

Transcript – Ruth Peterson, Edna MacDonald '19

Narrator: Ruth Peterson and Edna MacDonald

Interviewer:

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Track 1

Interviewer: [00:00] Okay, why don't we introduce yourselves first, and then we can get on.

Edna MacDonald: I'm Edna MacDonald with class of 1919 in the Women's College in Brown University, AB degree. That's all.

Ruth Peterson Watchin: My name is Ruth Peterson [Watchin?], also AB, 1919. You remember [May Wilden?], she was our president one time, she was head of the biology one two department, and she said, "Do you realize that 1919, that's a very special year, over 2000 sometime before you get another combination that would be 2020," you see? (laughter)

Q: Okay, I guess the first question that maybe we could start off with is, for [01:00] each of you, why you went to college and why you went to Pembroke, specifically, and where you from, where you grew up? You grew up in Rhode Island...

(multiple conversations; inaudible)

EM: Well, I think my family simply expected that I would go to college, and I just took for granted, but not many girls were going to college. Four of us went from my high school, which is East Providence, to Pembroke, which was a most unusual thing to happen. One girl in the class went to Mount Holyoke, but one reason perhaps, that my father would have liked me to go to Mount Holyoke because he knew the father of the president of Mount Holyoke. But there were three of us that were going to be in college at the same time, so as the oldest, I thought I should be, you know...

Q: You were the oldest child in your family?

EM: Yes, so, and [02:00] with four of us going, you know, and there were two girls at Pembroke who came from East Providence, but not many girls went to college in those days, I don't think.

Q: Well, I'm curious, I know not many girls did go to college, and you said your parents just expected that you would go... had your parents been to college?

EM: Yes, my father had, and my mother had studied music beyond high school, but I don't know, perhaps it was their ambition, but they just took it for granted. My mother was from Rhode Island, that is, it used to be Rehoboth, but her family went way back to the beginning of the 1643, and maybe it was a little ambition, on their part, to have a daughter be one of the few in East Providence who had gone to -- of course, Mrs. [Hamel?] went and (multiple conversations; inaudible), that's right, but Mrs. Hamel came from [03:00] our end of East Providence. People didn't get around as much in those days, either, you know.

Q: So did you choose to go to Pembroke?

EM: I was delighted to go to Pembroke, to go to the Women's College. (laughter) That's all right.

Q: I mean, you said your father wanted you to go to Mount Holyoke, was there a lot of pressure that you should do that or just --

EM: No, because I took a trip to Washington when I was a junior, mostly the seniors went, and I remember when I said, oh, I wanted to go with juniors from high school, to Washington, my little spring trip, so my father said, "Well, it'll cost money, and you know, I want you to go to Mount Holyoke," and because he was a Scotsman, and everything was in terms of how much it cost -- (laughter) I shouldn't do that -- but he did want me to go there. But he loved Brown, he felt like an adopted son of Brown.

Q: So he wasn't too upset that you were to --

EM: No, oh no.

Q: How 'bout you Mrs. Watchin? [04:00]

RP: Well, I was going to go, and then my parents wanted me to go to Brown primarily because we lived right there.

Q: What street were you?

RP: Williams Street, so you see. And all that territory was a stomping ground, you might say, and whatever went down, we were always attending something going on at Brown.

Q: And did they always expect you to be going to college?

RP: Yes.

Q: Were there other children in your --

RP: No.

Q: Did you want to go to college?

RP: Yes, I think so. I think there were, as I remember now, I think there were about four of us from Hope Street that went to Brown, and quite a number went out of town colleges.

Q: Did you think about going to someplace else, or was Pembroke a natural place for you to be going on?

RP: No, I would have liked, at that time, I would have liked to have gone to Mount Holyoke. It [05:00] seemed to be pretty popular around this territory, everybody talking about Mount Holyoke, more so than Wellesley, don't you think so?

EM: It's because Ms. Woolley that was the president of Mount Holyoke, and she was one of the first graduates of the Women's College.

RP: She was in the first class with [Ann Reedy?] So I think that might have been the pull.

Q: So did you apply to go to Mount Holyoke?

RP: Oh, well no, no. I just made up my mind -- we made up my mind that I was going to Brown, and so that was it.

Q: Now how did it work when you were applying to colleges? I know, for example, when I did it, I sent out ten or twelve [laugh] applications. Was it pretty (multiple conversations; inaudible)?

RP: (inaudible) were very glad to have us, most colleges, you didn't have to have any interest in us, just according to what your grades were you were accepted.

Q: So if you decided that you want, for example, that you wanted to go to Pembroke Women's College, you could...

EM: Well, you presented your marks (multiple conversations; inaudible) your high school presented your marks, and if they were [06:00] all marks, they took you in without an (inaudible).

Q: I guess there weren't such an overwhelming number of girls who wanted to go, that they had to --

EM: Oh, no, nothing like to-- oh no.

RP: We were only 50 when we graduated. I don't know how many there were --

EM: About a hundred.

RP: -- when we came in. In our class?

EM: I think there were 98, something like that. I really thought, I was pretty sure of that. You mean to say that 50 --

RP: We withdrew.

EM: The dropout was tremendous. I could be wrong though, very wrong.

Q: Why would it be that so many people, even if it wasn't quite 50, would have come and then dropped out? That's quite a large number.

RP: Various reasons, with wartime, too. Well, the war didn't come until '17, you know.

EM: No, but...

RP: I remember that day, I was in history class, and Professor Collier, he was so excited and just walked up and down the aisle with his [07:00] eyes closed and felt the time, the right time to go in, and everybody was excited about it, you know, and we just sat quiet as mice watching him. Were you in that class?

EM: Yes, if it was our sophomore year, I was. I took history with him sophomore year, that is, history was a world history at (inaudible). (multiple conversations; inaudible)

RP: It was world history.

EM: Well, yes, that's right.

Q: You went to Hope High School?

RP: Mm-hmm.

Q: Did a lot of girls from your class go on to college?

RP: Just trying to think, I don't think there were more than four or five that went.

Q: And you said only four girls in your class went to college?

EM: No, went to Pembroke. And one girl went to Mount Holyoke, and I think two girls went to what was called a normal school, and it was the Rhode Island College of Education, it used to be.

Q: So I guess it was sort of a special thing to be going.

EM: Yes, it was. [08:00]

Q: When you got to Pembroke, since you were of such a select number of girls from your -- both of you -- from your graduating class in high school, was there a sense among all the people, whatever it was, 100 or 75 or whoever it was that entered in your class, I mean, was there a sense -- I don't know if you can remember this -- but did you feel as though you were sort of a real cream of the crop group? Or what was the way, I don't know, that you perceived yourselves, or... let's start with that.

EM: Oh, I don't think so.

RP: No... I think... I don't think college women were particularly popular for the people in town because there were so few of them, they didn't like the idea.

EM: It was a generation -- we were brought up to be seen and not heard, and I told you the other day, I think, "Oh, I thought it would be so wonderful to know some college girls," don't you know, I felt low man on the totem pole, [09:00] we did, or at least, maybe you knew a lot of people.

RP: Well, of course, I knew people that were connected with college, in one way or the other, you know. And anything going on, we were always taking a walk up there and, oh, I even took my sled. Did I tell you this?

Q: No.

RP: Isn't that Marcus Aurelius in the back of Sayles and there's a little hill that goes down. Well, a lot of little kids would go up there and that's where we used to coast. (laughter)

Q: You mean when you were younger?

RP: When we were little kids, you know.

Q: So this seems sort of interesting that at the time you went to the Women's College, that there weren't that many girls going to college, and it was sort of an unpopular thing to do, and yet both of your families did encourage you do that. I wonder if that was sort of, I don't know, try to kind of think back how you must have felt going.

EM: You know, you're giving me an idea that perhaps there was an awakening of [10:00] women being of more importance, perhaps, than the world to our families, and then we realized, I don't know.

Q: That's what I was sort of just thinking.

EM: Yes. I know my mother's mother, my grandmother, always thought she'd love to be a doctor and she had to go to Norton Seminary, which is now Wheaton College, and lived there just to go to -- it was high school then, and that was like going to college for her day, but of course, she was born in 1852, that is a long time ago. So women were having feelings, and I told my mother, perhaps, got married very young, and perhaps she had wished she had gone, you know? Your mother most likely was very young, too, but there must have been stirrings in our parents.

RP: Well, we knew a lot of people around where we lived that were college people, you know. [11:00] And I think that that makes quite a difference. We associated. (multiple conversations; inaudible) Not necessarily like children my age, but I mean the older generation.

EM: Well, my mother had a cousin that taught there, and that was Professor Johnson, who taught Spanish, and then there was a Dean Randall that was on the great uncle's side, that is, he was a relative of my great uncle's wife, so we knew him, but those are the only faculty people that I ever knew (inaudible), and I think they didn't think much of faculty. You knew them as neighbors in the neighborhood, that would be very nice. They encourage you, maybe, to go.

RP: No, no. I don't ever remember that.

Q: I was wondering, too, the people who were faculty and Dean and that sort of thing [12:00] at the college, do you remember what your impression was about how they viewed college girls? I mean, I've heard from talking to other people that a woman, say, like Dean King, it sounds to me that she did think of the students as a select group of people, you know, the things that have been described to me about making sure that the Pembroke women didn't go over to the Brown campus and that's where all of the guys (multiple conversations; inaudible)

EM: We weren't allowed to go over to the Brown campus. (multiple conversations; inaudible) That is, you never walked through it or anything like that.

Q: Why was that, (inaudible)?

RP: Well, it was the men's campus, the men on the hill, the college on the hill.

EM: I don't think you would have any idea of what controls there were on women's conduct at that time. We were supposed to wear hats and gloves when we went out, [13:00] and she used to give us talks on how we walked. We never walked arm in arm. She said we shouldn't.

RP: I don't remember that.

Q: You were never supposed to walk arm in arm?

EM: No.

Q: You mean with girlfriends or?

EM: Either with the girls or with the boys either, and we mustn't go over on the Brown campus. You know, we skirted it when you would go over to the John Hay library to study, you would never take a shortcut through.

RP: That's true.

EM: And another example is, our class was the first class that was ever allowed to walk through the Van Winkle gates when we went down the hill for commencement. We always had to go down by ourselves, down Angell Street, and well, one of the girls in our class, Elsa [Mezca?], she really made a great drive for us to be allowed to.

Q: How did she do that?

EM: Well, I suppose she must have -- [14:00]

RP: Well, her husband was a Brown man and --

EM: But she wasn't married then.

RP: -- sister.

EM: Oh, her sister had gone!

RP: Yes, yes. And her sister's husband at the Taber.

EM: (inaudible) famous. So this gives you some idea of how we stood in relationship to the university. This was at the end of our four years.

Q: So you were almost felt like stepchildren, or something like that?

EM: No, we accepted it. So that, for instance, the head of the English department wouldn't come over and teach English classes at (multiple conversations; inaudible).

RP: Well, you're talking about who in particular? Professor Benedict came over.

RP: He wasn't the head of the English department, that's the --

EM: No.

RP: -- one I think of. The man that was the head, what was his name? I know it just as well.

EM: Damon.

RP: No, his nephew taught at Brown since then, and was very popular, I can't remember.

EM: Popular, he wasn't popular in English? [15:00]

RP: Oh, yes, but I'm talking about the man who was the very head of the English department.

Q: And he didn't want to teach Pembroke?

RP: He didn't want to teach women, to come over there and teach. So we never had him, and I took a lot of English.



Q: That must have been a real disappointment.

EM: Well, you know, there was resentment, a little bit, but we accepted it. It was the rule, so we took it.

RP: You know, in the mathematics department, Professor (pause), you must know who he is, the man that taught trigonometry and (inaudible).

EM: Yes, oh, he came from Canada too, I liked him very much but he had such a severe way of teaching, I liked him though, a lot. What was his name? Oh, dear...

RP: It'll come to us.

(pause) [16:00]

EM: There was only one professor whom I ever remember having us at his house.

Q: Who was that?

RP: Probably Professor Collier.

EM: Oh, yes.

RP: What was his standing in the history department? I thought he was head of the department.

EM: No, I was just talking about one man that was, you know, Damon, because I wanted to take classes that he offered. Professor Collier, I remember his [syllabus?] that there was no conversation, but we were all afraid, you know, (laughter) we sat there in his house, and he had nice, we passed for us to eat.

Q: And nobody spoke? (laughter)

EM: Nobody talked! (laughter)

RP: We sat on the floor.

EM: That's right, yes we did, that's right. And we had a good time, but you see, we'd been used to having the lecture method, I don't know whether they have it anymore. [17:00]

Q: Well they have both, we have lectures a couple of times a week and then a discussion.

EM: Yes, which is nice.

Q: They didn't encourage you, like you said, women were supposed to be seen, not heard.

EM: That's right. But I don't remember any classes that we had just plain discussion, do you?

RP: Well, how about (multiple conversations; inaudible)? Professor Buckley.

EM: Oh, yes, I liked him very much.

RP: Well, what was his rank?

EM: Well, [Deely?] was head of the sociology department.

RP: Well Deely came over.

EM: That's right. I don't mean, I think, to make a general statement, no.

Q: But you were talking about this one great professor?

EM: That's right. You wanted examples of how our life at Brown was affected by rules, and I don't mean I protested it, I accepted it, of course.

Q: But it was still disappointing, for example, that you couldn't take classes --

RP: Well you wouldn't advise --

EM: (inaudible) Is this off?

Q: [18:00] No, do you want me to turn it off? Okay.

(break in audio)

Q: Why don't you start that again, you said you had one psychology course?

EM: Well, I didn't take his [syllabus?] because I wasn't interested in (multiple conversations; inaudible) in biological psychology, and they did have, of course, an experimental course, but this man named Cauldin was going to teach -- I was a junior and it was mostly for seniors, but I wanted to fill core taking it, because there were going into teaching, and he gave a general course

in psychology for the first semester, and for the second he wanted to give us all kinds of tests, which later became very interesting, but they were going to be like personality tests; everyone would have a number, you know, and you would pass judgment on your friends. [19:00] We had a list of questions, and then they would put a (inaudible) so nobody would know who is judging him for anything like that. The class didn't want to do it. (multiple conversations; inaudible)

Q: Was it just a women's class?

EM: This was a women's class. So we were just as restricting in our own thinking, don't you know? We weren't open either, so it's something to be taken down, but I wasn't interested in the, as I said, the Pavlov dog's leg type of conditioning of psychology. I don't know whether they still have it that way, in that, so a group of us stayed in the class for the second semester and really had a fine time, with all these different kinds of tests that he wanted to do. And they left at the end of that term and went to Columbia to teach. But that's the only psychology I took as an undergraduate.

Q: I guess you had to take psychology, [20:00] didn't you?

EM: No, it was a choice.

Q: Well that or science, or something?

RP: Yes, the lesser of two evils, or something like that. (laughter) But you know what was nice about it? You had a real dilettante education, you did not have to specialize, and college was a delightful experience of tasting all the different subjects that you wanted to. And I have been talking to people now at Brown, and I realized it's the kind of education that nobody can afford today, you've got to specialize so you've got something to offer when you graduate, and we expected that you'd go on and specialize in what you wanted afterward.

Q: Do you remember when you went whether your own expectation was that you would do something with your college education, or did you see it as four years of getting to taste all these different things but not really [21:00] oriented towards --

EM: Well I expected to earn my living, too... you didn't (laughter).

RP: Yes. (pause) I thought it was a great privilege and everything we had to do, it was an eye opener.

EM: Absolutely, I adored college.

RP: But something very special, and of course, we didn't have to major. That, I sometimes thought, was unfortunate because when we got out we just had really very superficial knowledge, you might say, of a great many things that you couldn't put down and make a living at one particular, unless you had some further training.

EM: Well, that was in... well, let's be frank, what choices did women have? Teaching. You could teach. [22:00] You could be a lab technician. Or you could go into office work and be a secretary. Those were really the only choices. Now, as late as World War II, I was a counselor all my life.

Q: At Hope High School?

EM: Yes. And it was experimental. We started counseling at Hope, and it was a start to Alan, who taught at Harvard, and I had a girl, [Kirto Copec?] who graduated from Brown, and she wanted to take pre-medical courses and a lot of physics, and she got to Brown and they wouldn't let her do it because they said there was no chance for her to go into medicine anyway. So it's been a long, hard pull for women to have the freedom that you people have, and you're very, very lucky. Except I know it's hard times at present. So why [23:00] would you specialize? What was there to specialize to be?

(inaudible)

EM: I don't know if that's the kind of thing you want to know.

Q: Anything that you want to talk about.

EM: Because I'm in a sense making comparisons between today and (multiple conversations; inaudible). But don't think we didn't enjoy it; we loved it, we did. For instances, we loved Hazel [Hartwell's?] husband.

RP: I didn't.

EM: Oh, you didn't? (laughter) I did. So I took an extra course with him.

RP: Really? I thought he was very nice, but I don't mean to say I would never take his second course.

EM: Oh yes, I did.

Q: Did you major in something?

RP: No. Just in AB.

Q: And then what did you do when you got out of Pembroke?

RP: Well, I went to Katharine Gibbs for a short course there, [24:00] I should have stayed on longer and really gotten some good training. I did a number of things, nothing amounted to very much.

EM: Well, you got married almost immediately.

RP: Oh no, it was five years. I wasn't married until '24, 1924.

EM: Well you must have been engaged for about two years.

RP: Yes.

EM: So you knew you...

RP: Oh, I taught school, some, but oh, I did a variety of things. Nothing amounted to very much.

Q: Do you think that it would have been much different, either during college or after, if you had had more women professors? Do you remember if you sensed any lack of -- there's also talk about role models and things like that.

RP: Well Ms. Danelson, she taught biology 12, now she was the only women instructor, wasn't she?

EM: How she blushed when she came to explaining sex, [25:00] which none of us knew about anyway. (laughter) But I guess she left at the end of the year, maybe, or the next one. No, you know, we had had high school teachers, most of our high school teachers had been women, and there was no tradition of women being able, competent, to teach classes. So we didn't have that pro--

RP: That brings to mind, most of the teachers that we had at Hope Street were brown people, women and men, and they were outstanding. They were. And so it was just natural, you know, that those of us who wanted to go to college, we chose Brown because it was, in my mind, I lived right near the campus.

EM: So I don't think the thought of a woman as a college professor entered our minds. Do you ever remember wishing you had a woman for a professor?

RP: No, I thought it was [26:00] delightful to have men. (multiple conversations; inaudible) said there was one reason she wanted to come to Brown, was to have men professors rather at Mount Holyoke. She was on the verge of going to Mount Holyoke, but that was her decision and she understood that she would have to (inaudible) department. I think in the very early days they did have the heads of the departments, and I thought most of ours were heads of departments, I was satisfied with them anyway.

Q: Did you have a lot to do with Dean King?

RP: No, not at all.

EM: Well she was rather removed.

RP: Very remote.

EM: The very popular one was Dean Allinson -- well, Dean Crosby who married Professor Allinson -- and she had great influence on the early years of the college, and when she retired, or resigned, to get married, [27:00] I think they did come back to one year. But she was a delightful person.

Q: But Dean King was not close to the --

RP: Well, she was aloof, wouldn't you say so?

EM: Well, my sister got to know her very well, my sister was a freshman when we were seniors, but that's my sister. She's, you know. And Dean King had a hard life, her father was a clergyman I think of the Baptist church there, and he was very severe with her, and she was a classical scholar.

RP: Graduated Vassar.

EM: And I did have her in sophomore, well, we had all this Catullus and Ovid Latin poets. I had to have two years of Latin if you wanted an AB degree, that is, so you had four in high school, so this made two more. [28:00] But even having her as a professor in class, you didn't get to know her well. But my sister, for some reason, rather did.

Q: Was she awfully strict with you all?

EM: Well, I don't think so. She didn't have to be, we were all well behaved.

RP: I suppose.

EM: We never had to go to her because we had cut classes or anything like that, had taken too many cuts. You people don't have to go to class if you don't want to, you think?

Q: No, we don't.

RP: Chapel every morning?

Q: (laughter) No.

RP: Those three flights of stairs?

EM: That's right.

Q: No, we don't have to do that. (inaudible) Flip this.

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