

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women's Herstory Project

Personal Experiences

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ROSE SAYRE

Interviewed

by

Deborah Pesce

on

September 25, 1987

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ROSE SAYRE

INTERVIEWER: Deborah Pesce

SUBJECT: marriage, education, employment, therapy,  
family life

DATE: September 25, 1987

P: This is an interview with Rose Sayre on Women's Herstory for the Women's Resource Center in conjunction with the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Deborah Pesce. This interview is being conducted on September 25, 1987 at noon.

What do you remember about your parents and family?

S: My mother and father had seven children. I was a twin. We had an older sister and four younger brothers. My mother was always a housewife. She stayed home and worked. My father worked in a mill. When I was three years old my family relocated to the country. My father had the idea that really hard times were coming during the war. His basic plan was to move somewhere where he could raise food for the family. We got the farm. But my dad had to work in the mill all the time. So it was pretty rough for all of us. We had cows, chickens, pigs and large gardens. We put up the hay. We worked in the garden. We hoed and picked bugs and cooked. We were always going somewhere to pick something: raspberries, strawberries, blackberries, apples, anything we could bring home and can or freeze or eat. We hunted mushrooms with dad, and caught bait to fish with. We made cider and jelly. It was a lot of hard work. We lived way out in the country. Our nearest neighbor was about a mile away. We didn't have any other kids to play with, just family. My brothers and sisters were aged well apart. There was a span of eighteen years from the oldest to the youngest, not like we were all together in a clump. More like groups of us. The girls were the oldest. We fell into a period when there were not a lot of luxuries. My parents didn't have electricity or gas or a telephone. When they moved

to the farm there was a coal burning furnace and an outhouse. We worked our way up from a really primitive situation, and we were real tight on money for a long time. Gradually, we got electricity and indoor plumbing. I think when I was in high school we got a gas furnace, so we didn't have to take care of the furnace anymore. At first, when we came home from school we had to walk about a mile from the bus stop, and later we had to walk three miles. Then we changed our clothes and went down to the barn to milk the cows. We fed the chickens and pigs and threw the hay through the trough. We helped mom cook supper and did the dishes. Then we did out homework. There was no stop.

P: Was it a happy time?

S: I don't know if it was happy or not. It was very busy. But I don't remember feeling miserable until I was a teenager.

P: You were still on the farm?

S: Yes. My parents still live there. They don't farm anymore. There are no chickens or cows or anything like that. They just live there. The place is really wild now. My whole childhood was spent there.

P: Do you remember what school was like?

S: For first grade we went to one school, then they rearranged the school districts. We went to a country school in second grade. Then they opened up the Catholic school. My parents wanted us to go to a Catholic school. We started attending Blessed Virgin Mary School in Ellwood City, about ten miles away. That was nice. It was a real small school. I think Grace and I got special attention because we were twins. Because we were poor, my parents could not pay tuition. They paid with milk, eggs and butter and things like that. We got to be special to some of the nuns and priests. Our neighborhood, however, if you can call it that, was very Protestant. At that time there was a lot of discrimination against Catholics. In the fourth grade we were thrown off the public school bus. That is when we had to start walking three miles to catch the city bus to go to school. I remember that quite well, walking in the snow and in the mud. At that time the roads were not paved. It was real muddy and sloppy. Sometimes when the school bus would go by us, the public school bus, it would zoom past and the kids would throw things out the windows and call us names. It seemed as though the driver was trying to run us over. A lot of bullying went on. Because we lived on a farm, we did not have many social contacts. We did not know how to make friends. Thank God I had a twin sister because we held on to each other real tight. I don't know what it would have been like to be just

one person in that situation. We went to the Catholic school until eighth grade. Then we went to Lincoln, the public high school. We had been in a class with thirty kids. Suddenly, we were in a class with three hundred. That was a real big transition. I did not really make the transition very well. Academically, I did fine, but socially I was shy and very insecure. I felt like everybody hated me. I slunk around the halls. I spent a lot of time in the bathroom crying because nobody liked me. I was depressed a lot. I cried a lot during my teenage years.

P: Did you graduate with good grades?

S: Yes. I was in the upper ten percent of my class.

P: What college did you go to?

S: I did not go to college right off the bat. My parents were paying for my older sister to go to college. And my twin sister went to nursing school. There was no more money. I got a job in Pittsburgh as a telephone operator, and as a timid country girl was overwhelmed by the big city. In the meantime, I had started dating a boy in high school. I ended up getting married a few days before I was eighteen. I had a child that same year. I had three children. But the marriage was no good. My husband didn't work. He was abusive to me and the children. I thought I had no alternative. I blindly tried to make it work. It just did not work. One day he beat me up very severely. I left. I went to my twin sister's. I got a job in Warren at King's Department Store in the shoe department.

P: Where were your children then?

S: Ross and Randy were with me. But about a year before I left my husband my third child had died a sudden infant crib death. Within six months, I was hospitalized because I was suicidal. My marriage wasn't working, and I was terribly insecure but I took pride in being a good mother. Not that seemed to be a lie. And it seemed that I was a complete failure. It took an awfully long time to struggle with that. I think it was not until I left my husband that I started feeling some self strength and power. I was relying on other people to put my life together. That did not work. I found out that I had to do it myself. I think I did a much better job. I lived with my sister for about nine months. Then I had a series of apartments which eventually led to living in metropolitan housing because that was the only place I could afford. My children and I lived there for eight years.

P: What is that?

S: Government subsidized housing projects.

P: Where at?

S: Campbell.

P: For eight years you lived there?

S: Yes. That was a real trip.

P: How old were the children then?

S: Ross was in the second grade at that time; Randy was probably starting school.

P: Did you work?

S: I almost always worked, before, during and after the marriage. My first job was with Bell Telephone in Pittsburgh. I got pregnant while I worked there. They had a rule at that time that you had to quit when you were six months pregnant. Even though I sat on a stool and did no physical work at all, just plugged in cords, I had to leave when I was six months pregnant. My husband was not working. I lied to them. I did not tell them that I was pregnant until I was almost six months. I told them that I was two months. I worked until I was probably eight and a half months. Then when I had the baby, they kind of got a grip that I had been lying although my doctor had agreed to back me up. But I was laid off after the pregnancy leave. I got unemployment for awhile. Then they called me back to work, but I became pregnant again. So I lied again. That time they did not believe me. They made me leave when I was six months pregnant even though I was tiny and swore that I was only four months along.

After I left my husband it was difficult to find a job. There was a lot of prejudice against women who were separated. When I went to apply for a job, they told me, "You are separated. You will probably go back to your husband. We can't hire you. Come back if you get a divorce." Some people didn't want to bother even after I was divorced. "You are no good because you are divorced. You are a loose woman. You won't stay around." That was also true in finding housing. They didn't want to rent a house or apartment to a divorced woman with two children. They didn't want to have anything to do with me. One time I had my girlfriend's brother pose as my husband in a military uniform. I pretended he was my husband, on leave. "He's here now, but he's stationed somewhere else." He used to go around with me when I was trying to rent apartments. I was turned down at a lot of places before I figured out how to go about it. I also figured out how to lie, either tell people that I did not have any children or that I was still married, because there

was so much prejudice against being separated or divorced. I found the only place that there was not that kind of prejudice was in bars. I did start working in bars at night. And I was really naive, having grown up on the farm. I didn't know anything. I was scared to death and really dumb. Eventually, the guys in the bars kind of took care of me. They were protective. After they got to know me, they wouldn't let anyone mess with me. So it got to be better. I also worked in a factory and some small stores.

P: Was that in the Youngstown area?

S: Yes, but some of it was in Toledo.

P: How did that lead up to you deciding to go to college?

S: I always wanted to go to college. One of the values in my family was education. We had to be smart. We had to get smart. I always felt I lost something by not being able to go to college. It was a big disappointment. I had all these grand plans of saving up money to go to this school or that school. My parents were still raising my four brothers. I just never felt like I could go and say, "Educate me. Send me to school." I wanted to. But I couldn't do that. Always in the back of my mind, it was like, somehow I will get some money together and I'll go to school, but it did not happen for a number of years. When I was about thirty, I was still living in the projects. I heard about BVR, Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation. Somebody told me about it. I went and applied for them to send me to school. They tested me and all that stuff. I had had ulcers for a number of years. And after my daughter died from crib death, I had been hospitalized for an emotional breakdown. I was severely depressed for quite awhile and had had psychiatric treatment. That qualified me, got me on BVR. They thought it would be okay to send me to college. I started college when I was thirty years old. At that time, BVR allotted me \$160 a month, paid my tuition, and gave me money for books. With one thing and another I was able to supplement. Most of the time that I went to school I also worked in a bar at night. I had quite a busy schedule. I worked until two-thirty at night. I came home and slept till seven. Then I got my kids off to school and went back to bed for an hour. Then I ran down to classes at Youngstown State University. After classes I got back home in time to meet my kids after school, fix them supper, and try to do a little bit of studying. Then I would get ready to go to work again. It was pretty crazy.

P: Was that full-time at school?

S: Yes.

P: And working at nights in the bar?

S: Yes.

P: That is a heavy load with raising a family. Did you have help with the children from neighbors?

S: I had to pay a baby sitter.

P: What was it like living in the projects?

S: I had never lived in much of a community at all. I never lived where there was any racial mix. I had never been exposed to Black people or Puerto Ricans or Spanish people. But in the projects I got involved with my neighbors and especially with their children. I was involved with Cub Scouts and boys clubs and girls clubs. It was social work on a volunteer basis. There was a community center where I started to do a lot of work with Tenant Council and the National Youth Council and Head Start. This was the last part of the 1960's. I got real involved in the political movement, not on a national or citywide level, but just on a local level. I already started getting my direction. When I went to college, I decided that I wanted to go into social work. That was my aim. It was going to be perfect. I was going to major in sociology and minor in black studies and Spanish at the same time. I thought that would really wrap me up. I did not get the minor in Spanish, but I completed the rest of the plan. During my third year of college, I went to do an interview for school. I went to a juvenile delinquent home. At that time I was having a lot of problems with my teenage son. I was looking into teenagers and how you could help your own child as well as other people's children. I interviewed a psychologist at the home for delinquents. Subsequently, he asked me for a date. I found out that he was the father of three very young children and that his wife had taken off and left. He was working with teenagers and I was so good with little kids. I met his kids. I fell in love with his kids. Within a very short time, I married him. I think in my mind I was kind of doing this trade-off. You take care of my problems and I'll take care of your's. I left the projects and went to live in Grove City, Pennsylvania. My husband was also a professor at Slippery Rock University. I got into academic life on another level.

I continued to attend YSU and eventually graduated. I had a lot of work to do with three little children who were six, four and two, and pretty messed up. For instance, the youngest one was terrified of water. He screamed. You could not even shampoo his head. Within a year, I had him diving into the swimming pool. I thought that was pretty good. I was very close to the children. I thought that I was content to stay

in that life, but my husband ran off with his graduate assistant about the third year of our marriage and left me with the children, his and mine. I thought, that's okay. I thought, I did this before, I could do it again. I was content to do that.

I started looking around for work. I worked for an agency in Farrell for awhile. Then the mother of the children who had not been in contact with the kids for four or five years, came back into the picture and kidnapped the kids and took them to West Virginia. When I went to get them back, I was not allowed to transfer my custody rights from Pennsylvania to West Virginia. Basically, I was kicked out of their life and not allowed contact with them. About that time I came to Youngstown. I was really laying low on the ground. I was crushed. It took quite a bit of time to recover.

P: But you had your two children, a teen-ager . . .

S: Both of them were teen-agers. Ross went to live with his father. He was kind of at that stage where he wanted some contact with his father. He had not seen him for about twelve years. I finally recognized that he had to do that. I had my younger son, Randy, who was then a junior in high school. I was here and there doing odd jobs. When I could not find anything else, I worked as a cleaning woman and as a wall painter. I wallpapered, cleaned people's yards, and eventually was a volunteer at the Good Karma Food Co-op. I was there at the beginning. We got tied into an agency that had some money and I was hired as the manager.

P: This was in the 1970's?

S: Yes, 1975 and 1976.

P: You were there right when it started?

S: Yes. I think that job was through CETA at first. I was eligible because I had not been employed even though I had a college degree. I couldn't find a job in my field. We ran with Good Karma for awhile. It was a lot of work, but we steadily made progress. As a matter of fact, it is still alive today. After that, I got a six month job working for the YWCA in Youngstown. I was hired to research and write their history for their seventy-fifth anniversary. That was a limited job. I also did a little PR work and some graphic design. When I came to Youngstown I also got hooked up with a literary magazine, Pig Iron Press, which was volunteer work that led to editing, writing and eventually, I started doing art work on my own. That was probably why I got the job at the YWCA. I am still with Pig Iron today, twelve years later. I am still an editor. Even though the YWCA job was only a six month job, they considered it a



layoff. I was on unemployment for awhile and again tried to find a job. I went to the career center at the university, finally. I thought, I can't find a job on my own, somebody has to tell me what to do. When I went there, I expected a job. But they just screamed and hollered at me, and jumped up and down, and told me that I didn't belong in some bitsy job and that I should go back to graduate school. I said, "With what money? Where am I going to get the money to do this?" They said, "Apply for an assistantship." I said, "What is that?" They told me what it was. I think that was in June. I thought about it for three days. And I said this is it. But I did not know what to get my graduate degree in. They said, "Go into counseling." It had never occurred to me before. It seemed all of the steps in my life, or most of them, were kind of leading in that direction, even though I was not aware of it. It just seemed like everything clicked and everything fit. I applied for the assistantship. I got the assistantship in secondary education at YSU. The reason I got the assistantship was again because of my work with Pig Iron, the graphic and editorial work.

I was hired to write a manual for the education department for a course that was beginning soon. This is what I did. I researched and wrote a manual on machine operation and reproductive work designing posters and printing for students who were going into education. The last part of the assistantship was teaching that course. I was in graduate school. I was real scared at first, thinking--What are you doing here? Eventually, I found out that I was in the right place. I graduated. I had done my internship at Parkview Counseling Center. Five days before graduation, I was hired as a counselor there, in the aftercare department for long-term or chronic mentally ill people. About two years ago, I switched to the children's department. That excited me. I had always worked with children. I was always involved with kids. And I think that the pain of losing so many children in my life, especially the three stepchildren, pushed me away from that field. But when I went to the children's department, I kind of felt like I was coming home.

P: So you have been counseling children for two years?

S: Yes.

P: Looking back, what changes would you have liked to have made?

S: I certainly would not get married at age eighteen and have my children so fast, before I was ready to face the world. I was real naive and innocent. I would take a longer look at my decision to get married. I can say that now, as if I could redo it a second time. I think instead I would have liked to have gone to college right on and started that way.

P: Is there anything else that you think is important that we have not covered?

S: About a million things.

P: What was a typical day like for you while you were in school trying to raise your family and balance everything?

S: It was real rough and real crazy. There were periods of time when I did not sleep for three or four days. I would run as fast as I could. I looked forward to breaks. I did a lot of sleeping then. I did go one summer to school. That was a terrible mistake, too burned out for me. I found ways to manage my school schedules so that I could do everything in two days or three days. My kids helped me with the housework. I taught them how to cook and bake.

P: Were your children supportive then?

S: As much as they could be, I suppose. I suppose they really would rather that I had stayed home. But I didn't get a lot of flak from them. That was the way it was. I had to go to school.

P: How do you feel now?

S: I could not do it again. Sometimes I look back and I say, "Where did all of that energy come from?" I don't know where it went. It was just something that had to be.

P: Are you happy now, counseling?

S: Yes. I belong in this field. I especially think that I should counsel children and their families. It has been really good for me. I think I do it well.

P: You said that you are still editing Pig Iron.

S: Yes.

P: So you are still pretty busy?

S: Yes.

P: Can you think of any events that stand out as major and significant to you?

S: Most of the major events in my life have been tragedies. I think that though they are really hard to get through, once you reach the end of the tunnel, when you finally come to rest, some sort of strength has developed. I got through it and it was really bad. So I can get through something not as earthshaking. I think that maybe I would not have become

SAYRE

10

as strong as I feel I am if some of those awful things had not happened to me when I was really young. I feel that I just built my strength as the years went on.

END OF INTERVIEW