

Shirley McFarlin
First Person Plural Interview Summary
29 December 2014

Intro – Jo Blatti interviewing Shirley McFarlin for the First Person Plural project at her home, Monday 29 December 2014

JB Very beginning, your folks -

SM Gene & Edna Brewster, West Fork, Washington County, Arkansas
Father a geologist, taught in smaller schools northwest Arkansas
Back to geology after World War II
To Rohwer [Japanese American internment camp, Desha County, 1942-45]
As teacher, then administrator

JB Grew up in northwest Arkansas?

SM Yes - Western Grove, Greenland, Fayetteville, eldest of four

JB How old Rohwer?

SM About 12

JB Know why family went there?

SM Yes, went with father when interviewed for position, hired on spot [actually went to apply to replace principal who was going to Rohwer; the fellow hired Brewster to join him there]

Nov 1942 mother with four kids plus dog went from Fayetteville to McGehee
Gray tar paper barracks, our new home in barracks, lived there until employee homes finished at least a year later
Central bathrooms, dining halls, "gumbo" mud, 2 rooms for the 6 of us, living conditions very like the Japanese
Never has been around another culture

JB How did that make you feel?

SM Don't remember feeling oppressed. Very courteous people. Good friends with the Shiraci sisters [check spelling]

10 min in

JB Recent commemorations Japanese American internment in Arkansas, part in any?

SM Last time rededication cemetery - working for David Pryor, drove him down, not sure anything since then (1970s)

JB Mother an educator also?

SM No

JB Family expectations for you all growing - chores -

SM Father washed dishes

JB Did parents talk about Rohwer with you?

SM Recollection never talked about it. Parents open-minded. Father felt California public education deficient because Japanese had not achieved what he expected. Looking back, I wonder if they were treated as blacks were here.

15 min in

JB How remember your educational experience?

SM At Rohwer, better in English, lousy at art
First grade, father was principal, piece of fudge story, spanked by schoolteacher, mother had not explained couldn't eat just anytime

JB Dad often principal?

SM Yes, often only playground. No special privileges

JB Expected to go to college?

SM Yes & no. I did go to Little Rock Junior College [precursor to University of Arkansas at Little Rock] couple of years before married
Met man who would become husband a couple of years before would have graduated
Next oldest sister didn't go
Brother went, youngest sister went
Husband to be became a mining engineer

JB Little Rock not mining engineer territory

SM Bauxite - Reynolds Aluminum [neighboring Benton, Saline County]

JB How meet?

SM Thanksgiving 1946 - annual football game Little Rock, North Little Rock high schools. I was dating a friend of Jack's. Went on a double-date, older, concern for parents.

JB Veteran on GI bill?

SM Yes - Colorado School of Mines, 5-year school, 'til 1951. Married in 1948, now well-trained, He would disagree.
Lived in company housing at first, moved to Little Rock in early 1950s

JB Joined League about 1954 looks like, very early in its history [ca 1951/52 established]

SM League much stronger in Arkansas then than it is now - 10, 11 chapters
Just about the only place you could have adult conversation, kindred spirits - Ann Fulk, Ruth Bell

JB Interested to see it self-described as a place for politically isolated, bi-partisan thinkers, independent outliers

24 min in

SM Possibly because of Winthrop Rockefeller . We lived through Orval Faubus. Not many identified as Republican in those days.

JB Big issues 1960 League?

Elections - lot of work for clean elections. I was lobbyist Arkansas legislature about election laws. I went to all the committee meetings. I met a lot of people - all men, no women serving yet.

David Pryor, sister, a member from Camden. When he decided to run against McClellan, I decided to volunteer. I was treasurer, not much money. He lost.

30 min in

Two years later, he decided to run for governor and won. I handled appointment boards and I used to say to my spouse, I know somebody in every county if I have car trouble - never did.

JB Back to election issues for a moment - what were they?

SM 1874 constitution - ballot traceable to voter. Voting machines & secret ballot. Took forever to legalize voting machines. Long battle simply because it was different.

Next was voter registration, to replace poll tax

Tells story of Marlin Hawkins, sheriff Conway County, found boxes of ballots in his attic. I always liked Marlin - a scoundrel

He'd say, 'We both believe in voting machines, just different kinds.'

JB Poll tax eliminated 1964

SM Took a while

36 min in

JB League records - documentation studies, process. Talk about process

SM In process when I joined – limited

JB How decide the limit?

SM Probably - size & calendar, never recall any large disagreements
Original studies pro/con, resource people, lively discussions

JB Consensus - how agree?

SM Never an issue as I recall

40 min in

SM Never an up or down vote

JB We're talking in 2014. [League] in early 1970s chose environment, health care

SM I can't explain it. In fact, I can't explain Arkansas. So much left to do. Wide choices. Very stimulating to meet with people from other states.

JB Pryor administration - day-to-day

SM Talking to people - astonished at how many people wanted to be on the Cosmetology Board. And when I went to the Senate office [in Arkansas] - Social Security, etc. Foreign accents always came to me. Immigration, agencies you wouldn't think of

45 min in

JB ERA [Equal Rights Amendment for women] - met someone traveling across country on behalf ratification in past week

SM I can't explain that. 'Cause all the rest of us tired. Maybe the changing role of women - much more across the economy, same kind of bias, equal legal rights.

53 min in

JB Back to your personal experience as young woman

SM Never worked for money - volunteer things, mainly home raising kids. Son complained to pediatrician about mother volunteering

JB Credit card in own name?

SM I was in the federal building - working for David [Pryor] - late 1970s. Finally gave me a paying job. Still have that credit card.

JB Have your kids grown to be interested in the same sorts of things?

SM Can't say as they have. Daughter a teacher, working mother until retired recently. Son an architect- does a lot of volunteer work. Neither is politically active. Son only person he knew who voted for Bill Clinton. My daughter now a master gardener.

60 min in

Talks about cats & dogs

JB Pryors [father & son] as politicians, bi-partisan approach

SM Not prevalent, personal relationships -

JB Reminds me in a way of the League, can it keep on in current climate?

SM Not just Arkansas, friend in South Carolina
Don't have old structures any more, don't see how it will survive different demands on women

JB Played such an important role

SM The one place you could use your brain

65 min in

JB Other organizations that might assist?

SM Not in a position to judge. Last three years not much outside. Don't see it in newspaper and news.

JB Lots of times husbands appear to participate in study groups, resource situations - that true your husband - engineering, environmental?

SM He thought my job

JB Religion a role in your family?

SM Presbyterian Sunday School, Mother's women's group, my father never. Daddy sat through many sermons. Realized he was an atheist. When I grew up, sometimes to church. Jack raised Baptist Church.
Many years ago, Unitarian Church right answer for us, variety of religious views. We don't participate at all now.

JB Not a lot of Unitarians in central Arkansas, how hook up?

1 hr, 10 min in

SM Jack's father worked at Veteran's Administration [in Little Rock]
Had a friend, thought we would relate to this guy
20 families, half doctors from medical school

JB Where?

SM Reservoir Road, octagon shape
We reared our children in the church, important
Daughter married a Catholic, son's second wife Jewish, very ecumenical
My brother Catholic convert, 11 children - my mother & I used to talk to him

JB League paper - birth control
Reproductive rights 1982 survey members - return to Ruth Bell

SM Quite dead, I imagine, another issue I used to lobby on
I had forgotten about that, I'd call Ruth Bell

1 hr, 16 min in

JB 1968-69 [state] presidency biggest issues

- SM I can't remember-more about lobbying days
- Ladies from El Dorado making cakes, men enjoyed the cakes [Refers to celebrated ERA resistance event]
- JB You were legislative chair for the League following tenure as president, worked on textbooks issue
- SM Did not have free texts for high school late 1960s - one store, Allsopp - Chapple - some could pass down, dreadful that you had to buy your own books
Don't recall being a problem in the legislature, they had kids, a little close to home
My memory - don't have to think about that any more
- JB Particular people stand out in the League
- SM Been so long, I do remember woman names Kurrus - very successful in getting across League message to legislators
By that time, a few more women showing up at State Capitol
Joan [Kurrus] did outstanding job
I'm sure there were others in other parts of the state
- JB I'm interested in where there were Leagues, where there weren't
- SM I don't really know how that happened
One of the most active in Crossett, never would have thought a place where would fly
Obviously depended on the women themselves
I don't really remember serious long term effort to establish local Leagues
Now really sad, I don't know how many we have - Fayetteville still going, Little Rock a struggle
They're missing a lot
- 1 hr, 25 min
- JB Anything you'd like to add?
- SM No, just glad the project continuing, so many women have done so many things
- JB Trying to get some of your voices in one place. Thank you for being one of them.
- Off -