And all these things they're always, there are always things going on that you know during the week there, there are always meetings or events or. You know, for a small town, it really has a lot of activity. It all requires work and labor. Um, we have a pretty active parent support and involvement with the school board and with the town government—

[end of transcript]