

Transcript – Eleanor McElroy, Class of 1937

Narrator: Eleanor McElroy

Interviewer:

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Side 1

Eleanor Rosalie McElroy: [00:00:00] – recorder.

Q: Yeah.

ERM: And you can put cassettes in this?

Q: This is January 24th, 1986, and I'm interviewing Eleanor McElroy, Pembroke Class of 1937. Can you give me a little information about your family, where you're from, and the occupations of your parents?

ERM: Well, my mother was a teacher, and she taught for 45 years, I think, and she went through the whole routine from first grade, actually, to principal of a grammar school, and she did special education. She had a bachelor's and a master's from BU, so we sort of felt we were related to BU as well as Brown, and my sister went to URI, so we had quite a combination of colleges. My father died when I was quite young, so I really [00:01:00] never got to know him too well. He was an antique dealer, and he sort of dealt in a few other things that were related to that. So I was really, primarily, brought up by my mother.

Q: Did you have any siblings?

ERM: I have a sister who is younger, and she went to URI, and she's married, has two children. She is now a state representative in the house, so we've come into politics. [laughs]

Q: It sounds like it.

ERM: She's very active in South County and always has been. She went to URI and really never came back to Providence again because she liked the country. We always figured we lived in the country, actually, because we had a farm next door.

Q: Oh, how nice. Really?

ERM: And when I was in the retail business, I used to love to go to New York and tell them I had the farm next door with chickens and a cow and corn. [laughs] So nobody believed that really. [00:02:00] They thought I was making that up, but really until, oh, I guess about 15 years ago that was a farm, the last farm in the city I believe.

Q: Where was that?

ERM: The Whitman Farm up near Providence College.

Q: Really? Because everyone I talked to who went to Pembroke from Providence says they were called city girls.

ERM: Well, we were city girls. There's no question about that, but we put farm in front of it.

Q: Okay. [laughs] How did you decide to come to Pembroke?

ERM: Oh, there wasn't any question that was where I was going I guess. I went to Classical, and then, of course, that's just sort of a normal routine, to come to Pembroke, I guess.

Q: Did you have any – it sounds like, I mean, since your mom had a lot of degrees, there wouldn't be – was there any pressure about going to college because you were female?

ERM: Oh, no, I just think you were expected to go.

Q: That was in your family?

ERM: That was – oh, yes.

Q: Did your mom –

ERM: Because I had quite a few Brown people in my mother's family. [00:03:00]

Q: Oh, I see.

ERM: So there were – well, actually, if I was going anyplace it would be to Pembroke. My mother went to the Rhode Island Normal School – which of course was RIC, and now it's Rhode Island College – initially, and then, of course, she went to BU, but there wasn't any question, really, as long as I got in. That was the main point. Of course, we didn't have to take exams at that point, so if you were scholastically okay then you got in without any problem.

Q: I see.

ERM: So it was a normal stage, I guess, a normal ladder to go to Pembroke.

Q: Was that unusual at the time period?

ERM: No, I don't think so, because quite a few of Classical '33 – I have to remember that, because somebody asked me was I Classical '33 at what time –

Q: That's a long time.

ERM: – and I said, “No, of course not.” I couldn't remember that that was when I graduated from Classical, because we had a reunion about two years ago. [00:04:00]

Q: Oh, that's nice.

ERM: That was our first reunion. So when somebody called up and said, "Are you that Eleanor McElroy," I said – I had to pause. "Yes, I guess I am." I never thought about it, you know. Initially, you think of Pembroke '37, but I never thought of Classical, being a '33.

Q: Did your family have expectations about what you'd do with your education?

ERM: No, I don't think so. I just knew that I didn't want to be a teacher. That was my determination.

Q: How come?

ERM: I guess I had been brought up too much in that, you know, my mother being a teacher, my aunt a teacher, my grand-aunt a teacher, everybody, and cousins, you know, galore that taught all over the state, so that was one thing that I didn't want to do.

Q: You wanted something different from the rest of the family.

ERM: Well, of course, I got the fellowship when I graduated, and I got appointed a training teacher, so, of course, that was what I did, [00:05:00] because, of course, it was Depression time, and you were happy to have anything, really, at that point. So I did train for a year for absolutely nothing, so it was quite a change from today.

Q: Yeah.

ERM: So I think I was no more enamored of the teaching profession after the year than I was previously, so I don't think, you know, I was given a good send-off, you might say, in the teaching profession, because I still had no liking for it.

Q: Did you see your mother as a role model besides the teaching, which you didn't like?

ERM: Oh, no, no, because she was a great teacher. I mean, she was really a born teacher, and I think my sister is too. She went into teaching as well, among many other jobs. [00:06:00] But I just – last year, last spring semester, I taught at CCRI, “Retail, Accounting, and Personnel Management,” and I still was not a good teacher I think. You know, I think you have to like it to teach.

Q: Oh, yeah.

ERM: I think even though all of the knowledge I had was based on what I had done for 40 years, I think teaching it was a little different.

Q: Yeah, you have to –

ERM: So I had my experience at one end, and I had it at another end, so I think – not that I disliked teaching. I do think it's great, but I think you have to be equipped to do it.

Q: Let's talk about your freshman year at Pembroke. Did you live at home that year?

ERM: Oh, I lived at home all of the time. [00:07:00]

Q: For the four years?

ERM: I never had that opportunity to stay away, which was okay, too, I guess.

Q: You know – okay, why don't you tell me some of the courses you took your freshman year. Do you remember?

ERM: Well, I guess you all took biology, as I remember, and French, I think, and an English course. I don't remember what else.

Q: How about some of the other years? What was your major?

ERM: Oh, math, I took a math class with Dr. [Adams?], so then I continued math in the second year, and French, and then I guess I started history with Dr. Hedges and Dr. [Moss?], Professor George, economics with Schumacher.

Q: It's all coming back.

ERM: [00:08:00] Yeah, I have to think now. Oh, and I took a German literature course with Professor (inaudible). He was very nice, and then art. I took two or three different art courses over the four years, Professor [Darling?], Professor Taylor.

Q: Did you have a favorite course?

ERM: Not really. I think that most of, now, what I've gotten out of Pembroke probably I got out of the German literature course and the art courses, you know, reflecting back to what you did study in your junior years. [laughs]

Q: What was your major?

ERM: History, plus ed.

Q: Can you talk about some of the people who were important for you at Pembroke?

ERM: Do you mean professors?

Q: Professors, or the dean, or students.

ERM: Oh, I guess the professors were probably the most [00:09:00] important people. I never saw the dean too much. Miss Morriss was, you know, high and mighty up there. We didn't have

her – you know, talk too much to her. Miss Mooar, of course, was very, very nice. She probably was the one that we had the most to do with.

Q: Who is Miss Mooar?

ERM: Edna Moore, she was – Eva Mooar, she was the dean of admissions, and she was a great lady, and, of course, Miss Rudd, who was very influential in our daily life with the physical education. She never could see me playing tennis or field hockey, and she abhorred my swimming, and, well, I guess I was all right in horseback riding, but she was always amused in later years whenever I saw her that I became so athletic, because she said, “You weren’t very athletic at school.” [00:10:00] [laughs]

Q: It was a challenge.

ERM: So I think she got a big kick out of knowing that I skied and played golf, and she couldn’t see that in me, I guess, when we were here, because she changed my swimming and made me a no-good swimmer. I was fairly decent before I came, but after she got a hold of me we went down to the Plantations Club for swimming, and then I guess we went to the Hoyt pool. But as an athletic person, she couldn’t see me. I guess she was probably right, although I did more later after getting out of school than I did in school.

Q: How much contact did you have with Eva Mooar, you were saying? What was her role?

ERM: Well, I think she was always very nice. You could talk to her if you had a problem, and she was always very friendly. And of course, later on, [00:11:00] when I used to see her after I graduated I think we became good talking friends, because she and Miss (inaudible) would always come into the store, and they were some of my customers at times, because I went into the retail business after my year of training. I went into Gladding’s for Christmas, and I stayed, so that was my retail career of 40 years, more or less.

Q: Did you have any contact with the dean?

ERM: Very little. I don't remember meeting with her, once or twice or three times, possibly, in the four years. If that was good or bad, I don't know. It might have been a bad idea.

Q: What sort of impression did she make on you?

ERM: Well, she was somebody that, you know, you really couldn't get very close to, I think, possibly that was the way the setup was, although I think she was very friendly [00:12:00] with some people, but I wasn't among that group, I think. Maybe that's all right too. So it's hard to single out any person, but I can remember Miss Mooar more than anybody else, I think, because she was really a top-notch person. And as I say, I did see her and Miss Rudd often afterwards, and we always had a few words to say, so it was that continuing kind of thing, whereas I'm sure Miss Morriss didn't know me from a hole in the wall. [laughs]

Q: Do you remember any of the talks Miss Morriss gave to the Pembroke's? Did she –

ERM: No, there was only one, I think, that probably I have invested in very, very much and very wisely, possibly. She always said that you should invest in yourself, and probably this is what – education was meant to do that, and you educated yourself for life, [00:13:00] not for a job. That was probably her second motto, and I think she felt that Pembroke wasn't a vocational school. It was something that led to your own development, and thereafter it became your problem to decide where you were going as far as – because actually all of the girls, I'm sure very few of them married and stayed home. Most everybody, it seems to me, got a job as a requisite to living.

Q: Do you think that was partly because of the time period?

ERM: Oh, I think so, but I think in previous classes probably more persons were married and that was their vocation, should we say, whereas probably starting a couple of classes before us people were expected to get a job, I think. [00:14:00] Possibly people didn't work and were married, but many of them did, I think, eventually. You know, I think possibly that was sort of the way of life at that point, and that was the changing period, I think, for people.

Q: So do you think attitudes about marriage changed during that time period?

ERM: Oh, I don't think so. I wouldn't be aware of that anyhow. I certainly think that possibly everybody wanted to be married, I suppose, at some point, whether it was immediately or whether it was in the future, you know. That was a question. But I think everybody thought they would be at some point. I don't know whether I was one of those or not. [laughs] I always said I was never going to wear a white wedding gown. Well, I never got the chance to.

Q: Right. [00:15:00] You were (inaudible).

ERM: It lived right through. I didn't have any chance to say, "No, I'm not going to wear that," so I think possibly I established that at that point. But I suppose we all thought we were at some point – I haven't gotten the right adjective – to have an interest in the female and the masculine gender, I suppose, as a get-together at some point. But I guess I was a little immature, I think, when I came to school. I was younger than most of them, and most of them had more of a social life, I think, than I did. I was too studious, I think. I don't think that's too good. I would say, you know, it should be a half and half kind of a deal.

Q: Was there much dating at Brown [00:16:00] when you were here?

ERM: Oh, yes, definitely. I suppose everybody who lived in was much more apt to get Brown dates, and, of course, the Brown fellows were not supposed to date Pembroke gals.

Q: How come?

ERM: Oh, that was unheard of. If you made the grade on that [score?], I think you were very lucky. Brown fellows looked down at Pembroke, I think, as far as the female gender was concerned, but there were people who were very fortunate. The very social gals in the class, I think, always had dates to the frat dances and so forth. I was 16 when I graduated and came to Pembroke, so it was – [00:17:00] you know, I think you should be older and more mature when

you come to college, and I would always say 18 is very nice for (inaudible). I think kids are more mature even at 12. [laughs] But I think at that time there were certain groups who were more socially minded. If you went to Classical you didn't really have too much of a social program to begin with, you know, except during the summer.

Q: Because you were studying a lot?

ERM: It was, you know, a very tough scholastic effort, I think, so that you had to buckle down, I think. And if you wanted the grades and if you wanted to get in anyplace, then you had to make good grades. That was – I think some of the girls that came [00:18:00] were not as – had not had as good marks as they might have had had they not been a little more social, but Classical wasn't a social spot to begin with. Either you had it in the summertime or anytime else. I think it was not – I belonged to the orchestra, and I belonged to the orchestra here, too, so I belonged to Sock & Buskin. And I can't think of the – Mrs. Barker's dramatic group here. I did costume work and stage work, never the acting part. So that was – and you always had a job. I had a – I was on scholarship as well as having worked at the John Hay, worked at the [00:19:00] YWCA, and I did Americanization work, so I always had a full schedule. I never had time –

Q: It sounds like it.

ERM: – for playing, I guess, except during the summertime.

Q: What was Americanization work?

ERM: Well, I was teaching Polish ladies English. I think I probably learned more Polish at that time than they did English, but it was a very – it was at the Federal Hill House, and it was a very nice experience. I think everything adds up to your total life, I think.

Q: Was there much involvement with the community on the part of students at Pembroke?

ERM: Well, probably the dorm girls might have had something, but I'm really not aware of that because our class was more or less half and half, I would think, half city and half dorm girls. Some dorm girls you knew. Other dorm girls you didn't know. I think I probably know more dorm girls out of school than in school. [00:20:00] But we only graduated 99, and I've forgotten now how many dropped out in the four years. Maybe 10 or 15 might have dropped out, so we had a small class as compared to today.

Q: Right.

ERM: So we knew everybody really, except you didn't know the dorm girls that well because you sat in the cafeteria down here in between classes, and some people played bridge. Other people, you know, sat and knit, and other people just talked. So this was the in-between class situation at that point.

Q: So there wasn't that much interaction or friendship?

ERM: I wouldn't say so except in certain individuals. I think this can be very true, but I think the dorm girls had a certain life. The city girls, you know, came [00:21:00] and went without too much involvement, maybe, in the other group.

Q: Was there any feeling of tension?

ERM: I don't think so. At least, I wasn't aware of it. You know, I may have been unaware of many things, but I wasn't aware of that as a big point, because, you know, you had your own little group. I think there were five Eleanors that were in our group, so, necessarily, I became Mac, and it took me a long time to get used to Eleanor when I got out of school.

Q: Oh, that's funny.

ERM: People would say Eleanor, and I'd have to look around to see who they were talking to because five Eleanors was really –

Q: That's a lot.

ERM: – quite a group. It's strange that everybody got together. All of those Eleanors were sort of in a disjointed group, but nevertheless in a group, and a couple of those were dorm girls, but not, you know, tightly [00:22:00] related, you might say, socially or even in class. Some people were in class. Other people were not. It depended on who you were in class with, I think, going back and forth, and of course you had to get classes on the hill. That was very important. So if you didn't have that, you had to work for one of those each semester anyway at least.

Q: Classes on the hill as opposed to –

ERM: As opposed to right here.

Q: Oh, I see, so that was class with the Brown men.

ERM: Most of the classes, you see, were in Pembroke Hall, but you really had to get a class over there in order to be in the right section.

Q: With the men?

ERM: Definitely.

Q: Now we see what our priorities are.

ERM: That's right. So I got most of my history classes over there, I guess, psychology. I guess we went over there for psychology. We went to Rogers mostly all the time. And then, of course, when I took the seminar courses with Moss and Hedges we went to University Hall [00:23:00] to their office, so that was – you didn't see everybody then, because they were small, so you only had a few people. [laughs]

Q: What did the Pembroke women think of the Brown men?

ERM: Oh, well, I think it's, you know, well known that all the Pembrokers liked the Brown men. No question. It's just the other way didn't work that way all the time.

Q: They thought that Pembrokers were too studious?

ERM: They would go to Wheaton or to any of the neighboring schools, you know, to have a weekend date, I think. I mean, this is all little conjecture on my part, because I didn't know anybody that well that did this, but I think the dorm girls could tell you more on that situation, you know.

Q: Did the dorm girls date more with Brown men because they were –

ERM: Oh, I would think so, yes. I mean, any that I knew were always that way but were – I can't think of any particular city girls that [00:24:00] were dating Brown people, but I'm sure there must be, and I just don't bring them to mind at the moment.

Q: Did city girls date men from other schools?

ERM: Oh, yeah, very – well, I would say quite a few girls did date PC fellows, and they wound up married to them in most cases, because they were city people, actually, so city with city was a very good situation.

Q: Were most Pembrokers on some sort of scholarship or financial aid at that time?

ERM: I don't think so. I know I was. I don't know how many others were, but I would assume surely that I wasn't the only one, and I'm sure there must have been others who had scholarships or a work kind of a situation.

Q: Work study. What were the relations like [00:25:00] between male and female students in the classes?

ERM: Well, there wasn't, you know, that much of a problem, or I don't think there was any problem. I think you were there, and that was it as far as myself is concerned. You know, so I think there wasn't any noticeable difference even from being up here at Pembroke as being over on the hill, so there wouldn't be anything that would be worthwhile talking about I think.

Q: It wasn't – it didn't seem (inaudible).

ERM: It didn't seem important actually, but maybe it was to certain people. You see, that's the – individuals, I think, come into a situation more than you can generally group half a dozen people, because they all have a different viewpoint I think.

Q: Were Pembroke students steered toward any particular [00:26:00] majors?

ERM: No, I think our class was really pretty much divided into many of the different departments I think. Of course, I knew the history people most, but we had sociology and psychology. We had, of course, a nursing program at that point, and there were quite a few girls in the nursing program, the five-year nursing program, and I can't think of any other that stands out as far as knowing particular people, as far as their situation was concerned. But I think it ran the whole gamut of what was offered.

Q: Did you receive any career advice at Pembroke?

ERM: I don't ever recall any, no. That was up to you I guess, up to your own determination.

Q: Do you remember what sort of expectations you had for what you would do after college while you were still here?

ERM: No, I just knew I didn't want to teach. [laughs] That was the only point I ever had, but the rest of it – I suppose you just wondered where you were headed, but, you know, it wasn't a vocational situation, so, you know, you took civil service exams. You took other kinds of – had all kinds of resumes, I guess, ready for people, but I wasn't geared to any one spot I know. I suppose I should have been, but I wasn't. I didn't know what I was going to do. [laughs] I was just getting out, and that was it. But that was sort of, [00:28:00] you know, a sorry kind of a thing too. You'd like to prolong that, which, of course, I did with the fellowship in education. So I still was here, you know, for another year.

Q: How did the Depression affect life at Brown?

ERM: Well, you see, we were in it, so how would we know what the effect was, you see?

Q: Because that's what you were used to.

ERM: I suppose it was more at home that you felt the Depression in that you made everything work and everything pay. You didn't waste, and you did everything that was possible in the best economical way, should we say, but I think – I don't think it had any effect on me as far as the school was concerned. [00:29:00] I couldn't say any one particular effect that would be noticeable.

Q: Were people worried about not being able to find work when they graduated?

ERM: Well, of course, I think that would have happened afterwards.

Q: I see.

ERM: And I don't think we worried about those things, at least I didn't. You know, I thought about a job, but what that was going to be, of course, was still a question. And I always had something to do in the summer. I worked at the playground. I worked at the John Hay. I took courses at RIC. I took courses at PC. I've always taken courses all my life. I have enough

courses, I think, to have a doctorate or two. [laughs] So I followed Miss Morriss's idea of investing in myself, I guess, [00:30:00] so that I'd never given up education as such, if you want to put a broad umbrella over it all. And I guess I'm still doing it. [laughs] I'm still doing a course at the museum.

Q: She would be proud of you.

ERM: Well, I don't know about that, but my mother did that, so I guess I just followed in the same grouping that she was in. So I guess that was a good example. I presume it was a good one. [laughs]

Q: Can you tell me about some of the social rules about dating or, you know, when you could come in and out of the dorms while you were here?

ERM: Well, you see, I don't have any of that.

Q: Oh, right.

ERM: You see, I have nothing of that. All I know is that you weren't supposed to be late for chapel. That's about the only thing I could ever remember, and I was apt to be that, and I haven't changed too much. I'm pretty much behind schedule most of the time, but that was the one place [00:31:00] you really had to get to on time with a cap and gown.

Q: How often was chapel?

ERM: Oh, I think it was once a week, but I've forgotten that too. But I know you must be there to walk in, so, see, a lot of these things become fuzzy, I think. You accept them at the time and forget about those things. They just became a matter of course at that point, but I think it must have been once a week, but I really don't know. I couldn't vouch for that.

Q: Do you feel like at Brown you developed a sense of what were appropriate roles for women?

ERM: No, I don't think that was ever touched on too much. I think we were students, and I don't think the role we were supposed to play [00:32:00] was ever really brought up in my particular courses. Now, maybe it would have been different in another course, you know.

Q: What about Dean Morriss? Did she talk about being women in particular?

ERM: Well, this is what I think she thought, and that's why she said it prepares you for life, whether it be a family background or whether it be a business background. I think it wasn't a vocational school, so therefore it was your own inner development, actually, that was important to her, not as –

- End of Track 1 -

Track 2

Q: [00:00:00] This is side two of an interview with Eleanor McElroy, Class of 1937, and we're talking about appropriate roles for women, but it doesn't sound like you got a sense of that at Pembroke.

ERM: Oh, I don't think so. Whether I had that role in mind, you know, from my own viewpoint I don't know, but I never really – I can't say that I was fitted for any particular role by any particular influence at Pembroke.

Q: Do you feel like just from general life up to that point you had a notion of what was appropriate for women?

ERM: Well, I just never thought of a role for women somehow. Probably we think more of that today than we did then. [00:01:00] I suppose there was some little rut that we all were in, and we didn't get out of it. But to me, that was an unconscious kind of a thing. I don't believe I ever thought of my particular role in life in general or even with the society around me or whatever

group that I was in. I just have never had that particular thought, so I can't say that being here would have made me any different from being there as far as where I fit myself into society, which is, I'm presuming, the role that we talk about.

Q: Was there a notion of appropriate careers or inappropriate careers?

ERM: Well, I guess it was more or less what you were offered and what was available. I think that the same thing is true of, you know, [00:02:00] teaching and social work. That seemed to be the biggest type of interest somehow, but I don't think it was specifically said, "You should go into these particular points." So maybe everybody had determined where they were going before that, but I didn't, of course, so I don't know about all the rest of the people. Some people were interested in social work, and they took sociology, and they ended up as social workers. I think this is probably a whole scheme of things, but, you see, I wasn't interested in that. [laughs] And I really didn't take – when I went into the retail business, everybody said, "You were a history major, and you're in the retail business. How come?" I said, "Well, that's – I was interested in history. [00:03:00] I took what I wanted when I was here." I mean, I majored in history, American history, and that was what had always been my interest, so I didn't deviate from that at all because I did – and that's still my interest today, is American history. So it has been, let's say, a lifelong interest as far as that goes, so I presume that other people may have had the same kind of a bent, you might say. So that unless you talk to all of those people, I guess you really don't know what their ideas were when they came and as they progressed along in the four years. But I think today when people come out of school they sort of have an idea of where they're headed, and I don't think that 50 percent of our class certainly had an idea of where they were headed. Maybe they did, but, you know, I wasn't aware of that. [00:04:00] Certainly, I didn't know where I was headed other than where I didn't want to go that I did go. [laughs]

Q: Well, let's talk about what you did the first year after college.

ERM: Pardon?

Q: What did you do the first year (inaudible) –

ERM: Well, that was the fellowship and the training at the junior high.

Q: Can you tell me about that?

ERM: Hm?

Q: Can you tell me about that?

ERM: Well, it's a very difficult situation. The cost situation was fine. The kids I had were – I had one good group, I guess, and I had two terrible groups, and I think it's very poor for a supervisor, training supervisor, to give poor groups to somebody who is training. I think that was dead wrong, so that gives you a very poor conception of teaching. You know you're going to get that, but there's no need for having an initial [00:05:00] bad (inaudible) to that without having a good basis to go on. So I think that part of it was – it was in a very good school. The principal was great, but I think the training supervisor had a wrong concept of what to do with a training student, because in my case, where I didn't like it to begin with, I went into –

Q: Oh, that would make it so much worse.

ERM: – you know, two classes that were really discipline problems as well as low mentally capacitated people. You know, it gives you a very poor taste of the teaching profession really, of course I knew so much about it anyhow. I'd heard it 24 hours a day, and my mother knew all of these people, and, you know, I had to be on my P's and Q's. In fact, I always had to be, because she knew all the teachers [00:06:00] we both had in school, so we were sort of at a disadvantage, you might say, in school right along, because we had to really behave, [laughter] or else were heard about it, not physically speaking, but it was just sort of a bad thing to do the wrong thing, so you had to behave, and I guess we did.

Q: It seems like it.

ERM: I think we had to or else. [laughs] But it was a good bringing-up, I think. I had very, very good – had no problems like all of these people today have problems with kids, and we certainly had everything we needed despite the Depression time. And we had – my mother gave us the best she could and saw that we got [00:07:00] every kind of development that we needed, so I figured I was very lucky actually. I think I had – I have nothing to complain about in life, I guess, except what I brought on myself. [laughs] So if that's important, then that's my fault.

Q: What did you do after the fellowship?

ERM: Well, I substituted a couple of days, I think, and said that was that, and then we had the hurricane, the '38 hurricane, and I went into Gladding's for Christmas help. Gladding's was the oldest department store in the country, and I went in there for Christmas help, and I stayed. So I stayed there until 1960.

Q: Boy, what were you doing there?

ERM: Well, I was the buyer. I came in as an assistant buyer who knew nothing, but I had a great boss, and she was from New York [00:08:00] and very much out of swim in Providence. She couldn't see Providence, you know, so every weekend she was off to New York. So she was a great gal, and then I was named buyer, and I was buyer of the accessories and gloves and all kinds of things, sportswear, blouses, sweaters, everything imaginable – my hardware store, as I've always called it, until 1960. And then, in 1960, I left because I said they weren't going to make me president of the store, so I left. And I taught for a year in Middletown in the junior high, and then I went to Indianapolis in between as glove buyer, so I was there for a while, and then I came back. And I taught for another year in North Kingstown in the high school. And then, I went to Cherry & Webb's, [00:09:00] got out of school one day and went to Cherry & Webb's the next day as glove and jewelry buyer. So I've never had a free moment, you might say, from the time I went to work in Gladding's.

Q: Can you tell me about the hurricane?

ERM: Well, I was out in the hurricane driving around in a new car, and I was picking up my mother down in Warwick, and I was on the highway. And I said, “Well, I’ve got to get off,” because you could see, you know, trees coming down in front of you and electricity flapping in front of you and all kinds of things. So I got into the boy’s training school, which was called Sockanosset, and I guess it still is. And I parked under the slate roof, right underneath. I said, “That’s the safest place to go,” so of course it wasn’t the safest place, because the roof came down [00:10:00] on top of me, so I had a nicked car, I guess, for a couple of years, my mother’s car I should say. So then I drove home. And you could – came back from Warwick over the top of the city, you might say, the top hill, you could look down, and you could see all of the water and everything floating around, you know, and everything was safe at home. There wasn’t any problem. We figured the big oak might be in the house, but it wasn’t. But when I had left the house originally, you know, it was stormy but nothing like what we came through, so that was quite an event anyway. So after that, that was when I went into Gladding’s to work.

Q: Did you –

ERM: Thanksgiving began, the Christmas holidays, of course.

Q: Did you decide on that field, or you just wanted a different job and so you decided to go to Gladding’s?

ERM: Well, no, I – [00:11:00] you know, I liked – I had never done anything like that, and I can still remember my first day in Gladding’s. I was fitting two ladies’ gloves, and, of course, I had never fit any gloves on anybody, you know. You used to fit gloves. You used to be doing this, and you’d push it down. I had two ladies from South County who came in, and they turned out to be very important ladies from South County, an interior decorator, and the other lady I can’t remember. But they became my very good customers over the years, but they said, “We can always remember your first day and how you were fitting gloves.” Of course, they were used to having gloves fitted at that point by expert people. [laughs] But I guess it wasn’t too bad. So it was very interesting, and it was a great job. It was for 20 years, and I never moved out of it. I had many an opportunity to go elsewhere. I always went on the interviews for the jobs. [00:12:00]

That was when I was young and beautiful, you see, and I always got the jobs. But then, I don't know, I just thought Providence was for me, so I never went to Detroit. I was hired by Marshall Fields and by Higbee's, by Riccardi's, all of the stores in the Midwest, but I never went, so I –

Q: You never wanted to move?

ERM: Never. Well, I guess I didn't, you know. I guess I liked what was going on here, and I never knew I was such a New Englander until I went to Indianapolis, and I took a job in Indianapolis. And I just missed the shore, I guess, and it was so warm in Indianapolis, and I couldn't play golf. It was so hot. [laughs] The store was great, but the outside part of it was rather [00:13:00] difficult. So I guess I confined myself to New England. I guess I'm a New Englander, born and bred.

Q: Were there people who have been important for you in your career, in your years of work?

ERM: Well, I suppose my first buyer probably was the one who was the most influential in my staying in the job, and there were several presidents and merchandise men who were very, very, very helpful, and they were sort of an inspiration, I suppose, to be a good merchandiser, which I thought I was. I still think so. [laughs] Some people might not think so, but I think those are the people [00:14:00] I think. George [Ladd?], of course, was a great influence. He was president of Gladding's. And there were various people in Cherry's that were very – Mrs. Gross was a great person, so there were people during various years, I think, that were – if you have a nice relationship with people, I think you do a good job, and I think we did do a good job in varying situations and most of the time. Most of my time in the merchandise field was very good.

Q: Did you encounter any obstacles?

ERM: No, I never ran into the so-called "female problems," you know. I never seemed to have had those, so maybe I didn't rise to be merchandise person, but I don't think I ever wanted to be. So I can't say that I aspired to [00:15:00] a higher position other than buyer. I thought buyer was very interesting, and that was – I was satisfied with that position, whereas today I think most of

the young gals, if they have or think they have something on the [ball?], they want to be a merchandiser, general division. I just never had that inspiration I guess, or aspiration.

Q: Do you think that's probably a sign of the times?

ERM: Oh, I think it's more or less individual myself, because there are certain people – one person I can think of particularly – who, after she was in the buying job for a year, thought she could be a merchandise person. Well, I don't know. I just don't think that's a possibility. She aspired to this, you see, and in a year and a half [00:16:00] she was a merchandiser.

Q: Wow.

ERM: But she fit in probably with the people in power, so I think that has a lot to do with it, you see. I wouldn't have given her a job if I had a store. [laughs] I know. She would have been out before I would even have thought such a thing, but that's the way it is, you know.

Q: Have you ever felt pressure to marry?

ERM: No. I always said the “blonde won out.” [laughs]

Q: What?

ERM: I always said “the blonde won out.” That was where I went with a gentleman for, oh, I guess, seven years, and then the blonde took over, so I said, “Blondes always have had the best time.” So I just accepted that. [laughs] No, I've never really minded that too much. I guess I've always been more or less independent, and I've done a lot on my own. I've always had travel in mind, [00:17:00] so I guess I couldn't have done that had I been married. So I guess I've had over 26 trips to Europe, and I've had trips to the Caribbean every year from 1955, so I used to have trips twice a year. So I spent my money that way, I guess. I have lots of film, loads of slides, thousands of them.

Q: I can imagine.

ERM: [laughs] So I suppose that when I pass on those will just get thrown out, but, nonetheless, that was my substitute I guess for marriage. I don't think I've ever envied anybody. It's nice to have somebody to go around with, but I guess I – if you're not with the right person, then there's no sense in being with the wrong person.

Q: That's for sure.

ERM: That's worse than nothing. [laughs] So I guess I just missed the boat by not being a blonde. [00:18:00]

Q: Have you been involved with Brown since you graduated?

ERM: Oh, yes, I'm here all of the time it seems to me. I'm secretary of our class, so I'm always at the association meetings, and, well, I've always taken courses, as I say, and come to anything that's going on. So I haven't lost that connection at all, so I think I probably, you know, kept an even keel on relationships here. I guess they know who I am once in a while anyway, but not always – Mr. [Reichley?] says hello to me, and (inaudible) sometimes says hello. I'm sure he has nowhere to put me, but –

Q: He knows you're –

ERM: – I think I've always gone on Brown trips whenever there was something that I wanted [00:19:00] to go on, and the Brown Club and the Pembroke Club. I don't know what other – the music groups, whenever they come, and I have – I would figure I have a close connection as compared to some people.

Q: Right.

ERM: So that – and being in the city, it's very easy to become active in most of the things so that – it's a good relationship, I guess.

Q: It seems like Brown really evokes almost a familial feeling with its alumni, that people feel very close to the school.

ERM: Oh, it does. It really does. It's a wonderful feeling, actually, and wherever you go, if you're a Brown person you really are in, so that it's – I don't know now whether, with a larger student body, this is true, but it would [00:20:00] certainly seem true through the '50s. And I'm assuming it should be still pretty much the same, because I think it's the close relationship that people develop. When you think of John Workman and how close he was to so many people, I think the professors had a lot to do with it, and I was always very friendly with Professor Hedges, and I worked on the Brown papers with him for a very short period, but I should have done more actually. Had I had the time, that would have been my [honors?] work, but I figured I didn't want to do that either. I didn't want to get too involved in something that maybe, you know, wouldn't come out right, but I do think that the professors we had, like I talked to – I had dinner with Schumacher when I was in Hawaii one time. I was not – you know, I don't think today – [00:21:00] maybe you could with a professor if you were particularly friendly with him.

Q: It's a lot bigger now though.

ERM: Oh, well, that's the whole thing. There were so many more people. And twice, I started my graduate work, and twice I've quit it, and I haven't – I don't think I'll ever start the third time, but I think Hedges was always very nice, and, as I said, Schumacher was great when we were in – and that was a long time after I had graduated. That was 20 years maybe. And if you saw Carmichael in Washington, I think he knew you. He remembered you –

Q: That's nice.

ERM: – as far as being in his psych class. So I think there was a relationship. At least, they knew who you were in most cases. They might not have known your name, but at least they knew what

you looked like and that you sat in such-and-such a seat possibly. And Professor [Downing?] [00:22:00] and Professor Taylor were great as far as the art department, I suppose. But everything is bigger today, so, you know, everything is relative to – depending on the impression that you make on people, I think.

Q: How did you feel about the merger?

ERM: Well, I wasn't like most of the people. Some of the older classes were so vicious and so adamant against it, but I can see economically speaking it was – there's no sense in having all of the same deans, the same admission, the same office work. Just that alone was enough to – I think that we were Brown to begin with. We always graduated from Brown, although most people didn't think that, and I think that it was a shame really not to keep the name just as it was, the Pembroke College in [00:23:00] Brown University. What is the difference, actually? I mean, if Cambridge can do it and Oxford can do it, why not this?

Q: So they could have done the same merging but just kept the separate names?

ERM: Yeah, I think – I don't see the need for having a dean here, although you should have a dean of women, and I think you should have a dean of men, because certainly they're two different spheres. But it could have still been one organization rather than a split kind of thing that was economically wrong, I think, at the time. I think this – Why have two? You had two duplications, actually, where I suppose you'd have the same number of people eventually, because you'd still have the women and the men separated, actually, but I think it had to come. [00:24:00] But I think having the Pembroke Center just brings back Pembroke. They discarded it, and then they wanted to bring it back, so it's too bad, you know, to have it eliminated and then still want to bring it back again.

Q: When people talk about Pembroke, I think they feel like there was a certain sense of identity or belongingness. Did you feel that? Is that why you feel like they should have kept the two separate names?

ERM: Well, they could have had a Pembroke College, could they not, and still had men and women, had a division like they do at Oxford and Cambridge. What is the difference, you see?

Q: I see. Right.

ERM: So that could have been appropriated maybe to a certain sphere of Brown if they wanted to keep the name of it. If they didn't want to, well, then what they did was right. As I say, we all graduated from Brown, [00:25:00] but most people outside of Brown and even some people in Brown, some of the older men, don't realize that Pembroke did graduate from Brown. They did from, you know, the 19 – 1800s, so I think this was probably what the older folks felt. And just like having women's colleges today, they figured having their own student union or whatever you want a student council produced women who might be able to do the same thing outside, whereas if you get together with the men the women certainly are not on top of this. I mean, they're second-rate no matter what happens, I think, usually. [laughs] Now, of course, there are exceptions, but it's – I never really had too much for or against it, [00:26:00] because I figured, "We graduate from Brown, so what's the difference in action?" I never really was as pointed at some of the meetings we had.

Q: It got really heated.

ERM: Oh, my, my, they were really very heated meetings, especially from the older folks, and I can see their point, that they didn't want to have it thrown out the window. And it's just like keeping up Alumnae Hall actually. Some of the older gals are very upset because Alumnae Hall is in a very sad state, physically speaking. And if we had had our own unit, maybe it wouldn't be so bad, but it's only part of the university actually.

Q: I see.

ERM: And it's not really the upkeep. When you think of what a nice spot that was and what it is today, it's not really kept up. That's one of the really big problems that the girls [00:27:00] talk about at the Pembroke Club and at the reading group and at the association meetings, that this

part of the campus – but I've seen some buildings over on the other side, too, that don't look too good. You know, I think it's too bad not to keep it up, because my nephew goes to Penn State, and I have never seen a more immaculate campus, immaculate buildings. Everything is really topnotch, and to think that we probably charge more than Penn State – and where I know we fall down maybe on salaries and physical equipment and all of that business, but I think we have to keep up what we have, because I think to let that deteriorate is just too bad. That's the way with any deterioration, I think, whether it's [00:28:00] the house you own or a building, something a business owned. But not to keep it up, I think, is very bad. We're always talking about money. I know money helps, but I think a little more enterprise on what's here could help.

Q: How do you feel about some of the other changes that Brown has gone through since you've been here?

ERM: Well, of course, everything changes. I think you have to keep up with the time and go with whatever changes are necessary. You can't be isolated, and you can't be off by yourself and be part of what the community needs or what the country needs, I think. You have to change; there's no question about it. So then, I think any change came [00:29:00] from necessity or from innovation, and there's nothing wrong with innovation. So you go through that in the business. I went through that. Every time we had a change of a merchandise person, you had a change. I had 15 stores, 15 stores were swept clean, you might say, new people brought in, new ideas brought in, and then the new ideas were probably what was five years back. [laughs] So they weren't new ideas at all, you know. So everybody has to have change. It doesn't make any difference what it is. It comes as a necessity, I think. Everybody wants to sweep clean and put in their ideas, and sometimes they work, and sometimes they don't.

Q: Do you feel like your ideas about what are possibilities for women have changed?

ERM: Well, of course, I never thought women had any detriment or any [00:30:00] hindrance, should I say, to doing what they wanted to do. You see, I never – I think I was brought up in that atmosphere, that women could do whatever they wanted to do as long as they put their mind to it.

Q: Did you realize that was unusual? It seems like that would have been an unusual attitude.

ERM: Oh, I don't think so. Maybe it was, but I just didn't realize it at that point. Of course, my mother did everything, and maybe this was why I have always done what I wanted to do regardless of what other people might think, you know. If I could do it and capably do it, then I did it, and this is what she did. So that – I think this is why I say I had a very good background, a very liberal background, I think, that fitted in with the times or ahead of the times probably so that I never felt anything. My mother always did [00:31:00] anything she wanted to do whenever she wanted to do it, and nobody could ever say, you know, “You shouldn't do that.” If they did, that's – well, they'd be just talking, you know, because she never listened to them anyway. [laughs] But she took vocal lessons when she was 50, I guess, and she did – she used to skate when she was 60, and, you know, she did all kinds of things that she wanted to do, and it was never – and as I say, I think I just never thought there was anything I shouldn't do. I always did what I wanted to do. [laughs]

Q: Sounds like a sensible [idea?] to me.

ERM: You know, within the boundaries of what you thought you were able to do, so that I suppose I never tackled anything that was way out. I learned to fly. I went down to the airport at 6:30 in the morning in order to take flying lessons. I guess it was six o'clock. I had to be there at six o'clock, and I had an instructor who didn't think women should set foot in an airplane [00:32:00] as far as being a pilot is concerned, but I learned to fly. I had a pilot license, and everybody thought that was crazy, but, you know, everything I've done I sort of did because I wanted to do it. So I've learned to ski and play golf and traveled, just whatever I had in mind to do, by myself or with other people. It didn't make any difference.

- End of Track 2 -

Track 3

Q: [00:00:00] This is side three of an interview with Eleanor McElroy, Class of 1937. Are there any other observations or memories of Pembroke that you can think of that are important for you or that stick in your mind?

ERM: Well, I can't really think of anything more that – I'm sure there's five or six tapes' full that I can think about, but I can't think of anything right now that we haven't covered in some form by your questions.

Q: How about any alumni activities that have been important for you?

ERM: Well, I think probably one of the things that we miss, and maybe it's too old-hat to think about, but the garden party – I think a lot of people of the older classes [00:01:00] miss the garden party just as they used to miss the ivy chain procession, when they had that, and the crowning of the queen and all of that kind of thing. That's sort of an era, I suppose, that's gone, so I presume we have to accept that they are no longer around either. But that sort of was the women's college idea, I think, that –

Q: What was that, the garden party?

ERM: Well, they had a garden party at commencement time. I suppose the Pops concert more or less takes the place of that today, but you did see people of other classes at your time. And when we had the four – I don't know what kind of a system they used to call that, but the four classes came together at reunion time so that you saw people in your class and the classes previous to yours rather than just one five-year reunion. Of course, our class has a reunion [00:02:00] three times a year. We have a luncheon and commencement time, and then we have a fall dinner, and we have a spring dinner. So the group in the city really gets together, about 20 or 21 people, three times a year in most cases, so we are sort of a little nucleus, whereas we get the out-of-town people probably at the five-year. And hopefully, when we're coming to '87, we're going to have a big group, because that's our fiftieth, and goodness knows I sure never thought I'd live to see the fiftieth reunion. [laughs]

Q: That's a terrific anniversary.

ERM: I thought anybody out 20, 15, 10 years was old for me, but now to think that we will be here 50 years, have gone through 50 years, is a little bit hard to understand, but we are making plans for that now.

Q: What sort of plans? [00:03:00] What are you thinking –

ERM: Well, there are, you know, the usual things, but we have to strike up something that's really innovative and really attractive, I think, to get our people back, because we're scattered all over the country, and the greatest concentration, of course, is right here in Providence. So we expect all of those people, but we would like to see all of the rest of the country try and come back and see how well we all look. [laughs] Some of us say we haven't changed. Others say we have. So some have, and some haven't, but we had a reunion maybe 10 years ago, and a couple of people came, and we didn't know who they were.

Q: Oh, really?

ERM: We couldn't – one of the girls came in the room and said, "This is the Class of '37, yes?" And nobody knew her, and she didn't know us, so, you know, it was rather – because she had never been to a reunion.

Q: Oh, I see. [00:04:00]

ERM: And it was sort of an embarrassing kind of a time, because it was – it worked both ways. If somebody had known who she was, that would have been fine, but nobody knew who she was, and she didn't recognize any of us. Of course, she was a little bit late anyhow. But each year we've tried to get back persons who haven't come, and, being secretary, that has been my job. And of course, being on the – doing phone-a-thons, I've tried to impress upon people the idea of coming back. So that, we have two or three of us do the phone-a-thons, and I always call the

people that I'd like to talk to in addition to asking for their contributions. I still like to ask for their personal contribution to come to a reunion, so we try to work it both ways.

Q: Well, that must be nice, to keep in touch with people.

ERM: Well, that's one other way. [00:05:00] I forgot about that. See, the more that you talk, the more you remember. [laughs] So I think that's one of the good points of the phone-a-thon, actually, to call your own class and especially people that you were friendly with or even not friendly with. It makes a good contact, and I think this is what you have to keep up, and I think this is what Brown people have always done. I think this is one of the reasons that if you say you're a Brown person – like being in Spain with a Brown person, you have a certain rapport, even if it's just saying, "Brown." And this is what I used to do when I went to Europe first. I used to get from the alumni office the list of people in the varying areas. Sometimes, I got to call them. Other times I didn't, but it was a nice sort of a hello kind of a thing to be able to say, even if you didn't know them, that you were [00:06:00] from Brown and wanted to bring greetings from Providence. So this was one good way of doing that. Well, I can't think of anything much more. I've exhausted, I think, my thought period. [laughs] But it was very nice to be here, and, if I think of anything else sometime, why, I'll do another.

Q: Okay. [laughs] Thank you.

- END -