

Transcript – Mary Carpenter Emerson [Sweet] '27

Narrator: Mary Carpenter Emerson Sweet

Interviewer: Ashley Wilbur

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Ashley Wilbur: [00:00] This is Ashley Wilbur, Brown class of 1991, interviewing Mary Sweet, class of 1927, May 6, 1988, at her home in Warwick, Rhode Island. Mrs. Sweet, could you tell me why you went to Brown?

Mary Carpenter Emerson Sweet: It just never entered my head that I would do anything else. My mother had been a Brown graduate. Of course, we always said Pembroke, which it was in those days, and it just – it was just assumed that, of course, I was going to go, and I never questioned it. I would like to have gone, as I think many people would, further afield. I would like to have lived in a dormitory, and had that experience. And I thought there were much more glamorous places to go, but we didn't have the money. [01:00]

AW: Could you give me some background on your family; their education, their occupations?

MCES: My mother, as I mentioned before, went to Pembroke. She was the class of 1900. She was the first class, I think, to be in Pembroke Hall as freshmen. And she graduated Phi Beta Kappa. And since her maiden name was Bliss, she was the first woman's name on the role of the Phi Beta Kappa Society at Brown University, which she always rather fancied. (laughter) She, in her [02:00] senior year, had biology for the first time, and was entranced with it. So much so that she wished she had had more, and that Dr. Mead, who was there at the time, suggested she come back and get her Master's. And she was an assistant to pay her way, and she did get her Master's there directly following that.

Then she taught in a high school on the Cape, and every science there was to teach in the high school, including astronomy, at her lunch hour, for one student who wanted to go on to college. And then she was scouted by the head of the Rhode Island Normal [03:00] School,

which was a teacher training school, and went there. And was a professor of biology, and some mathematics there, until she married my father, whom she met at Cornell, where she was taking a summer course, and he was one of the instructors there. He was finishing his doctorate in geology. And I think it was, well, he came to Harvard for the last year because he had by then met my mother, and he wanted to be nearer her. And they were engaged, and were married in 1907. And he – his profession [04:00] was as a professor of geology first at the University of Missouri, and then at Louisiana State University.

AW: That's very interesting. So did you live in Louisiana?

MCES: We lived in Louisiana until I was 11, when he died. And then my mother wanted to come back where her family were in Rhode Island – forever, practically. And many, many years later I said, “Why did you leave Louisiana?” because I felt totally lost, as I think 11 year olds do when they – not only do they lose their friends, but they lose a parent. And it just–

AW: I had a similar situation. [05:00]

MCES: Did you have?

AW: Yes.

MCES: Then you know.

AW: I know. I definitely know how it is.

MCES: It's traumatic.

AW: It is very traumatic.

MCES: So when I said to her, “Why did you leave Louisiana? I'm sure you could have taught,” which she did to put her children through school. “Oh,” she said, “yes, I could have, but I didn't

really think I could live very long without your father, and I wanted you where, if you were going to be an orphan, you had relatives.”

AW: So your family lives in Rhode Island.

MCES: Her family.

AW: Her family.

MCES: Yes. As a matter of fact, her father had gone to Brown, although he was expelled for hazing, and went to Union College. (laughter) His two sons went to Brown, my mother’s brothers, and graduated from there.

AW: OK. [06:00] So, obviously, you heard about Brown from your parents, from your mother.

MCES: Forever.

AW: Right.

MCES: (laughter) And it didn’t – it didn’t bother me, you know, it just was never assumed that I would do – of course, I was going to go to college. And pragmatically, if I was going to college it was because it would be where we could – I could afford to go.

AW: Right. It turns out you went to a very good university.

MCES: Oh, my dear! Somewhere I think in some notes I’ve written down that I realized 27 years – or actually 30 years after I graduated, when I was a widow, with a child in high school to support. And what to do? I did come back to [07:00] the college, and I talked with Gertrude [Allen?] – well, no. [McCausland?] I think was her last name, who was the personnel director at the time. And she said, “Well, your background is teaching. You taught for two years. You have excellent references.” And I said, “Gertrude, look, I’ve been away all this time.” And she said, “I

think you'll find that you can get a job." And I did indeed, at a little private girls school. And by studying all summer, and by reading as much as I could find always on it, I was able to go back and teach biology, very creditably, I might add, as the girls that went on and passed their SATs with flying colors would attest. (laughter) [08:00]

AW: That's wonderful.

MCES: But that was due to the background I had had at Brown.

AW: That's interesting that you taught biology.

MCES: Well, I think you often don't really appreciate what – at least my generation didn't appreciate what we were getting until many years later. And with (inaudible) I did.

AW: Yeah, absolutely. Can you tell me a little bit about your freshman year? Like maybe about your first day?

MCES: Well, my freshman year I discovered men. (laughter)

AW: Uh oh. (laughter)

MCES: And I was 15 when I went. And I had been slow to – I know that the 15-year-olds today often are very sophisticated.

AW: A little different.

MCES: Believe me, I was not. And all of the sudden there were these wonderful, wonderful men. [09:00] And I did thoroughly enjoy my dating, and to the expense of my schoolwork, I might add. (laughter) I didn't – I worked after school to get money to help, so I couldn't participate in the sports. And one time I remember I tried out for the drama, which was called Comians. And

then when I left they said, “Well, now you will be available for rehearsal so and so, and so and so.” And I just looked blank, and I said, “I can’t do it.” There was no way, of course, that I could.

AW: Were you in a sorority? Were there – a sorority?

MCES: There were not any sororities.

AW: [10:00] And what were your views about the faculty?

MCES: One history teacher told me the first off-color joke I’d ever heard, and I was quite shocked. (laughter) It was that old one about a Confuc– you know, “When you’re going to be raped, relax, and enjoy it.” The Chinese Confucius Say. And it did.

AW: It shocked you.

MCES: But I think it’s a very valuable piece of wisdom. (laughter) Oh, my. I don’t know if that ought to go on the tape.

AW: That’s OK. Anything that you don’t want on this tape can be edited.

MCES: I was enormously impressed from the beginning with every science course I had; absolutely every one. They were outstanding. Math I had a hard time with [11:00] and I think I had not been properly grounded in algebra, because geometry is very simple for me. And I found out then, all those years later, when I went back to teaching, when I had to coach some way behind gals in algebra, that I – that it was much clearer to me then. I could see no sense in it, you see, in high school. I just went right ahead and regurgitated what I had. But, as so often happens as you are older, and more experienced, and can see a reason for something, it makes a difference.

AW: What did you think about the students, your female peers?

MCES: Oh, there were some very nice ones. I didn't have much [12:00] time for socializing with women. And I had one very close friend, who left at the end of her freshman year, and then – to get married, and was married, and out for a year, then came back and graduated the year after me. And I had another very close friend who was two years ahead of me. And then, as I went up in biology – I majored in biology and minored in chemistry. And as I went up in both to the higher level classes, there would be fewer and fewer women. And I didn't have that many close, close friends.

AW: Were you a commuter? [13:00] Or did you live –

MCES: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, I was a townie. (laughter)

AW: How do you think that affected your schooling, or just your experience at Pembroke?

MCES: Well, I never gave that a thought. It was just the way it was.

AW: What did you do on campus for entertainment? Did you come – on weekends did you come and spend time on the campus?

MCES: No, I usually had a date with the masculine sex.

AW: Were there fraternities then?

MCES: Yes.

AW: Did you spend any time there? Did they have parties –

MCES: Well, they had a lot of dances.

AW: – or mixers?

MCES: And I was fortunate in going to quite a few.

AW: Do you remember anything that happened?

MCES: This is all freshman year?

AW: Or, no, any time throughout.

MCES: I loved the class night, when they had the –

AW: What was that?

MCES: It was on Friday [14:00] and they now, I believe, have dances, don't they, on middle campus?

AW: Mm-hmm.

MCES: At that time they had dancing on middle campus, but every fraternity house was open for dancing too. And so what you did was you hopped with your date from house to house.

(laughter) And I found it very gay.

AW: It sounds like it.

MCES: Lots of fun. And I don't think my freshman year alcohol became involved, because Prohibition was in effect. And but by my sophomore year, people would sneak out to a car and have a drink of bootleg liquor. Never a great deal, but it was – it was that business, you know, of authority we're going to rebel against.

AW: Right. Was everything very much – was [15:00] authority great on campus? Did you feel like a lot of people were getting in trouble for drinking, or smoking?

MCES: No. No.

AW: OK. Who or what do you think influenced you the most at Brown, at Pembroke?

MCES: Call it Brown. I try to make myself do it too. (laughter) Well, Dean Margaret Shove Morriss was a real inspiration. She was very scholarly, spoke beautifully, was quite lovely to look at, was a – a real gentlewoman, a real lady, and a perfectly marvelous [16:00] figure for young women to look up to. And before her, just for a very few months there was a Dean [Alling?] I think her name was. She was married to one of the professors. And she was filling in while they were – I think while Margaret Morriss finished wherever she was.

And there was a very gracious thing that she did. There was a dinner one time at Pembroke, with a large table, maybe. And I don't even remember what the occasion for the dinner was, but – smoking was also not supposed to happen on campus. But at this dinner Dean Alling took one cigarette, [17:00] lighted it, put it in an ashtray. And she never took another puff at it, but that was making anyone who did smoke at the table feel that it was all right to do so at that particular occasion. And I don't believe this was on campus. Maybe it was – I'm vague on the details. But that always impressed me as a really gracious –

AW: Yes, it was, very.

MCES: – way to handle a situation. And then, of course, we used to meet at Brennan's for a cup of coffee, and have a cigarette, because that was off campus.

AW: Was that on Thayer Street?

MCES: That was on Thayer Street, just at the entrance to the tunnel, the streetcar tunnel, which it was then, on the left side as you faced it from Thayer. [18:00]

AW: Did you participate in the freshman initiations, or the masque day, or May Queening?

MCES: Oh, yes, we had that, but I thought that was sophomore for May Queen. I did go around the maypole and, yes, there was a May Queen; a very beautiful brunette, Mary. I don't remember her last name.

AW: Was there a lot of competition between the women to be May Queen?

MCES: No, we didn't – I don't – I think it was selected by the faculty. I'm not sure.

AW: Do you remember anything from your sophomore masque. No?

MCES: Not really.

AW: Was there a particular ritual behind it?

MCES: I don't even remember.

AW: Really? (laughter)

MCES: No.

AW: It didn't impress you very much?

MCES: Another thing that [19:00] greatly impressed me, and to this day I can hear it, is that we used to have chapel at Pembroke Hall, which is in the very top floor of Pembroke Hall. And don't think I didn't steam up those two flights of stairs huffing from streetcars and buses many a time. And the senior class, as they left – on the last chapel service they would leave before the rest of us did. And then, with the doors closed outside they would sing, "Seniors, seniors, seniors," and then gradually that voice, those voices all in unison would fade away, [20:00] as if they were fading into the distance. "We are all here, Brunonia." They spelled out Brunonia, and then, "Seniors, seniors, seniors."

AW: That's a nice tradition.

MCES: If I could sing I would show you how lovely it is. (laughter)

AW: That's very – it sounds very nice, though. What do you think your best memory was of Brown?

MCES: You've got to stop that tape because I can't –

(break in audio)

AW: All right. Going back to relations between men and women. Did you feel like men inhibited you when working in laboratory situations, or in the classroom?

MCES: That they resented me?

AW: Well, did you feel like they were inhibiting? Like were you – did you feel –

MCES: Oh, you mean, I couldn't concentrate? Or.

AW: [21:00] Not really so much concentrating, but did you feel like they, well, maybe resented you, and made you feel inferior to them?

MCES: No.

AW: Not at all?

MCES: No. And I've heard other women of my time speak of that, and later, but I never, never had that feeling. As a matter of fact, in my junior year I had one research course in chemistry. And there were only three students in the class, and what I was working on required, at times, an oxygen tank, and that would have to be wheeled from one lab to the other. And I would go

looking for it, and start wheeling it, and invariably some nice male would appear, and wheel it for me. No, I didn't ever have a feeling of –

AW: That's good. That's very interesting, because a lot of women apparently [22:00] have.

MCES: I wonder if it was in their own minds.

AW: That is probably where it was, actually. Were women never restricted from classes during your time at Brown?

MCES: There was never a class I wanted that I couldn't take. Whether you could choose your professor or not, I don't know. I was really very limited in that I took only as much of the humanities as I was required to take. And I might add that I think that is one of the reasons why I had such a good education. If they had not required me to take Classy Civ, as they called it, there would be a whole blank [23:00] in my own knowledge which is important to have.

AW: So how do you feel about Brown's new curriculum?

MCES: Well, if, you know, I never am sure that I'm getting all the right information. It's not that easy to tell when you just see what's in the media, or what's even in the Brown alumni monthly, or what the students are saying. I think that all the universities are making a mistake by not requiring a certain amount of what I would call the history of civilization. Now I grant you I think that we should know what women have done. When I was at Brown we heard nothing of the Orient, to speak of. Brown had a [24:00] Brown in China missionary program, just as Yale had a missionary program. Of course, the Jesuits had a missionary program. But you didn't hear anything of the histories of those fascinating parts of the world. I'm sure that that's changed now, and there's even an Asian department, as I understand it.

AW: Yeah, there is. I think that's changed.

MCES: And we had to take some economics, and some social science. And I don't think I would ever have taken that if it hadn't been – it was a requirement.

AW: Right. What do you think the most pressing rules or regulations were?

MCES: By “pressing?”

AW: The hardest to –

MCES: Hardest to stand up to?

AW: Yes.

MCES: [25:00] That you be at chapel every time there was a chapel meeting. I was not that fascinated with the physical education. It was fine if you felt like it, but there were a lot of other things that I would have been happy to do. Although I liked both my physical education teachers.

AW: Were they women?

MCES: Mm-hmm, oh, yes.

AW: Were most of your professors women?

MCES: No. As a matter of fact, there was only one woman, and that was the freshman biology teacher. I think that's often true, was often true in the sciences.

AW: OK. [26:00] How did your years at Brown develop your sense of what women's role in society should be?

MCES: I don't think in any way.

AW: Really? It didn't form your views on women in the working world?

MCES: It formed my views on society, and gave me a wider background and awareness of the many needs, and inequities, but not specifically women. I never have felt that I was, in any way, kept down by being a woman, except that I was [27:00] always aware that my salary as a teacher was less than the men's. And that I resented.

AW: Did you ever stand up to that?

MCES: Not for myself, but I did for one of the teachers at the little private school where I was. And I went to the principal, and I said, "You know, you're going to lose so and so unless you give her the same salary you're giving so and so, who doesn't do as good a job as she does, in my opinion." (laughter) And, by golly, she got the same salary.

AW: That's very good. What did you think about the two colleges merging together? Did you think it was a positive merger?

MCES: I thought, as a pragmatist, that it was the only answer. I liked [28:00] having it – I liked it being Pembroke, and a little college in a university. But then I had the advantage of having classes with men for three years. In fact, well, four years, because geology was a mixed class too. I wrote Brown at the time, because they asked for input from alumnae and alumna, and I said that I could see great sense in it, and that I felt that you should get together the infirmaries. It was a ridiculous waste (inaudible). That you should get together the libraries. There should be [29:00] where you want the most available in any library that you can possibly get. So I was one of them that did write and say, "Yes, I approve that."

AW: After you left Brown, did the university help you to get a job?

MCES: The first time I got a job through an employment agency in Boston. They may have told me the name of it. And when I was going back to being employed again, as I say, Gertrude Allen McCausland – I think. I should remember – ridiculous, because I know her well, is the one that

advised me to stay with teaching, because I had thought, [30:00] I had thought, “No way, having been away for 27 years, could I go back and teach a science,” even though I read whenever I had a chance, the *Scientific American*, or whatever was available. But there was just no way.

So she said, “I think you’ll find that you can do it.” And so I did take a summer course at Brown. They let me just audit one that summer. And, as I say, I went to summer school two other times.

AW: So what did you do after you graduated from Brown?

MCES: Taught school for – well, I went to the Rhode Island College of Education, which was the normal school, for a year, and got my Bachelor of Education degree. Because my mother had said, when I finally decided that what I wanted to do was teach, she said, “That’s fine, but you don’t know how to teach.” And I had had one education course [31:00] at Brown which, frankly, was pretty worthless. Most education courses, per se, that I’ve been exposed to – and I’ve been to them in three different state universities, as I was getting teacher accreditation. Most of them are not worth the powder to blow them to a certain place. Because they concentrate – the testing concentrates on regurgitating back what the professor has told you, in the way of history. Practice teaching; there is where you really learn how to teach. And that’s what I did have a year out of the College of Education.

And then for two years I taught at this little high school in Essex, Connecticut, where I taught, besides geometry, biology, general science, [32:00] chemistry one year, and physics the next year, and I was the gym teacher. (laughter) Isn’t that – I was well-qualified to be everything except the gym teacher. (bell rings) Turn it down if there’s a bell.

(break in audio)

AW: OK. Did you think that your education at Brown affected how you taught your students; the way you were educated?

MCES: It certainly gave me the background that you – is essential to teaching. The way I taught my students?

AW: Considering the way you were treated by your teachers at Brown.

MCES: No, I don't think so. I was teaching at the high school level. [33:00] I don't know.

AW: OK.

MCES: Certainly, if you'll excuse me for interrupting, I – when it came to running the lab courses, I'm sure, obviously, that the techniques I learned at Brown got passed on. But as far as the actual how to teach, no, I wouldn't say that. That's why I do think that the way to go for anybody wanting to teach is practice teaching under a master teacher. There's no question about it. And if Brown could incorporate that some way into whatever education classes they're giving now, it would be helpful. [34:00]

AW: What was the first thing that you did when you graduated from Brown? Did you get married? Or.

MCES: No. Remember I went to the College of Education?

AW: OK, right.

MCES: Got a Bachelor of Ed degree.

AW: Right.

MCES: Then I taught for two years.

AW: OK. What was commencement like at Brown?

MCES: I thought it was very impressive. Walking down the hill in our – of course, at that time undergraduates graduated from the First Baptist Church, and I was very impressed with it.

AW: Did you graduate with the men?

MCES: Yes. But we – but we walked separately. Women – the men walked first, of course, (inaudible) (laughter), I think. I'm not absolutely sure even of that. [35:00] But it never occurred to me to –

AW: Right.

MCES: – feel that I was a – a second class citizen.

AW: Is there anything that you particularly remember about your commencement?

MCES: Not really. I remember that our class president got hysterical, and one of the advisors slapped her, and....

AW: Oh, my gosh!

MCES: And, of course, then I found out afterwards it's a way to bring somebody out of hysteria. And I used that once myself.

AW: Oh, really?

MCES: I used it with my daughter-in-law in the Greek church in Jerusalem, at 3 o'clock in the morning, when she had hurt herself badly [36:00] and there was a service going on, and she was in such pain. No way I could get her out, or to a doctor at 3:00 a.m. because you don't get a taxi in the old city. And I gave her a slap on the face, and hugged her, and she came out of it.

AW: Did you feel any pressure to get married while you were at Brown? A lot of women talk about how other women thought that they would never be married if they went to a university. Did you feel any of that pressure?

MCES: I never felt that I wouldn't get married if I went to a university, if that's your question. My mother, while she was at Brown, walking up to where she got the streetcar, met [37:00] one of the friends of the family, and he said, "I don't know why George sends a daughter to Brown. All she's going to do is get married." Now that was my mother in 19— probably 1898, or '99, but I didn't care. I think they were beginning, well, I did — I've been privileged in my parents, and they were very farseeing, as far as many parents were concerned. I think that there are parents who did say to their daughter, "Oh, you mustn't get too much education."

AW: Do you think that your marriage affected your career at all?

MCES: Of course, I didn't teach after I got married. I hardly could have, because I did one year in Panama, where I did some substitute teaching. [38:00] A year in Annapolis, two years in San Diego, three years in China, and the Philippines. You know, you just—

AW: Was that a problem for you, that you couldn't continue your career?

MCES: No. Because then I was — it was not easy to cope with the various living conditions in all the different places, or you had to learn how to run your place. And it — the Navy life did require a lot of socializing, which you had to contrive, one way or another, on very limited funds. I was kept pretty busy. (laughter) And I, no, I didn't resent leaving teaching.

AW: Did you [39:00] volunteer for things for the Navy?

MCES: Not really, no. I would be told what to do lots of times. "You will do so and so at such and such a party," and — or, "You will go to such and such a party. They need an extra person."

AW: And you had children?

MCES: Yes.

AW: Correct. How many children did you have?

MCES: Two children. One born in Manila, and one born in Honolulu.

AW: Was there any time that you taught after your first marriage?

MCES: Only some substitute teaching in Panama.

AW: And did children, having children affect your career while you were teaching?

MCES: Well, I wasn't teaching when I had children, you see.

AW: Oh.

MCES: [40:00] I was in Panama before I had the first child.

AW: Oh, I see.

MCES: But those are all very important questions in today's world.

AW: But you didn't feel they were –

MCES: Not to me.

AW: So you basically, you were –

MCES: I was a housewife.

AW: – very involved with your family?

MCES: I was a housewife; wife.

AW: Right.

MCES: Working hard to be a very good Navy wife, which, as I say, required a – when I say a great deal of socializing, I mean four or five days a week you probably had calls that you had to make on other officers. You had parties coming up. You – it might be that they were entertaining a consul. It might be they were entertaining who knows what? And it would [41:00] – it required a great deal of time.

AW: Did you enjoy it?

MCES: Very – I loved it.

AW: Do you have any particularly striking memories of what happened during the time that you were being a military wife?

MCES: Oh, they are too numerous to mention. There were truly some very exciting opportunities. Living six weeks in Beijing, China is one of them. That's pretty fabulous.

AW: Yeah.

MCES: My time in South America, in Chile three years. That's a great learning experience.

AW: Definitely.

MCES: No, I just thoroughly loved it.

AW: Have you kept in touch with Brown, as an alumni?

MCES: Off and on. [42:00] I wouldn't be in Rhode Island, you see. I would be far, far away a great deal of the time. Rarely in Rhode Island at the time of reunions. I think I went to my second, and not again for what – heaven knows.

AW: Is there anything that you feel you would like to say about your experiences at Brown, or how Brown affected you that you would like on tape?

MCES: I can't think of what would be relevant. It certainly affected the person I am.

AW: How do you feel it did that?

MCES: Because one's background always affects [43:00] the person you are. And I'm just very sad for people that haven't had the doors open to them. I'm thinking about the mental doors that are opened by a good education. I think it's a pity. And I have seen all too many, three state universities I can think of that are not university training. It's high school training. And not the best high schools, at that. So I'm – I feel that many minds are deprived. I think that NAACP [44:00] statement is such a telling advertising feature for their fundraising. What is it? It's something like how – and this is not it, but this is the idea, "How tragic to waste a mind." And without the opportunities for enlarging your knowledge, you – very rarely can you make it on your own.

AW: Mm-hmm, that's true. OK. Well, thank you very much for doing this interview.

MCES: You are very welcome, dear.

- END -