

Women’s Rights

Theme Description:

The stories in this theme focus on women’s struggles and triumphs, past and present. Some share personal experiences, while others talk about the women who were important in their lives. From the home to the workplace, these stories provide the opportunity to reflect on the many changes that have occurred in the past century, as well as what remains the same.

1) Barbara Weaver

File Name: 1.Weaver_Farming

Interviewed: 2011

Biographical Info: *Barbara Louise Gray was born in East Springfield, New York in 1923 and grew up on a small dairy farm next to what is now Route 20. After marrying Herb Weaver, she raised three children and spent many years working outside of her home. In this interview clip, she talks about women working on farms.*

Interviewer: Did other women work outside of the home in Springfield?

Barbara Weaver [BW]: In Springfield? Well, there were some farm women that did go out and work, but of course the thing that the farm women had to do in those days was to get food on the table because they would have maybe six, eight men working and they would come in for dinner at noontime. Then, when they used to put the hay in, they’d bring the horses with a wagon and put them in the barn with a load of hay and then they would set the hay with a big fork, one man on top, and then you’d have another horse and rope hooked on that would go from the barn out until it brought that hay up and over into the barn and then it would release and you’d bring your horse back in. My mother always had to do that, she would take old Fox, the white horse we had, out to the end and bring it back. Then she would have to have the meal on the table for the four or five men that might be working. In the meantime, sometimes she would go out with a rake and rake hay while they were loading and then she’d come back with her horse and hook that on and put the hay up in the mow and dropped it down. That was hard work in those days. Things were done so differently than they are today.

Sample question prompts:

- What did the women in your family do for work?
- What did you do for work (whether you’re a man or woman)?
- The mother in this story had a lot of responsibilities. Do you think people at this time thought women’s work was as important as men’s work?

2) Dorothy Smith

File name: 2.Smith_Women_Science

Interviewed: 2015

Biographical Info: *Dorothy Smith was born in 1950 and grew up in Atlanta, Georgia. She was one of the first women admitted into Georgia Tech. After receiving her degree in Materials Engineering, Dorothy worked at the Oak Ridge National Laboratory in Tennessee, where she made diamonds and other crystals for experimental use. She moved to Cooperstown, New York*

and was a stay-at-home mother to four children, and she now runs the cash register at Spurbeck’s Grocery. In this story, she talks about studying science.

Dorothy Smith [DS]: Well, at the time I went, it was shortly after girls were admitted. Girls were not admitted to Georgia Tech. They were supposed to go to a liberal arts school. So there were fifty girls and five thousand boys, but that didn’t seem to make any difference. I took all the same courses. I graduated in Materials Engineering and never had any problem and never really any harassment or anything. So it was a good place to go to school, and I enjoyed all of it.

Interviewer: Why Materials Engineering?

DS: Well, that’s hard to say. Actually I was interested in chemistry, but the chemistry program was still closed to women because there was a similar program at one of the other Georgia state schools. So I took materials. It was ceramics and metallurgy at the time. It’s now combined to materials.

Sample question prompts:

- Do you know many women who work in science?
- The woman in this story couldn’t study chemistry, because the program was closed to women. Was there anything you wanted to go to school for but didn’t?
- This story is about a woman who was a trailblazer at Georgia Tech—she was one of the first women to go there. Do you know any women who were the first to do something?

3) Shirley Schue

File Name: 3.Schue_Working_Mother

Interviewed: 2015

Biographical info: *Shirley Schue was born in 1965 in a small town in Virginia to two parents who were educators. After graduating from Virginia Tech, she moved to Florida and later to Cherry Valley, New York. In this story, she talks about what it was like to have a mother who taught.*

Shirley Schue [SS]: My father was a principal and my mother was a teacher, so community was important to them. They knew everyone, and they taught a lot of the families. My dad was such a good role model and so was my mom, but especially my father. He made family really, really important. He was our Sunday school teacher, he was the person that we knew when he came home we all had dinner together as a family and then we would all either play games or go outside and dad would throw a ball or we would go for a walk or ride our bikes and my dad would be there. My mom some too, but my mom worked and came home and she was tired. She did the cooking, but my dad did the cleaning. My dad did a lot of things maybe not so many other husbands did. They both worked though so that we could have vacations and do things. Most moms when I was growing up did not work, so it was a little unusual to have my mom work, but I guess that probably influenced me too, having both parents work. My parents instilled a very strong work ethic, and education was really important, especially since they were both teachers. Both of my parents were the first to go to college in their families. My dad was one of two children, my mom was one of eleven, but my dad’s parents were immigrants from Greece. My grandmother never got an education, not even elementary school, so education was

really important. So I guess all three of us knew when we were little that we were going to grow up and go to college.

Interviewer: What was it like having a mom that worked when a lot of other moms you knew didn’t work at the time?

SS: Well, I think it made a little more stress sometimes. I knew other kids’ moms, and they didn’t really know my mom, they knew my father. The other thing was that my mother didn’t drive, so my father did the driving. So when we went to Girl Scouts or somewhere, my dad was the one [taking us], where most of my friends it was their mother driving them or their mother taking them. So I knew most of the other kids’ mothers and they did not know mine very well, and they all knew my dad. I guess it just made it a little different, but I appreciated her working. My dad would say things like “This is why we can go on a family vacation this summer, because your mom works.” And my mother always wanted to be a teacher as a small child. Like I said, she was one of eleven and the first one to go to college, so being a teacher was important to her, and she loved it. She taught 32 years.

Sample question prompts:

- Do you think the father in this story is acting differently than fathers usually do?
- What are the differences between a father's role and a mother's role?
- How did your parents divide work, or how did you divide work in your own household?
- Have you seen mothers and fathers change over time?

4) Earle Peterson

File Name: 4.Peterson_ Double_Standards

Interviewed: 2013

Biographical Info: *Earle Peterson was born in 1933 in Yonkers, NY. He grew up on a farm and became a veterinarian, specializing in work with large farm animals. He met his wife while they were both studying at Cornell, in Ithaca, NY. Dr. Peterson ran a veterinary practice in New Jersey, and now lives in Cooperstown, NY. In this story, he talks about the women at Cornell.*

And so, I went to Cornell. That was in 1951. Students went to school to study; they had fun on the weekends. I think it was a lot more rigid than it is now. Girls who lived in the dormitory, and they had to live in the dormitory, they had to be in the dorm signed in by 10:30 every night, and if they weren’t they were assessed minutes. For every minute they were late they were assessed a minute, and if they got a certain number of minutes they were kicked out of school. I remember a gal who her sophomore year had gotten pregnant and she was kicked out of school; the guy wasn’t. That’s not really fair.

Sample question prompts:

- What kinds of rules did you have to follow when you were younger?
- Did you ever break the rules?
- Do you think they were fair?
- Were the rules different for men and women?
- Do you think the rules are still different for women and men today? In what ways?

5) Barbara Mulhern

File Name: 5.Mulhern_Three_Generations_in_College

Interviewed: 2011

Biographical info: *Barbara Mulhern was born in New York City in 1925, and grew up in Cooperstown in the 1930s during the Great Depression and World War II. She attended the Knox School and Smith College, and worked as a teacher and in publishing before she married in 1949. She then raised six children and has done extensive volunteer work in the educational system. In this story, she talks about three generations of women going to college.*

Interviewer: How was a woman’s obtainment of a degree viewed at that time?

Barbara Mulhern [BM]: It was considered a good way to get an engagement ring so you could marry, which I wasn’t ready to do. But by the time I got out of college--when my mother went to college, women didn’t go to work in the 1920’s. When my grandmother’s class—I’m going backwards on this--when they went to Smith at the turn of the century then, they were learning to be missionaries and get out into the world. They were much more apt to get out into the world than the women of my mother’s generation. On the other hand, by the time I came around, the non-working [women], they literally just went back home and got married and raised children, that’s what my mother’s generation was expected to do. That had passed by my time. Because of the war, going out and getting a job after college was sort of half expected of you and you were sort of prepared for it. Not really, not with a liberal arts education, but I did go on. I went to Knox and taught for a while and then I was in publishing for a bit before I married, but many women of my class at Smith did go out and have been in careers ever since. I was not one of them. After I married in 1949, I spent a lot of time dealing with what needs to be done in the community where your children are growing up. I never went back to a paid job after I married.

Sample question prompts:

- Do you think education has changed for women over time?
- In this story, we hear about multiple generations of women living their lives based on what was expected of them at the time. What do you think young women are expected to do today?
- How have you seen women and men working in roles that might not be official or paid with a salary—such as homemaking or volunteer work in the community?

6) Wendell Tripp

File Name: 6.Tripp_Unrecognized_Women

Interviewed: 2014

Biographical Info: *Wendell Tripp has spent many years studying and publishing the history of New York State. Dr. Tripp is the former director of publications at the New York State Historical Association (NYSHA) Library in Cooperstown, New York. He worked there from 1964 until 2000. In this story, he talks about something he regretted during his work life.*

I also wrote a history of New York History, of the journal. Mary Bliss, who was then the secretary, she saved me a lot of time, because I was doing other things. She also found additional material and my big regret was that I didn’t mention her. You know, I published the article with my name as the author, but I didn’t even mention her in a footnote. Did I deliberately do that?

No. I was not being selfish, I was being careless and sloppy. I should have acknowledged her help. After that I made an effort because I did come to recognize that back then in the 1960’s and certainly before that the role of women in society—while extremely important, as far as the, I guess you can say—the practical, workday role of women, it was somehow, I don’t know if the term is subservient, but that was true in general and it was certainly true at the New York State Historical Association. I was impressed by this because during World War II, the place which had been run by men, but on the staff were two women. They had the title of temporary directors, or whatever it was and so forth, but in looking through material I realized how much they had done. Well a woman can’t do things, right? [Laughs] Not in a man’s world. But they had. In fact I found a letter in which he mentioned, among other things, that we cannot expect these young women to lead this organization. The war has ended; we can’t expect these young women to lead this organization, so they began looking for, well, a man. That’s the way that it was at the time. But the result is that a lot of the people who did a lot in the history of the organization are not known. Well at any rate, I’m not saying I’m a saint who thought much about women’s rights, I didn’t think much about it at all. I just realized that these women were very capable. Whenever I think about those early years I think about these people who had the title secretary or something like this. But they were not simply stenographers, they were very effective. Some of them did go on as the cultural situation changed to hold distinguished positions in other places.

Sample question prompts:

- Does it surprise you that the women in this story were treated this way?
- What were some typical jobs for women when you were young?
- Have you known any women whose work was unrecognized?
- Can women have jobs now that they couldn’t have when you were young?

7) Jean Shea

File Name: 7.Shea_Travel_Problems

Interviewed: 2013

Biographical info: *Jean Shea was born in Syracuse, New York, in 1928. She got married after graduating from Syracuse University and worked for one year with the IRS before becoming a stay-at-home mother of six children. Her husband worked for a telephone company and they moved around New York State before settling in Oneonta. In this clip, she talks about the expectations placed on couples when she was a young woman.*

Interviewer: When was it that you left home?

Jean Shea [JS]: When I got married. I didn’t get married the year after college. I got married the following year. That’s when I left home. I would’ve liked to have been in today’s society where you can go anywhere you want with your boyfriend. In those days, I was hell bent on getting out to Colorado to ski. I was on the ski team for four years and that was my love. They changed things. You couldn’t just go off with your boyfriend. That would’ve been a real “no-no.”

Interviewer: Well why not?

JS: I know. Why not? I guess because there was no pill. [Laughter] The pill changed the world. I remember going up to see my friends that were up at Lake George. So, three of us went, three couples. One couple was married. We had to say we were married or they wouldn’t let us stay. I remember leaving it and she kept calling me “Mrs. Shea.” Of course, I didn’t pay any attention. I thought she probably realized we all weren’t married, but you just didn’t do that. In fact, when we left on our honeymoon, the first place we stopped was in Ohio. They wouldn’t let us stay in the cabins unless we could prove we were married. After you get married they don’t hand you a marriage certificate that day. So we couldn’t stay there because we weren’t married. Can you imagine that happening today? It was a much stricter world. I think it is better with the freedom they have today. I would’ve like that. Then you could’ve slept with a lot of people, [Laughter] instead of the one you married. I’m only kidding.

Sample question prompts:

- What was dating like when you were younger?
- The woman in this story wasn’t allowed to stay in a hotel with her new husband because they didn’t have a marriage certificate. Did anything like this ever happen to you?
- Were any relationships in your life ever limited by what people thought was proper?
- Do you agree with this woman when she says that birth control has changed the world? If so, how?

8) Charles Hudson

File Name: 8.Hudson_Fighting_Racism

Interviewed: 2012

Biographical info: *Charles Hudson was born in New Jersey in 1937. He worked as a physician and psychiatrist, and moved to Cooperstown in 1974 to work at Bassett Hospital. His mother came from an Irish family in New York City, but moved to rural New Jersey with her husband to raise their family while working as a nurse. In this story, Dr. Hudson talks about his mother’s life.*

My mother was a person of firm will. She didn’t know it at the time, but she was a feminist. She did things in public and the community. But she couldn’t get along with her stepmother and got angry at her father, so she left home at the age of fourteen and went to stay with her brother in Pittsburgh, having no real plan and thinking about what to do. My mother was Catholic. She went to a Catholic nursing school in Pittsburgh, St. Joseph’s and applied there. She was fourteen and she was supposed to be sixteen, but she fibbed about her age and went through nurses training and she was a nurse the rest of her life. But to show you the kind of person she was, in the area where we lived, of course we didn’t all live together, there were black people living in one area, and there was prejudice. She, in the 1940s, joined the NAACP to be an advocate for black people, and that came up very sharply once. Every year, the eighth grade school would plan on a trip to Washington, DC, and we would go with a couple of teachers, stay overnight or two and visit all the great sights. My mother was in charge of that one year and she started calling down there looking for places to stay. It turned out that nobody wanted the black children; nobody wanted black children to stay in their hotel or their motel. I don’t know how she did it, but she rang all around with one place for a while and finally they agreed, but they said, “Keep them out of sight. Keep them out of sight.” Well, I don’t think my mother made any

great effort to do that because she wasn’t the kind of person to lie down and roll over for anybody.

Sample question prompts:

- In this story, the man says that his mother was a feminist before there was really a word for it. What does the word “feminist” mean to you?
- Do you or any women in your life call themselves feminists? Why or why not?
- The mother in this story stood up for what she believed in. Have you seen women fighting for things they care about?

9) Charlotte Collett

File Name: 9.Collett_Life_Lessons

Interviewed: 2016

Biographical Info: *Charlotte Collett was born in Harlem, New York in 1951. She grew up in government housing during the 1950s and 60s, and attended the State University of New York at Old Westbury, Columbia Teacher’s College, and received a PhD from New York University. In addition to teaching in New York City public schools for over 30 years, she has played the violin and sung the blues around the world. In this story, she talks about preparing her daughter for the world.*

I tried to raise Hazel, our daughter whom we adopted, with a sense of who she is as a black person in America, a black person in the world, and a sense of responsibility for what she has to do. Just take it to the next level. Whatever that level is, she has to be the best of whatever she can be, not for anybody else but for herself—and also for me too. I’ve got to admit that. I’m going to keep hitting that hammer on the head. I used to tell her read the paper, read the New York Times. You’ll see we’re at the top of the food chain and our responsibility at the top of the food chain is to keep moving and then seeing the opportunity that is here. I used to tell my students that all of the time. It’s an interesting perspective being black because you see life from a lot of different angles, partially because you have to protect yourself in different environments and different situations. You have to learn how to codeswitch in order to protect yourself. You have to project your job. You have to protect your ass just in the street. You are polite, smiling, and always watchful because there is always a subtitle going on in your head about what’s happening on the surface and what’s really happening. I can see trouble coming at me. I really can. You learn that sixth sense, more than Jon does because he hasn’t had to survive the same way. It’s something I tried to teach Hazel. My mother used to have a saying “If it don’t kill you, it’ll make you fat.” You heard that one? [laughing] Yeah, if it don’t kill you, it’ll make you fat. You just keep getting up and you keep going.

Sample question prompts:

- What kinds of lessons were passed down in your family from one generation to the next?
- How do you think women have to protect themselves?
- Do you think women of different races face different challenges?