

Field Notes and Transcript – Romaine Ahlstrom, '62

Narrator: Romaine Ahlstrom
Interviewer: Sondra Vazirani
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Field Notes:

Track 1

SV: This is Romaine Ahlstrom, who is a librarian with the LA Public Library, and this is the ...
Interview, so here we go. Why don't you tell me about your family background?

RA: I was born in New York City, but we only stayed there about two weeks 'cause, um, the reason I was born in New York was my mother met a nurse at the Clark Avenue Hospital and there was an obstetrician that she particularly wanted to deliver her first child, so we stayed in New York, and in those days, women laid in for a couple weeks after birth, now you go home in two or three days, but my family was actually living in Washington, DC, where my father was teaching at a ... school in Washington, and so in I lived in Washington, DC, for a while, and then when WWII broke out, my father joined the navy. We went and lived with my mothers' parents in New Jersey. By the time the war was over, we'd moved to Massachusetts. That's where I started school. I spent two years in, um, Peabody, Massachusetts. Then we moved to Canada and lived in several places in Ontario. So, my childhood really took place in Canada and I think that was one of the most important ... in my life: growing up in another culture. Even though it isn't all that different, it is different enough. And being an American, my family and I really stood out. So, that was very interesting. I came back to the states in, um, 1955, and that was to Chicago area, and went to high school in La Grange, IL, at La... High School, which was very different, it was very college prep, very hard, whereas I had a sort of a country education in Canada. It was good in some ways, it was more rigorous, an American education, in some ways, and not as sophisticated in other ways. And then I finished high school in Connecticut, in Portland, Connecticut, because my father took another job. He was in the publishing business. He wasn't

in the army or anything, but he kept being offered jobs and he kept taking them, so we moved around a lot. And then, I went to Pembroke or Brown in 1958, from Connecticut.

SV: And why is it that you chose Pembroke?

RA: I really don't remember how I first found out about it. I applied to Duke, which was where my father had gotten a Master's. I applied to McGill in Montreal, because I wanted to study French and I wanted to go back to Canada. And I applied to Mt. Holyoke, because my father had gone to Williams as an undergraduate, and he thought Mt. Holyoke was great, and we visited there on a beautiful day in the winter with the snow on the ground and the sun shining and people were very gracious. And somehow I found out about Brown, I think I wanted to be at a co-ed school. And if my parents wanted me to be in New England, I wanted to do something different than be at an all-girls' school because I was socially very unadapt. I thought the idea of these weekends was just going to kill me. I wanted to be where at least there was a chance of meeting men casually and in class, you know. Why Brown? I'm not sure. Except that it was sort of unknown. In those days, it was really a school that drew most people from the New England areas. There weren't very many students from anywhere else, in the mid '50's. And we went there on a day of pouring rain. That hideous old building is still there. I think it is Pembroke Hall, is where I was interviewed. The interview, my father remembers, didn't go well, but that was my choice, and that I got into all the schools, but that's where I wanted to go, and he never could figure it out.

SV: Hmm, great. And uh, what do you remember about your classes and your dorms and the house mothers and ...?

RA: I was lucky because we didn't have a lot of money, I asked to be in situation that probably doesn't exist any longer—I'm not sure how long it existed—but, there was a dorm called Bates House. It was in one of those funny little Providence, I suppose they were mansions in a sense, it wasn't elegant, it was just an old house with three stories. And this is, I think, right where the medical school is now. I mean, that's where it was. The building is long gone. And there were twenty of us and a house mother and we did our own cooking and cleaning. We bought our own

food and we saved a lot of money that way. It was sort of cooperative living and it was very interesting and I really enjoyed that.

SV: That's really nice.

RA: But, basically being in college I didn't like, and I thought about that a lot. I started college at 17, because I had skipped a year in grade school, and my mother felt I was too immature to go, but my father said, "No, let her go," and my mother was probably right, I probably should have stayed out for a year and worked or something and realized how much I hated it. But I went off to college and because I had been in several high schools that were not really very rigorous intellectually, I was much at a disadvantage. I think in those days, we always felt that if you'd gone to public school, it took you a couple years to catch up. If you'd gone to private school (which about half the students had), you were much more used to dealing rigorously with concepts. You knew how to write papers. It was really hard for me. And I was suffering from teenage angst and I was not particularly happy at Brown, but I don't think I would have been happy anywhere. There were good parts, there were bad parts. But it was not a jolly time. And also, it was the end of the fifties, which I can't understand why from my age and perspective, why anybody would want to romanticize the fifties or make TV shows about the fifties. They were a horrible time, a time of dreadful conformity and being a woman was very difficult. I mean, you had strict standards you were supposed to live up to, and I was a feminist before I knew I was a feminist. And so, when I went off in the fifties, in the late fifties, it was very much button-down oxford shirts and knee socks and loafers, but the beatnik movement was on campus. And so, I went off with my preppy clothes and I came back at Christmas to Ohio, which is where we were living at the time, and I had all black clothes. So, I had black tights, black skirt, a black sweater, I don't know how I had the money to acquire these clothes, because I never had any money. But I was dressing like one of the beatniks. And that was sort of my orientation while I was at school. I didn't participate in student government. I didn't feel a lot of school spirit. I hated sports. I've just recently gotten active. I work out at the gym five days a week now, but in those days, I was different. So, a lot of my memories are not particularly happy, but I think it was because of how I was feeling in general. I don't think I would have been happier anywhere else. It was just an unhappy period of my life.

SV: Hmm, ok, great. Um, what, what is your best memory you have?

RA: I had some very good friends. I had—I kept up while I was at school, I kept up friendship with the women who had been in Bates House my freshman year. And some of us roomed together later on. And that was good. And I, did have, um, a couple of men friends, who I was close to, and one major boyfriend when I was in school. And basically, I think it was the fellow students that I felt closest to. I was not asked—I was an English major—I was not asked to be, uhm, what do you call it, to do honors English 'cause my early grades were not good. I got distinguished on my comps. I don't know if they do that any more, but when I took comps, I, uh you know, I got this great rave review of my comps. I always read a lot. I loved to read. It took me a while to get going in school and I didn't come out with a very good grade point average. I was not super competitive. So, I don't, there weren't many very professors, that, uh, I remember particularly taking an interest in me. Maybe I didn't taken an interest in them,. The only woman professor I had and one of the few on the campus in those days, maybe only one, well, one of the very few, was in the English department, and I had her for a required class in seventeenth century literature and we disliked each other on sight. It was the only woman professor I had, and you know, it just was, it was never, it was just real, well you know, and I never had that problem with men professors that I remember where it was just this kind of, mm, but um, I can't even remember her name. And I didn't like that period anyway, so that was uh, I didn't care for that class for various reasons. [laughter] Am I being too frank?

SV: No, no, no, no. That's perfect. So, was there anyone who influenced you at all?

RA: I don't think anyone particularly on the faculty. Although, there was one, no, that's not true, I lied. Uhm, Andrew Sabel, who taught Shakespeare, was a wonderful teacher and that was my, probably, the class I liked best of everything I ever took. In fact, I took it one and a half times. I was, uhm, during my first senior year, I was going through a lot of emotional problems and then I dropped out and I had, I think I had that quarter, or that semester, an A, a B, a C, a D in my classes and my A was in Shakespeare and so when I came back after I dropped out for a while, It took the rest of that class, and I think I even took an extra semester of it because it was

wonderful. He was terrific. He was very exciting, very demanding, it was a great class. The other class that I took that I didn't do as well as in because I was a sophomore, but that I've never forgotten, and it's really changed my life, I didn't write that down on the form. When I started at Brown, was when Brown was doing something very innovative. They changed the way freshman, sophomore requirements were done. I think they were the only college at the time that was doing that. And you could take seminars as a freshman or a sophomore and I think that's probably quite common now, but then it was very uncommon. And I had a seminar my sophomore year with a professor of, I think, Spanish and Portuguese, his name was Trueblood. And it was called "The European Write in the Non-European World" and it was wonderful. We started off with Columbus' letter, one of his letters from the New World, which Trueblood got from the, um, John Carter Brown Library, and we read all kinds of things. We read D.H. Lawrence's, um "Mornings in Mexico," and Plume Serpent, and we read Tolstoy, and we read "Passage to India" by Forrester and it was a wonderful, wonderful class about how you take your attitudes with you when you go to a new setting and you can't even see. That letter from, that Columbus sent back to the King of Spain talks about hearing nightingales in the woods of Cuba, well there are no nightingales in the new world. He was hearing what he was prepared to hear. That class really influenced me. In fact, a couple of years ago, I started working and I am still done with it, I hope, on a master's degree in Latin American studies, here locally at night. Because I just got very interested in that whole idea of, of, how one's perceptions are conditioned by one's background. I think, too, having grown up in Canada made me aware of different perspectives and how people think based on their culture. So, I'm really interested in anthropology. If there had been Anthropology there at the time, I probably would have majored in it. But, they had a few courses in the sociology department. But it was not a developed major in those days, and I never heard about it, so I took the easy way out and majored in English. So, I would say that particular, well those two professors, those two classes were the most influential on me.

SV: Alright, well, let me switch, uh, tracks here. How were the relations between men and women at that time? Were all the women there looking for husbands?

RA: A lot of them were. A lot of my friends got married at the end of sophomore year and some of them dropped out. Um, certainly, dating was difficult, you know, people were really, if you didn't get a date for homecoming, you felt rotten. I think, having my expectations of being there and having , being able to meet men casually, were kind of fulfilled, except that the men on campus, it was really much more prestigious to get a date from another school, than to date somebody at Pembroke. Especially for freshmen and sophomores. Later, I think it kind-of evened out. The one thing I remember, I was a waitress in the dining hall, which I enjoyed having to do something to work, and so I was a waitress, it was a lot of this pre-decorum on the waitresses. It was a lot fun. It was active. It made you get up and off your bottom and do something a couple of times a day. And we found out that the men who served in the dining hall at Brown, because it was very separate in those days, got more money, it was five or ten cents an hour more than we did, and it was obviously a sexist thing, but the reason was that they carried twice as many juice glasses on the trays as we did and that was the differentiation between the men's wages and the women's wages, which I thought was a rather pathetic excuse, but in those days, you know, we weren't organized to react to that. It was pre-feminism, so we didn't know what to do.

SV: Was smoking really in Vogue? 'Cause I was looking through your old newspapers and there were smoking advertisements in every paper.

RA: It was.

SV: Aren't they illegal now?

RA: I don't know. It was very much so. I had never smoked. I thought smoking was disgusting, although my parents smoked, and they since quit. But when I got to school, it was the thing to do. I learned how to do it, even though it made me sick at first and I became a real addict and I didn't quit until about fifteen years ago. I finally stopped. And then there were campus reps. One of the campus jobs you could get was to distribute little four-packs of cigarettes to people, to, um, that's something that's not done anymore, I'm sure of it. Little boxes of all the major brands for four cigarettes in a pack. You could make money by being a rep like that. And various, one of

the cigarette companies, I forget which one, had a contest, and one of my dorm-mates won it, of a blindfold test to tell each cigarette brand apart. It was very much the thing to be sophisticated, was to smoke. And, um, that's changed, I think. Throughout society, people don't think it's particularly clever, and we did.

SV: How did it work with curfews and things like that?

RA: That was interesting, because we had to sign out. When I was there, we had to sign out if we were going to be out after, I don't know, nine or ten. And we had to be back by, I think twelve-thirty. And everybody was like a timecard. You had a thing that was on the wall where you went into your dorm and you had to sign out and the house mothers kept track of you and they'd do bed checks and stuff. And, um, I think for me in the late fifties, that was probably, I didn't question it, particularly, like I questioned some other things. I would have a few years later, but at that point it just seemed like an extension of parents and those kinds of rules. Girls pure, you know. There were girls who violated it, and there were girls who got kicked out when they were caught. I wasn't one of them, at that point in my life. [laughter]

SV: [laughter] And what about, like, dress codes?

RA: That was funny, because we couldn't go off campus if we were wearing shorts or pants, unless we were wearing a coat. If we were on the campus, it was OK, as soon as we left the campus, we had to be wearing a coat, but, so we didn't show our knees or something like that. And, um [cough] excuse me, for Wednesday dinner and Sunday dinner, we had to dress up. We had to wear stockings and a dress or a suit or something like that. That I resented very much. I used to wear my dress shears, which meant no stockings at all, because they just annoyed me tremendously. But we had teas and that kind of thing, and we did have to be ladies from time to time.

SV: And, um, how'd that correlate, with your uh, things like May Day and Ivy Day, and...?

RA: You know, I don't remember any of that. I think some of that had already gone by the boards, but maybe it was just that I thought it was all so ridiculous, I didn't participate. I remember none of that kind of thing.

SV: Hmm, um, how did you think that, um, your years at Brown, or anyone else's that you were in cooperation with, developed your sense of, um, role and jobs for women in the future? Like, were most people there, uh, oriented in getting an education and getting a job or ...?

RA: I think, looking back, and that relates to the question that you skipped about chapel or convocation. Um, I don't think we were offered much opportunity. I think there were some women who were very ambitious, prepared themselves, I remember someone in my class was a math/ec major and I thought, "Oh my god. That's very impressive." Some people, some women were definitely going to go on to higher education beyond BA. It never occurred to me. In fact, I didn't know what I was going to do. I would say a good proportion—a third to a half—expected to get married and have children, and in some ways, I did that too. Some of them expected to work for a few years and a lot of them went into publishing, especially the English majors all went to New York or Boston and tried to get jobs in publishing. I didn't want to do that, but I didn't know what I wanted to do. So, there were, there were the academic types, who knew they were gonna go on and none of them were close friends of mine. And then there were the ones who were gonna get married or got married, some of those were friends of mine. I don't think we were offered. Well, what was interesting, though, and I didn't realize it til years later, that question about chapel made me think of it. Um, it was years later I realized that those compulsory chapel things, which I hated and resented at the time, really sunk in to my consciousness, because what they told us was, "You have been given a great privilege by being here, and you need to make a contribution." At that time, I thought, "Oh yeah, sure, a contribution." But really it has, it has done something to my life since then. And that I did take away—it was not a particular contribution that I remember but something, and there are some things I know, like I never had any contact with the deans and the faculty, except the Pembroke dean who told me I really better drop out and think things over for a while, when I was doing badly. Um, there were very few female role models, because I mentioned that one woman professor and I absolutely despised each other. The only other women I remember were the gym

teachers, who I thought of at the time, as kind of, Nazis, for making me do things that I didn't want to do. And, um, I think at that point, there was a kind of openness that women could do various kinds of things, but it was really up to the individual woman to break that ground, you know. It was not offered to you as an option. If you had your own strong sense that you wanted to do something different, I suppose no one would have said no, but I didn't know anybody who was trying to do anything really different, and maybe some of that really got...Uh, my sense would be they didn't get a lot of encouragement. They really had to fight for it on their own.

SV: Going back to the chapel...

RA: Yeah.

SV: thing. Um, was that non-denominational, or was it..?

RA: Yes, we met in that pretty building, whose name I forget, that's got a stage. It's right on the, on the Pembroke quad there.

SV: It's probably Alumnae Hall.

RA: Alumnae Hall. And it was not really religious, but it was sort of inspirational, you know. It was completely non-denominational. It did emphasize ethics and good behavior and giving something back, and it was, there was a lot of it I can't remember if it was once a week or a lot. The memory's faded, but I know I didn't like to do it. And yet, it had an effect on me, positively.

SV: Was there anyone, um...I only saw one foreign student in your yearbook.

RA: Oh, that was interesting. We had...When I was there, my class, in the four years I was there was as normal student, before I went away and came back, there were, I, there were very few foreign students. It was very much, a, white-bred kind of campus. It was more New England than anything else. It was probably more Protestant than anything else. Um, more Anglo than anything else. When I went back for that final year, I was put, because I was sort of anomalous, I

was put on the top floor of...what's the name of the dorm, like if there's, here's the Alumnae Hall, and there's a door back here in the old quad and there are two ancient buildings here, but this one was built, like after World War II. And like here's, um, Pembroke Hall, down here, and Brown's over here. It's on the old quad.

SV: That's, like, Andrews.

RA: Andrews. Exactly. And I was put on the top floor of Andrews with all the other anomalies. And that's where some of the Jewish students were. There were two black students, if you can believe that. One was from Africa. One was an American girl student. And that was it. And very few other interesting, odd, or you know, special kinds of people, and that's the way it was in those days. And it's changed a lot since then, because I read the Alumnae magazine, and I know there's been a lot of changes since then.

SV: Um, uh, I want to talk about Brown in the past. They said that they built all the dorms as singles so that girls would not congregate in their rooms to cut down on lesbianism. And do you remember, any, uh..?

RA: And this, uh, these were mostly singles up here. These old rooms, 'cause I was in this one one year and then, Bates House was over here—they were all doubles. But yes, this dorm had lots of singles. You know, I wasn't even aware of lesbianism in those days.

SV: Not at all.

RA: Well, I wasn't aware of it going on, I don't think. Um, and it's funny because I certainly have been since, but at that point, no, I know one of my men friends from Brown campus would get furious because a couple of his, um, the guys in his fraternity, were gay, and were trying to, you know, kind of recruit him, and he was not that way, you know. I remember he'd get very angry about it. Homosexuality was more something that people knew about, but they, you know, there was no gay rights in those days or anything. We had a "Fair Play for Cuba" committee on the campus, because that was just after the Cuban revolution stuff, but there was no...I had no

consciousness whatsoever of gay women. Whatever they were doing, they were doing it very privately.

SV: What did the, um, Brown men think of the Pembroke women?

RA: I think they thought that they were, that they were for weeknight dates, and for the big weekend dates, they got girls from other campuses. Well, they ended up marrying a lot of them and getting serious about them later on. But, I think basically, the basic attitude that they were OK for coffee dates after class and stuff, but not for important stuff, when it was stated.

SV: And um, in '61, you had, um Nancy Duke Lewis leaving the university and Dean Pierrel coming. So was that like a big thing on campus?

RA: Well, I think as I remember, it was a big thing in a lot of ways, well because, Lewis had this wonderful, gracious approach. She was very quiet, very gracious, charming woman. Not a pushover, by any means, but a woman of the old school. And, and, um, Pierrel was very different, very brash, very tight, was a rat psychologist, ya know, I think there was a lot of a feeling that she didn't fit. She was the one that asked me to leave, as a matter of fact, when I wasn't doing well. And I think she, she, became over the years very well accepted, but the transition was hard, because she was such a different type of person. I think looking at her now as, as, from a feminist point of view, you know, we wouldn't have had that attitude, but I think it was difficult at the time. Gosh, remembering the politics of twenty-five years ago.

SV: It must be kinda hard.

RA: Yeah.

SV: And back then, you still had Josiah T. Carberry.

RA: Yeah, has he died?

SV: No, I think he is still there, but um...

RA: He was this mythical person, this mythical traveler, this strange person, who would be sited in various parts of the world, doing strange things.

SV: Was it funny?

RA: Yeah, I mean, it was funny.

SV: OK, I was wondering about that... Um, what did you think about the merger in '71?

RA: It didn't affect me. At that point, I was already out here, and I was you know, college was a long way behind me. And, um, I'm not even sure I was getting the alumnae magazine. My father got me into the alumnae association, because he felt that I should do that. I probably wasn't even paying attention. It didn't bother me, because Pembroke was never separate, you know. We did all our classes at Brown. There was very little of Pembroke to begin with. It wasn't like Radcliffe, or something going out of business, if that should happen. We really were part of Brown to begin with. Our degrees were from Brown. So, it was time.

SV: Ok, um, how big were, um, sororities and fraternities back then?

RA: Well, we didn't have any sororities. We never did, but um, girls at other schools did. And the fraternities were, were big. I was egalitarian, I thought, and I didn't think there should be fraternities. On the other hand, I'd rather date, I would rather date guys from fraternities than not. And so, I was kind of a snob, also. There was a great deal of snob appeal to being in a fraternity. It's true. They had better parties, they had nicer accommodations, you know. And I think most of the guys who were not in fraternities were rather proud of the fact that they didn't feel left out too much.

SV: That's good.

RA: It was, uh, it was the kind of a thing, I think it was, because it was there was a beatnik influence, and because the counter-culture movement was beginning to form, it was a lot of iconoclasm among students. But on the other hand, when they had a mock election between Kennedy and Nixon, Nixon won. So, um, it was a relatively conservative time, but as I said there was a “Fair Play for Cuba” group on the campus and so there was a little radicalism that was beginning to build at that point. I was not a joiner in the sense that I didn’t want to be a part of stupid government. And, I reluctantly got involved with things like community chest and fundraising activities. One thing I wanted to do was theater. And, because that was completely extra-curricular, you mean, you couldn’t take performance as a class or anything. It was all on your own time and I never had much of my own time, but by senior year, I tried out for some productions and got some tiny roles, and that was really fun, ‘cause that was another group with tremendous inspirational core. People who were the theater people were really great. I mean, they were kinda ridiculous. They had mannerisms that theater people always have, but I like theater people. It’s like people who deal with horses—there’s a way that they are that’s they’re a lot of fun to be around. So, I did get involved with theater toward the end. I can’t think of anything else though. I liked to be by myself and read and be with my friends and, I suppose sulk a good deal of the time because I felt that life was, I don’t know, teenage angst, is what I called it before.

SV: How cliquy was it?

RA: I, well, we had our group of freshmen friends, who’d been in that dorm together, and because we were all in the dorm because we didn’t have a lot of money, um, there was a certain amount of feeling among us that there was, there were a lot of cliques, other than us. I remember as a waitress there was some women who treated me like the servants that they had had at home or the servants they wish had had at home. And, um, one of the Sultan stall girls was in my class, and there were people who went skiing in the winter, and went to the Caribbean in the winter, but I think a lot of this just felt, you know, this is what rich people do and you don’t need to worry about that. Other than that, I don’t know, I didn’t feel left out of groups particularly because I sort of felt left out of society, I think. It wasn’t ‘til later years that I began to have the sense of where I belonged. But that didn’t bother me particularly, and I didn’t want to be part of those groups.

SV: Um, did you feel you had any extra restrictions placed upon you either by your background or by the fact of just being a woman, the fact of being a Pembroker?

RA: In terms of when I was there?

SV: In terms of getting into classes or as opposed to people's attitudes towards you..

RA: I think that the women were treated, I can remember, I mean, this is like before feminism, you could sense that you were beginning to have feelings but you had no way to express those, no structure to express them in. There was no theory yet, there was no mass movement yet. I can remember resenting a lot of things that now professors did to women. They didn't take them seriously. We always felt, many of us felt, we knew this, in fact, that our grade point average to get into Pembroke was higher than the guys' grade point average. And I think that the guys did get more opportunity, probably got into more honors' programs, trying to think. I remember one thing and there are probably many examples, this is just one that I remember. One of my friends went to a, uh, a class, I don't remember what program this was in, discipline. But, one of the, there was a woman student in the front row, she crossed her legs, and the professor said, "well, now that the gates of hell are closed, I'll go with the culture." I mean, that kind of thing, I can remember at the time thinking that was really disgusting, but there was nobody to protest it to. I mean, you could say that as a professor and it didn't matter.

SV: So, it was just between you, you could yell. You couldn't even go to a dean, or a...

RA: No, there as nobody you could go to. I mean it was not something that was recognized as a problem. Except for the people who, you know, heard those kinds of things, and who were sensitive.

SV: But nobody wrote letters to the paper?

RA: No, no. These were the olden days, believe me.

SV: OK, and um, it still says you had the feelings about the name change in 1928?

RA: I don't even remember what it was.

SV: OK, you have me on that one. Hmm, let's see, let's go to uh, let's go to what happened after Brown. We'll probably get thrown back into Brown. Um, first tell me about your job history and right now you're at, you're working for the LA Public Library.

RA: I have been for years. In fact, all my serious jobs have been here in different capacities. But, I think that more interesting than jobs, socially, when I left Brown, I dropped out for a while, went back to Ohio with my family and I worked in the library at the Denison College, which was right near where we lived as a clerical person. And I really got to like working in libraries. I applied to library school, I think I applied to UCLA and Simmons and I got turned down because my grade point average was low and then I decided I didn't know what to do. I went, well I came back tot Brown, I finished my requirements, and then I cast around for something to do and I really didn't want to go to New York and I didn't want to go to Boston, and I had a friend from college, one of my friends from freshman year, who also had been a roommate at one point. And she was out here in Los Angeles. Her mother had moved out here, and so, I came up to spend the summer with her, and she had wanted me to come partly because she was living with her mother and her mother didn't want her to live alone. And she wanted her own apartment, and she figured if I came out, then we could get an apartment together, and she could break away from her mother, which is was what happened, and I came out her in June 1964 in the Jack Rabbit trees were in bloom and it was gorgeous and I thought I was gonna stay for the summer and I eventually got a part-time job and moved to the beach and had a lot of fun. She had started a master's program at UCLA at that point in Linguistics, which she later finished. So, I, I mean, it was, the summer went on, the summer went on and all of the sudden it was October and I thought, "Gee, what am I gonna do now?" 'Cause in New England, where I was most used to living, by October, it is winter, you know, and the summer just seemed to be endless. So, I got a job at UCLA in the business library there and um, stayed. And after a year or so, I met a Chicano man..

Part 2

RA: So, I met this Chicano guy whose name was Nevarez, and we got married, and had a child. And, I quit work at that point, I think that's right and basically joined the counter culture, which was absolutely fascinating and I did it with, um, a great deal of enthusiasm. I had my child by natural childbirth and I nursed him and this is funny culturally because my sister-in-law, his sister, who all the children have been nursed as children, she wanted to have her children bottle-fed. And so that the Hispanics were beginning to be modern with bottles and I was being old-fashioned with breastfeeding. And, um, we had a great time and I was, I don't know, I could go on and on about that.

SV: Go ahead.

RA: Counter cultural stuff. Well, I don't know if I really wanna relive the sixties, but it was a very exciting period. It seemed as if lots of thing were opening up—there was, there was the Beatles, there was all kinds of stuff going on and it was very exciting to me: the new ways of child-rearing, many of which have turned out to be wrong and just new ways of doing everything and we were very involved in that. But, my husband was not good at making money, and after a while I realized I needed to make some of my own money and be able to support myself and my son at a little higher level than what we were doing because this was beginning to paw at, living at the bottom of the social scale was beginning to bother me, mainly because of things like healthcare. So, I figured library school, I'd try once more for library school and we had moved to Seattle, Washington where he was working as a warehouse man and I applied to library school and had the interview and they took me on a sort of probationary way. If I did well, 'cause I didn't have good grades, if I did well enough in the first quarter with the basic courses, I could stay. I had been at home with the baby for two years at that point and I really was dying for some adult conversation and even though library school is intellectually undemanding, they give you a lot of work and I met a lot of nice people. And so, I think in library school, I got all A's or maybe one B, but I got, I had a very high grade point average. I worked very hard. It was a lot of fun. And I was up there for about a year and a half and there were very few jobs up there. This was an exciting time to be in library work because the whole thing of outreach to the ethnic

communities, outreach to children, outreach to everybody, was really big, and I really bought into that. And so, also the climate of Seattle was so grim. It's a very nice city, culturally it's interesting, it's small enough to be manageable, but it rains all the time. The sun never comes out. It really got me down. And there were very few jobs, so I applied to come back to Los Angeles, and I came back in 1969, and my first job was as a children's librarian, which I had trained for in East LA, not far from here, in fact, about a mile from here, in a Hispanic community. I've learned some Spanish because my mother-in-law and father-in-law don't speak a lot of English, so I learned some Spanish. And I started out with mini skirt, driving this old ford, and I was Mrs. Nevarez and when I'd go visit the schools, Mrs. Nevarez was coming and then I would walk in, it was always kinda fun to see people's reactions because they were not expect. I worked as a children's librarian both on the east side, here in the Hispanic community, and then transferred to the west side. [cough] Excuse me. Transferred to the west side and worked in a couple of other branches as a children's librarian. Found that very rewarding, but very difficult. I mean you really put out a lot for kids and you get a lot back from them, too, and then eventually promoted to the central library, which is one of the biggest public libraries in the country, certainly the biggest west of the Mississippi, west of Chicago and, uh, a really great, fine library. And so, uh, it was exciting to come down to the central library—I was a senior in the literature department, which was my academic background, fortunately, so I had some background going in. And then, in 1979, I got promoted to the position I'm in which is Collection Development Manager, and I'm also responsible for rare books and special collections. And, I've been involved with the union, I joined the union right after I came. It was new, then it was only a couple of years old and it's been a professional association as well as a group that bargains for wages and conditions of employment, very, usually, very well led, very fine organization that's fought against censorship and a lot of other issues that are important in library work. Um, after the counter culture died, sometimes in the seventies, I got very involved in feminism, and that was probably a turning point that made me a much more, I think, personally secure person. It was very exciting. I think to be a feminist in the early seventies was to be very, very angry for a few years, when you started seeing what the world was like. Very angry, for a while. And I was divorced by then, and I had no, I didn't even wanna get near men for a long time, and uh, I've since gotten past that point. But that was really interesting and really exciting, intellectually and emotionally, to get involved with that and I wasn't involved with the

big parties or politics or anything, but just through reading and [don't understand this section here] and that kind of thing. And, um, I can't think of anything else to say along those lines. Ask me another question.

SV: Um, did you go to any reunions?

RA: No, and you know, I, I never felt particularly drawn—I'm not good at keeping up with people. My mother says that the Ahlstrom side of the family, her husband's side of the family, is all like that. Out of sight, out of mind, if you're not around, they forget you, you know. She's very good at keeping up with people. In fact, she and my father keep up with people who they knew in all those towns that we lived in. They go to reunions in Canada from this town we used to live in. I didn't keep up with anybody really. And, um, the twenty-fifth reunion was last year, and I toyed with the idea of going, and I didn't go because what I did do last summer about three weeks after the reunion was go back to Brown for a conference that was very exciting for me 'cause of my interests, which was on, um, hmm, I can't think of the name of it, but it was done at the John Carter Brown Library and it was on the collision of cultures of the Spanish and the Portuguese coming to the New World and there was like a three day conference. It was wonderful. They drew scholars from all over the world. There was a Japanese scholar, a Dutch scholar, and all this kind of thing. And I figured I don't want to go to Providence in the summer twice, because I knew what Providence was like in the summer, it was really disgusting. So, I went in late June and it was a great conference. I also saw my parents who live on Cape Cod now, which was nice, because I only see them every two or three years, unless they come out here. And it was funny walking around the campus. A lot of it was different, some of it I really didn't remember very well, but it had very little emotional charge, you know. I didn't expect to go back into paroxysms of nostalgia or anything like that, and I didn't, you know. It was interesting and I did recognize things. The place has changed a lot. There's a lot of new buildings and of course, the way it's organized has changed, too. But, um, it was pleasant to be there, but it was not a really moving experience, what can I say? It's a long time ago for me, now. I did get a letter though from one of my freshman dorm-mates with a picture, photograph, of the group of them that had turned up at the reunion, which was nice, because they remembered me, maybe

better than I remembered them. So, maybe, the thirtieth or something, I'll go back. Yeah, I'll have a different attitude at that point.

SV: And, um, did you, generally, on the whole, did you find a lot of the women like Pembroke/Brown back then? Was it..?

RA: Oh, I think so. I think so. I don't know. I'm trying to remember how people felt about it. I mean, they were annoyed by particular things from time to time, but, um, yeah, I think basically most of the people who were there felt they'd made the right choice. There were very few people coming in. I mean, most of people who started, finished and that was one good thing about Brown. Even me, who was emotionally, um, upset some of the time and did sort of flunk out, was very much encouraged to come back. It was just that I had to come back with the right attitude, you know, get my work done and not having incompletes and things like that. So, once they had you, they wanted to hold onto you. There were women who were kicked out for disciplinary reasons, who were also let back after they'd been punished for a while, you know, after being found in a, in a, men's dorm or a fraternity house after hours kind of thing. And there was very little I think, as I recall, very little transferring in. I think once you were there, you were kind of there. I think people were pretty happy with the place.

SV: How, um, you said there was, was there a [incomprehensible] of counseling available to you, or was it mostly..?

RA: I don't think so.

SV:...past a certain point, then.

RA: I don't, I don't remember. Oh, you mean in terms of ... no, they didn't do a lot of counseling. I'm sure that's better now. It was like you had to have screwed up pretty royally before they noticed and then they would call you in and Dean Pierrel was more of the type who led you to [incomprehensible], you know, rather than was warm and supportive. But, I think, you had to go pretty far before they would notice. There was not intervention early.

SV: But, I mean there was no voluntary part on the student's to go in and see the Dean...

RA: Not that I remember. Well, some people might have but I had a strong anti-authoritarian streak, so it may never have occurred to me as an option.

SV: And, um, what did your family think of Brown? That, um,

RA: Well, I mentioned that my father was always surprised that I'd gone there instead of to Mt. Holyoke, but I think they thought it was a fine school.

SV: And after you got out, they figured that, they could tell that you had matured...

RA: Yeah, yeah. I think my father particularly... My mother didn't go to college and she's always felt a lack in that and I think it's more of a social lack than anything. I used to tell, you know, it's not that important, it's helpful and it's interesting and it's useful, but it's not, you didn't ruin your life if you didn't go, but my father has always been very pleased that Brown's reputation has been going up and up and up and up all these years. You know, it really has. And that's been [incomprehensible] for me, too. You know, when I came out to California, nobody knew what or had ever heard of Pembroke and very few people had ever heard of Brown, and that's not true any longer, you know, people really know about it. It's a very competitive school and has a very good reputation, but he had been to Yale and Williams, so he'd been to [incomprehensible] schools, so it pleases him a lot that Brown, you know, is coming into its own, the way it is.

SV: Great.

RA: In summary, looking back on that period, I think it's all very mellowed out in my mind now, because I know what a difficult person I was in those years and whereas I used to blame school, I think, I can see now that a lot of the problems I created, yeah I created problems myself, and, um, having kept up to the extent of reading the alumnae magazine for many, many years, I know there have been lots of problems. There was the black student walkout. There was the case of

Louise Lamphere. I don't know if you're familiar with that, since you're so new. She was an Anthropology professor, who I had already read and knew her work, when I was, this was like ten years ago, and she was denied tenure and fought it and finally won. And it was very ugly for Brown, because they had to open confidential records about how tenure appointments were made, and it was clearly sexist crap. And so, there have been lots of problems and I think Brown by and large, has reacted well to the kinds of stresses and strains that have been put on it by social pressures and different generations of students. And now that I'm older, A, and a parent, B, and relatively high up in an organizational structure, C, I'm a lot less anti-authoritarian now, and I can see how difficult it is as an institution often to respond in a good way to things. It's just hard, not that it shouldn't be done or shouldn't be attempted, but it's hard. So, really looking back, I think that I was not mature enough when I was there to really take full advantage of what I was offered, but I did get a lot out of it and it's only recently that I've been able to acknowledge all the stuff I did get out of it. Particularly, intellectually and also this thing that I mentioned about all that emphasis on giving something back, and it really had its effect, even though at the time, I would just sit there silently and say "Why do I have to sit through this?" That sums up my feelings about my time at Brown.

SV: OK, great. Again, this was Romaine Ahlstrom, and thank you very much.