

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

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FRANCES LEVINE INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself?

Frances Levine: I'm Dr. Frances Levine, I'm the president of the Missouri Historical Society and the Missouri History Museum here in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your early life: where you were born; your parents; your siblings; your friends; your grandparents. Who really said to you, "Frances, you really have a special ability and you should consider going on to school and doing what you want to do," and then talk about your elementary and secondary school. Was there a teacher that said, "Frances, you're really special" or something that made you realize that you could do things that you didn't realize you could do, and just talk about your growing up and your elementary and secondary school and your family situation.

Frances Levine: I was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut and I lived there until I was 12 years old. I was one of three children. My oldest sister, Adele, was about 11 years older. My brother, Philip, is about 4 years older and we grew up in a neighborhood on Bronx Avenue in Bridgeport, Connecticut that was just a neighborhood of lovely families and when you ask about my family, we walked to school every day from Bronx Avenue to Madison School and when we walked, we would walk by the house of my aunts and my grandparents lived right across the street from the school and so my grandfather would be out on the porch every morning when we walked to school and every afternoon when we came home. He'd be on the porch and we'd stop and see him, and the candy store was right next to my grandparents' house so sometimes my grandfather would give us pennies and we would go in and get candy. But we knew people all along the way. It was like walking through a village, although it certainly was not a village. We played outside it seemed from the moment we were dressed and fed until suppertime and I only remember parents in our

lives when we were going either on a bus or in the car to go to the beach but for the most part, it was this big pack of kids, and we had swing sets and bikes and sandboxes and my brother and I had a big apple tree where we played. Under that apple tree, we had a big excavation where we decided that we were digging our way to China and I remember, when we got to the clay level in the soil, and it was kind of yellow and we thought we were almost there, in China, and then my father filled it in because he was afraid it would collapse on us. We also had many, many cousins. My father was one of eight children, seven of whom survived and so I grew up with about 13 first cousins and more second cousins and cousins once removed that I could count. So, it was in this environment of friends and family all mixed together. My parents were very interested in antiques and in history and so I remember my mother and I and my brother would walk to the library at least once a week, sometimes we'd take the bus, and they always took us to museums. Sometime when I was small, Disneyland opened and I remember saying to my mother, "Could we go to Disneyland?" and she said, "No, Dear, that's not for people like us," and I never knew exactly what that meant but I did know that I spent my life in libraries and museums. Some of my earliest memories are being in museums. I remember seeing an exhibit about the Missing Link at the American Museum of Natural History in New York and I was really tiny and I remember saying to my dad, "Who came first, Adam and Eve or the cavemen?" and my dad said, "Adam and Eve were cavemen," so that settled it for me. Then I thought I understood the sequence of history. Then I remember visiting the Mapparium at the Mary Baker Eddy Library in Boston and being in this big glass, beautiful glass domed room. It was a map of the world with a bridge in it and thinking, I want to work in a place like this. So I decided I would...you know, after my experience, I would probably be an art historian and there was not much discussion about "what do you want to be when you grow up?" I think one of the things I really loved about my parents is that when you were a child, you go to be a child. You didn't have to answer the question of, "what do you want to be when you grow up?" However, when I was about eight, one of my aunts got her PhD and I remember thinking, there was such a big deal about that in the family that I said, "I'm going to get a PhD," and I remember my brother's headmaster at his school saying, "What would you get your PhD in?" and I said, "I don't think that really matters," because I really didn't know what a PhD was but I had to have an answer.

We grew up with very, very creative people in our family. My maternal grandmother was a designer and dress maker; my great uncle was a tinsmith and folk artist. So there was always somebody making something, doing something with their hands. My mother was a beautiful seamstress. My father had been a baker early in his life, like his father. My paternal grandfather was a baker. By the time I was a child, he had already retired but he and my grandmother were always cooking and making things. Their home was where we all gathered until they got too elderly and then we would move that over to other aunts and uncles. So I grew up in this very creative, loving family, although I would say, my mother's family were the artists and my father's family were the thinkers and those two families didn't always see things in the same way but it was that creative energy that I think went into who I became, was the idea that you made things, you do things. I remember, we moved when I was 12 to Fairfield, Connecticut, to a really beautiful home and what I remember most about that move was how much my parents did themselves to make that home a home: how much carpentry my dad did; how much sewing my mother did, the curtains and the wallpaper and all of that. Everything was just so beautifully put together. It was a lovely home and I transferred schools and I made friends with women...they were girls then...in the 7th grade and we're still friends. So that move, I think, was very pivotal. My parents wanted us to be in better schools. Bridgeport, at that time, didn't have great schools so I went to Andrew Ward High School in Fairfield, Connecticut and my brother was a senior when I was a freshman so we had one year together and we still had a lot of common friends and we ran with a huge pack of kids. It's interesting how many of us are still very connected, very loving, close friends. I think I had three teachers at Andrew Ward who really helped me understand my own interests and one was a history teacher named Mr. Bradley and Mr. Bradley and I had terrific rows about the interpretation of history and it was really the only time I was ever suspended from school, was for having too strong an opinion and expressing it too strongly to Mr. Bradley, about an interpretation of African American history. I remember that and talking about the importance of women in the family in African American history and I felt like some of the issues were because African American families had been discriminated against and I was very, very vocal about that. This was the mid 1960's, during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.

Blanche Touhill: And what was his position?

Frances Levine: His position was that there were so many broken families and I looked for more root causes and so I didn't think his analysis went deep enough and I remember just mouthing off in a way that he didn't like and so I was sent home to think about the error of my ways.

Blanche Touhill: And did you come back repentant?

Frances Levine: I don't remember ever repenting. I just remember coming back. I think my mother interceded and made me apologize.

Blanche Touhill: But you were apologizing, not for the content; you were apologizing for...

Frances Levine: Maybe for my demeanor.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, for raising your voice or something.

Frances Levine: I think I might have said something rude.

Blanche Touhill: I see.

Frances Levine: I'm sure I said something rude. And so I became very, very interested in...it's interesting, now that I look at it, in museums and libraries as teaching places, places where you could find out information.

Blanche Touhill: And that was early.

Frances Levine: Very early.

Blanche Touhill: That was early because museums were sort of, they showed things and they had little labels but it didn't mean that the one item related to the other.

Frances Levine: Right, and I had come up with sort of a different idea but I didn't really know...I mean, I remember, one of my college essays, my college entry essay for my undergraduate was about Dr. Spock because Dr. Spock had been so much a part of our mother's training of how to be good parents and then he was very supportive of anti-war protests and I remember hearing him speak and thinking he not only helped to set our mother's generation; he was there to support us in our protest against the war and our protest of civil rights discrimination. So I wrote about Dr. Spock as an undergraduate and then when I went to graduate school, I wrote about

wanting to create a museum about race relations, and those were sort of, I think, pretty continual themes in my life, what was important about people of many cultures coming together and understanding each other.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have a sensitivity to women's rights at that time?

Frances Levine: You know, not until a little bit later, really not until graduate school. When I was an undergraduate...so I went to college...I want to talk about one other teacher...I had one other teacher, Fred Thorn, who really encouraged my over developed sense of my right to speak and Fred Thorn really supported all of us who were very, very outspoken and we used dramatics and stage to do a lot of that and he was the drama teacher and he was terrific about that. Then the teacher who made the greatest impact on me and my brother was a man named Paul Toff and Paul was our art teacher and my brother and I were in the same art class in high school. My brother is tremendously talented as an artist; I'm not, but Paul really encouraged me to find that part of me that was artistic and expressive because I used to watch my brother draw and my brother would, right from the time I was really little, anything I wanted, my brother would draw for me or he would create. He would take a box and turn it into a house or a jeep or something. So Paul really got me to think about my own creative expression. Well, in high school, my mother wanted me to be a nurse and I had been a candy striper all through high school. My mother wanted me to be a nurse and Paul...I had graduated from high school. I was supposed to go to Children's Hospital School of Nursing in Boston. My parents, right after my high school graduation, went on vacation and left me and my brother and Paul and his girlfriend had me over to dinner and Paul said, "I think going to nursing school is a terrible thing for you. I think you need to go to college. You love art; you love history. You need to go study art history," and my grandmother, my paternal grandmother, Anna, had said the same thing to me. I'm going to cry.

Blanche Touhill: That's all right. We can pause.

Frances Levine: And my last year of high school, as my mother pushed me harder and harder to go to nursing school, my grandmother, Anna, who is my father's mother, kept pulling me out of that and kept saying, "Don't do this. Go to college. Don't go to nursing school. Nursing school is a dead end. I want you to go to college. You're too smart to be a nurse," and so,

between my art teacher, Paul Toff, and my grandmother, I remember just an evening when I said, I can't do this; I can't do what my mother wants me to do. I have to go study art history; I have to do it. And I think one of my uncles and my art teacher helped me go see a guidance counselor at college and it was the middle of summer before I was supposed to go to nursing and I wrote to the nursing school and gave back my scholarship and said, "I'm not attending," and so my guidance counselor said, "It's weeks away from college," and I said, "We'll find a place. Let's just work on this," and so we found a little experimental college in Maine called the New Division of Nasson College and it was really a hippie commune connected to a college. So I went. My mother was furious with me, absolutely furious.

Blanche Touhill: And did she pay, did your mother and father pay the tuition?

Frances Levine: Oh, yes. You know what? My father was so happy, so supportive, always, that I was able to express myself, you know, scared about what had I just given up, but my mother stayed mad for quite a while and my father just said, "Let's move on. Let's see where this goes," and in my first year of college, I really didn't have access to an art history program but there's an anthropology class and it also had an archeology component and I was transported. I started taking part in doing archeology and then fell in love with an archeologist and so my development as an anthropologist and historian came through that way. So I went to school in Maine for a year and then my father came to visit me and said, "This is not a good enough school. You need to go to a school that really has a specialty in American archeology," and so he said, "I think you should go to Arizona, New Mexico or Colorado." He said, "The Southwest has the best archeology in the country. You need to get away from your friends who are here on the East Coast. You need to get away from the tension with your mother so I want you to think of one of those schools." So I ended up being accepted at all three but I had an aunt who lived in Albuquerque and I didn't want to be too close to family. I wanted to be on my own and independent. So I went to the University of Colorado in Boulder. Yeah, it's funny that I can't remember the year my grandmother died. I can't remember all the years of this, but it was all right around the same time. It was very formative but I remember that support and that almost physical sensation of my grandmother and my dad and Paul Toff supporting me and putting wings on me to go do what I wanted to do. So I went to the

University of Colorado and I was still torn between art history, history and anthropology because I loved it all. My first day on campus, I remember going to the history department. Now, you have to remember, this is the late '60s and I went on campus and I'm wearing a mini skirt that just barely...you know, right now, I couldn't even use it as a sleeve but I was wearing this little mini skirt and I went over to the history department and I remember being treated dismissively, very dismissively, as though I were nothing. No one there had that much time. It was all men in white shirts and ties, very formal and I thought, you know, I don't need this, and I went over to the archeology department and was greeted warmly and offered a position to work on restoring pottery from Mesa Verde National Park and to work in the restoration lab and so, of course, I took it, jumped at it. Then I tried to go register for the introductory Southwestern Archeology class and it was full and the instructor said, "You can see if anybody drops in the first week," so I went to class every single day that it met and finally the second week, he said, "You're not going to go away, are you?" and that was Robert Lister, Dr. Lister, and Dr. Lister said, "You're not going to go away, are you?" and I said, "No," and he said, "Why?" and I said, "Because I'm going to be an archeologist," and he laughed and he said, "Okay," and he signed and let me come into his class.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have a chair or did you have to sit on the floor?

Frances Levine: No, there was always a chair, but he kept thinking that I would not want to go and I remember going to his office and he was so grumpy. He was so grumpy. I have to tell you that later in life, I worked for him and he was probably one of the best bosses I ever had.

Blanche Touhill: Was he grumpy then?

Frances Levine: As a boss, no. As a boss, he was fabulous but he was coming to the end of his teaching career and his wife, Florence, who I still adore...and you look a little bit like Florence...Florence ran the archeological labs and they were like the generals in charge of everything. Well, I started studying in archeology and it was still that same feeling of having wings and just being so satisfied by what I was learning and at the same time, I was taking an art history class and I struggled; I struggled so much in art history because I kept asking about the way people lived. I didn't want to just study cave paintings; I didn't want to know about the line and the

paint; I wanted to know about the people. Finally, my art history professor, Dr. Ellidef, said, "Give in, study archeology. You're going to be so much happier. It's going to answer the kinds of questions that you're always asking." So that was just it.

Blanche Touhill: Liberating.

Frances Levine: It was totally liberating. I completely channeled everything into archeology and geology and I had a wonderful undergraduate experience but it was very...I had to learn so much, I remember that. I had to learn about the Western United States because I had been raised in New England. I had to learn about the tools of archeology. I had to learn to camp. I had never camped in my life. When we traveled, we stayed with relatives or in a hotel. So I learned so much and then I did my first field season doing archeology in Mesa Verde.

Blanche Touhill: And that confirmed it?

Frances Levine: Oh, absolutely. Actually, my very, very first experience in archeology...that's not right...my very first dig was in upstate New York, working on an Iroquois long house and I was working for an archeologist named Dr. Marion White and she was a Niagara Frontier, so it was the Iroquois and it was a period of time of Iroquois/British/French interaction and Marion White took a real interest in me because I was so young. I was the youngest person in the field school.

Blanche Touhill: Well, were there many women faculty?

Frances Levine: You know, in archeology there was always a core...a small group but a core group of women. So the first person I worked for in archeology was Dr. White and I was only about 17 and she was worried about me with all these older people so she would always keep me near her and if everyone was going out drinking, she would make sure that I had something else that I was doing. She was very protective and I would drive out to the site in the morning in her vehicle with the other people and she gave me interesting things to do and I remember that first day that I found...I was digging in a trash mound and I found this pipe that had been discarded and it just took my breath away and I realized, oh, you could learn so much. It was just a wonderful experience. Then my next field season was at Mesa Verde in Chimney Rock in Southern Colorado and by then, I also was the assistant to an archeologist named

Frank Eddy who was working at Chimney Rock and he was a very meticulous archeologist...and people make jokes in archeology because he put me in a room where I was excavating this room and it was called piece-plotting, very meticulous, detailed mapping of every single stone, every single artifact in this room, excavated in a particular way so you could see how the room fell in and it was one of the first times that that technique had been used, but everyone says I spent my entire summer in Room 8 of Chimney Rock Ruin, piece-plotting everything. But it was fabulous and, between Dr. Dave Bretternetz and his wife, Barbara Bretternetz and Frank Eddy, Dr. Eddy, they were very, very supportive and, in the meantime, Dr. Lister, who had been so nasty, retired from teaching and went to work at the National Park Service and ran a huge Southwestern Archeology Study Center for the National Park Service.

Blanche Touhill: And where was that?

Frances Levine: In Santa Fe, New Mexico. I finished at the University of Colorado. I worked in the University of Colorado Museum for Dr. Joe Ben Wheat and Joe Ben was just one of the most marvelous mentors and I did a special project, cataloguing and analyzing basketry and loved it. I had wonderful one-on-one mentors so Dr. Bretternetz and Dr. Eddy really mentored me about being an archeologist and developing my ideas and Dr. Wheat taught me so much about museum technique and I was taking museum classes and archeology classes all at the same time at Colorado.

Blanche Touhill: Were you getting a graduate degree in Museum Studies?

Frances Levine: No, this was undergraduate.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, this was undergraduate still, so your undergraduate was very enriching?

Frances Levine: And it was wonderful for me and wonderful field work opportunities and I developed a real sense of professionalism and I learned how to write and part of it was the program I was in. Now, there were quite a few women in it. This was the mid 1970's.

Blanche Touhill: Did they stay in the field, do you know?

Frances Levine: A lot of them did, yes, and a lot of us are still...

Blanche Touhill: And did they stay in the Southwest, that kind of Southwestern...or Indian kind of...

Frances Levine: Most of them did but I also had another sort of force in my life and that was my mother's first cousin, had moved to Mexico in the 1930's and she and her husband were major museum founders and directors. He was the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico City and the founding director. So, throughout my life, Susanna and Fernando were always sending us catalogues and letters about where they were, traveling with exhibitions. So museums and archeology were always together in my life and Susanna and Fernando really showed me that there was a career out there and they did museum exhibitions all over the world. So they would fly through New York and we would meet them and I would hear that they were on their way to Paris or they were going to Brussels or they were going to Moscow. It was just this very exciting time and their letters were always full of information and reports about traveling exhibits and the interesting work they were doing. So I was very interested in Mexico and also speaking Spanish and that's something, really, that my mother did, was fostered my love of Spanish. So I was learning Spanish; I was thinking about doing archeology in Mexico, but I had so much support to stay in the Southwest that I stayed there. Then I took another class from Dr. Lister before he retired and it was the Archeology of Mexico and it was a terrible class; it was just awful; it was awful. It was his last semester teaching and he just was a terrible teacher. So I stayed with Southwestern archeology and then decided to go to graduate school and applied to various programs. I was interested in so many different topics in archeology but at that time, I thought I wanted to do something called Paleoindian archeology which were the earliest archeological sites in the Southwest and I moved to Dallas and went to Southern Methodist University and I went there...

Blanche Touhill: Was that for a Master's or for a PhD?

Frances Levine: That was for a PhD. It was a program where you completed a certain number of courses and exams and got a Master's and then you went on and wrote a doctoral dissertation so you didn't have to write a Master's thesis, which really appealed to me. I wanted to just get...

Blanche Touhill: Get down to it.

- Frances Levine: I wanted to get down to it. I wanted the PhD.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, by that time, had your mother seen that you were in the right field?
- Frances Levine: That came in a very interesting way.
- Blanche Touhill: Did I get ahead of the story?
- Frances Levine: Only slightly. So I moved to Dallas and started going to Southern Methodist University and my parents came out to visit me, I think my first or second year in the field; I don't remember. I think it was the second year, and my mother came and my parents went out to where I was digging, out on the Pecos River and I still remember my mother in her turquoise pantsuit and a sun hat, climbing this Mesa with my dad helping her and when she got to the top, she looked out and she saw this beautiful view of the river and she said, "You know, I get it; I get it, I really do. I understand why you want to do this." By then, I was in a PhD program and she was very happy about it. She was just nervous. It was so different. For her generation, she thought a nurse or a teacher were the only professions...
- Blanche Touhill: You could make a living.
- Frances Levine: Yeah, and my dad just kept saying to me, "If you want to do archeology, be the best; be the best. Do everything you can to be the best archeologist. If you want to work in a museum, combine it with your archeology but do what you love and you will always be happy." Then I traveled to Mexico to meet my family there and Susanna had a huge impact on me. Here was a woman who had become so thoroughly Mexican in her sensibilities and her understanding and she was just a wonderful, wonderful mentor and influence to me. So, I finished my PhD and then I moved to Santa Fe to work at the Southwestern Archeological Center that Dr. Lister had founded.
- Blanche Touhill: For the National Park Service?
- Frances Levine: For the National Park Service and Dr. Lister hired me and, of course, remembered me because I had fought my way into his classes before and he was a tremendously wonderful mentor as a teacher. He and Cal Cummings, who was the director of the center after Dr. Lister, and they really taught me to be a professional manager of cultural resources and

to work within a bureaucracy and how to keep my head in a bureaucracy, how to keep my vision and it was literally another form of graduate school, working with them. And I worked in a program that was called the Indian Assistance Program. We did environmental and archeological compliance with national preservation laws on projects on the Navajo and Hopi reservations. So I made sure that the archeologists who were doing the work were following the law and filing the right reports, giving back to the tribes they were working in, and I did that for three years and then I moved over to the Bureau of Land Management in Santa Fe and did the same work for them, running archeological projects and managing other people's projects and doing renovation and restoration of historic buildings on BLM land. Then I decided to have children. I got married in the meantime.

Blanche Touhill: Now, did you marry an archeologist?

Frances Levine: My husband was the New Mexico Historic Preservation officer so we married in Santa Fe and he did that work for 25 years and then retired from the state and started his own business but I stayed in working for the BLM and the Park Service for a while and then I stopped when we had children. We have two children, so we have a son named Steve who lives in New Orleans and he's 32 now and we have a daughter, Anna, who is a staff writer for the Village Voice and she lives in New York and she just turned 28 and they're great kids. They're very evolved and socially active. They had a very good life growing up in Santa Fe. Then, when the children were small, I was doing consulting work so I was writing national register nominations and doing small projects for the National Park Service, mostly writing, and then I started teaching archeology and history.

Blanche Touhill: Where were you teaching?

Frances Levine: I was teaching at Santa Fe Community College in Santa Fe and I got to be a dean; I got to be the dean of Arts & Sciences and I realized that I didn't want to be an administrator in that way and I think it was a meeting with the math faculty. Somebody said to me when I became a dean, "The art faculty is going to drive you nuts." Well, I loved the art faculty, loved it and worked with the art faculty to build a fine arts center in Santa Fe. It was about almost 60,000 square feet and I loved it. I loved the building of the art center. I loved staffing it and...

Blanche Touhill: That's quite a building.

Frances Levine: And creating the curriculum programs and I loved all of it once I got into it.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have a theater in the building?

Frances Levine: No, that got...

Blanche Touhill: It was really an academic...

Frances Levine: It was really fine arts. It wasn't performing arts. It was supposed to be fine and performing arts and then we didn't have enough money so we didn't do the performing arts but we did the fine arts.

Blanche Touhill: But it ended up with 60,000 square feet?

Frances Levine: Uh-huh.

Blanche Touhill: That's a coup.

Frances Levine: And I loved doing it and I found that I liked that, but then, after I finished that project, I said, there's got to be more; I want to do something else, and I had been teaching archeology and history and using the Palace of the Governors, the New Mexico History Museum as one of the sites that we studied and so I was doing write-ups on reports from excavations that had taken place there and analyzing artifacts. Well, the director of the Palace left and I heard it on the radio one night and I drove directly over to my best friend's house and said, "I found my next job. I want to be the new director of that museum," and her husband said, "Okay. Well, I'll coach you." He was an employment coach and so he helped me put together my resume and talk about why I would give up being a dean to go become a museum director and I was hired and one of the things I was hired to do was to build the New Mexico History Museum. So I started in August of 2002 and nothing had been done when I got there except they had raised about half the money.

Blanche Touhill: You got the job and your job was to build a new museum?

Frances Levine: My job was to build the New Mexico History Museum behind the Palace of the Governors, which was a national historic landmark, adjacent to the Santa Fe Plaza which was a national historic landmark, in the middle of

the downtown historic district in Santa Fe where there was seven feet of archeology underneath on the building site.

Blanche Touhill: On the building site?

Frances Levine: I did not run the archeological project. A wonderful archeologist named Steve Post did the archeology and then I helped to complete the building plans and revise the building plans and ultimately, in 2009, we opened the New Mexico History Museum which was 96,000 square feet with no serious cost overruns or delays, you know, little things here and there and it won every award you can imagine in its first couple years. I loved it. I loved the development of it; I loved the...I did international exhibits. I started working quite a bit with Spain and Mexico on exhibits and when I started working in Mexico is when I found...I had never really talked about Susanna and Fernando and it happened in a very strange way, that someone I was working with on a project, I went to her office and there was a picture of Fernando on her wall and I said, "Why do you have the picture of Fernando Gimble" and she said, "He was my boss. He was my mentor." She said, "How did you know him?" and I said, "Well, he was my uncle," and that started a whole bunch of things in Mexico connecting me there. Then I worked bringing exhibitions from Spain to New Mexico and New Orleans.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go to Spain to do that?

Frances Levine: Yes, I was in Mexico, like, four times a year and Spain at least every other year.

Blanche Touhill: And who did you work with in Spain?

Frances Levine: I worked with the (Archival Hernanalde Indias in Seville and also with the Spanish Ministry of Culture in Madrid.

Blanche Touhill: And did they welcome you?

Frances Levine: Very much, and we brought an exhibit that had been done in Spain to New Mexico and also to the Historic New Orleans collection and to El Paso and that won an enormous award from the American Association of State and Local History.

Blanche Touhill: And what was the name of that exhibit?

Frances Levine: El Hilo de la Memoria meaning the Thread of Memory and those were the documents of first contact between Spain and North America so they were letters, drawings, maps, charts that showed Spanish exploration of La Florida, the Gulf Coast, the Northern Mexico and California.

Blanche Touhill: Now, when you were doing this, were you doing this at the same time you were putting up the building? Were you preparing for that exhibit when you were putting up the building?

Frances Levine: You know, when we were putting up the building, I was working on about 10,000 square of exhibits and this was an exhibit...the building opened in 2009 and this exhibit came in 2010, so, yes, it was happening at the same time.

Blanche Touhill: Because it takes a long time to put those together.

Frances Levine: Very long time.

Blanche Touhill: Then, may I ask, how did you get the money to put up the building and then to get the money to bring in the programmatic part of it?

Frances Levine: That's what museum directors do and so, to build the building, we had about 14.7 million dollars from the National Park Service which we matched with about 19 million dollars of state funding and then I had to raise 7½ million dollars for the exhibitions and that was done with a group of volunteers and a foundation. We just worked tirelessly. I mean, it was exhilarating and scary all at the same time.

Blanche Touhill: Did you bring people in to a circle then that had never been involved?

Frances Levine: Oh, absolutely.

Blanche Touhill: And how did you get them in?

Frances Levine: You know, part of it was persuading, talking, sharing a vision, is what I called it. It wasn't selling; it was sharing, it was sharing this vision of what a history museum could be and it was then that I remembered my college essay, my entrance essay because what I was really doing was creating the story of people of many cultures coming together in this place to create New Mexico.

Blanche Touhill: Were your exhibits more interactive?

Frances Levine: Oh, yes, they were wonderful. I mean, the Palace of the Governors had gotten very dated...

Blanche Touhill: I've been in the Palace of the Governors...

Frances Levine: And it got very, very dated.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, it was a beautiful building.

Frances Levine: Gorgeous building but that was the other thing we were doing, renovations of that building and creating a...

Blanche Touhill: At the same time?

Frances Levine: At the same time, and then I was trying to make sure the articulation of the two buildings, the new and the old, was sympathetic, was simpatico so that you didn't come out of the Palace and say, "Oh, look at that horrible thing behind it." And we won major architectural awards for urban infill from the American Institute of Architects, I think. We won historic preservation awards for the way we articulated the buildings. So it was like juggling. It was always juggling and I worked with a tremendous group of women and men, but a lot of women, raising the 7½ million for the exhibits. That's where I had some of my greatest mentors and my greatest success, were women who had been in the community a while. I remember our first meeting and Eileen Wells, one of my great mentors, said to me, "What are you going to do if we don't raise the money?" and I said, "Shadow puppets," and she didn't laugh. She was ready to kill me. She thought it was such an awful, sarcastic remark and now Eileen is, like...I sat down and wrote her an apology and I said, "I really don't know what we're going to do but I know that what we have to work with are compelling stories, important artifacts about people of many cultures coming together," and she and a consultant we used, helped us shape the strategy and it was many, many, many people, volunteers in the community who raised that 7½ million dollars and then another woman named Cheri Davis, who had been in St. Louis and then she was in Minneapolis and when they retired, they came to Santa Fe and she became the chair of my development team. She taught me so much about fundraising and, when I think about it, my mother was an amazing fundraiser. That's kind of what she did.

Blanche Touhill: As a volunteer?

Frances Levine: As a volunteer, and I used to be mortified because everywhere we went, my mother was asking for money for something and I remember diving under furniture so I wouldn't have to hear her ask again. But the museum opened in 2009, was very, very successful and then I stayed and after El Hilo de la Memoria, I worked on another...I mean, we did 30-some exhibits between 2009 and 2014, when I left the museum.

Blanche Touhill: So you had to continue to get this money?

Frances Levine: Oh, yeah, it was fundraising constantly.

Blanche Touhill: Did you build an endowment?

Frances Levine: We did. When I came in, the endowment was about \$900,000. When I left, it was about 2.3 million with promised gifts but we were at a faze where what we really needed to do was operate. We had to have the operations and we were partly state funded and partly private funded so we got about 3 million dollars a year from the state and then I raised about a million dollars a year and I found that I really loved it but I started thinking about wanting to be at a bigger museum and also to be in a bigger city. My children were grown and gone and I had spent so much time traveling to Europe and to Mexico and I loved being in bigger cities, loved it and I finally realized that I wanted to live that way.

Blanche Touhill: And so how did the Missouri Historical Society find you?

Frances Levine: Through a headhunting firm and I had come to Missouri...my husband and I came here on vacation. I'd been in St. Louis several times. When we were working on the New Mexico History Museum, I came here to the Missouri Historical Society...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, did you?

Frances Levine: ...to talk with Karen Goering and Bob Archibald and the staff here about what they were doing and about how they built so much community support and I think Bob did a tremendous job with that, tremendous. So I came and worked with them a couple of days and Bob gave me a book that he wrote about creating community around museums and museums and civic identity. He really gave me a lot of the words that I had been doing but not having all the right stuff and so I learned a lot of that, and then, I've always said Missouri History Museum was my mentor museum.

We had a lot of the same exhibits, like Jamestown, Quebec and Santa Fe, Women of the West so those exhibits would be in Missouri, here in St. Louis as well as in Santa Fe. And so there was a lot of back and forth. I was there...

Blanche Touhill: Well, and the Opera Theater.

Frances Levine: Oh, yes.

Blanche Touhill: The leadership of the Opera Theater was connected all those years as well.

Frances Levine: You know, there's tremendous connections between the two communities.

Blanche Touhill: They're the Santa Fe Trail.

Frances Levine: Yes, historically it connects; culturally it connects, so I had been here a lot and then my husband and I like to travel for our birthday gifts and one year for his birthday, we came here and we traveled up to Springfield, Illinois to see Lincoln and then we crossed the Mississippi and came down to see all the Mark Twain and by the time we got to the Chase Park in a terrific rain storm...it rained so hard, I'd never seen anything like it. We went to the bar at the Chase and we sat down and I said to my husband, "I'm ready to leave New Mexico and I think I could live here."

Blanche Touhill: And did you know that job was going to open?

Frances Levine: No, no.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness! Okay.

Frances Levine: No, we were just here on vacation and I said, "There's something about St. Louis that I just really like" and he said, "Really? Huh!" and then he drank his martini and we continued on our vacation. Then when I was contacted about this job...I shouldn't say this but I didn't even tell my husband that I applied because I didn't know it would go anywhere. I said, well, we'll see. I've always liked St. Louis, and then I was getting more and more serious about leaving New Mexico so I had been applying for jobs and I had been thinking about what I wanted to do next: did I want to go back to teaching; did I want to join the Peace Corps; did I want to join the circus, you know, and I did what all people do in Santa Fe, I

went to India for a month to pray and meditate about it and when I was in India, I got an e-mail asking if I could come here for an interview and I said, it will be the day after I get back from India and so I did. So I came here for my first interview in November, utterly jetlagged.

Blanche Touhill: Did you stop in Santa Fe or did you...

Frances Levine: I stopped in Santa Fe to unload the suitcase, to just grab a suit and get on the plane and I never told my husband.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, he didn't know at that time?

Frances Levine: No. So I came for the interview and then at the end of that interview, they asked if I'd come back, like, in two weeks and I came back for that interview and I still hadn't told him and then when they called about a third interview, I said, I guess I'd better tell him.

Blanche Touhill: So how did he take it?

Frances Levine: Well, he was stunned. He was absolutely stunned but he came over here with me and it was during the Polar Vortex this winter and he came and he went to see the Arch and he came back from his day in St. Louis and he said, "You know, I completely get this. I understand why you want to do this." Once my husband visited St. Louis, he got it; he understood it and he went to the Art Museum while I was in my interview and he kept talking excitedly about the Art Museum and it's what we do. It's where we've traveled. It's how we've lived...

Blanche Touhill: And there's wonderful music in St. Louis and there's theater, there's sports...

Frances Levine: You know, my husband is very interested in historic preservation and historic architecture...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, St. Louis has a lot of that.

Frances Levine: Yeah. I mean, sports, he...

Blanche Touhill: That's not his...

Frances Levine: It's not his thing but he loves the architecture. So when I accepted the job, then we came over to look for a place to live and we had certain requirements: it had to be a historic neighborhood. He would have liked a

house. I didn't want to take care of a house and we've kept our home in Santa Fe because we live on family land there. So now, when people ask him where he's from, he says, "We're from St. Louis and Santa Fe," and we love that. We love having the best of both ends of the trail.

Blanche Touhill: Well, and your children can use your Santa Fe property too.

Frances Levine: Our children have also come to visit in St. Louis and they loved it. So we're all very happy with having a foot in each world and a house at each end of the trail.

Blanche Touhill: So where did you settle here?

Frances Levine: We're living in DeMun and it's a very sweet, very lovely scaled little part of town and we found a beautiful condo so we're very happy.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, and there's a nice place to walk to the coffee bars and...

Frances Levine: And I can walk to work at the museum. I'm a big walker.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, you can walk, that's right.

Frances Levine: Yes, it's a mile-and-a-half from the museum so I do walk once in a while and it's lovely.

Blanche Touhill: Let me change the subject for just a minute because I always ask two questions here...several questions anyway: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life have been like?

Frances Levine: You know, I think if I had been born 50 years earlier, I might have been a teacher like my mother wanted me to be. Maybe I would have been a nurse but I don't think I would have been a good one. I think I could have been a teacher and been more of a home person, volunteer. I probably would have been a museum volunteer or docent.

Blanche Touhill: What level would you have taught?

Frances Levine: Maybe high school history.

Blanche Touhill: And have you any award or awards that you really treasure?

Frances Levine: Oh, goodness, there have been a lot of them. I think the award from the American Association for State and Local History for El Hilo de la Memoria. We won a National Leadership Award. You know, there have

been many awards and much recognition for the work I've done in museums and I'm proud of it but I'm proud of it also for the teams that I've put together to win those awards. When you're in a museum position, when you're a museum director, if you're a good director, you're a good choreographer and it's about team work and that's what I'm proud of, is the way I build teams and then use those teams' best efforts to win awards for the museums.

Blanche Touhill: Would you say, in a broader definition of awards, that the building and the international exhibits that you've been able to bring, that's an award too, isn't it?

Frances Levine: Absolutely. I mean, when I go back to Santa Fe...people were stunned when I left Santa Fe, absolutely stunned. I called Cheri Davis who was the head of my development committee and she started to cry and she said, "I can't believe you're going to do this but I know you have to; I know you have to. I know you have to grow." When I told the staff in New Mexico, it was a groan, just a groan. It was like, "How could you do this?" and I said, "Because I have to grow and you have to grow and I've done everything I can in this museum and you are going to take it to the next place and I have to go to my next place." But when I go back, there's this fabulous museum and fabulous building and the last exhibit I did there was called Cowboys, Real and Imagined, and it has already won a National Leadership Award from the American Association for State and Local History that they'll get in the fall.

Blanche Touhill: Why is the cowboy so important in being a symbol of America's history?

Frances Levine: Your question is, why is the cowboy such an important symbol and that was really what we explored in this exhibit because there's the real cowboy, the cowboy who was living a very, sometimes rough life and then the cowboy as image of America and it's the way in which the cowboy was transformed, really by Theodore Roosevelt, into this mythic figure and the Remington's and the Russell's, the artwork that made the cowboy that symbol. I think it's an enduring symbol, it's about the individualism, about rugged individualism. It's about the tie between people and place and land. So I think that that's why it's so enduring and what we did in this exhibit, Cowboys, Real and Imagined, was really look at the cowboy in all of its facets and the cowboys of color and the

cowboys of different ethnic and racial groups and kind of broke apart the myth of the Marlboro Man.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Is there anything you've forgotten?

Frances Levine: No, just that I'm so new to St. Louis. I'm honored to have been asked to speak.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I'd like to ask you the question: What are your plans for MOHIS? What are the plans for your new job?

Frances Levine: I think my plans with the Missouri History Museum is to really build on the excellence that's been the base of this museum. Sometimes a museum, even its own community, its national stature is not that well known. There's work to do behind the scenes at the Missouri History Museum to really focus our collections on collecting the important history of the 20th century and the 21st century, so there's really important work to do there. There's work to do with communities of color and different ethnic communities, different immigrant communities, to make them feel at home and to see their stories reflected in the museum. That's one thing I'd like to do and I really want us to be a partner in life-long education and appreciation of this region, of the architecture, of the natural resources. So I think it's using excellent bully pulpit of the history museum to celebrate this region.

Blanche Touhill: Thank you very much.

Frances Levine: Thank you.