

Transcript – Elizabeth Pretzer Rall

Narrator: Elizabeth Pretzer Rall, class of 1944

Interviewer: Claudia Schechter, class of 1966

Interview Date: August 8, 2013

Location: Home of Elizabeth Pretzer Rall, Centennial, CO

Length: 43:10

Track 1

Note: The first few seconds of this interview failed to record

Elizabeth Pretzer Rall [00:00] ...has to do with economics, and the times, and the family. And so my father was a social worker, not highly paid but significantly. And my sister is close behind me, the two of us, and as the war was on us and we needed to go to school three semesters, and there was no way that they could afford for me to live in a dorm, and there were lots of people. I don't know what proportion of the class lived at home, but that's a different experience than living [01:00] in a dorm. And I didn't live in a dorm until I went to graduate school at Columbia.

Claudia Schechter: And did you have particular expectations when you arrived at the college? As a student who was living at home, did you expect that you would be doing certain things, or not doing certain things at the college?

EPR: No. I don't know what I expected. (laughter) I had always hoped I'd be a botany professor. [02:00] That's what my goal was. And unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, when I signed up as a freshman, there was no room in the botany class. Disappointment. So, you have to complete your science requirements, so take geology.

CS: And did you then come to enjoy geology?

EPR: I very much enjoyed geology. I found that I had to put the geology to the end of my study period, the time I allotted, [03:00] because that was a goal. I wanted to read the geology. Of course, most of it I was somewhat familiar with because my mother had the same textbooks at Flora Stone Mather, and had kept some of her college, like the geology, and we kids looked at

the pictures. I had the same text as she did, only a later edition. (inaudible).

CS: So, do you remember some of the professors you particularly liked in geology or in your other subjects?

EPR: Well, I remember **[04:00]** Dr. Goldthwaite, Dr. Swan, and -- who was the head of the department? I can't say his name. And I still remember the first lecture, and with Dr. Goldthwaite saying that "Well, why are you people taking geology? Some of you are filling the requirements, some of you are interested in the rocks, and some of you will make a profession of it." And I kind of wondered at the time, what would a profession in geology be like? Well, **[05:00]** going through Pembroke then to graduate school, taking the courses that were necessary for graduation in the science, and that would admit me to graduate school, I found that I really liked the geology, and the botany was a disappointment. The professor was much into the sex life of mosses and ferns and I was more interested in the ecology, and it didn't turn me on.

CS: And did you expect to use your degree **[06:00]** later? Did you think you would go on and become a geologist and work in the field?

EPR: You know, I don't know if I really expected to be able to find a job or not. I took enough sociology to admit me to graduate school in social work if that was what I wanted to do.

CS: So, you would have an alternative if you decided. Were there many other women who were science majors in your class?

EPR: You know, I don't know how many were science majors. I think quite a few of us took chemistry and biology, at least the beginning subjects. You were required to take a certain number of those subjects. And I remember the **[07:00]** chemistry was qualitative and quantitative analysis, and they were giving us a beefed-up course so that we'd be prepared for industry in chemistry.

CS: Interesting. What would you say was the relationship, then, between Brown and Pembroke,

as it was reflected in your classes, and just in the campus life that you participated in?

EPR: Well of course, being in geology, I was on the main campus most of the time, especially South, junior and senior years, and taking a number of geology courses. [08:00] And being a home person living at home, I was not involved in not many of the social activities.

CS: What did you choose to be involved in, in terms of social activities?

EPR: At Pembroke?

CS: At Pembroke. Did you hang out with other girls who had gone to Hope and gone on?

EPR: Well, [I didn't see very?] many, but I remember one of my best friends was Virginia Lansing, who lived in the dorm and was from Ohio, and I went to see her [09:00] as a -- I don't know -- sophomore, so I would see her in the summer time. She was from Ohio, I can't remember where. And she was a Latin major, very important in the war because they were doing the translating and the decoding.

CS: That makes sense. What would you say, then, are your most striking memories of Brown, and/or Pembroke? When you think of your college years, what comes back as most important to you?

EPR: Well, I suppose the Michigan field camp, [10:00] just south of Yellowstone Park in Wyoming.

CS: And so you went there as a student to do field research?

EPR: Right.

CS: How exciting. Did a whole group of students go?

EPR: Well, it was an eight-week course, and then there was a four-week add-on which I wrote to

my parents, and they scraped to send me. The University of Michigan, several of the football team was there because they were making up their marks. [11:00] What else?

CS: Well, that does sound exciting. Were there parts of your experience at Brown or Pembroke that were low points, that were things you didn't like?

EPR: Well, I can remember one day, we were studying speech and vowel sounds, and I can't remember what class that was, but being asked to go to the blackboard and write the word phonetically. Oh, that was embarrassing, [12:00] and a struggle, and not fun.

CS: Overall, did you like the quality of the professors you had?

EPR: Oh, I was very impressed, yes.

CS: And did you interact with the deans at all, the Pembroke deans? Did you work with the Pembroke deans at all? Meet with them, remember them?

EPR: I don't think so.

CS: And as a student who lived at home, what did you participate in, in campus life?

EPR: Well, I had a job, a scholarship, a working scholarship in the library, so that kept me on the campus a little longer each day than I would have [13:00] been otherwise.

CS: Let's see. I asked about that... How did you meet your friend from Ohio on the campus?

EPR: I do not remember how I met her. Each freshman was assigned to a senior. We had a senior sister, and as I remember, she was very sweet and I was very innocent and shy. There were a couple of pictures in recent Brown alumnae publications, [14:00] and this one -- and I can't lay my hands on it right now -- if I come and find it. It's a picture of freshman girls, a whole bunch of us standing in an entryway, and mostly you see our heads. And I can see my friend, Virginia

Lanning. I can identify Virginia Lanning, and I can identify -- I'm pretty sure that's me. I think that was a couple of years ago that was -- and there was another one. It was a recent publication for the class [15:00] of '44, and there is a picture of me and another girl standing there, and I think we were in shorts. The other girl is identified, and I cannot remember her name at the moment, or why the picture was in the magazine, even, but that is fairly recent.

CS: I am sure Wendy will be able to find those, because that's all digitized now, so you can look it up online. Being a city girl in Providence, did you spend time in the city itself doing things? [16:00] Or did you just concentrate on your studies?

EPR: Square dancing was very popular, and I was very much interested in the Quakers. And what else? My sister and I both were in the -- I'm trying to think what they called it -- the bicycle. They had a network of places where young people could stay; you bicycled from one to the next.

CS: Hostels.

EPR: Hostels. And sometimes, we stayed in a barn, and they had a little cooking facility.

CS: [17:00] So where did you ride? What trips did you take?

EPR: Well, one trip I took -- I have to get the rock. I still have the rock. Do you want to bring in my septarian concretion?

CS: Certainly. Which one is that?

EPR: Right there on the end, the last end.

CS: This one?

EPR: That's him. It's heavy.

CS: Tell me about this rock. So, you picked this up on [18:00] one of your bicycle tours?

EPR: Tight. And put him in the basket and carried him home. I'm impressed.

CS: I'm impressed. I would have thought the bicycle would go like this. (laughter)

EPR: Well, I think it's remarkable I still have it.

CS: It is. It's a beautiful stone.

EPR: Well, it's very interesting and it's so symmetrical and all. It doesn't happen very often.

CS: No. Were there Brown or Pembroke events or traditions that you also took part in?

EPR: Oh, it seems to me, I remember singing.

CS: Did they have convocation when you went there? Did you have to go to convocation?

EPR: I think we had to [19:00] go to convocation. I think some of the girls got together and did some singing. I don't remember much of that.

CS: Do you think that your experience at Brown and Pembroke taught you much about women's roles and gender differences with those topics at the time you graduated, the way they were? Not so much when I graduated, but maybe later after I had graduated?

EPR: What I remember is they were very equally treated. And when I went to the University of Illinois, treated quite well. [20:00] Went to Texas with my husband on his first job, and I could not believe (laughter) the cultural difference.

CS: Interesting.

EPR: And then, we moved from West Texas, moved from -- where did we go from West Texas? To Calgary, and that was sort of like going home.

CS: Interesting.

EPR: (inaudible) international relations.

CS: So do you think that your professors at Brown encouraged you to go on in geology? And did your parents encourage you to go ahead with the science [21:00] career rather than social work?

EPR: Sure, yes. Well, not rather than, but in addition to. Make sure you've got your bridges behind you.

CS: Right. So how would you describe the way you treated work and family during your marriage and your geological career?

EPR: How would I...?

CS: How did you balance work and raising your family, and your use of geology in work?

EPR: I'd like to say that from the most part, I worked on an hourly basis. [22:00] And that way, it gave me lots of flexibility. At the end of the month, I'd tell them how many hours I worked, and they'd pay me for that amount. If the kids were sick and I had to stay at home, you know, I didn't worry about making up an hour here and there, and the opposite was true, too. They were busy down at the office, why I'd -- and by the time I got my PhD from the University of Illinois, you were allowed 10 years between the time you graduated -- I don't know if they still do this or not -- and [23:00] the time you got your PhD. So in that amount of time, I had gotten a master's degree. I taught at Galesburg division of the University of Illinois. I had married and had three children. I can't believe it.

CS: I think there are many young women today who would appreciate the fact that you did all of those things when you did.

EPR: Well, I had a wonderful husband who admitted that he felt a little bit guilty about three children and still striving to get [24:00] that Ph.D. He was a big help, but of course, it's being a geologist, and I doubt the -- I'm saying this loud enough so Lucy can hear -- that we ever went on a vacation that didn't have a geology theme. Right, Lucy?

Lucy: No, that's untrue. We did go to visit my grandparents on the farm in Illinois. I am sure there was geology worked in there somewhere, but...

CS: (laughter) So, the grandparents on the farm in Illinois, were those your husband's parents?

EPR: Yes.

CS: My father grew up on a farm in Illinois, which we still have. His mother's family homestead it. And he was actually a professor of chemistry at the University of Illinois, but at the medical school [25:00] in Chicago. So I grew up mainly around Chicago. Did you have professional mentors as you got your PhD, as you did your geology work? I'm sure you and your husband discussed it, but did you have folks who helped you as you went through your career?

EPR: Just people our own age, I think. Oh, I guess at the first job in Midland, there were some very astute geologists who were contributing to the information and the geology of [26:00] some of the Midland basin.

CS: Was that a new basin at the time? Were you exploring something that was really new to the country?

EPR: Yes, and these professionals, like people working for Humboldt were writing papers, and we liberals in that foreign country sort of clung together. And their support was professionally. And we were a long [27:00] way from home, we all had young families, we were all struggling.

And we finally met up with the Unitarians, and some of those people are still -- so those are the hard, fast friendships. A few, like this Virginia Lanning, I corresponded with, and a few others, but those were people that we depended so on. (laughter)

CS: For my husband and me, it's very similar. We were in the coal fields of West Virginia and our best friends are from those early years [28:00] of our marriage. We were all having children; we were all supporting each other.

EPR: You needed each other.

CS: I understand that; that was really important. It asks if there are any social or political or religious organizations or experiences that you would want to share.

EPR: Political or religious? Or...?

CS: Or social.

EPR: Or social.

CS: I mean, you did share one, the coming together of the families to support each other, but I didn't know if there were any others that you wanted to mention.

EPR: Well, there's Virginia Lanning. We had a little cabin in [29:00] Rhode Island, my family did. And I can remember her coming to Thanksgiving dinner at the cabin and the Spanish professor, this professor of Spanish, lived next door to us, and I don't know why I remember, they came out and brought her for Thanksgiving.

CS: Do you think that there are ways that your time on campus influenced the choices you made in the years afterward?

EPR: Well, I can't think of any specific instance just [30:00] right off. Give me an example.

CS: Well, I'm not sure. Maybe the camp in Wyoming would be an example. It might have given you a real-life taste so then when you got to the Midland Basin, it felt like you were exploring something really important. I don't know. They give us a really wonderful list of questions and some strike a person and others don't. So, you know, I don't know if there's anything that your time on campus kind of influenced later on in your life or not. Maybe other influences were more important.

EPR: **[31:00]** Well, as I say, I think that a social life did not develop the way modern people in the dorm.

CS: Right, so it changes. I just finished, actually, summarizing [an interview of] a woman who grew up in Providence, and she said the same thing. She said, "I told all my children to go away to school because I didn't feel integrated into the campus," basically is what she had said. Did you see a change in Brown and Pembroke from when you began there to when you left? Did anything change on campus in that time?

EPR: Oh, I think a lot, and it was a lot due to the war.

CS: Really. What were some of those changes?

EPR: Well, I don't know about the changes, but -- well, change in **[32:00]** the program, three semesters a year instead of two. Blackouts at night, (laughter) so you better get home, get the curtains pulled. What else? Rationing.

CS: So how do you think about the Brown and Pembroke that you attended and Brown and Pembroke today, when you read the alumni magazine? Are there positives; are there negatives? Do you follow the changes in the university? **[33:00]**

EPR: Well, I haven't thought about, (laughter) you know, is this different than -- we lived down near the Brown stadium. And as a junior high student, we used to park our cars -- people going

to the football games in our yard, and I can remember my mother saying, mimicking me saying, "Paak yaa cah." (laughter)

CS: (laughter) Have you stayed in touch with the university over the years?

EPR: Well, in a [34:00] limited sort of way. It's the same with Virginia Lanning and some of the other girls. I have not been back to any reunion. It was too far. The kids were too young. I was too busy.

CS: And how do you feel about when Pembroke was no longer an independent entity within the university, but just merged into the university in 1971?

EPR: Well, I thought it was the way it should have been in the beginning. Yeah. But an interesting thing is that here in Colorado, not many blocks from where I live, there was a Pembroke girl in my class.

CS: Really? [35:00] And have you caught up with her at all?

EPR: Well, she has died since. But yes, we got together occasionally.

CS: So as you were thinking about this oral history, I've asked a series of questions that are suggested, but what did I miss? What would you want to say to someone who is researching these oral histories about your experience that should be on this recorder?

EPR: Well, the professors were -- especially this David Swan -- young professor, certainly was very supportive. And [36:00] some of the other students who were geologists, majored in geology. Dave Swan probably influenced me more than anybody else. He was at the University of Illinois and helped me get my first job, which was with the Illinois Geological Survey.

CS: I think that concludes the questions I was going to ask, Mrs. Rall. Do you think that there is anything else you want to add?

EPR: What? Well, advice.

CS: [37:00] What is your advice?

EPR: Follow your soul. If this is what you like, keep with it. And you might have to give up a lot to make it work, but you won't count the cost. You don't count the cost.

CS: And is that the advice you gave to your daughters and son? They all obviously valued education the way that you and your parents did.

EPR: Yes. Well, I think it's interesting that -- hey, you! -- my mother's [38:00] father was a principal of a high school in Cleveland. This was about 1900. They had property outside of Cleveland -- my mother said 40 miles outside of the city. And can you imagine packing up a family of seven, eight, nine children and moving them to the beach for the summer? We went to the shores of Lake Erie, and my grandfather very often invited some of his students to come for a couple of weeks at a time. Relatives were always coming. They [39:00] started out living in a boathouse down on the beach, and my grandfather and the boys of the family built a big castle, they called it, up on the bluff. And my mother persuading my father to go camping for their honeymoon. And they camped, you know, all the rest of their lives. And I loved the camping. My kids do. I think it's interesting, that kind of a thing, how an [40:00] interest carries through the families.

CS: I think that's right. That's an important string in families, that it gets handed down from generation to generation.

EPR: Well, and the same holds true with education. Imagine a high school principal sending -- he had five girls. The first girl was firstborn. She had to stay home and help Mom when she graduated from high school. Well, it was a time when women didn't even graduate from high school, most of them. And after the rest of the family got through, [41:00] and some of them are engineers and doctors and so forth, they were all well educated. And my father, in order to be

with my mother, (laughter) graduated with a master's degree in 1920.

CS: Well, I think that concludes the interview, and I thank you very much, Mrs. Rall. I think this will be exciting. So I am going to turn off the machine now. [42:00] (pause) I'm not sure why it isn't turning off. I did this before and it told me "good-bye," but it's not doing that now. [43:00] There we go.

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