

Ruth Bell
First Person Plural Interview Summary
16 January 2015

Intro – Jo Blatti interviewing Ruth Bell for the First Person Plural project at her home in Little Rock, 16 January 2015

JB Start with Illinois, your family background

RB Born Northern Illinois, 60 miles southwest Chicago
Seemed remote, now collar suburb, outer ring
On a farm, house converted to duplex - parents & grandparents, Great Depression
My father only child, grandfather stone deaf
Grandmother business partner - farm, grain sales, she made notes, passed to him
One room school

JB Nearest town?

RB Yorkville, Illinois 10 miles
2 nearby villages, we went to both - country stores, churches

5 min

12-15 miles another county seat, Grundy, where mother's family lived - Morris County
1946 I graduated high school
I needed to take beginning economics to make up requirements - 3 girls, 30 boys in class
Passed notes among girls, boys finished course
Back to school in fall - Northwestern University [Evanston, Illinois]
Fellow from summer economics class asked me to help find blind date for exchange student
Jim [future husband] called back - I asked what time you be here? [Laughter]

JB Forthright woman, Southern man -

RB Met in college, married after college. Because Jim from Little Rock, expectation return

10 min.

JB My family from Illinois - Northwestern pretty good school

RB My brother & I both to college

JB Expectation?

RB Yes, even though parents did not. Even though grandparents born in 1860s. Grandfather had read law, not meant for law

Great ambition, land speculation, bought & sold. Why I ended up with some farms. He knew little about farming, lots about making money. Grandmother grew up in Ohio, went to a female academy, appreciation for education. Grandmother - every afternoon to her house - would read books *Bobbsey Twins*, *Five Little Peppers*, *Robinson Crusoe*, - no kids' books. My father into history books, discussion.

15 min.

My mother's father Grundy County clerk 15 years. She had older sister, worked in clerk's office, 1920s part time law school. Upwardly mobile as a family.

JB Tenant farmers?

RB Yes. I still do, now 'operators.'
Close relationship - back then, those children went to school with us. Parents worked very hard, wanted very best for children
Father was a nice guy, grandfather less interested in people
With father, heard a lot about everyone's problems, living conditions

JB What was grown?

RB Corn & beans [soybeans], hay for animals, early days of mechanization

20 min.

JB You & brother - same chores growing up?

RB Of course not, sex-typed. Brother seven years older. I was girl, could avoid hard manual labor. Not expected to farm. I had pony, then horse.
Expectation was that he would go to farming, that I would play piano, teacher, needlework.
I had no talents

JB In college, study to be teacher?

RB Yes & taught for one year. A year older than Jim – though look so much younger [laughter].
Now get to Little Rock?

His family had retail sporting goods - guns, etc., made obsolete by big box stores

25 min

Apartment Ninth Street, next to Nazarene Church, I went to Methodist Church, - low church, tame - listened, left.

Married 1951, fall 1951, our first house Kingwood - new subdivision Little Rock
Alice [Farrell], our new neighbor, typical Southern fashion, 'I lived in Portland' 'Oregon?'
'South Arkansas' Bush-Caldwell [Jim's firm] - my uncle Mr. Bush
Established everything about Jim & family, that's the way Little Rock was

JB How did you feel?

RB Actually OK, having grown up in a small community

JB How did you occupy time?

RB Didn't have to worry. Feted with lunches & open houses. Met lots of other young women - many of whom said 'I dated Jim in high school.' Once, I figured, given hours in day

JB How form friendships?

RB Bridge, lunch, dessert. I had to learn to play bridge, spin-off clubs for [younger women]

31 min.

Didn't have all that much in common with many. Some hadn't physically left Arkansas, others had

JB Why important?

RB Prior to World War II [WWII], mostly local, regional. War veterans, college students who'd been away Sid McMath, people not wedded to culture of city [began to make difference]

My father on school board, cemetery board - tradition in my family, you did something for the community

Carroll Holcomb had married a local, knew about the League of Women Voters from growing up in the East

36 min

Was looking for women to start a League

A friend asked me to a League meeting - was member more than 60 years

JB Remember first things?

RB Water - not one of favorite topics

Watersheds & drainage, pollution, northwest Arkansas Buffalo River

Schools from day one

Sidewalks along streets leading to schools post [WWII], mayor-alderman form of government

So I could understand what was happening, reported in newspaper - recounts story of man who got raided even when making payments, punched mayor out of frustration

1957 - Little Rock school crisis also the year city getting city manager form of government

JB League feel that form pretty successful?

RB Always in flux, describes various complications, on-going reform efforts Little Rock city government

45 min

Early Little Rock city councilwoman, in partnership with husband, always referred to as 'Mrs.'

Bigger the city got, harder to get elected city-wide, set up wards, districts

Mayor elected by voters, 7 wards, 3 at-large

Mayor has grown more powerful over time

JB From outside, seems like city manager more like bureaucrat, strong mayor form -

RB Jim Dailey [LR mayor, 1993-2006] right man for job, Mark [Stodola, elected 2006-] different perspective

JB As I understand League, long periods attending [state] legislative & [city] council, continuing boards

51 min.

RB Planning board, key Little Rock committee for at least 25 years. Kathleen [Oleson] split with me in beginning. Kathleen would point out - very unstructured, didn't know how to run a meeting.
Kathleen got appointed to the board - we complained - even developers complained.
As neighborhood association grew movement, board changed again.

55 min

People in the Heights [Pulaski Heights] don't think they need an association because they know all the important people.

JB Is there a Heights association?

RB Marla Jones really got together. She died. Nobody has her skills, wax, wane with effectiveness of volunteers.
Now Planning Commission mainly ward representatives, heavily industry connections - mortgage, small business. Lobby for more representative make-up.

JB League commitment to ERA [Equal Rights Amendment].

RB I was rank & file- talked to legislators. Shirley [McFarlin] up there.

JB Do you remember reception?

RB One guy - widow later on Planning Commission. Carroll Holcomb & I went to this guy twice. First time, all over the lot- how public schools going to hell. Second time, would vote for it in committee, then voted against it in full house!

60 min.

JB League papers - reproductive rights questionnaire ca. 1982 returned to you

RB National League study, position
Growing up on a farm, always another one
Very strong League member having trouble with -
Not government decide, person should decide
Very devoted League members still – [identifies a mutual friend] one of them

65 min.

JB Ties to right of privacy, what happened?

RB Position was yes - we could support, I don't know [beyond that]

JB 30 years ago difficult question

RB Check newsletter

JB May have missed - vast amount schools

RB Another on-going issue schools - equal access, financing, textbooks

JB Textbooks –

RB Our oldest daughter had to buy books

JB League newsletter *cri de coeur* Little Rock schools

RB World is not a static place

1 hr. 11 min.

Things play into school failures - poverty, push at home, equipment not there, individual differences

1 hr. 15 min.

Back to days of poll tax, 'public' voting, private place to vote
Poll tax, my grandfather would have been appalled
I did embarrass my husband- I didn't see why it [poll tax, lack of privacy] had to be
League very involved in voter registration, counting votes, getting voter machines

1 hr. 20 min.

JB Your role present League Action Committee?

RB For years, I was rank & file while Shirley [McFarlin] led the parade. Never get off boards at the League.

1 hr. 26 min.

JB Arkansas more kids in private school proportionately, than elsewhere, nationally

RB Yet not a private school economy

1 hr. 30 min

One of four daughters taught in a charter school in Maumelle [AR] - needed the money
I went to a basic school. My high school in 1946 had more resources than charter school in Maumelle. Never enough supplies - but parents think it's wonderful. Half a block away public school with everything.

E-stem [downtown little Rock] is well-provided
You're Episcopalian

JB You're referring to Cathedral School [formed around Little Rock integration crisis 1957]?

RB No - Collegiate School. Good education includes learning to deal with people different than yourself.

1 hr. 35 min.

Daughters - Brady Elementary, Henderson, Horace Mann, Hall High - integrated

Process integration very slow

JB When?

RB Mid to late 1960s
Hall [high school] 2-3 years later
Schools integrated
By Charlotte's time, youngest - all integrated
She went to same school as father, principal retired military
4th & 5th grade students divided by ability, than as soon as mastered, moved to another class, so motivating
Charlotte horrible in math, but she learned, finally ran out of classrooms

JB Not a plan used much as far as I know

RB Yet so good, I forgot to say - Westover Hills [Presbyterian Church] kindergarten, where our kids went, included black children. No kindergarten in public schools at that time.

Jim & I were just talking about Unitarian Church -

1 hr. 41 min.

JB I was going to ask about religion - how get there?

RB Shirley McFarlin - League met in units
We went to Unitarian Church in Memphis - there for Jim's work, moved back to Little Rock

JB Church history mentioned more Women's Emergency Committee members

RB Percentage-wise, it could not happen now - women would all be working

JB What about League?

RB We are all falling prey - dearth of people, same for churches, all organizations

1 hr.45 min.

Suggestion is networking - yet need to keep identity,
Moving away from officers & board, becoming more electronically connected
Certainly have enough issues
Looking at my own children - Susan- musician/job/husband; Annie-job/teenager, Charlotte-children at home/husband

RB I told people I was a professional mother
Discussion changing meanings, roles women in past generation

1 hr. 50 min.

When my mother & grandmother widowed, lived together, brother would check on them & his mother-in-law
Jim & I have three daughters who live in town -

1 hr. 55 min.

JB Anything I failed to ask?

RB Days new to Arkansas, when I went to Northwestern, wonderful liberal school - blacks from South, many Chinese from Taiwan, obviously well-to-do-
Never in my thoughts to live in the multicultural society Little Rock has become

For daughters - must be complete people- capable of taking care of themselves, deal with other people

Boss talks about one of daughters: justice, math, music

Math from Jim, justice from me, music a complete mystery

JB The mystery of parenthood

RB Best do-it-yourself job in the world

1 hr. 60 min. [2 hrs]

Off