

Transcript -- Mary H. Swope '55

Narrator: Mary Swope

Interviewer: Elizabeth Bernstein

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Track 1

Elizabeth Bernstein: [00:00] This is Elizabeth Bernstein, I'm in San Francisco, California. It's January 14th, 1986, interviewing Mary Swope, class of –

Mary Swope: -- class of '55.

EB: Okay, we're going to divide it into three sections, roughly. Just biographical information before Brown, during Brown, and a little after Brown. Starting with the biographical information, for example, where did you come from, and what did your parents do, and did you have brothers and sisters?

MS: Okay, I'll just start, and if you have any -- if I leave out stuff, you'll tell me. Let's see, I was born in Philadelphia in a hospital there, but I grew up in Wayne, Pennsylvania, which is right outside of Philadelphia. My father is an electrical engineer. My mother was a mother and housewife; she was more than that, actually, but she didn't have a job, except at home, which was a job because she had five children. I'm second oldest; I have an older sister, then there's me, then two sisters, and then the very youngest is a brother.

EB: Did they go to school, also? I mean, college?

MS: Yes, they all went to college, and it's sort of interesting that we've all ended up in teaching, either married to someone who's a teacher, or teaching, ourselves. It is interesting. But anyway, I grew up in Wayne, and then when I was about 10 years old, the family moved to Newton, Massachusetts, because my father got a job at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology working on a synchrotron, which is an atom smasher, to put it simply. (laughter)

EB: (laughter) For me?

MS: [02:00] No, for me. We learned a phrase; that a synchrotron is a machine that activates high energy particles which bombard nucleon. I went to a mixture of public and private schools when I was growing up, and my happiest memories are the time I spent in private schools, I must say. I

graduated from the Cambridge School in Weston, Massachusetts, which is -- was known then as a progressive school. What more about childhood?

EB: Where did your siblings go to school?

MS: My sister, Betsy, went to Bryn Mawr. Julie went to Mills. Lucy went to Sarah Lawrence and then the University of Arizona; she transferred there. And Tom went to Washington University in St. Louis. They all graduated. [03:00] I'm the only one who went on to get a Master's. My sister, Betsy, I think, has an advanced degree. She went into the field of psychology later on in life.

EB: Is she the oldest?

MS: Yes, she's four years older than I am.

EB: Did your parents go to college?

MS: Mm-hmm, both. My mother didn't graduate from college, but she went to Wellesley College. She was from a very small town in northern Maine, Presque Isle, and was always very bright, received a lot of her education at home, I think. And she was one of five children, also four girls and one boy, same as in my family. And my father was one of five children, four boys and one girl, so the pattern repeats itself. Anyway, she went to Wellesley, she was there for, I think, two or three years, and then left to get married [04:00] to her first husband, but not my father. She was divorced from her first husband, and then married my father. My father -- he went to Harvard, MIT, and also went to school in Germany.

EB: They sound like scholastic background family.

MS: Definitely, definitely. We never questioned the fact we'd go to college. I never thought of another choice, I never thought about it. I assumed it as part of the continuum of my education.

EB: Sounds like private education, sounds like me (laughter). Leading up to college, was that how your friends were also?

MS: Yes, I don't remember among my friends talking about what we would do after we graduated from high school. We talked about which college we'd go to, that's the way it was. I think it was maybe more true then than it [05:00] is now, about choices, possible choices.

EB: Colleges, or whether or not to go?

MS: Whether or not to go.

EB: Why did you decide on Brown?

MS: Well, at first, I didn't. When I graduated from the Cambridge School, I went to the Women's College at the University of North Carolina, in Greensboro, because one, I wanted to go to a different part of the country for my education, and I wanted to go to a college that had a good art department because I've always been interested in art, ever since I was a little girl. My mother was wonderful; she drove me around to various colleges to actually visit them, including the Women's College. I applied to about two or three other colleges; I got into all of them, but I chose that one.

EB: Did you not apply to Brown?

MS: No, I didn't apply to [06:00] Brown. I think I applied to Washington University in St. Louis -- they had a good art department -- and I don't remember what other ones. Anyway, I can't remember quite now. So I went there for two years, when that was certainly a double education; going to college in the South, and this was in 1951. Segregation was still legal then, and it was my first experience with overt segregation, and the South is a different part of the country. It was like a foreign country to me; I was strange to them, and they were strange to me. You had different ways of acting, and certainly different ways of speaking. Even a language difficulty. They had a very good art department, but it was a state school, a southern state school, and academically it wasn't really [07:00] -- I was suppressed, blends in. (laughter) I was sort of over prepared for a women's college, so at the end of two years, I just decided to change, and I just remember deciding to change. And I applied to Brown.

EB: What made you apply to Brown that time? (laughter)

MS: I was afraid you'd ask that (laughter), why did I? It was just a very natural decision, somehow, and I don't remember how I heard of it first. It could've been that my parents suggested it as being a place to go to. And when I decided to transfer, I think that's the only place I did apply to. And after I did that, there was a lot of people were transferring; it became a lot harder to be accepted as a transfer student, but when I did, it wasn't as difficult as it became later and I was accepted. So I was at [08:00] Brown for the last two years of college, my junior and senior year.

EB: Did the women's college you first went to have a male counterpart? Or was it an all-female school?

MS: It was all female. Now it's co-ed, by the way, but the counterpart would have been co-ed, you know, the other state colleges in the system.

EB: It wasn't like Brown and Pembroke?

MS: No, no, no, nothing like that. For men, we went to Duke University; it was just about the closest place.

EB: So what was the change like?

MS: Going from -- we called it WC -- going from WC to Brown. It wasn't that big a deal. It was more fun because men were more available, there was a certain ease. But it was not that big a change for me, and any change it would be it was just nicer. [09:00]

EB: But it wasn't even a minor part of your decision to transfer?

MS: No, it wasn't. All I remember is that I wanted to leave WC, I'd sort of had it there, and again, Brown had a very good art department, and we could go to RISD. So that was the strongest factor in my decision. I don't remember even thinking about the fact that it was co-ed; I'm sure it entered my mind, I was aware of it, but it wasn't a factor.

EB: And after college, did you expect to go into art or go to into the same profession your mother did?

MS: No, I didn't expect to go into the same -- I didn't think much about it. I didn't think much about what I would do when I graduated. I sort of took things as they came, and I've been lucky that [10:00] nice things have come my way.

EB: Did your parents expect you to work or did they --

MS: Well my mother wanted us all to get married, that was what women -- she was very happy, she loved being married. My mother loved men, and she was very attractive to men; men loved her, and she just loved that whole thing. Happiness to her was being with a man, and so that's what she hoped for all of us. So there was a certain pressure of expectation when I was growing up, which -- I didn't conform to it, obviously, because I'm still single, but it wasn't any sort of rebellion; it just worked out differently for me than it did for her. And I had a hard time when I was growing up because of that pressure. I know I just wasn't meeting her expectation in that regard, [11:00] but I worked my way through it, but it took time, and it helped to move 3000 miles away. And my father, by the way, he never pressured us in any way. He was a very gentle, very sweet, quiet man, and he gave us a lot of encouragement for what we did, and I don't remember him ever putting any pressure on us, or decisions. So I wasn't really programmed to -- about what life would be like after college. I just somehow thought I'd go to college for four years, and then I would look for a job, and then I would find a job, and then I would work, and whatever would happen would happen.

EB: That's logical.

MS: Well, it isn't. (laughter) Well, it is sort of trusting to fate, too, it was sort of logical and thoughtless at the same time, I think. [12:00]

EB: When you got to Brown, do you remember where you lived?

MS: Well, I was afraid you'd ask that, too. Was it Pembroke Hall, is that the big..? But I don't know what Brown is like these days, but that's what comes to mind, Pembroke Hall, yes. And, of course, that was back in the days -- Pembroke doesn't have any -- how does Pembroke exist now?

EB: A campus, there's main campus, Pembroke campus.

MS: So residence halls? Is that its...

EB: It has Emory, Woolley, Morriss, Champlin Halls, were they there?

MS: Yes, well, the names are familiar to me. There was only one department there -- of course, all our classes were at Brown -- but physical education was Pembroke. And Bessie Rudd, she was a formidable woman. We had to pass a swimming test to get our diploma, I remember that. [13:00]

EB: No, not anymore.

MS: No, (laughter) tread water for one minute in order to get a Bachelor of Arts degree.

EB: What was your major?

MS: It was all as art.

EB: Do you remember any of the courses you took?

MS: I remember teachers, two teachers in particular, Walter Feldman --

EB: I had Mr. Feldman!

MS: Did you really?

EB: Yeah, he taught me painting last year, I thought you were going to say that. (laughter) He's been there such a long time.

MS: Gosh. I took print making from him, I got very interested in print making, and he was very encouraging to me, always very, very encouraging to me, he was good. And Dr. Downing, who had retired. He was wonderful in art history. Those were two very strong people who did a great deal for me in terms of knowledge and giving me confidence in myself. I really can't [14:00] say enough good things about them. And I took print making and art history, mostly, and the other courses I took as part of the program -- the required ones. I took some design courses at RISD. I never liked the courses as RISD as much as I liked the ones at Brown.

EB: Why not?

MS: The teachers I had weren't as good, they didn't seem to care as much. There were two teachers, Mr. [LaFarge?] was one, and I can't remember the name of the other. So my happiest art memories are at Brown University, rather than at RISD.

EB: So it sounds like the art teachers at Brown were just as qualified --

MS: Absolutely.

EB: -- as the ones at RISD.

MS: Yes, they were.

EB: Did you think of applying to an art school, or RISD?

MS: No, no. I didn't even know about RISD, especially, just as a name.

EB: [15:00] Do you know anything about the relationship between the Brown students and the Pembroke students, in particular, was it like you were one school, or was there any...

MS: No, I felt there was a separation. I guess, what would I feel...that we were sort of the inferior members of the duo. There was, for me, a feeling of separation. I don't remember guys so much in classes, especially -- we were all students together -- fraternities is what I remember best. Going to fraternity parties, dating guys at fraternities. I didn't date that much, I did somewhat, two main guys. [16:00] Fraternity parties and football parties.

EB: So, another one I interviewed said that a lot of the men turned to other schools and thought that Brown women -- or Pembroke women were too smart for them, did you get that at all?

MS: I didn't get that, but I'm sure some, they could have thought that.

EB: But it wasn't as strong as you were there?

MS: No, I don't remember anything like that.

EB: Were you outnumbered by males in any of your classes?

MS: I think in just about all the classes, I was outnumbered.

EB: Even art?

MS: I don't think so much in the differences, like the men-women breakdown. In art, I would think, pretty even balance.

EB: But in other more...

MS: It's hard for me to honestly remember. I do [17:00] remember men being at least half and half, sometimes a few more. English classes were another very strong department, as far as I was concerned, very good department.

EB: Do you remember your advisors? Your thesis advisor, or any strong memory besides Mr. Feldman and...

MS: Dr. Downing.

EB: Dr. Downing, of professors you admired?

MS: Well, I wish I could remember the name of an English teacher, but I can't. He was wonderful, though. I remember Bessy Rudd, because she was such a character. She looked sort of like Margaret Rutherford, as I remember, and Dr. Wriston was -- you know Nancy Duke Lewis?

EB: She was a dean.

MS: Yes, and she was wonderful.

EB: I've read good things about her. [18:00]

MS: I didn't know her that well, but I can still remember her welcoming me as a transfer student in her office, and she seemed to take a personal interest in me; she seemed to know about me,

she seemed to feel that she was glad that I had come. I can still remember that meeting, and that was in 1953. She was a remarkable person, I think, I think she was extremely bright and very good with people, too.

EB: Did you have the same kind of personal interaction with professors...?

MS: Well, with certainly with Mr. Feldman, yeah.

EB: Was that a small class?

MS: It was, yeah, maybe about 10 or 12 people in it.

EB: They got bigger.

MS: (laughter)

EB: [19:00] Should we turn this off?

MS: Yeah, turn it off for a second.

(break in audio)

EB: Did you do extracurricular activities while you were there?

MS: I don't remember doing any. I know I didn't do sports; I never liked sports. If you found a yearbook, I could see if I did, but I don't remember doing any.

EB: But your time was occupied with academic and social?

MS: Yeah, that's right. Art, academic, and social. And since my family was so close, I went many weekends, I'd take the train.

EB: Do you remember what any social rules were when you were there? Any that got in your way or any you didn't mind, but you remember?

MS: Not that got in my way, but there certainly were rules, like curfew, a lot of dormitory rules to control the girls.

EB: Control all those wild [20:00] girls. (laughter)

MS: Well, be sure we didn't get wild, yeah.

EB: And they didn't bother you?

MS: No, they didn't, I don't think I was that involved socially, and the curfew was something like 10:30 or 11:00, it was at a certain time on weekdays and then a little longer on weekends, and that was fine with me. And there were always times you could get away and be crazy, anyway. So I don't remember even -- I think I was a good girl when I was there, I didn't break any rules that I remember. I certainly never was caught.

EB: That's different. (laughter)

MS: I know it is. (laughter) But no, I don't think I remember breaking any rules.

EB: Brown students, I think it was at that time, didn't have the same curfews as the Pembroke students. That didn't bother you?

MS: No, I was very unenlightened. [21:00] No, it didn't bother me. I didn't even think about it. Looking back on it, sure, it was a double standard. I would have liked co-ed dorms, too, but that was never -- oh God, it was assumed I'd go to college...you'd never have co-ed dorms, never. "Men on the hall," you'd shout as someone comes down the hall. In short, there were plenty of rules but I didn't find them repressive.

EB: By the time you were getting your major and graduating, did you have career plans?

MS: No, as I say, I knew I'd graduate and get a job, and I was lucky. I decided I wanted to work in a museum. All my friends who were majoring in art thought they either got married, or got into teaching, [22:00] and I didn't want either. Teaching seemed to be such a catchall, you know, if you can't do anything, you go into teaching. So I decided I wanted to work in a museum, so I wrote to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and I told them I was graduating and asked if there were any openings. I said I would be willing to do anything, including sweeping the floors, and I got a job in the library there working for Marjorie W. Childs, the librarian. Spinster lady who lived in Waltham, she was in her 50s when I worked for her, probably. Of course, she seemed much older than that. She still lived with her mother. She'd never taken a taxi in her life, and she'd never been to New York City. But I loved working at the Museum of Fine Arts, it was wonderful being a library assistant. [23:00] I was there for about four years.

EB: When you were writing these letters to the Museum, was anyone at Brown advising you on your career choices? Did you talk to anybody about what you were going to do afterwards?

MS: I don't remember talking to anyone. That doesn't mean I didn't have an advisor, but I have no memory of having an advisor.

EB: So no one really significant?

MS: That's right, yeah, or else I would remember.

EB: What did you do -- you worked at the Museum for four years?

MS: Yes.

EB: Why did you leave? What did you do then?

MS: Well, I wanted to try...I had a chance to go to Europe with my aunt and uncle and my two cousins, so I decided to do that.

EB: How long did you go to Europe?

MS: It was a couple of months. My uncle had a Jaguar and we drove around Europe. It was fun. (laughter) [24:00] Then I came back and was a student again at Boston University, taking art courses. Then I came out here.

EB: And what jobs did you get here?

MS: I'm missing a couple of years, but that's all right, maybe I was at the Museum longer than that, because I came out here in 1960, and again, I just take things as they come along. I'd moved out here because I wanted to move away from home. I came out here because my sister Julie went to Mills College, I'd been out to visit her, I knew I liked San Francisco, so I came here. I took the first place I saw. I took the first job that was offered, which was at the Emporium and the sign shop.

EB: And how long were you at the Emporium?

MS: I was there for about...it was less than a year, because again, I had a chance to travel to [25:00] South America with an English girl who I had met at Boston who had moved out to San Francisco, and have a job to earn money to go to South America; she'd always wanted to. So she wanted someone to travel with her, and I just couldn't resist. So I quit my job and gave up my little apartment and we traveled in South America for four months. It was wonderful. So I came back here and started all over again, looking for a place, and looking for a job.

EB: You found?

MS: Well then I worked at a funny little store on Polk Street that had a very small section that sold art supplies. I also started to study for my masters at San Francisco State, in art, and I worked at a coffee house weekends.

EB: How long have you been teaching at (inaudible)?

MS: I have been teaching [26:00] about -- I don't remember even, exactly -- but about nineteen years.

EB: Oh, that's a long time.

MS: Yes, a long time.

EB: You didn't want to teach when you left Brown. What changed your mind?

MS: Well, someone suggest -- I guess I was older -- well I was older, and someone said, "Well, why don't you try teaching?" and I thought, "Well, you know, I haven't tried it. I might like it." So I tried it, and then I did like it. And I'm pretty good at it, too. So I really do like it. And every year is different, it's still a challenge, so I'm glad.

EB: Did your years at Brown have any effect on -- it seems like you kept your same attitude about what you wanted to do and how you wanted to do it -- did it have any strong effect on you? Do you remember any, I don't know, [27:00] changes in attitude or changes in perception of what role you wanted to play or anything? Any pressures or...?

MS: No, I don't. Brown was a wonderful place for me, but I don't remember changes. It might've strengthened me in good ways, again, as I say, Feldman and Downing giving me confidence in myself because they believed in me. Certainly a superb education, but I don't remember it changing me except in terms of increasing my knowledge and I was going to say, maybe, making me a little more mature, but I'm not sure about that. (laughter) I'm certainly glad I went there.

EB: When you were at Brown, did you encounter any [28:00] obstacles because you were a woman, that you can remember?

MS: No, but I wasn't very aware then, either. But I do not remember that. I can remember Walter Feldman encouraging me to take a summer class -- this is on the opposite side -- he encouraged me to take a special course in graphics at Yale University, they had excellent an excellent graphics department. I went to Europe, instead, but I was really torn and looking back on it now, I really lost out on something by not taking him up on his suggestion. Which is another way of

saying I was never aware of being discriminated against or being thought of less because I was a woman.

EB: What about after, in the job market, or at work? Did you ever encounter any obstacles?
[29:00]

MS: The only time I've been aware of encountering obstacles was at State, and again, I was so unaware of women's rights or whatever you -- I was just not aware. And it was only looking back I thought, how stupid I was. The moment was when there was a big meeting of art educators when I was going to State. The meeting was in Los Angeles, it would've been a chance for me to look for a job, because many graduate students went down there to look for jobs. My teacher said, "Well, I'm going to these meetings, would you be able to come stay with my children while I'm away?"

EB: This is a man?

MS: Yep. And I said...I felt flattered that he trust me enough to [30:00] ask me. So I stayed and took care of his children, and he went to the meetings. And it was only years later, I thought, you know, the light dawned on me, I thought, "You're so...stupid." (laughter) So that's the only place I've been aware of it.

EB: That's not bad. Maybe it hasn't been there.

MS: Well, I teach now at an all-girls school, and that's sort of an insulating factor. Most of the teachers are women, I suspect one reason is because the pay is low at this school, and most people have to have a second income in order to afford to teach there. And I wonder, I don't know -- I don't think it's true -- I was wondering if there was a different pay scale, that if men get a little more. You know the thing where men, because they support [31:00] families, and get more...I don't know if that operates at school. And we were all treated equally when I was growing up. My father took us in his shop, he had a wonderful shop, we had carpentry lessons when I went to the Cambridge School; I took carpentry. So on one hand I was unaware, on the other hand, most of my experience was being treated equally. But yeah, I feel like I'm given a fair shake, all in all.

(break in audio)

EB: Just a couple more questions. You say [32:00] your mom expected you to get married; did you feel pressure to get married?

MS: From her, yes.

EB: For a long time?

MS: Yes, yes. It was just there. I knew how she felt. She didn't always have to say it, I knew how she felt. She didn't often speak of it, but she didn't need to. But there was a big gap between her expectations and my thoughts, so it had a certain air of unreality, and it was just sort of a nagging issue, you know?

EB: Yeah, I've had a few of those. And do you have any final, lasting memories or impressions of your experience at Brown?

MS: Well, the ones I've spoken of. A superb art department [33:00] that did a great deal for me, and two teachers I keep referring to. I think the academics is what I remember the most. The art and the academics; the courses I remember were solid, demanding, challenging courses, and exciting. That's why I got so interested in English, because they were really exciting courses. And the campus was beautiful, and Dr. Wriston was an impressive person.

EB: (inaudible)

MS: Yes. I was there at a good time and a very strong time, I think, and it sounds like it's a very exciting place now, too.

EB: Yeah, I think it is, for me. [34:00] I'm trying to think of something.

MS: So the main thing for me, it's a definite plus for me, Brown. If you asked me about anything negative, I would say I couldn't think of anything negative to say.

EB: Nothing?

MS: Nothing.

EB: So you liked it better than WC?

MS: Oh yes, I did. That was a good education because it was a cultural education, as well as a school education, so I'm grateful for it. But it was a wonderful way to finish up my college education at Brown. Well, of course, time has a way of glossing over negatives, I think there is a tendency to remember good things, but I do remember Brown with... [35:00] I'm glad I went there.

EB: Did you have any trouble being a transfer student? Any problems making friends?

MS: Socially? No. You'd think there'd be little cliques, and all of that have been built up over the years, but no. The dorm life, of course, is the main social life, and we knew people up and down the hall. I roomed with another transfer student, and we still correspond with one another. Christmas time, but we write letters, it isn't just, "Merry Christmas, Love, Sally."

EB: And your academic background was strong enough? You didn't feel behind anyone?

MS: No, I didn't.

EB: Okay, I think we're about up to the present. Thank you very much.

MS: No gaps? (laughter)

EB: No. Your memory is great. Thank you.

- END -