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Recommended Citation

Howarth, Ruth, "Oral Interview of Ruth Howarth by Jenny Meagher for a Project on Activist Women in South Berwick, Maine" (1992). *Audio Files*. 14.

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

Interviewer: Jenny Meagher (JM)

Photographer: Susanna Ross (SR)

Interviewee: Ruth Howarth (RH)

Date: 1992

Note: audio is faint

Recording number: 1992.2.8.c11.a

Length of recording: 22:24

[transcript begins]

RH: —how to do it but that. If you could just turn back time and start back and get rid of some of the things that we've acquired that are so not good in our society but I just don't know how you're going to do that. But I listen to somebody like Jerry Brown, I really like him a lot. You know, his philosophy is right up my alley—

SR: Refreshing.

RH: It is, really. I was listening to him early this morning and everything that he says just makes so much sense, you know. We need to get back somehow or other and have things more simple so that you can have some kind of control over it. Now everything is so big, you can't, you don't know where to start.

JM: Right. Right. Yeah. Another thing that my mother, it's just interesting. She's Catholic but yet she has a lot of trouble with the traditional Catholic teachings, like the Pope. I don't know if you—

RH: Definitely. Yeah, yes. I couldn't feel more that way. In fact, we were talking about this just recently, my husband and I. We were saying this person with whom I take the Bible course. I mean, Dr. Burney, he was, now I didn't want to burden you with that because I didn't know how you felt and you don't want to listen to about somebody else's faith if it doesn't have

any application to you but he was a missionary for 15 years in Africa. But his love was teaching the scriptures. Because he truly feels that, unlike Fundamentalists, who take everything word for word, that he is able to put you back in the setting of those times, then you can see how those things have an application to your life. Not if you're just going to take it word for word and try to apply it now. It doesn't even make any sense because they didn't live like we do. So he has knack of being able to take you back and still relate it like, I'd love to hear him when we go to a course [unclear] during the Gulf War for instance. He started talking about Iraq and he said now that was Babylon. You see now, he ties it into today so you can have some kind of a meaning and some kind of a follow-through so that it begins to have some meaning. But, what was my point, I was going to tell you something, I have a terrible tendency to do that. I was going to tell you something that he said. Oh, I, I was going to say he brought that subject up just recently. Saying how Pope came about. It was when Pope Leo and Attila the Hun and he won for his people and they started— And he was an Italian, they called him papa. That's was Pope means. He said really the successors to Saint Peter were more the patriarchs. Which are in the Eastern rites. And see and I love to, I love to listen to what they believe. You know we go to their service and I just, I like to go everybody's services. And I can find people in any faith that I, I say now there's somebody who's about, like I told you about Carolyn's church. See that's not my church. But they do all the right things. They really do. They're always involved in all, you know, uh—

JM: Um-hmm.

RH: They have their, the pantry for the needy and they're just involved with the elderly. They have that, the office there for and the meal [unclear]. You know, they just do right things.

So, I can be in one faith and find all the good things in mine but I find lots of good things in others and whoever's doing it wherever they are it's just the right thing is the right thing.

JM: Well that's so good because that's not traditional Catholic—

RH: Yes, I know. No, we're not traditional in that sense, Jen. And my husband and I feel that way very much. And we're comfortable with that though. See I never worry about what somebody thinks that I should be giving to this or that or the other. I give to everything that I think is important. And then I don't worry. You know, I just say no, this is how I feel. Or if I see that they collect for something and I, it's not, I just don't, I don't say that it's a bad cause. But I'm saying that I think it needs to be used more somewhere else. Then it doesn't bother me to not give so much to that and I'll give more to the other one and I'm perfectly comfortable doing that. It doesn't faze me to say that or I would be very upfront and it wouldn't bother me to tell the pastor that either 'cause that's my personal feeling and so. He'll have to do his and I'll do mine.

JM: One thing Carolyn was telling me yesterday that I though was interesting. She said as she got older she felt more and more I don't know, more and more, what's the word, able or kind of a right of, of growing older was to be able to speak your mind more. That because she believes that age should be respected. And so, she felt that people should respect her opinion because I guess the older she got she felt the wiser she got in some ways. But she—

RH: Well I think everybody does. And that's part of that, what older people should be able to add because they may not be any smarter but because of the very fact that they've had the experience that has to in and of itself, you know, given you something that somebody hasn't born yet that hasn't even been through it. Because I always feel that way. To look at

something that, I believe in that old saying you have to wear the moccasins. You know, it's fine to be on the outside saying that somebody else should or shouldn't do. That's one thing that we always notice in our family where my husband is the oldest of all his seven, you know, siblings. And so, we found that we had our children first. And we found that his brothers are, they probably said 'Well they probably wouldn't let their children, or their children wouldn't do this.' We found when they had their children their children did similar things because you don't, when you don't have them yourself you don't know the kind of feeling you're going to have as a parent. Things that may not, you can't imagine, well that this would happen or that would happen. When you have your own it's a whole different thing. So I do think you have to, you have to have lived it to know it. You cannot learn it necessarily from somebody else.

JM: Um-hm.

RH: Not always. Maybe some things you do but I do think that there's something to be said for having actually gone through something.

JM: Um-hmm. And she said she felt like she spoke out, she's speaking out more now than ever. Do you think that for yourself?

RH: Oh, I think that. Well see I don't see Carolyn quite as much now because I'm in a little different set of circumstances, but she always spoke out. And I, I look for Carolyn to speak out. She's the one I know if something needs to be said Carolyn will be there to say it and I just, I just have so much respect for her. I never thought of her as being able to say it because she's older. I think she should have said it right from the beginning because I mean, she just always was in the right place at the right time doing the right thing. [laugh]

JM: How about yourself though? Do you think you speak out more—

RH: Well I, I think that I, I may be more comfortable speaking out now and saying what I, and not worrying about what someone else thinks about what I'm saying. I'm more apt to say what I really believe and not, before I used to be [unclear]. You know, they probably won't, they'll probably think this, this, or this. I don't think that as much anymore. Now, I say those are my feelings and they're sincere and so this is how I am. And they'll have to take me as I am. I gotta be me so.

JM: Right. Yeah.

RH: That's what Frank Sinatra said. [laugh]

JM: That's right, And, um, I'm just wondering how, how you would define activism. Like you talk about people that that have done a lot of great things. What is it about what they've done that—

RH: That impresses me?

JM: Yeah.

RH: Well, I think just sometimes taking the unpopular stance. I think sometimes the, to be an activist you have to be doing something that other people are criticizing. You know, to stand for something that you know maybe the majority do not believe, and I think that takes a lot of courage. That's what I call being an activist, being able to get out and do that in such a way that you can inspire others that maybe feel that way but not are not able to express it in the same way and, and it, enable them to do it. I think that's what I see it as. You know, that's how it is for me. Sometimes I might not have been able to do something that Carolyn would have done, but the very fact that she's doing it, I am, then she gives me that courage that I need to do it. Because I so, so totally believe in it. And then I need support in order to do something like that and so—

JM: Do you think that you're an activist?

RH: Probably. I don't know. I guess I probably wouldn't be considered one because I have not always been, like I tell you a lot of times the things that that I have supported sometimes I've done it through donations as opposed to actually working. I have been there to support their thinking, but not necessarily to be doing it in an active way, you know in a very small group. So probably you might not consider me, but I really don't know. Maybe I should just say that I don't know to that answer. I don't know if anyone else would. I don't consider myself one. But I do consider myself standing for a lot of things that are not popular. But I, they're popular with me.

JM: Um-hmm.

RH: So. I guess maybe I'm not one. [laugh]

JM: How about when you stood out though for anti-nuclear?

RH: Well, I thought that was. I thought I was in that case. Because I thought that took a lot of courage because as I said, I knew these people that, that we're showing that we do not approve of arms and everything and that also spills over into something like a shipyard. I mean that's very much involved in, in that type of a race. I mean that's defense no matter how you look at it. But like I said, I mean the shipyard was going to be there and somebody had to work there. So, if all my family didn't work there because we didn't believe in it, that wouldn't have changed anything. So I felt it all someday it may be something that we can approve of. Certainly said it in that direction. I don't know but they should have done some long-range planning to have something useful to use it for. But at that time I did think that took quite a bit of courage because even my children had to go by and see me there coming from work. And I don't know with whom they were riding, and they probably didn't

feel that way at all. Those that were in the car with them. But they never, they [unclear]. I guess they knew mama was like mama herself.

JM: Do they, I know for me sometimes, when my mom was doing stuff like that I'd be a little embarrassed or I'd be scared for her.

RH: Yeah.

JM: Did they ever say anything?

RH: I don't think they were scared for me, but they might have been a little bit embarrassed for me and said gee, probably they were thinking well, that's what all the other people are thinking about me doing this, you know. So, I I'd say they, they might have felt that way, but they never expressed it. They never said, oh you shouldn't do that. I think they thought if this is what I believed in, they're pretty much that way anyway. They say yeah, okay, you go. Like we're cutting down trees now that my husband was a big person in planting trees when we came and this was a field, there wasn't any house here or anything. So, any of the grounds we have he had done. So, all those trees that we planted, you know, as a wind barrier, everything was in the right place. The ones that dropped their leaves were in the south. The ones that shaded and kept the wind away were on the north. But now, see, they have grown to the point that the stems are all on the bottom. The growth is on the top where we don't need it. We need the sun for the flowers. So now little by little he's planting hemlocks to replace them and cutting them down. So, my son came over the other day and he said— we took down one on the side and it really made a big hole. You know you didn't notice it until it was down 'cause all the growth was on the backside. But once that tree went down, oh, we had this really big opening. But now we'll be able to see the, the moon at night and the sunset in the, the winter. And we really didn't need that [unclear] closed in,

so. My husband said to, to Bruce, he said something about, well, did you see I took the tree down? He said, hey, look, Dad, that's your tree. Do whatever you want. [laugh] Instead of he might have said, well gee, you tried to get trees out what are you cutting it down for? [unclear] enough, that's your tree. Do what you want.

JM: That's great.

RH: So, they sort of have that attitude. You know, that's your life. You do what you think. But they, they pretty much think like we do anyway.

JM: Do the people in town give you a hard time?

RH: No, I don't see the people in town that much. Yeah, it's in that it's getting back to now like it was for me when I was young. We didn't get downtown very much. I was saying that to my husband, he said, well, we didn't have cars. You know we didn't. I still rode in a horse and buggy sometimes to the end of the road to meet the, the bus. You know, during the mud time. So we didn't get downtown. We were, we were pretty much out here. We didn't associate with the people downtown. Not that we didn't want to do that was just how life was. And I find it kind of reverting to that again because now I'm involved in my family, all of whom are right around here. And I'm not involved downtown unless I go down there for as you said, you know, a town meeting or office something. So, I'm pretty much out here and a lot of times we do not hear the things that are going on if I didn't read the paper, I would not hear things that are happening that other people seem to be very well aware of. You know, like I'm saying, maybe things that you wouldn't want to hear. You know like the police. Things like that. We just don't hear things like that, you know.

JM: Do you think—

RH: Or gossip or things.

JM: Yeah. Do you think that's made you more independent?

RH: I consider myself very independent. You know, I just, I do not need. I enjoy people. Don't misunderstand me, but you don't need a lot of people around. I can be very happy with the setting that I have. I don't have to have— and I notice that among people some people can never go do anything unless they have another couple along. And we're not that way. We enjoy doing because maybe because we share the same interests. If we didn't, maybe it wouldn't be that way, but I kinda think it would anyway. But we don't need to have a lot of people. If we have our family, our family are our friends. The others are our associates. And we like them and but they're not people who interact with us in our everyday living or even our every year living. You know, we see them at different functions. Always glad to see them and like to chit chat with them but they're not an active part of our life.

JM: I'm just wondering, I know Beverly Hasty was telling me about the kind of hardships of women during Ethel Hasty's time. Just talking about childbirth and losing children and—

RH: Oh, I think that was common.

JM: Horrific stories.

RH: Yeah. Yeah.

JM: And I'm just wondering what you feel in your lifetime or maybe in your daughter's lifetime or your granddaughters. What are the hardships of being a woman? Do you think?

RH: Um, well, I'd have to go back. First of all, what you said it does have meaning to me because my mother's mother died from a blood clot in her leg. This was after my aunt was born. She had a, I suppose, today would call that thrombosis. But she had a blood clot and in the process of doing what they thought was helping her, they rubbed her leg, which put

that blood clot in circulation and she died from that. So, I mean it was, you know, a result of childbirth because in those days they kept everybody in bed for so long. You know nine, ten days. And now I mean they're up the same day, which is much, much better. So that medicine has progressed tremendously to me. I mean, that's, I think everybody agrees to that that we now live longer and, and, and we have all the tools that we need to live well. If we don't do it, that is not because it's not available to you but, uh. Well, [unclear], now it's, that's not a good statement because there a lot of people it's not available to. But I'm saying you have the knowledge is there for you to use. But I mean 'cause we all know that in the healthcare field needs. There's so many people that don't have access to medical. I think that's another blight on our country to me. So, I'm not sure if I want socialized medicine but I certainly think they need to do something to make everybody, it accessible to everyone. I think.

JM: Right. So, so what do you think are the hardships for women today?

RH: Ah.

JM: Or, or when you were—

RH: The hardships for women today is trying to manage your family given all the outside influences over which you haven't any control. Like drugs and even TV. I mean, you may want your children not to see certain things, but it's just about impossible. Parents have to work today. There's no way for most of them unless they're affluent that the mother can stay home. So, I, I just think bringing your children up and trying to instill the values that you want in them and trying to install values in them and also to uphold the values you have for them. I think that's the hardship because everybody has to work and everything costs so much that there isn't any place that you can cut corners. Like when we raised our children

we always, we had to live a lot on hamburger, but in those days hamburger was good meat. I mean we bought ground chuck and that was excellent. Today, even tuna is not a good buy, you know. But there isn't any place that you can actually cut corners and, and if you do, it's a place where they shouldn't have, it's food that they shouldn't have. So, I, I think that's the hardship to me. Is trying to bring your children up having to work and still having them to have the, the outside influences that you want them to and try not to have them have the ones that you don't want them to have. I think that's a real hardship. I see that with my daughters like, oh my gosh. I really feel sorry when you have to get up and go out to a babysitter and. Now even in the summertime, my other daughter she has to take her two children. They go with her. They're in excellent programs. But you know, we, when we were young, we used to think it's wonderful. Came summertime, you could sleep a little longer in the morning. You didn't have to get up and get ready. These kids still have to get up and go with their parents. They go to the shipyard and there's an excellent program for them, so they have things. And now I think children today do need to be kept busier than we did. Because their minds are so much more active and they've been exposed to things so much earlier, so they do need to have things to do. But by the same token they're not able to stay home in a family setting like, like my children. So, I think that's the hardest that I see.

JM: So you think that stress falls more on women than on men?

RH: Yes, I do, because the mothers somehow or other. I mean that I think the fathers, and certainly in my case, I think everybody, my son is so good with his children and everything. But still it's, he does all the things that his wife is the one who sets it all up, you know, and he just cooperates and does everything. But she's the one who does all this planning and tries to work it all in. And I think the mother is the, the planner and the— I can't think of a

good word. I, I still think that she is the one who has to make things, gets things set up and then the husband has to help make it happen. But she's the one overall that I give all the credit in the world to. And I think they do have it very hard to me. Much harder than we did.

JM: For you, what about, how was it being a mother for you?

RH: How was it being a mother?

JM: Yeah, was it a very hard thing?

RH: No, it really wasn't. I think back on it I never thought of it as being hard. Now maybe somebody looking, if I told them what I did then they might say 'Oh, gee, that was, how did you do that?' Because I used to get up, my children were all up at 5:30 in the morning. I used to see the sunrise. And, and I never felt that that was, I enjoyed that. I'm a morning person. I love the morning. I feel that's the best part of the day. So, I was up early with them but also, on the other end, they, we never had a problem with them going to bed, they were always, went to bed early, they were up early. And they were busy all day but we just always found things to do. I never, I never found that it was. And I used to take them clinics because in those days only my husband worked and you know he didn't have a high paying job by any means. But in those days, seems we don't have any more, there were clinics. If you were willing to go and stand in line your children got their shots. And I did that and I'd spend hours there, you know. Waiting for them but they all got their shots and everything. And that didn't cost us anything. You see today that's not available anymore. So, some people would think that that was a hard—, but I didn't, you know. And we only had one car. And so, we didn't get to do a lot of things like people do today but neither did we think that we needed to, you know.

JM: Um-hmm.

RH: We went blueberrying and you know, things like that and. Had fun. We'd go to the beach in the morning and we'd be back for lunchtime. We'd always go down early before the crowds and before it got too hot. We'd take them to the beach and then we'd be back in time for lunch and they'd have their naps and we always had sort of a. They always fell into a structure that, my kids say to me 'How did you do it, mama?' But I don't know. It just happened. I mean we didn't work at doing it they just always seemed to work very well. They went to bed early, as I said, they got up early which we didn't mind at all. We were up early too. And they always seemed to fall into that structure and they didn't seem to. You know we had some sort of a little system so that we did things and they fell right into it. We didn't have, they never gave us a hard time.

JM: And I know for—

RH: Maybe I was lucky.

JM: [laugh] —for, um, for Carolyn, she was saying that sometimes she felt torn between her family and her issues, her ideas, her cause, I guess.

RH: Yeah, now that I would, that's one place where I would differ with Carolyn. See, I did not, I shared the same interest in those causes, but I never had a problem. My, but I, if it came down between the two it was always, always my family. I never had any trouble making that kind of a decision so it never. So, I probably was not as good at. That's why I say that she would be more of an activist than me because if it came down to that then that's where I would depart from it and I suppose that would not constitute a good activist. If you're not going to be there when, you know, you can't all of a sudden say if you're going to. You've got to be there when they need you so I guess maybe that would go back and answer your original question that maybe I wasn't a good one.

JM: Or maybe, maybe it's also saying that activism isn't necessarily a good thing in that way.

Maybe you should be able to be a good activist and be good to your family too.

RH: Well, thank you, Jen. That, that really is reassuring. That reminds me of something one time I was at a church meeting and there was a fellow who had come up from the diocese in Portland and he was talking about, you know, getting people to be on boards and committees and things like that and he was, the phone rang and the priest went on the other side to answer the phone and it was so nice and refreshing to hear this fellow say 'That sometimes you do have to say that you're not going to go and be on a meeting. Now when I went out tonight, he said, my little boy said 'Daddy, are you going out again?' [phone ringing in background] He said there are times when you, your family has to come first. And he said, and the priests do not understand this not having been in this situation he said. What they need to do is come at two o'clock in the morning—

[end of transcript]