

Transcript – Cynthia Brill Burdick, '65

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SAR: Well, I guess we should start with how you grew up and where you grew up.

CBP: Well, I grew up in Wilmington, Delaware, and I lived on a sort of a farm, which ended up being about thirteen acres but, uh, we had an apple orchard and truck garden and we kept ourselves in frozen food and were able to give some away. But I always disliked living in the country...I always said to my mother, "Couldn't I live in the city somewhere?" and then I could have friends who lived next door.

SAR: So how did you decide to go to college and come to Brown?

Telephone rang... slight intermission

SAR: So coming to Brown...

CBP: How did I come to Brown?

SAR: ...or Pembroke?

CBP: Pembroke. Well, I went to a boarding school in western Connecticut called Westover, and back in those days it was run by a headmistress who simply told you where you were going to go to college. Most of the time she was right, but, um...and she told me I was going to go to Bryn Mawr. So indeed, I applied, and was accepted, and went to Bryn Mawr. But What Miss Dillingham had no control over was the fact that I had met someone I fell in love with, and he was a lawyer, so, after a year and a half at Bryn Mawr, he and I were married, and he was working up here in Providence at Edwards and Angel, so I transferred to Brown, to Pembroke, and, uh, thus became the class of '65 instead of '64 where I was originally.

SAR: Hmm...How, uh, what was it like being married in college?

CBP: Uh, I hope Mrs. Anton warned you, it's very...back in those days it was very different and I

really wasn't much part of the undergraduate life at Pembroke. Uh, I played field hockey, and those really were the young women I got to know. With my husband not being a Brown student, since he was a lawyer, he, we basically had a social life that was not included the college, and so the women I got to know reasonably well were the hockey players.

SAR: Did you run into any problems with the administration or with the faculty about being married?

CBP: Uh, not about being married; I had a hard time transferring some of my credits from Bryn Mawr to Brown. A lot it still is the case, some colleges run on a five course per semester basis and some on four. Bryn Mawr and Brown both were on four but due to some different phrasing in the course book, it was... if it hadn't been for Dean Bigelow, I would still probably be fighting to get some of my Bryn Mawr credits. But she was very helpful, and I think, my major was history, and I think my transfer from Bryn Mawr to Brown in history was one of the best things I ever did, marriage notwithstanding...

SAR: Really? Why is that?

CBP: Well Bryn Mawr's premier teacher was a lady named Caroline Robbins, and I think she's still alive but I'm not sure, and I was able to take the only course she taught undergraduates the first semester of my sophomore year. And then she didn't teach again until she had graduate students. So, that although they were a perfectly adequate faculty at Bryn Mawr, it was a lot smaller than Brown, and it just didn't have the choice, and by coming to Brown I was able to have a far greater choice of subject and professors.

SAR: You came at the end of your sophomore year?

CBP: I came halfway through my sophomore year.

SAR: And what classes do you remember, the professors...?

CBP: Well, I was a history major... I remember Professor Don Rohr as certainly one of the most entertaining and imaginative teachers I ever had and ever have seen at work. I always defend the requirements, which, of course, went out 10 years ago?

SAR: Right.

CBP: ...because through the requirements I ended up taking art history which I would never have taken on my own, and I think I took it the second semester I was here, and followed it with a semester course each time thereafter, each chance I had: and it's certainly been the thing I carry with me most, the most useful things I took in college, it gives me the most pleasure.

SAR: You know, they are fighting for requirements again.

CBP: My daughter goes to Columbia, and they have requirements, and has taken a lot of things

that she would not have ordinarily taken.

SAR: Columbia has some great requirements, too.

CBP: Yes, they have, sort of, Literature from the Egyptians to the Present and music and that kind of thing. There are pros and cons to requirements, but I'm not sure that there aren't more pros than cons.

SAR: Hmm...Even though you weren't part of the dorm life and the social life, do you remember anything about it?

CBP: I'm afraid not really, uh, no.

SAR: I don't know whether they still had, I was reading about May Day and Ivy Day...

CBP: Oh my goodness, they had those at Mawr, I can tell you about them at Bryn Mawr, but, no I never did participate in them at Brown.

SAR: I think they had it at Brown.

CBP: They certainly had required chapel; I do remember that.

SAR: They did?

CBP: Oh, yes, the only thing I remember about it is, one of the seniors, my first year, I guess the seniors marched in, in Alumnae Hall, and one of the seniors had absolutely the most striking profile I've ever seen in my life. You know, there's a painting, of the Duke of Urbino, I don't know who it's by, but he's opposed to his wife, in two small paintings and her nose goes out, straight out and this woman had the same exact nose, and I just loved it. This poor thing, she probably hated it, but I thought it was the most striking thing I had ever seen, sort of wished I had one like it, but I didn't. Other than that, I don't remember anything about that... chapels, but that was a long time ago.

SAR: How about contact with faculty? The availability of professors'?

CBP: I think they were very available. I was someone who tended to go it alone more. I did have conferences when they were required for a paper or something like that, but I never particularly had, I was never in any academic trouble necessarily, and, like I said, my life was not campus centered, it was centered in the community, and so I never took advantage of their availability, I never went to any of their Christmas functions or anything like that where the faculty was there to chat.

SAR: What did you think about the merger in '71?

CBP: When I was there, the only thing, to my perceptions, again, I wasn't living in the dorms, was that we had separate gym classes, so it seemed perfectly natural and logical to me. All the

academic classes were shared and it just, I think I probably thought it made sense. Radcliffe and Harvard were having a big fight at the time, and they didn't join for a long time, and I'm not really sure they've resolved where they're at at this point.

SAR: Right, I don't think there is a line of distinction there now. My mother was there at the time, so I always hear about those battles.

CBP: Yes.

SAR: What was it like being a woman at Pembroke? Did you feel any kind of discrimination in classes or outside of classes?

CBP: No, I think if I felt any discrimination it was sort of odd man out being a married student, and you know, people back in those days you didn't often get married and change colleges, so people sort of looked at me askance. A couple of times I went into West House, which was the non-resident students lounge and area and so forth. And I never really felt that maybe it was the group of girls that happened to be there when I walked in, but I never really felt as though that anybody really gave a hoot about me, so I went my own way, and made my contacts in classes, which, the contacts were almost all female, you know, we would sit together or talk more readily to a woman student than a man student.

SAR: We were talking about science classes, actually, that there was a lot of tension between men and women in science classes. Did you take science classes, or feel this tension?

CBP: No, I had taken science at Bryn Mawr, and that credit was transferred; but I had to take a second, so I took astronomy, which I don't think really qualifies as a science class. But that's OK, it counted, and there were no labs or anything like that, so it was more a philosophic science than a quantitative science.

SAR: What kind of extracurricular activities did you do?

CBP: As I said, I was on the hockey team, and I wanted to play for the ice hockey team, the Pandas, while I was here, and unfortunately, discrimination, here you go, the only ice time available was at 10:30 at night. And as a married student, that didn't really fit into my life. So, I passed it up, and I was always very sorry I couldn't play, but the boys had the ice. Obviously the hockey team wasn't using the ice all that time, but everything else came before the Pandas. And I had gym, but that was a requirement. Basically, I had other, uh, fish to fry.

SAR: Right. What about after Pembroke?

CBP: After Brown, I remained a housewife, I had two children, and moved about in Providence. Once you get to know people in Providence you'll hear them say, oh I've moved five times. Well, they've moved three blocks one time and six blocks the next time so this is now my fifth house on the East Side of Providence. I became interested, after my daughter was born, in two

volunteer activities. One was Women and Infants Hospital and the other was the Meeting Street School, which is for retarded children. And I am still active at Women and Infants, and that has been a twenty-one year commitment to the hospital, and that has been, for me, the most interesting and rewarding thing I've done. I've moved on, as the kids grew, I was trustees of the various schools, it's all down there on that sheet. I am employed now, and about six years ago I was head of the parents' association at Lincoln School, which was a girl's school up the street, where my daughter went. I was approached by the head mistress and was asked if I would be interested in taking a part time job in the Development Office. I thought about it, and, since I was in the middle of a divorce, I thought it would be a good idea, one, to have the income and two, to have something else to do, so I took it. In a year, the woman who was my boss left Providence, so they asked me if I would be willing to take the position. It was just a question of being in the right place at the right time. So for five years I was director of Development at the Lincoln School. I'm all for single sex education, also. In the appropriate place, and for appropriate kids. Pembroke certainly wasn't single sex education.

SAR: Right.

CBP: My son went to Providence Country Day, which was all boys and so I'm an advocate for single sex education.

SAR: Why? Just out of curiosity.

CBP: Because I think it offers both sets of kids, both sexes, opportunities to grow at their own speed, and in a community as small as Providence, there are plenty of opportunities for dating, and for church groups and such, but I think if you keep, again, for the right kid, if you keep social activities separate from academic activities, the kid benefits.

SAR: I was talking to someone who went to Smith about that. She was telling me that she really likes being in a single sex place. Do you find that having gone to Pembroke helped you at all in finding jobs, or the experience you got there...

CBP: Not going to Pembroke. Again, it was my connections with the community, and again, I was more part of the Providence community than I was of the Pembroke community. And I never had to, quote, network. If I had moved to Chicago, or something like that, it would have been different.

SAR: So you were already part of a...

CBP: Yeah, I was already a part of a community, known or not known, as the case may be.

SAR: When you decided to go college, was that with the expectation that you would have a career afterwards?

CBP: No. I belonged to this old fashioned group that was raised that they probably would get

married, and if they had a job, "it would only last a year or two, dear" and I think one of the things I found most striking and distressing was that I had followed sort of the normal social expectations of my peers in that I got married, and had kids and was active in the community, and so speak always behaved myself. Well, then I got into this divorce, and started dating again, and it was clear to me that the whole society and society's expectation had gone 180 degrees from where I was basically when I got married in 1961, '62, to where I was again dating in the late '70's, and it really made me very angry, at society and at myself for having gyped myself, so as my daughter hits her twenty first birthday, raised a toast to myself and said, well, at least she'll have some opportunities just to try different things that I never had. And I'm not sure, I know in fact, I never would have realized the consequences of having married early, and I probably would have felt, "Oh, my God, I'm graduating from college next week, what am I going to do? I'm not married, what am I going to do?" But I think it's a wonderful opportunity for people just to do what they want.

SAR: At the time, though, were most of the women there expecting to have a career, or just expecting to go out and get married?

CBP: I would say it was probably fifty-fifty. That's just kind of a guess. Some women I knew were already married, some, because I graduated actually in January, my class of '64, some of the people I had gotten to know finished in the June before, and they pretty much were either going on to further study, or had jobs or the Peace Corps, or something like that.

SAR: Were your parents happy that you got married...

CBP: No, no they were horrified, but they didn't perceive that they had much choice. My brother had gone to Yale, when I was still in high school and he had come from boarding school, as I would, and he had so much his first year that he was put on probation, or something like that.

SAR: Academic probation?

CBP: Yes, that's right, and then he flunked some quiz or exam long about February of his second semester, and he simply departed from Yale telling anyone he was leaving or where he was going, and back in 1959 you simply didn't do that sort of thing, so he disappeared off the face of the Earth for two weeks, finally turned up in Nashville. My father had alerted the banks not to cash his checks. Nowadays, you try to get a bank to cooperate, no way, José. But they called him, and they were going to process this check, and my father went down to Nashville, and basically was waiting in the bank when he showed up. However, I think they were afraid that I might do something along those lines if they tried to keep me under control, send me away for... So they kind of had to bear with my demands. But they did ask that I finish college, and indeed I did.

SAR: Did you want to?

CBP: I didn't not want to. I didn't want to have children right away, this gave me something to do basically, until I was more or less ready, and settled into the community. Oh, but I enjoyed Pembroke very much. It added a life of my own.

SAR: Do you have any vivid memories, any specific things that stand out in your college career?

CBP: Gosh. Well nothing in particular. We had comprehensives in those days, and the system wasn't particularly flexible: comprehensives were given at the end of May, and so therefore a semester short, I had to take comprehensives instead of taking them late in December after another full semester. So, I did my best, and one of the questions was absolutely wonderful. I do remember that. It started with, "History is the graveyard of ideas..." and I thought, if this isn't the opportunity to shovel everything I know... Then, after the things are corrected, they just post a list, in the History department, as to who passes and who doesn't, or I guess, if your name wasn't there, then you didn't pass, and because I was a half a semester senior, I wasn't listed alphabetically. And I went down, my name was Brill at the time, and I said, oh, my God, it's not there. I have flunked, this is awful, what am I going to do? Well, just sort of as an afterthought, they had put me down at the bottom of the list, so I did find myself. Oh, boy, that was a vivid memory.

SAR: I can imagine. How did your husband feel about your going to college?

CBP: He didn't want it to interfere with his life. That was very clear. I barely studied in the evenings. My activities were in concert with his when he came home from work.

SAR: What do your kids think of you going to college and then getting married?

CBP: Uh, I don't know that they've ever really...

SAR: ... given it serious thought?

CBP: Given it serious thought. After all, if I hadn't done it, they wouldn't be here.

SAR: Right.

CBP: I think my daughter is very clear in her own mind that she isn't going to get married yet. She has had three very serious boyfriends, and it's always a terrible crisis when it breaks up, but I always say, thank heavens, and on to another one, or whatever, just keep learning, keep learning. My son is too young. He is a freshman at Williams. And that sort of thing goes right over his head.

SAR: Well, I think that's all I have to ask you. Is there anything you want to add?

CBP: No. Is this your first interview?

SAR: Yes.

CBP: Good, good. Well, I think it is a very interesting project, as I say, I'm probably a great disappointment, as far as my memories of Pembroke.

SAR: No, not at all.

CBP: With the exception of some wild and crazy things which have nothing to do with Pembroke at all. But I think you'll find this very interesting. Do you get an opportunity to interview other people?

SAR: I'm not sure, I think other people in my class will interview other people.

CBP: Well, if you get an opportunity to work with the Archives, that should be very interesting.

SAR: Yes.

CBP: Just to have a sense of the different types of people who went to Pembroke.

SAR: Yes. Diverse then as it is now.

CBP: Yes. Well, actually, the Pembroke was a much harder college to get into than Brown was.

SAR: Oh, I know.

CBP: I only knew one person who came to Pembroke, I knew her since ninth grade. She was a very different person. Very nice, very bright, and just her own person even in ninth grade. Brown people where, uh...some of the people were very bright, some of them were not all that bright.

SAR: I actually heard that there was a lot of tension because the women were doing so much better academically than the men, and they weren't happy about that.

CBP: I suspect that is true. I don't know that, because most of my courses were lecture courses, and there wasn't much sharing of grades. Also, because I wasn't part of the social community, I didn't go back to my dorm and scream and yell and say how could I possibly have gotten that grade?

SAR: OK, well, thank you very much. I really appreciate the time you spent with me.

CBP: Thank you.