

Marjorie Townsend
May 19, 1987

Mary Kasamatsu
Interviewer

MK Ms. Townsend, would you tell me where and when you were born?

MT Manchester, New Hampshire in (that's my hearing aid whistling) 1897. Is that right? I guess so.

MK I guess so. Okay. New Hampshire and you told me that you...did you grow up in New Hampshire or?

MT No, I lived in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The doctor lived in Manchester.

MK The doctor?

MT My mother's doctor.

MK Oh I see.

MT She was having a baby.

MK Oh I see, she had to go to Manchester.

MT We came to Manchester because her doctor was there and that is where she wanted to be.

MK So you grew up in Cambridge.

MT I grew up in Cambridge, Massachusetts and Plainfield, Vermont.

MK Now when did you come to Vermont?

MT Every summer. My father and mother both had lived in Plainfield. One of them lived in this house that I am in now. So I am an oldtimer everywhere.

MK Now you were telling me that your husband went to Shataquas.

MT Yes, my husband went to Shataquas. He just loved Shataquas. He thought they were wonderful. He told me all about it.

MK How did the two of you meet?

MT That's so long ago, that that's asking ancient history, but we knew each other because I spent every summer in Plainfield. We naturally got together because all the young people went to the Nellie Gill Players and we went to see a play you see a play every night that we could.

MK Tell me something about the Nellie Gill Players.

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MT Well the Nellie Gill Players had come out of Boston. They started down in Massachusetts way, but they found they had a wonderful audience in Vermont and they loved Vermont. So they came up here. This was a (what do they call it, I can't tell you so)...

MK Oh that is okay. Don't worry about it. I can edit anything that need to come out.

MT You see I am going to forget things.

MK That's okay.

MT What do they call these?

MK Like a summer theater?

MT Well it was a summer theater, but it was not related just for the summer. It was all the time.

MK Oh I see, it was a travelling...

MT They had a name for them. If you had read that book, you would have had it. But the Nellie Gills had their headquarters in Plainfield. Then they played a different play in every different town every night. Some towns where they had a very big audience, they should do the same play two nights. But most of the time they went on to another town. So they would play one night in Plainfield and then they would go to Ryegate or South Ryegate and play there. They would take another town somewhere near. They did have automobiles. They traveled by motor. Once in awhile they went by train, because we a little small train that ran up this valley, so they could sometimes do that. But they would go to a different town and they would play the same play for 7 nights and then Sunday they rested. Then they did a new play. That's what their rest was learning a new play. They did the new play all the time to the same towns.

MK So they had a circuit?

MT It was a circuit. They went on the circuit. They went all summer on this circuit. Then they would go down somewhere in the southern part of the state or another state maybe New Hampshire and play in the winter. Or sometimes they would break-up and they would go individually back to New York. They all played in New York. They considered themselves not all all an amateur theater but a professional theater and there were none of these and then many of these professional theaters would go to Shataqua. I don't know whether they ever played in Shataqua or not.

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MK How long did the Nellie Gill Players exist? How many years were you able to see their performances do you remember?

MT Now you are asking questions is too much for my memory. But I think they played a number of years, probably at least 7. I am not sure. You see Players are very volatile and they can play as they want to. Another place that you could ask to get better answers is to go over to Dartmouth College where they have had a lot of interest in drama and where some of the faculty members who have been interested in drama made quite a study of it. I think they might be able to tell you. I offered all this stuff that I have of the Nellie Gill Players to them to put into their library. They are very glad to have it. So I got ???

MK It is real interesting. Before the tape recorder was on, you talked a little bit about why things like the Nellie Gill Players and the Shataqua were so important to rural communities like Plainfield and I wondered if you could say that again now that the tape is running?

MT I think that that happened because people do like to go to the plays. They always have. They were going to go to plays back before Shakespeare. They still wanted to go to plays. So there were always a few amateur groups that would do things. But these Nellie Gills were considered themselves professionals and always played very seriously. You know if they were playing a tragedy, they made it tragic. Now the reason I guess that we thought it was so important was that we wanted to go to the Players. My father was a great theater goer, so he would take mother down in Boston and they would go to plays. Then the same play would be produced in the summer by the Nellie Gills and if it was a play that they liked and approved of why John and I could go up here. We didn't have to stay up so late. It was daylight and better. If the Nellie Gills were considered themselves a very honest sort of group. I won't say moral, they weren't priding themselves on being moral particularly, but they did advertise that all their plays could be seen by young people. So I gather that they considered themselves pretty moral. They did have a play called "Her Husband's Wife" or something. Well it sounds pretty shaky. If you read through you would see what the titles were.

MK Did they perform the same plays from year to year? Would they repeat some of the plays sometimes?

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MT If people requested it, that I want to see it. But usually not. Usually it was new plays. Just about as they came out. You see it would be a new play one year in Boston. It would be a new play the next year in Plainfield.

MK Where did they perform here in Plainfield?

MT In the town hall.

MK In the town hall.

MT We have a really good stage and lots of room behind. It was an intimate theater, but it was in most of the towns. Most every town had a town hall that was considered to be a place to put on plays. But sometimes there were other halls. I think if you look through here, you will see what towns they were. I can't begin to tell. I think Woodstock was one that had a place especially for plays. It wasn't also a town hall. But most of these little towns all do have. The awful thing about them was that all of them are on the top floor. You had to walk up a lot of steps. So nowadays I wouldn't go.

MK Do you remember how much they charged to see one of the plays?

MT It is all in those.

MK It's in here okay.

MT If you would look through it. It is hard to remember it all.

MK Okay. The reason I am asking you is; I will look through these. The reason that I am asking you is that since this is for a radio series, hearing your voice is the part that will be most meaningful to the people who listen to the program.

MT Yes.

MK I can put in additional information from research...

MT Yes, you will have to.

MK Okay.

MT I think you will find a lot of information.

MK Sure, sure, thank you. I wanted to ask you on another whole subject now. When did you begin living full-time in Plainfield?

MT In '32.

MK In 1932.

MT You know the depression years.

MK Yes. How did you happen to move up here at that point? Is that when you were married?

MT You see I was living in Canada. I lived in Canada for 12 years, just across the border from here. My husband and I lived up there. Now you are going to get all mixed up. At that time, my husband was a different husband. My real husband is my second husband, Harold Townsend. But my first husband was Jerome Johnson from Cambridge, Massachusetts. So we lived in Canada because that's where his job was. I could go back and forth from my Canadian house in Montreal to my Vermont house all the time. So where would I go if I wanted to go somewhere. I don't know as that is very clear?

MK I think I have it figured out. The reason I was asking when you came to Vermont full-time were another one of the programs that we are doing in this series is about early automobile travel in Vermont. I thought maybe you had some interesting memories to share about that.

MT I do have a lot of interesting memories.

MK Good.

MT Because we traveled by automobile a lot. It was so unusual that people would run out of their houses to see this automobile going along. We always had automobiles. But you see in '32 was the depression and my first husband lost his job so I naturally came from Montreal here, because we had been going back and forth all the time anyway.

MK Do you remember when the road was paved here in front of your house?

MT Yes, it was the summer I first came. I had 4 small children. They played in the tar all summer. Putting it mostly in their hair. They were blond, little blond children. They loved that road. So they stayed out there and played with it. They put it in their hair. So I can remember exactly when it went through.

MK That is true to form for children though.

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MT Well it wouldn't be possible if you couldn't have a road. It just couldn't. Those roads were deep in mud. They were dusty and they were awful. So we thought it was good. Now I would be glad to see them abolish it.

MK It has gotten very busy now.

MT Too busy.

MK Do you remember any of the springtime travel or winter travel in Vermont?

MT We were probably one of the first cars that went back and forth between Cambridge, Massachusetts. When my father and mother were living in Cambridge, Massachusetts, of course I was living there too until I went to college. My brother, John, loved automobiles and we got one of the first automobiles in Cambridge. The first automobile was owned by our neighbors and we used to look at them. The first automobiles had a door in the back. You sat on benches on the side. We didn't buy one of those. The first automobile that we had was a Lozier which they don't make anymore. You know how Lozier is spelled. We had a great big green Lozier. None of them had tops on them. We had a top you could put up. It took 2 or 3 men to put it up. But we loved the automobile. We had horses too. Oh I am doing something to that.

MK That's okay.

MT Anyway we had in our Jenning Street house in Cambridge, we had an attached stable with a pair of horses from my pony and John's pony and the Lozier. So it was quite a...we had to move everything over; the carriages and everything. The pony cart, all had to be jammed over to one side so we could get the Lozier in there. The floor held up which is pretty good and then there was the Coachman, he was supposed to learn to run the car, but he was a dumb Irishman and he couldn't. So we had to keep both the man that took care of the horses and that was the same name. They all had the same name. It made it easier. He was the one that took care of the horses and the other man took care of the car. So it was very complicated but that's how it had to be. We used to drive every Sunday. We would take a drive out a little ways. You know it is quite an adventure to go. We probably would have 3 flat tires as we drove. We would go out to Lexington, Concord and Lexington. That's not very far from Cambridge. But it was an afternoon's drive because you would have all these flat tires. That's the early early automobile.

MK So then you drove an automobile from Cambridge up to Vermont in the summer?

MT Yes, we finally got so that was a big excursion. We got ready. We got up very early in the morning. We had lunch. We had me and mother on the back seat and the cats. They were in wooden boxes. We had the horses went up on the train. The coachman went with the horses and they took the harness. I remember they hung the harness near my pony. They had to have half of a freight car on a train. So they put the harnesses on the wall and they didn't watch and my pony ate the harnesses. She chewed them. That was very foolish. That made a big impression on me because you see we couldn't get into Boston without the horses. That's how we went into Boston. Mother had to go and shop. Nothing to go in except the car. And of course getting the car going was such a big thing. We only did it when we were going to make an excursion.

MK When you came to Vermont, then the horses came too.

MT Oh yes. That was the reason. But of course things went very fast and gradually only the men stayed in the city in the summer and the women didn't and the children didn't. We came up here and stayed all summer back at the old house.

MK The old house, is that

MT You see, my father and mother lived in Plainfield and my father and mother went to Goddard College when I was young. You see you lost it for a really bunch of time. What they did was he was a Plainfield boy and she was a Barre girl, but they went to Goddard and they met at Goddard and they fell in love and he'd cross over on foot from Plainfield to Barre and woo her and they finally got married at the Unitarian Church. I have got the wedding invitation somewhere. I don't think they are in that box, but they are somewhere in my attic. Anyway they got married and then father thought he wanted to fix the old house over. So he and his brothers all did it. That's my Manor at Goddard.

MK Okay.

MT That was about 1912 I guess about then. Isn't that when they did the ????. Have you been out there?

MK Yes.

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MT And they did some nice gardens. The story of the gardens is kind of interesting. It seems to me that that would be more interesting in a way than the early Gill Players. I have quite a nice article on the gardens, who made them and so on. I can't remember it all.

MK Sure.

MT If you want to know it, you can come and get the article and read it. I will hunt through the attic or I will have one of these girls do it. It is very difficult for them, but they do.

MK Sure.

MT But it is sort of worth-while. Do you think people are pretty interested in the old times.

MK Oh yes. Very much.

MT Well that's good.

MK I think so. I think so.

MT Well I am with you and if I can help, I am glad, but I can't help as much as I wish I could. If you had only come 10 years younger.

MK Oh I understand. Well thank you very much for being willing to take this time to talk with me about these things.

MT I hope I have answered most of your questions.

MK I will be talking in this section of the tape about her attendance at several voting rights conventions in the early 1900's.

MK Now you said you went to one of the, some of the little voting rights conventions and the big one in Washington.

MT Yes I went to the big one. That's the one I remember.

MK Now tell me about it.

MT Well my woman that was going to be my mother-in-law, Mrs. Grace Johnson, was very prominent in womens affairs all over the country and so she arranged for me to be a delegate. I was just a young girl.

MK How old were you, do you remember?

MT I think I was about 16. So I went to it when I was 16 years old.

MK What do you remember about it?

MT Well all the old ladies there. They all seemed old to me. As long as you give me a treat. There was a ice cream bar in this hall where we met and soda bar and so I never had so much ice cream and soda in all my life as I had then because they all were so pleased that I was a delegate.

MK Were you the youngest delegate there.

MT Yes, I was the youngest delegate. So that is mainly what I remember about it. But they all got very excited. They all had wonderful ideas. All difficulties would be at an end as soon as women had to vote. Everything would be perfect. So I heard all these dreams they had about how wonderful it was going to be.

MK Did you believe that too?

MT Oh yes. Yes, I thought they probably knew. I didn't have anything to prove anything different.

MK When women did get the vote, did you see changes? Did some of the dreams come true?

MT Yes a few. I did see a few.

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MK What kinds of things improved after women had the vote?

MT Well I was determined that there should be better things for the children and I think there were.

MK When women had some say about how...

MT They had a lot more say. Not that the men were against the children, they weren't, but they didn't bother so much about it. So that was it.

MK What kinds of things do you remember working on the behalf of children?

MT The children. Oh we worked on lots of things all along through the years. Let me see if I can remember what they were. Of course, one of the things when women had the vote, they would see to it that there were better laws for children. And one of them was custody. You see before that the man would get the custody and the jury changed that.

MK So if parents separated, mothers usually did not get their children before they had the vote.

MT That would be possible.

MK That's an important change.

MT Yes it was. It was a very important change. If you're looking for custody it is terribly important. But women didn't have the rights then. It was those women that saw to it that they did have rights. That women were equal. And children had rights too. So those women really put a good fight. I must say that I didn't see it all at the time, though I listened a lot. I really did listen to them.

MK Do you remember any of the speeches?

MT Any of the speeches?

MK Speeches or any of the speakers? Did you hear any of the big names of the day?

MT I ought to remember them, but you can find them. They are all written down.

MK Sure. I wondered whether you met any of the famous spokeswomen for the Cause of Women Suffrage?

MT Well if you read me the list, I might be able to identify some of them. I can't you see, it all off hand.

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MK Now you went to some of the smaller conventions around in Vermont.

MT Then because I had been to the bigger one, I was invited to some of the smaller ones where they would ask me a few questions and I would listen. They mostly just followed the big one and asked questions about it.

MK What were those little conventions like.

MT What?

MK The small conventions in Vermont. Were they just town conventions or did they involve women from several towns in a community?

MT Sometimes if there was a big enough town, but you see a lot of these places were very small. They wouldn't have more than two delegates. So.

MK It would be like a state convention in Vermont then with all the delegates?

MT Yes. It would be several towns on the north side or the west side would get together.

MK Did they do that every year?

MT Oh, I don't think so. It had to be something special.

Truck going by

MT People didn't run around as much then. Is that thing bothering you?

MK Let's wait until it passes. It is a very noisy one. That particular one is very noisy. Do you remember the first time you voted?

MT Yes I do.

MK Do you?

MT Because I had been living in Canada and I came down special.

MK Were there any particularly controversial issues on the ballot that year?

MT I don't remember about that. All I remember is that it was the first time women were voting. So I think to some people everything is controversial.

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MK Where did you go to vote that first time?

MT My first time I voted in Plainfield.

MK Right here in Plainfield.

MT Yes.

MK Was it in the town hall?

MT I guess so. Isn't it always there?

MK I guess so. I wasn't sure. I assume it would have been there. I was reading in one place where in the town of Northfield when women, for the first election, that women were able to vote, the town hall usually had had sawdust on the floor so that men could spit their tobacco juice onto the floor and they cleaned it up and put in chairs for the women to sit down. They were saying there were some actually real changes in the polling place because women had to vote and I wondered if you remembered anything like that or remembered hearing anything about it.

MT I don't think I was young enough to remember that. I sort of remember my father talking about it, but I don't know.

MK Did you feel very proud after you had voted? That this was something that you had helped work for too?

MT I suppose I should have. I know I was glad I had voted. Yes I guess I was proud. Just that I don't remember it all very well.

MK Is there anything else you would like to say about either the conventions or your first voting experience or what you think it has meant for women and children?

MT Yes, I thought it was really wonderful. Because although I didn't think it was going to be the end of all wickedness and the beginning of all holiness. I wasn't fooled by it that much, but I was glad. It made you feel as if women were important. That was the important thing. You felt more important. More like a citizen. So that was good.

MK I think anyones first time to vote is special. Even now for the first time to vote in an election is special.

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MT Yes and to think that so many good people couldn't vote. That was an awful thing ain't it. Now this mother-in-law to be, she kept stressing that how someday she was going to vote and how wonderful that was. I listened to her quite a lot.

MK She sounds like she must have been a pretty strong woman.

MT Well she was when it comes to that sort of thing because that was what she was interested in. She wasn't a bit strong when it came to raising children. She didn't pay much attention to them. And she had two sons and they were both lemons.

MK She knew what was important to her though.

MT I think so.

MK Well thank you very much for talking with me.

MT I hope I didn't disappoint you too much.

MK No you didn't. You didn't at all. It is kind of a thrill for me to talk to somebody who went to one of those early conventions. I remember the first time I got to vote was in a presidential election and it was in the Nixon/McGovern election. I was quite impressed with the power of suddenly being able to vote, that I was finally able to do that.

MT Yes, I do think it is a very thrilling thing and I still get a kick out of it and I didn't tell you how awfully old all the ladies seemed.

MK Ah!

MT ...at the first big meeting I went to.

MK Most of them were quite old or they seemed that way to you?

MT I was so young. That's the way it is. They weren't so old. I suppose they were beyond 30 you know. You have to realize how stupid and young I was. But I don't like to say that.

MK Especially not when you are so young. Did you go with your mother-in-law, your future mother-in-law to the convention in Washington or did you go by yourself?

MT Well you see I was in school, or I was in college, so it was more convenient to go from there than to come back here and go with her.

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MK I see, but she was there too.

MT I think she went from Cambridge and I went from Philadelphia.

MK Did you take the train from Philadelphia?

MT Oh lord, I don't know, how did you get there.

MK I suppose you would have taken a train or..

MT I probably took a train. I don't think they had any buses, did they? See I have lived through so much that I can't remember it all. When I was young, a subway train was running ???.

MK Was that in Boston? The subways in Boston?

MT Yes. They put the subway through from Cambridge to Boston when I was young.

MK I have been on that subway many times.

MT They had street cars in Cambridge. You see before that, they had horse cars, but I wasn't ever that young. I didn't ever see the street horse cars. No I just heard about them.

MK Thank you again.

MT You are good to lug all your stuff out here just for that kind of...

MK That's quite alright. I want to get some of the sounds of the birds and everything for just a couple of minutes. So I will let this run for just a minute.