

**STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS
INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

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MARY LOU HESS INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

BT: Please introduce yourself.

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, I'm Mary Lou Hess and I live in Clayton. I've been here, a native almost but I was born in Mid, Missouri.

BT: And tell me something about your family life: did you have brothers and sisters and something about your mother and father or your elementary or secondary school or was there some teacher that you really were fond of. Who influenced you in your life?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, of course, my parents were the major influence and they were wonderful. My mother had come from a large family who lived in Slater, she lived in Slater all of her life, Slater, Missouri and married a railway mail clerk and my father was in that position for about 40 years, going between Kansas City and St. Louis and taking care of the mail. Mother taught violin. She was an accomplished violinist and she taught it at home in our very small little brick bungalow and my brothers were playing instruments because they had a band in the back room and she's trying to give me violin lessons and she couldn't get a single one of her children to take up violin. It was a huge disappointment.

BT: Did you ever play in your brother's band?

Mary Lou Hess: No, I have no musical talent. I swear I had a nervous breakdown at age 8 when I tried to take piano lessons.

BT: And your family was willing to accept that?

Mary Lou Hess: They had to.

BT: And how about, were your brothers older than you were?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, four and six years older. My oldest brother went to the University of California and was on their faculty for many, many...well, until he died, as

a matter of fact. He was a physical chemist. He worked on the atomic bomb. He had a lot of things...he was invited by Einstein to work with him and unfortunately turned it down, which was a bad decision, and then my second brother was younger and he was a salesman, a crackerjack salesman and we were very close. He was kind of my guardian angel. When I got to the University of Missouri, he was still there and, believe me, he was watching over me all the time.

BT: Your father's job was very long hours, wasn't it?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah. He would be out for a week on the road taking care of the mail, sorting it in the mail cars and then he would have a week at home and that week at home he substituted as...he took care of the house and gave Mother a break so she could teach her violin and she played in a little community orchestra and she had other things to do so he took over as the house man.

BT: Were there a lot of teachers that you remember or some influence?

Mary Lou Hess: I did, my English teacher particularly was a character and she really made us like English and literature. She was Olive Femmerton, I remember her name well and I had a good history teacher, Marjorie Savington. I remember her particularly well because she made history very interesting to me, anyhow. But, yes, the teachers did make a difference.

BT: It must have been a small school?

Mary Lou Hess: Oh, very small, I mean, a small town, 3000 plus people, not much plus, and it hasn't grown at all. It's the same size today. I guess people die and some more come along. Actually, I think the schools were pretty good. The teachers tried very hard and we got a good basic education and all of us went to college and didn't have any problems with what we did. So it had to be a good basic education.

BT: How did you enjoy the University of Missouri?

Mary Lou Hess: Loved it, loved it every minute I was there. I was very active on the campus and head of the Panhellenic for the campus and actually had a wonderful deal because I did have good grades and so I got support from the sorority house I pledged because my parents wouldn't have been able to afford to have kept me there. So it was a good deal all the way

around. It was active and things...I had lunch with Eleanor Roosevelt one day which was just a high point of my life. She came to the campus to speak and I was on the...I've forgotten what organization but anyway, I took her to lunch and that was fascinating.

BT: Now, did you take her alone or were there other people?

Mary Lou Hess: No, there were three others of us. We had lunch with her but it was really a great opportunity for a discussion. We were there for about two hours. I was really impressed with her, really impressed.

BT: Did that affect you in some way?

Mary Lou Hess: I think so, yes. I was always interested in politics but the whole family was interested in politics and my mother said she was a Democrat, my father said he was a Republican, so we'd have discussions at practically every meal time, national issues and international issues. I think it was good.

BT: Is that what you discussed with Eleanor?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes. Well, we had some personal discussions too. It was really interesting. I don't really remember any details right now but she was very gracious, very gracious and it was definitely a high point of my life.

BT: And what was your major?

Mary Lou Hess: Journalism, advertising major.

BT: When you graduated, then what did you do?

Mary Lou Hess: I went into journalism...not really, I went into advertising, got a job at a department store in Dayton, Ohio, that's where we were living at the time, and did that for a while. Then we moved to St. Louis after the war. The war was really still on, 1943, I think we moved to St. Louis, got married and decided that's where we'd live. We didn't have any family or knew no one and it was a good choice.

BT: And how did you meet your husband?

Mary Lou Hess: I met Bob at school in a Recent United States history class. We'd both cut a class and Dr. Ellis made us come up and sign a sheet of paper if we'd cut a class so we were standing in line to sign our piece of paper and he said, "Do you like beer?" and I said, "Yes." He said, "Let's go get a beer over at

the Shag.” He didn’t introduce himself or anything and that was the beginning.

BT: And what did he do for a living?

Mary Lou Hess: An engineer and he was an electrical engineer, worked at Emerson Electric and then McDonnell and the Monsanto. He went through the whole gamut and ended up starting his own business which he liked best of all. Bob died about five years ago, I guess.

BT: What was the name of the business?

Mary Lou Hess: It was just Robert Hess Associates. He used his own...

BT: Did you do any writing for his business?

Mary Lou Hess: No, no. He didn’t want me involved in it at all. It was too technical for me, so, no.

BT: When you came to St. Louis, did you go to work?

Mary Lou Hess: I got a job at Stix, Baer, and Fuller. I’ve forgotten what they had me doing but they had a very active fashion department and they were doing a lot of fashion shows and the head of that department came one day and asked me if I’d be interested in trying out to be a model and I thought it sounded more glamorous than what I was doing, I didn’t like it, so I did and I modeled for a year with all the department stores downtown, the smaller stores and then I started putting shows together myself and did that for quite a long time and then Plaza Frontenac was being built and they asked me if I would come and be their marketing director and I had had some experience in marketing. I had worked for a company out of New York and traveled for them, so it wasn’t just out of the blue. I did have some experience but anyway, went to work for Plaza Frontenac...

BT: Let’s stop for a minute. When you were modeling and then you started your own putting on shows yourself, was that a woman’s job or were you one of the first women or what?

Mary Lou Hess: No, uh-uh, it was more or less a woman’s job. We had men in the shows but only as models.

BT: But the management, I’m talking about. There were a lot of women who did that kind of thing as managers or were you one of the first?

Mary Lou Hess: No, I wasn't one of the first, I don't think, uh-uh.

BT: And did you like that management role?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, I always liked the management role.

BT: Were you good at it?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, I thought my shows were good. Maybe other people didn't. There were some major goofs along the way, yeah.

BT: Did you remember any of the goofs?

Mary Lou Hess: The worst one: There used to be a big show that was held once a year. What did they call it? Anyhow, it was the Kiel Auditorium and with all the stores in town and it was major. You'd arrived if you were asked to do this show and they built runways even above the audience and off the stage. It was quite elaborate. So one show, I was given a cape over an outfit and I thought, okay, when I get out there, I'll be really dramatic and I'll take my cape off and swing it around. I did that and there was a fountain and I hit the fountain and it sprayed the audience.

BT: Did they laugh?

Mary Lou Hess: They did laugh after they got over their shock. I was horrified, you know, stopped and...well, what do you do? Go and try to wipe them all off? I don't know.

BT: Well, talk about Plaza Frontenac because I know you were there for years and I know that you were one of the first women to run a big shopping mall.

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, that was a really fortunate thing for me. I had had shopping center experience because I'd worked for make-up and I had been with West County and they knew I had that background because there weren't many people who really...shopping centers were new. This was a whole new phase of retail and Plaza Frontenac was going to be a different kind of a shopping center based on fashion. Anyhow, I was really fortunate. Richard Ruloff was involved in working with the Cap's family on that and he's the one who asked me if I would consider being...what did he ask me to be? Fashion director or something like that. So I loved the idea and right up my alley. That was a very happy time for me, when I was with

Plaza Frontenac and eventually ended up even being general manager. So it was just a real fun job.

BT: What's the difference between, say, West Roads and Plaza Frontenac? You're saying Plaza Frontenac was fashion?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, West Roads was an upgrade over other shopping centers. That was really the first one and I had worked there and I liked West Roads but Plaza Frontenac was strictly fashion and for them to build a building that looked like a colonial mansion, no one knew it was a shopping center. I mean, it was so different looking. Buses came from everywhere bringing people in to shop in those early days, it was quite an experience for people, to come from small towns. We had one busload of high school girls who came all the way from Texas and they dressed up for the occasion: white gloves and hats. I went out to meet them, I couldn't believe them, but they were really dressed for Plaza Frontenac. They had come to a fashion center. It was fun; it was great fun.

BT: Were you always interested in fashion?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes.

BT: Even as a child?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes. I would design my clothes that I wanted when I was about eight. I asked my mother to make me a dress that had ruffles like the rainbow, all different colors, rows and rows of ruffles. She made it for me.

BT: So she encouraged you?

Mary Lou Hess: Very much so. My mother always encouraged me and I think that is really important in a family, and my father was always supportive. The family is a really important part of childhood, I think.

BT: Do you sew yourself?

Mary Lou Hess: I did, but I don't anymore.

BT: No, but you could design and sew and make your own clothes?

Mary Lou Hess: I did. I'd rather she did it but...but anyhow, I could do it.

BT: And when you went to college, did you still follow that design?

Mary Lou Hess: No, I wanted journalism.

BT: You were interested in writing?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, and the advertising aspect of it so that's what I did.

BT: Talk about, how did Mr. Ruloff find you? How did he know you?

Mary Lou Hess: Through Plaza Frontenac. He's the one who hired me. I had known him socially.

BT: Oh, okay.

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, so he had known me and he knew my background and he asked me to do the job and I was thrilled to death.

BT: Now, what did that job really call for?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, it called for a lot of work, a lot of work. We were trying to build a shopping center that was different from anything that St. Louis had experienced before. People were very reluctant to come to it. They felt that the prices would be too high; they wouldn't be able to afford the merchandise; that they might be treated in a way that they wouldn't enjoy. Our first job really was to get over that attitude and make it feel like home to them and make people comfortable. So the solution was, I went to the community and asked colleges to bring in choral groups and high schools to bring in...I mean, we just tried to keep it so busy with things going on that people then could see that it was okay; they could be okay; they had stores they could enjoy and shop in and they felt comfortable there. So I think that was the solution to get people to come but it was awful at first.

BT: So you were really the creator of that entertainment aspect of Plaza Frontenac?

Mary Lou Hess: Right.

BT: And they still have the pianist that plays. They have a player piano, don't they?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, they did.

BT: And I suppose that there were moments when they bring in a pianist to play?

Mary Lou Hess: They do, and they still have groups that come in and sing and they keep that tradition up and I think it's very good that they do.

BT: Now, was that something new?

Mary Lou Hess: I think in St. Louis, it was definitely something new and it was out of desperation as far as I was concerned. We'd have six or seven people in the mall and you don't do business with six or seven people. I figured the more people you got in there, the more opportunities you had to sell. So that was...

BT: Had you seen that idea someplace else or was that just your idea?

Mary Lou Hess: No, I think I had seen it in other centers because I had traveled some for them but not to the extent that we tried to do it. The funniest thing was one day when they were building Levert Bruce store, the old Levert Bruce store by Saks and there was a stairway there. We used the stairway for people to stand on to sing when they were performing, put up chairs for people to sit down and so the workmen were doing the finish work on Levert Bruce and the hammering and the banging was going on and I went over and asked the foreman if they might consider stopping work for about 45 minutes and let us sing. So he considered it and then all of a sudden, all the workmen came out with their lunch baskets or whatever and sat down on the floor and they listened to the concert and had their lunch and we got our concert over with.

BT: I bet they enjoyed it.

Mary Lou Hess: Well, they did, yeah.

BT: And wasn't that a clever...

Mary Lou Hess: I thought he had a good solution, yeah.

BT: Did you have anything to do with the companies that were coming in?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, I traveled for the owners, looking for companies to come in and appropriate companies. I went coast to coast and up and down Florida and Minneapolis; I mean, I really went everywhere looking for stores and

some of them came in and were successful and some weren't. You never know.

BT: What were some that were successful?

Mary Lou Hess: Oh, boy, now I'd have to stretch back to think about it.

BT: Well, Neiman-Marcus?

Mary Lou Hess: No, Neiman-Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue were both there.

BT: In the beginning?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, in the beginning. They were free-standing stores and the reason that Plaza Frontenac really got started was because those two stores needed the traffic in between and they put a lot of pressure to get the mall built there and so the Cap's family decided to do it and connect the two stores but that was the whole reason for Plaza Frontenac.

BT: Isn't that interesting.

Mary Lou Hess: Uh-huh.

BT: And then they designed that beautiful front area that was so inviting?

Mary Lou Hess: Right, and our portico, I loved our portico. We had...do you remember Willie (Shatzhammer?) music?

BT: Yes.

Mary Lou Hess: Well, we had his orchestra on Sunday nights and they sat on the portico and played and people brought their blankets and what they wanted and they were all over the grass and we had concerts from the portico. We called it "Pops on the Portico."

BT: Oh, how wonderful!

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, No, it was great fun because the owners were...they said they'd never run a shopping center. Then they said, "You do it. We don't know anything about that." So they gave me almost total freedom except they gave me no budget to do these things and my solution on that was to use interns from the colleges, which was the best thing I ever did because I had the best people in the world and they were willing to run their legs

off and do anything you asked them to do. Without them, I couldn't have done it. There was no way.

BT: Did they get academic credit or did they get a little stipend?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, they got academic credit and we had them from UMSL, we had them from Wash U, Fontbonne, practically every college was represented and they were the most fun. They made the office great fun to be in. Without those extra hands, we couldn't have done the programs we did.

BT: So they were obviously interested in learning about department stores and shopping centers...

Mary Lou Hess: Right, mm-hmm.

BT: Did any of them stay in the business?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, they went into various phases: advertising and I wouldn't say any of them really stayed in shopping centers but they were terrific.

BT: So they were in the advertising and marketing or something and it wouldn't matter who they worked for? They had their internship really with you and with Plaza Frontenac?

Mary Lou Hess: Right.

BT: Do other shopping centers do that now or do you know?

Mary Lou Hess: If they don't, they're crazy. I really don't know.

BT: Was it hard getting the universities to agree?

Mary Lou Hess: No. They liked the idea and they gave them a college credit for it and those kids worked so hard that they deserved everything they got but we really had fun. It made it a fun place to work because they're so full of life and everything. It was great.

BT: How did you decide which companies to bring into the mall? Did you have some criteria?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah. They had to be special in some way, a higher class type of operation. We looked at their stores, how they set up their stores and, yeah, we were pretty selective about it. We would invite somebody to come in. It had to be the quality that they were looking for.

BT: How long did you do that?

Mary Lou Hess: Twenty years. It was about twenty years, yeah.

BT: Did you have children?

Mary Lou Hess: Mm-hmm, I had a daughter who at that time, she was eight when I started.

BT: Working, or with the Plaza Frontenac?

Mary Lou Hess: With the Plaza Frontenac, uh-huh, so by the time I quit, she was in college or married. I don't know but it worked out fine.

BT: And did she become a professional woman?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, she became a teacher.

BT: Yes.

Mary Lou Hess: And she's still at...how old is my Cheri, she's 70. I think she's in her 70's now and she will not give up teaching. She loves those students and she does speech therapy and she's been in that line for years but still with it, every year.

BT: She knew you were working and so did your husband help out?

Mary Lou Hess: He didn't pay much attention to what I was doing. He wasn't unhappy about it. He was fine but as far as giving extra help, maybe he did a little bit but not much.

BT: But when you said "I'm going to remain working," he said, "Fine"?

Mary Lou Hess: Oh, he was fine, yeah. He was fine with it. He never put an obstacle in my way and I was thankful for that.

BT: Did you know that when you were marrying him?

Mary Lou Hess: No. We were 21 and 23. I didn't know anything.

BT: But it all worked out?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, mm-hmm, it did.

BT: What is your interest in the International Women's Forum? How did you get associated with them?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, I was one of the people who was at the first meeting, when they brought some people in from California to talk with us about the possibility of organizing this organization and I thought it sounded like a wonderful idea for St. Louis so I was in that initial group that got the chapter going and I have found it very beneficial, if for nothing else, it makes me feel better. I still like to go to meetings when I can because I like to hear what other women are doing now. Their careers are so varied. They aren't limited the way they were when I was younger and I just think it's a wonderful organization.

BT: If you had been born 50 years earlier, would you have been able to do what you've done?

Mary Lou Hess: Probably not. I think the time was right for women to start making a bid to be recognized and to move ahead in careers and I think it was a very advantageous time to start a new career. I think earlier, no, you would have been shut out. It was still a men's world when I started. I remember one time, when I joined the Ad Club and I became president of the Ad Club and at that time it was a big organization. They had 1000 members, mostly men. There were two or three women and they always had their board meetings at Busch's Grove, the old Busch's Grove. It was customary. I was elected president and it was the first time they had had a woman even involved in the board so the first day we had the board meeting, I went over to Busch's and they'd always done it in the men's bar but women weren't allowed in the bar. So I accepted the refusal and then I went back to them and I said, "I'm sorry, but I have to be at that meeting. I'm president of this organization now and this is where they have the meetings. They'd like to continue," so they let me go in but it was a minor victory.

BT: What year was that, roughly or what decade?

Mary Lou Hess: Probably 1956 or 8. It was a long time ago.

BT: But that was very early in the women's movement?

Mary Lou Hess: Right and women just were not allowed in some places.

BT: Well, did some men leave the room when you all came in?

Mary Lou Hess: No, they took it very calmly.

BT: How did you get elected if it was mainly an all men's group?

Mary Lou Hess: That's a good question. I have no idea, I really don't.

BT: Had you served on committees in the organization?

Mary Lou Hess: No, I was a relatively new member. I don't know. They put me up for president and actually, I was president of the district as well, which was a six-state district.

BT: And you were probably the first women to do that?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, uh-huh, but it was fun.

BT: Well, I guess you knew these people from the profession.

Mary Lou Hess: Some of them, not all at all, but it was a fun thing to do, breaking some new ground.

BT: Did you enjoy that?

Mary Lou Hess: I did. Yeah, I did.

BT: Did your mother take pride in your...

Mary Lou Hess: Always, always, very supportive.

BT: And your father?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, a very supportive family. My oldest brother was an educator, I think I mentioned that. Anyhow, he wasn't around.

BT: Were your brothers interested in fashion and art?

Mary Lou Hess: Not at all.

BT: They were interested in sales or else science?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah...football when I was...

BT: Were you athletic as a child?

Mary Lou Hess: No, not at all. I had a year I was in bed. I had rheumatic fever and so I lost a whole year of school and I still have a gap in the 7th grade. If you ask me questions from the 7th grade, I probably can't answer you: geography, a few things like that.

BT: Why do you think you succeeded so much?

Mary Lou Hess: I think I wanted to succeed. I think you've got to have a drive and my family had always encouraged success but had done it in a very quiet way. I mean, they hadn't pushed anything on us except piano lessons, which I didn't like but anyhow, I think everybody was very motivated in my family, the children; there were four children. There was my sister came along 16 years after I was born, and that was a surprise to everybody and she was the first to die. Isn't that sad? Yeah.

BT: How old was she when she died?

Mary Lou Hess: It was just last year and she was probably 67, I think she was, yeah.

BT: And what did she do in her life?

Mary Lou Hess: Teacher and principal at several schools. She was west...what district was it? Anyhow, she...

BT: She was in a rural school district?

Mary Lou Hess: No, no, in the county, in St. Louis County.

BT: So you migrated to St. Louis and you and your sister stayed and your daughter stayed?

Mary Lou Hess: When Bob and I got married...we married on the campus at Missouri and when we got married, we had no particular place to live so we just chose St. Louis. We wanted a city. We wanted to be close enough to our families that we'd be able to see them and it worked out well.

BT: And from where did he come?

Mary Lou Hess: Crystal City.

BT: Oh, that's not far at all.

Mary Lou Hess: No, uh-uh, Crystal City and I was from Slater in the middle of the state.

BT: Are you a cook?

Mary Lou Hess: I used to be. I don't cook for myself anymore. I'd much rather go out and eat. The food is better too.

BT: When you said you were interested in politics and what did you think of the women's revolution and how it affected...

Mary Lou Hess: It affected me. My meeting with Eleanor Roosevelt just really had a big effect on it and I remember meeting Gloria Steinem when I went up to New York. This was on a forum meeting that I went to New York, when I was a new member, brand new member and I had the nerve to call her and ask her if she would come in and speak to the Advertising Club of Greater St. Louis with all those men and when I told them that Gloria Steinem was coming in, I thought they were going to kill me but she did and I spent the day with her. She was wonderful.

BT: Was it a good audience?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, but...

BT: Did they bring their wives?

Mary Lou Hess: No.

BT: They came alone?

Mary Lou Hess: They came and sat with 10 glum faces.

BT: And did she cheer them up?

Mary Lou Hess: Actually, they had to admit that she was really quite charming but they were grudging in that. It was a lot of fun for me.

BT: And so you spent the day with her?

Mary Lou Hess: Uh-huh.

BT: And how was Gloria?

Mary Lou Hess: She was great, yeah. We had a really good day and very interesting woman. I thought she was wonderful.

BT: How did Gloria make her living, from her books?

Mary Lou Hess: I guess, with lectures and that sort of thing, yeah.

BT: Did she talk about how she got her ideas or what started her off?

Mary Lou Hess: You know, I cannot remember what she even talked about that day. I was so nervous because I knew that they were just ready to pounce on somebody, probably me, as soon as it was over. I don't even remember much about it. It worked out.

BT: And she was good, you were saying?

Mary Lou Hess: I thought she was very good, yeah, and she wasn't heavy-handed at all about women's lib. She was good. She handled the audience very well, mm-hmm.

BT: Were you in any of those other organizations like NOW or any of the women's organizations?

Mary Lou Hess: No. In the beginning, when I first got married, my husband and I joined the Webster Grove's Theater Guild and I got really hooked on acting in plays and I did that for about three years before I decided I really wanted a real job and I wanted to do something. That was fun.

BT: And how old were you when you went...so you were married a couple years before you went to work again?

Mary Lou Hess: No, I went to work almost immediately, in Dayton. I got a job. We were married up there...no, actually, we weren't, we were married in Columbia...

BT: Yeah, and then you went to Dayton?

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah. The war was on and my husband was still in the service so he was stationed there at Wright Patterson.

BT: Oh, yes, of course. Was he in the ROTC or did they have it in those days?

Mary Lou Hess: He was in ROTC so he went right from graduation in college.

BT: To Wright Patterson?

Mary Lou Hess: To Wright Patterson, uh-huh, and he got orders to be sent over several times and they revoked his orders because they wanted him here. So he traveled a lot in the states. He was a radar specialist and this was when

radar was brand new and very few people knew anything about radar. So he spent his time flying test planes. He wasn't the pilot. He was the radar officer and all over the country. They tested it in every kind of climate. When I could, I'd join him on a trip but I wouldn't see him anyhow. It didn't make much difference because they flew from dawn to dusk and didn't see him very much.

BT: And then after that, you came to St. Louis?

Mary Lou Hess: Mm-hmm.

BT: What kind of awards have you gotten over the years?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, a few. I can't remember them. The Quest Award from...there was a women's advertising club and a men's advertising club. We got it unified and it's just one club now but when it was the women's club, they gave me their Quest Award which is one of their top awards.

BT: Were you instrumental in bringing the men and the women together into one organization?

Mary Lou Hess: Mm-hmm.

BT: Well, you were a busy person.

Mary Lou Hess: We got it put together and it took a year or two but it worked out fine and that year, I got the Advertising Federation of St. Louis Flair Award and I was the first female president of the Advertising Club and I got the Suburban Journal-KMOX Women of Achievement Award and that was a long time ago, 1986, I think it was, for business and community anyhow, and the 9th District Advertising Federation Ad Woman of the Year, I got. That's enough.

BT: Well, it's a great deal; it's wonderful.

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah. It was kind of new to have a woman who had moved into a presidency of a club with 1000 members in St. Louis. I was proud of that and then I was proud of the fact that we got the two clubs put together because it seemed ridiculous to have a men's and a women's club in a day and age when everybody was going to be equal.

BT: Well, when you talk about things like that, how did you convince the men that it would be all right?

Mary Lou Hess: Not easily. Well, some were really supportive.

BT: Obviously.

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah, and so those supportive people, I leaned on pretty heavily to work on the rest of them and get them to come around and there was still reluctance for quite a while but everybody was fine after a year or so. They were used to it and it was fine.

BT: Well, I know clubs in St. Louis that it took them 10 years to get to that point.

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah...we made it earlier than that.

BT: What other women were there in the advertising business in those days?

Mary Lou Hess: Well, this may or may not be a name that you remember: Ruth Jacobson?

BT: Oh, sure.

Mary Lou Hess: Ruth was with Fleishman-Hilliard in a very strong position because the agency was strong and she was a very strong woman and Ruth was also a real pioneer and she probably was one of the first women in one of these organizations. There are certainly others, a lot but I think of Ruth any time I think of a woman who really led. She did and she held an important position with Fleishman-Hilliard which was the major agency.

BT: Well, I knew Ruth's name years before I ever met her and she had that reputation.

Mary Lou Hess: Oh, yeah.

BT: And I knew your name too.

Mary Lou Hess: Oh, well, good.

BT: But I really always associated it with Plaza Frontenac.

Mary Lou Hess: Yeah.

BT: I didn't know much about you before Plaza Frontenac.

Mary Lou Hess: Right. Well, Plaza Frontenac was my favorite project because the owners, when they asked me to take the position, said, "We can build the building but we don't know anything about retail and we don't know how to make

this place a success," and I said, "Well, what do you expect out of me?" and they said, "Just make our center a success." That's all. Not much of a...

BT: Well, you know, I've noticed at Plaza Frontenac in the last...well, I guess five years...time goes by more quickly than you realize...that they now have buildings on the rim. Was that always the plan, those restaurants?

Mary Lou Hess: No. As a matter of fact, the city wouldn't allow it when I was there. I spent a great deal of time at the City of Frontenac, trying to get them to agree to do anything. Any change we made in Plaza Frontenac had to go through the city council.

BT: Was that Town and Country or Ladue?

Mary Lou Hess: No, Frontenac.

BT: Oh, it's Frontenac. Oh, that's right, it's Plaza Frontenac.

Mary Lou Hess: I remember one time, we had a little restaurant called Fanny's that was right in the center part. You remember Fanny's, and she wanted to put a few tables out in the mall right around where that open railing was and I felt it would be very attractive to do it. She wanted to do umbrella tables and make it look festive so they said, "Well, you'll have to take it to the city," so I made my request and they deliberated and they said, "Well, we'll have to have a meeting over there and we want to see the tables set up with the umbrellas." Well, okay, we didn't have 16 tables with umbrellas so I went to Joe Forshaw and said, "Joe, can you help me? We need..." ...and he sent them over, they set them up. The aldermen all filed over, walked around, studied, studied and went back and finally said, "Okay, you can do it."

BT: What were they afraid of?

Mary Lou Hess: Isn't that ridiculous?

BT: Yes. Well, did you buy your tables and chairs from Forshaw later?

Mary Lou Hess: Probably not, poor Joe.

BT: Well, he was a good neighbor.

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, he was a real good neighbor, he really was.

- BT: What's the secret of your success of getting things done?
- Mary Lou Hess: I guess persistence. I think you have to be convinced, first of all, that what you're trying to do is the right path. So you've got to go through a lot of deliberation before that but if you really want something, you've got to stick with it and work on it until you can convince whomever you have to convince and I guess I had that persistence. If I really wanted something, I would work on it. I don't know. That's all I can think of.
- BT: What other women or what other men helped you along the way? You talked about Ruth.
- Mary Lou Hess: Ruth was wonderful. Well, I'll tell you who helped me along my way and I never could have made it without it, I used interns from the colleges.
- BT: Oh, yes, you talked about that, yes.
- Mary Lou Hess: And they gave me the extra hands I had to have.
- BT: But you were clever enough to figure out how to get that kind of labor that would focus on it.
- Mary Lou Hess: Right, and I had no money to pay anybody but these girls were eager to do it and I carefully selected the interns.
- BT: How did you choose the interns? Were you hiring people?
- Mary Lou Hess: I wasn't hiring anybody...
- BT: No, but I mean, in a way?
- Mary Lou Hess: Yes, yes. Well, one of them...
- BT: How could you tell who would be good and who wouldn't?
- Mary Lou Hess: One of them, her father had an advertising agency and you may remember Jerry Duffy, okay. Well, Maria was my first intern and Jerry told me one day, he said, "You know, when you go to Plaza Frontenac, you're going to need a lot of help and..." he said, "I have a daughter who is going to do an internship and I think she'd be really good." Well, she was incredible. She wasn't good; she was incredible and Maria just took over. You'd give her a project, it was done; it was done right. So she was the first. I must have had 16 to 20 interns over...

- BT: Over the years?
- Mary Lou Hess: Uh-huh.
- BT: Yes. So, what you did is you saw a good idea and you took it?
- Mary Lou Hess: Yes.
- BT: And then you expanded on it.
- Mary Lou Hess: Right, and I thank Jerry for giving me that idea.
- BT: You have a good sense of humor. Did your family have a good sense of humor?
- Mary Lou Hess: Yes, you had to. In a little bitty brick bungalow...I was telling Sue...mother must have almost gone mad sometimes because she was a marvelous cook so she did the cooking but she also taught violin. She had four children to take care of it was a little bitty house, two bedrooms, one on either side and one bathroom. Right in the center where the front door was, my brothers would always forget to close the door. They were a disgrace. Well, anyhow, so we were crammed into that little house and we were right by a cow pasture and every morning I woke up to Betsy, our milk cow, she would stand as close to my window that the fence would allow and be making noise and feeding and everything and wake me up.
- BT: But you were fond of her?
- Mary Lou Hess: Oh, Betsy died, my brothers went out and dug a grave for this great big cow in the pasture and buried Betsy. It was a great ceremony and we had a tree house in the field and that was where we spent a great deal of time too, in our tree house. I lost track of the question.
- BT: Well, the question was your good humor.
- Mary Lou Hess: Oh, you had to have it.
- BT: Was your family filled with good humor and you said yes.
- Mary Lou Hess: Yes.
- BT: They were inventive and they looked at life in a jovial way.

Mary Lou Hess: Right. My oldest brother was a genius, he really was but he was entirely different from my second brother who was a born salesman.

BT: Were you a salesman or saleswoman?

Mary Lou Hess: I never did selling but in a sense...so, it was at Frontenac, we were selling the center.

BT: What did you do after you retired?

Mary Lou Hess: I started my own business for a while and I had a lot of...I focused on Clayton accounts because I had moved to Clayton and it was fun. I had all the Maryland Avenue shops.

BT: So you managed for them?

Mary Lou Hess: Mm-hmm, we did the advertising for them. We put on little performances and different things, did that for a while. There were other things I can't even think of right now.

BT: Did you volunteer in the community?

Mary Lou Hess: Yes, a lot of volunteer work.

BT: What groups did you volunteer for?

Mary Lou Hess: Oh, gee...well, let me think. It's really been a while.

BT: Well, I mean, it's not...

Mary Lou Hess: Symphony, Forest Park Forever, let me think...I don't do it anymore...oh, Tower Grove Park.

BT: Oh, yes. Oh, Tower Grove Park today is just beautiful. Forest Park is beautiful.

Mary Lou Hess: And you know, I loved Tower Grove and I never knew anything about it until they asked me to serve on their board and to help them become better known in the community and I really grew to love that park.

BT: Yes. Well, the parks in St. Louis are wonderful.

Mary Lou Hess: Right, and Forest Park Forever, of course.

BT: Oh, yes, and they just turned Forest Park around, didn't they?

Mary Lou Hess: Oh, incredible, right.

BT: Is there anything you want to say that I haven't gone over yet?

Mary Lou Hess: I don't think so. It's been a good ride and I'm still enjoying life.

BT: And what are you doing now?

Mary Lou Hess: Nothing, really, but I'm enjoying it. That's not true. I'm not doing much as far as volunteer work or anything. When you get to be over 90, you kind of forget about it but I stay active with a group in my apartment building. We get together. We were together last night to watch the ballgame and I have a friend that I go out with and I enjoy that and...

BT: Well, you have your daughter here and your sister.

Mary Lou Hess: No, no, she's not here, in Chicago.

BT: Oh, she's in Chicago.

Mary Lou Hess: Mm-hmm.

BT: Your sister's here?

Mary Lou Hess: No, she died. No, I don't have family.

BT: So it's friends; friends are your family.

Mary Lou Hess: Mm-hmm.

BT: But you're used to friends?

Mary Lou Hess: Right. Thank God for friends.

BT: Thank God for friends. Well, thank you very much. It was wonderful to talk to you and you were really the leading woman with Ruth and maybe a couple of others that led the way in the advertising business, which I'm sure...

Mary Lou Hess: Well, it was great fun and you kind of made it up as you went along but anyhow, thank you for having me.

BT: Thank you.