

An Interview with
Irene Cortinovis

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
Research Center, St. Louis, Missouri

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interviewed by Dr. Blanche M. Touhill
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Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 21

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PREFACE

The interview was taped on a placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets []. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [""] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Josephine Sporleder.

THE STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

WOMEN AS CHANGE AGENTS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NOVEMBER 12, 2014

IRENE CORTINOVIS INTERVIEWED BY DR. BLANCHE M. TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself?

Irene Cortinovis: I'm Irene Cortinovis and I was born in St. Louis but I lived in the North County near UMSL almost all my life until I moved to Clayton where we downsized into a condo.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your early life: your parents; your cousins; your grandparents; how did you play with kids in the neighborhood; your elementary school; your secondary school. Did somebody in your family say, "Irene, you really have ability and you should think about what you want to do with your life," and then, in school, was there a teacher or somebody who was outside the home who said, "Irene, I think you have ability and you could do this" or "you should put your eyes on the stars," or something like that?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, as I said, I was born in St. Louis but I lived most of my life in Ferguson. I attended parochial school. At that time it was St. John and St. James but it is now, I think, Blessed Teresa of Calcutta, and I lived on a one little block street which there were 32 children and right next-door to us was a family of nine and right next-door to that was my aunt and uncle who had a family of six. So, if a kid on our street went out the door, why, there was always somebody to play with. After I got a little older, there was always somebody to go to the movies with or something like that. As I grew up, my mother was quite an invalid and so my Aunt Margaret who was the mother of the six, was sort of a second mother to us. My mother was a childhood diabetic and she died quite early in life. My father died in his 70's but your question about who encouraged me, at the beginning it was my father, who would always urge me on and my mom, on contrary, was somewhat timid and she was inclined to say things like, "Oh, you can't do that" but my dad would encourage me and say, "Of course, you can," like, if I wanted to go to Girl Scout camp or

something like that. So my elementary school was standard Catholic school in the 1920's and '30s and surprisingly, some of it stays with me, especially the rote learning because even at my advanced age, I can still do a number of transactions in my head, things like arithmetic and I can remember when I worked with graduate students and I would do the simplest transaction in my head and they'd say things like, "How do you do that?" Well, that's because rote learning was how you did that, when I went to school. So then, I did go to Ferguson High School and I presume that that was pretty much a standard and it was probably a middle-of-the-road, good to bad, I'm not sure. I had teachers who encouraged me then certainly and suggested to me that I should go to college and when I graduated, I don't really know what my grade point average was but I was a member of the National Honor Society.

Blanche Touhill: Let's go back to your childhood. When you say that you played with the children on the block, were you told not to go off the block or did you go anyplace you wanted to in the neighborhood?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, pretty much because school was just about two blocks away and, of course, I've always been a friendly person and I can remember my mother calling me when I was growing up, something like "Miss Do-Be Friendly" and so I would talk to people in their yards and things like that. I can remember that.

Blanche Touhill: So you knew everybody?

Irene Cortinovis: I did, and of course, I can see now that that was a secure atmosphere and, as I said, my aunt, who was my dad's sister, was kind to me but one sort of negative thing about my childhood was, I did not have a happy home in the sense that my parents agreed. My parents agreed on very little and there was a lot of loud talking and fussing and quarreling. So that made a big difference in my life later because I was determined that was not the kind of home I was going to have.

Blanche Touhill: Did you learn to cook and clean?

Irene Cortinovis: Oh, I did. My mom, as I said, was kind of an invalid growing up so she could do two things, she played the piano and she could sew and I learned to sew on a treadle machine, you know, non-electric, and so she taught us to sew; she taught us to cook, and my sister and I did a lot of the housework as we were growing up in our small house. However, my

mother would play the piano and we would sing while we would clean. So, later on, I got to thinking that was pretty clever of her.

Blanche Touhill: And do you still sing?

Irene Cortinovis: No, but, of course, she played and she played songs that we knew.

Blanche Touhill: What songs did you sing?

Irene Cortinovis: I don't think I remember any particular songs.

Blanche Touhill: Did you sing songs from World War I, because you were young in those days.

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, my father was in World War I. As a matter of fact, he was wounded and received the Purple Heart which my brother's children still have. But that was a very important part of his life and he used to tell us a lot of things about it, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So, when you were in elementary and secondary school, you still knew everybody in the school?

Irene Cortinovis: I did because it was a small school. For example, we had just four classrooms, two grades in each room and, thinking back, I don't think the total enrollment could have been over a hundred so a lot of my neighbors belonged and things like that.

Blanche Touhill: And Ferguson, were you a leader in Ferguson? Did you get elected to offices or did you write?

Irene Cortinovis: No, I didn't.

Blanche Touhill: You mainly studied?

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, I lived at home until I got married, which was really common for people of my generation and as a matter of fact, my husband died about two years ago and this is the first time in my life I've ever lived alone because I didn't go to boarding school or anything like that. Even when I went to college, I only went in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: What major did you have in college?

Irene Cortinovis: Teaching.

Blanche Touhill: Elementary or secondary?

Irene Cortinervis: Well, see, I started at Harris Teacher's College because that was really the only...

Blanche Touhill: ...public institution of higher education.

Irene Cortinervis: Yeah. See, I was born in 1920 so in 1913, when I was...in 1933, at the depth of the Depression, I was a freshman in high school and things were looking up by the time I got out of high school but my father still had two jobs and things like that. So I couldn't afford anything but Harris Teacher's College. I did live in the city and you were supposed to live in the city but my grandmother did and so I used her address and went to the city. But I didn't finish at Harris. Do you want me to tell you about going to college?

Blanche Touhill: Yes.

Irene Cortinervis: Well, because I had gone to Girl Scout camp as a camper and I really loved it so I stayed there when I got in high school and became a junior counselor and then, when I was at Harris, I became a counselor and for the whole summer I got paid \$60 but that was the first money I...

Blanche Touhill: That was the Depression of the '30s as well.

Irene Cortinervis: Right. Oh, absolutely, yeah. It's always easy for me to figure those things because, as I say, I was born in 1920. So, when I was about 19, I received a letter from a friend of mine when I was at camp and she said, "Well, when you get your two-week break at camp..."...because sometime in the middle of the summer, we would have a week off, so she said, "When you come home, I want you to meet somebody because he's a friend of a boy that I'm dating now." So he became my husband later. I think one of the things that I should mention in growing up that has been really important to my life is that I stuttered. My daughter-in-law who is a speech therapist tells me that that's not the right word but what I have is a stammer. I even stammered when I got married and when I had children and was really afraid that they would copy me but, of course, as I know now, that's not how you stutter; it's something in your brain. Into my 30's, it began to go away and finally it went away completely and I did substitute teaching in the Ferguson-Florissant and Hazelwood School

Districts and did fine. Now, in my old age, I'm getting some of it back but not as bad as when I was growing up but I still do stammer sometimes.

Blanche Touhill: When you met your husband, the war hadn't started?

Irene Cortinovis: No, not when I met him but we had planned to be married, which is one of the reasons that I stopped going to Harris when I was a junior. I didn't finish down there because he was about to be drafted and we didn't know what would happen so we wanted to get married. We were very young, we were just 21, both of us.

Blanche Touhill: Had he gone to college?

Irene Cortinovis: No.

Blanche Touhill: So he went off to the service?

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, he had been an amateur radio operator since he was about 10 years old and he was federally licensed so instead of going into the Army, he did a little shopping and went around to the Navy and the Coast Guard and the Air Force. So the Coast Guard, it came about they gave him a rating. That's why he joined the Coast Guard instead of the Navy or something else.

Blanche Touhill: Was he an officer? Is that what you mean by rating?

Irene Cortinovis: No, he was a petty officer.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, but that was a nice rank.

Irene Cortinovis: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: And so he really spent his time in the war doing that?

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, he was in for four years exactly.

Blanche Touhill: And did he get to come home or was he in the States for a couple of years?

Irene Cortinovis: He was in the States but he never went overseas, although some Coast Guard units did go, especially into the Pacific, but no, he was stationed in Ohio for a while but he took his training at the Coast Guard Academy and I went with him because we had just been married and he was up there for nine months. So I got a job at Electric Boat Company which made

submarines and that was very, very interesting and I got to meet a lot of Navy men who would come in and install their secret equipment like their radar and things like that.

Blanche Touhill: Did you go with him to the next post?

Irene Cortinovis: No, I came back to St. Louis and got an apartment out in Normandy. I think it's Lucas and Hunt Village.

Blanche Touhill: But you were able to see him periodically?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, periodically from time to time. He, I guess, mostly worked on the big rivers, the Ohio and the Mississippi.

Blanche Touhill: So he gets out of the war and he comes back and he must have gone to school then.

Irene Cortinovis: Oh, he certainly did. He went to Washington U in engineering and he graduated in 1949 on a GI bill, of course, and by that time, we had been married the four years that he was in school and then I had my first child when I was married for six years. He was born before Bob graduated. He graduated in '49 with an electrical engineering degree and his first job was at McDonnell-Douglas.

Blanche Touhill: So he really had his career at McDonnell-Douglas?

Irene Cortinovis: Oh, he did. It's the only job that he had until he retired. He took an early retirement though and went back to school at Washington U because he had been on both of the space programs and he worked very hard on the proposal for the three-man but they did not get that from the government. That went to Lockheed. So he got another airplane to manage but it was never the same and by that time, Washington U was teaching astrophysics which was really what they were doing on the two space programs but nobody had a degree in that or anything like that then. So he took an early retirement. He was corporate vice president at McDonnell-Douglas. He loved it. He just had so much fun.

Blanche Touhill: Now, he got a Master's. Did he get a Ph.D.?

Irene Cortinovis: No, he didn't because he wouldn't put it together. He never intended to work again and he just took what he wanted. He had to brush up on his math and stuff like that so he had to take some of that stuff over but

nobody could have had more fun. So then when he and I both got interested in life-long learning at Washington U...

Blanche Touhill: Not yet. Let's go back. Then you have these children?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: You have two children, two boys.

Irene Cortinovis: Two children, two boys.

Blanche Touhill: And you continued to live in North County?

Irene Cortinovis: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Then, how did you find UMSL?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, because it was so close. It's just about 10 minutes from my house and so I think I came back in about '65, just two years after the charter. So I had a car of my own. It took me only about 10 minutes to get here.

Blanche Touhill: And were your children grown?

Irene Cortinovis: No, they weren't grown but they were in high school, both of them. Maybe one of them was in college.

Blanche Touhill: But you had time?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, I did. When they were growing up, I, as I said, substitute taught in the school districts because I wanted to be home when they came home. I didn't want a full-time job. So I had these three years and so then I came and talked to people and at that time, they had a program for returning students, especially women.

Blanche Touhill: Was that Margaret Fagan?

Irene Cortinovis: Margaret Fagan.

Blanche Touhill: She was wonderful.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about that program.

Irene Cortinovis: Well, I worked with her...or she worked with me and she arranged for me to take some tests so that I could test out of some things.

Blanche Touhill: Was it the CLEP?

Irene Cortinovis: I don't remember exactly.

Blanche Touhill: Did you get college credit for it?

Irene Cortinovis: I did.

Blanche Touhill: Margaret Fagan was famous for helping women understand CLEP and then they would get college credit.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah. I remember testing out of some English courses, geography...

Blanche Touhill: Now, did they take your transcript from Harris?

Irene Cortinovis: I presume so.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I know that Joy Widener, who was the dean of the evening school, was the champion of that, that we wouldn't have a time limit on courses. When the campus first opened in '63, they had, like, a 10-year window. You had to take the courses...

Irene Cortinovis: Oh, is that right?

Blanche Touhill: And then Joy Widener said he kept meeting these people that had longer than 10 years and that we should be open to accept those credits and the campus did. Now, whether they still do that, I don't know but they did for the first 40 years anyway at the campus. So you were able to bring in your other college experience. You were able to CLEP out of other courses?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So you didn't have much more to take?

Irene Cortinovis: No, but I would just take maybe one or two courses at a time, not a full load and so I graduated in '69...maybe it was '68 and then at that time, they were just putting the history department Master's in so I was having such a good time, I stayed in it and got that.

Blanche Touhill: Were you a graduate student assistant?

Irene Cortinovis: Oh, sure, yeah, and Neil Primm was the chairman of my committee.

Blanche Touhill: What did you write on?

Irene Cortinovis: I did art and music in early St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: Did you ever publish it?

Irene Cortinovis: No, but he thanked me in his book.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, in the Lion in the Valley?

Irene Cortinovis: Right, yeah, Lion in the Valley.

Blanche Touhill: And that really came from your mother's impetus too, wasn't it?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, right.

Blanche Touhill: That she sang the songs.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah. Well, the art turned out to be mostly art collecting and I was pretty amazed with that.

Blanche Touhill: You mean, what museum collected or what people collected?

Irene Cortinovis: People, there was no museum, real early and I'm talking about the French period.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, I understand.

Irene Cortinovis: But by the time the Germans came, they were all very into music, singing societies and things like that.

Blanche Touhill: They were, they were.

Irene Cortinovis: And I have published, yeah, in those fields and, of course, they were behind the symphony.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Who were the big collectors in St. Louis of art? Do you remember anyone?

Irene Cortinovis: No.

Blanche Touhill: Well, the scholars that look at this can look at your thesis because it's probably in the library someplace.

- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, I think it's in the history library, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Or it's at least in microfilm someplace in a computer.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: So, how did your husband think about your going back to school?
- Irene Cortinovis: Oh, he was very encouraging. I think part of my going back to school was the impetus for him going back to school because he saw how much fun I had doing it. Now, when I got my Master's, to my utter surprise, is when they offered me the job, to be the first director of the manuscripts collection and the archivist of the university.
- Blanche Touhill: Who offered you that job? Was it Glen Driscoll or Emory Turner?
- Irene Cortinovis: No, someone had turned it over to Jim Norris, to do.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes, he was a historian.
- Irene Cortinovis: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: A dear friend of Neil Primm.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, and Neil Primm came shortly thereafter. I took some classes from Neil Primm and, of course, I had been a teaching assistant to Norris and a couple of other people.
- Blanche Touhill: Gene Burns, maybe? Not Gene Burns, he was [inaudible 24:51].
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, and Mark...
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, well, Mark Burkholder or Lyle Dorsett or somebody like that.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, right, both of those, yeah...and Shaffer.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, yes. So you were really an American historian?
- Irene Cortinovis: Yes, right.
- Blanche Touhill: And Schaeffer was one of the Americans...Dick Resh.
- Irene Cortinovis: Oh, yes, I had forgotten about him, yeah, right.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, did you start the archives?

- Irene Cortinovis: I was the first director. Jim had been assigned that and I think that he was down to just teaching one course because he had been assigned that. But then he got an exchange program to Ghana for a couple of years, so they turned it over to Dick...
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, Dunlap, Dick Dunlap?
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, Dick Dunlap, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: I didn't know that. How did you know to set up the library?
- Irene Cortinovis: Well, they sent me for some training too, first to the National Archives.
- Blanche Touhill: In D.C.?
- Irene Cortinovis: In D.C., and then the following spring I went to a university in Cleveland...
- Blanche Touhill: Cleveland State?
- Irene Cortinovis: No.
- Blanche Touhill: Or Case Western Reserve?
- Irene Cortinovis: Yes, Case Western and I studied by myself and read a lot and things like that.
- Blanche Touhill: And you looked forward to it?
- Irene Cortinovis: Oh, I did. I first started the women's historical collections because the women's movement was just starting to bubble up.
- Blanche Touhill: What year was that, roughly?
- Irene Cortinovis: That was in '72...'73...'74.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, it was the reauthorization of Title Nine, I think.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, Title Nine, I'll never forget Title Nine because the chancellor then...and I've forgotten which one it was...sent me to Washington U as a representative of UMSL and another person and I went but I don't remember who the other one was. So it was at Washington U and a federal representative was down to explain Title Nine and what coaches and superintendents and everybody had to do, down to high school.
- Blanche Touhill: And this was particularly focused on sports?

- Irene Cortinervis: Oh, yes, and there was more to Title Nine but it was basically about sports.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, but it was also that in '65, with the Civil Rights Act, women became part of a protected class and then in '72, that was enlarged, that you couldn't discriminate against women in jobs.
- Irene Cortinervis: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: And you were active in that later, but go on with your visit to Washington.
- Irene Cortinervis: So I went to this conference at Washington U in the theater there and the coaches were out en masse because every school district in a certain federal district had to send a representative. It was totally hilarious. These people were so outraged that they absolutely made the most astounding statements, that, I think if they thought about it, they would have taken back, things like, "Well, our girls love to have bake sales," or "Our girls don't like those uniforms. They like to wear their own clothes," and stuff like that because at that time, the high schools were buying uniforms for boys but not for girls. The girls had to have bake sales.
- Blanche Touhill: Actually, I can't think who said it to me but during that time, somebody who was a director said to me, "We're going to have a bake sale to buy uniforms for the UMSL girls who are moving from intramurals to intercollegiate." So we were going to do this. We were bringing casseroles to have meetings and discuss and fundraisers. So we were doing the same thing.
- Irene Cortinervis: Yeah, that's totally against Title Nine. If you buy boys' uniforms, you have to buy girls and I don't think anybody would think of doing anything else these days but they did then and the outrage, as I said, was really funny.
- Blanche Touhill: Was it verbal and audible?
- Irene Cortinervis: Oh, verbal, yeah, and it was all in the tone of, "How dare you."
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Were there more men than women?
- Irene Cortinervis: Oh, there were hardly any women.
- Blanche Touhill: You were one of the few?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Did you report that back to...

Irene Cortinovis: Oh, sure.

Blanche Touhill: I think that would have been either Glen Driscoll or Emory Turner.

Irene Cortinovis: I think it was Turner.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, because he's the one...Glen Driscoll paved the way but Turner was the one, I think, who hired Judy Whitney who became the coach for the girls teams, not all the girls teams but she was in charge of starting up this girls program for intercollegiate. Did they talk about scholarships, that you had to give a scholarship?

Irene Cortinovis: I don't remember that.

Blanche Touhill: It was mainly the uniforms and things like that.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah. Well, the whole thing hinged on what you did for boys you had to do for girls.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah. So you came back and you reported and then slowly the campus did change?

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, and then sometime quite early, there was an Affirmative Action...

Blanche Touhill: ...director, for the first time?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And that was Sylvia Lang. Sometimes she was known as Sylvia West but we called her Sylvia Lang.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: I think she had divorced or something and she changed her name. Now, I know there was a women's committee on campus and you were one of the leaders of that?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, I was.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get involved in that?

Irene Cortinovis: I don't know. It was just that I was quite interested in it and we were able to set up a women's center.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, Lucy Lane was the director.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, and get money to hire a full-time director and it was in Benton Hall. It's not still there, is it?

Blanche Touhill: No, but they still have a women's center. It got moved to the new Millennium Center but then it got moved again. I think maybe it's over...I don't know where it is but I think it's part of Gender Studies now.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, probably, but getting back to my job here, one of the big things quite early on was I got very interested in black history and the field was quite open here. There was really nobody collecting in that.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you did come in and you began to make contact with the African America population.

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, I already knew some people from working on things like the United Nations Association and stuff like that.

Blanche Touhill: So that was volunteer activity?

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, that was volunteer activity and I knew some black women and I had belonged to a little group that was put on by the NAACP and knew some women and some black and white women talked and had coffee and things like that. So I had kind of a head start on that. There was not really anybody in town collecting stuff like that then. The (Missouri) Historical Society is a very different place today than it was then. It's an academic place and it's, I think, really top drawer now but they were not doing anything like that in the '70s.

Blanche Touhill: No, they were doing the VP and Lindbergh.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, and the first families of Missouri and things like that. So I applied and got a federal grant to collect black history and I got the money to hire two young people who were graduate students, both of them at Washington U but they took sabbaticals to do this and I'm sure that that was counted in their Master's program. So, two young black people and so I was still collecting and they went out and collected and the federal agency that gave it to us was very pleased with it.

- Blanche Touhill: What kind of things did you collect?
- Irene Cortinovis: Well, nobody had ever asked the sororities, the black sororities, the black fraternities, the social groups and, of course, there was a lot of political activity at that time too and some people that I didn't know, I guess called up or wrote to them and did a lot of oral history with them. Some people were very helpful and some people who were important in the community like Marion Oldham and Deverne Calloway. Marion Oldham became a curator.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, but she was denied entrance to the University of Missouri when she was going to graduate school so the State of Missouri paid her tuition and expenses to go to the University of Michigan which I always thought was a very interesting (thing?)...
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: And when she received an honorary degree from here in the social that followed the graduation, I said, "Well, congratulations. You're now a graduate of the University of Missouri," because integration had not yet taken place. She got her degree before Brown versus The Board of Education, and she was a leader in CORO.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, she was. Deverne Calloway was a state representative.
- Blanche Touhill: She was a very powerful political force.
- Irene Cortinovis: Well, she was because her husband was as well. He was a union organizer and they were very important in the community but she, at the time that I worked with her, was the chairman of the Education Department at the state legislature and, of course, that meant a lot to the University of Missouri.
- Blanche Touhill: Absolutely. Well, I knew she was very powerful.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: And that collection is in the State Historical Society?
- Irene Cortinovis: Well, it's in the collection here, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Now, what was the difference between the archives and the Western Manuscripts?

- Irene Cortinovis: Well, the archives were the papers of our campus university and the Manuscripts collection are a historical collection so they're quite separate.
- Blanche Touhill: So you were head of both in St. Louis?
- Irene Cortinovis: Oh, yeah, just for our campus, the archives, and the Historical Manuscripts is on all four campuses and when I worked, it was a part of the university but now it's part of the State Historical Society.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, they have been contracted with, I believe, to manage the archives of the University of Missouri.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: What kind of other things did you collect? You collected black history...
- Irene Cortinovis: Black history, we have hundreds of interviews with immigrants of all kinds.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, wonderful.
- Irene Cortinovis: And some faculty members did some. (Peggy...Hannah Sullivan) did some.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, she was a historian?
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, and Peter Etzkorn in music, helped me. He did some of the jazz men who operated on the boats going up and down the Missouri, out of New Orleans as well.
- Blanche Touhill: On the Mississippi?
- Irene Cortinovis: On the big river, Mississippi.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah. What did you like best about the job?
- Irene Cortinovis: I loved meeting all the people and, of course, history has always been my bag anyway and I consider these people part of history.
- Blanche Touhill: When you went to Harris, did you plan to be a history teacher?
- Irene Cortinovis: No, I just planned to be a teacher and I probably thought elementary.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, Harris was an elementary school program?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, right, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: So, how did you find history?

Irene Cortinovis: I guess I've always read a lot of history.

Blanche Touhill: Even in grade school and high school?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, I did.

Blanche Touhill: And you love storytelling?

Irene Cortinovis: Right, yeah, because that's what history is, is storytelling and I have one son who's now a lawyer but his undergraduate degree is in history too because he's the same way and he still reads a lot of history and I do, too.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about forming the women's group and how they came about to do the various things they did, to stand up for women.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, well, of course, some of them were organized for other things, like the League of Women Voters and that was a part of the suffragettes. One of the most exciting programs in the oral history program is when we found some suffragettes who had taken part in the Golden Lane, this display downtown. In 1916, the Democrats met here to nominate Woodrow Wilson for president but to get in the Coliseum, an old building which has now been torn down, they had to go through what was called "the Golden Lane" that the suffragettes of Missouri set up on each side of the sidewalk and they wore white dresses with a yellow sash across their breast that said "Votes for Women" but it was a silent protest. They wanted the Democrats to endorse votes for women in the same way that the Republicans had done the month before when they met in Chicago.

Blanche Touhill: Did they do it?

Irene Cortinovis: They did. Of course, women didn't get the vote until '20 and in Missouri, not until '21 but I did a very exciting interview, myself with one of them. She lived on Skinker Boulevard, right across from the park and so I talked to her about 45 minutes or an hour and at the end of it...oh, and she told me about going down and standing in this double lane. Her boyfriend who later became her husband didn't want her to do it and her father really wasn't too crazy about the idea either, but her mother, who was a member of the Missouri Suffragette League as well hoped that she would

go because the mother wasn't able to so she told me all about going in the white dress and everything. It was not that her father and her boyfriend were opposed to votes for women, but they were afraid she would get hurt because a lot of women had gotten hurt in demonstrations and some in England even killed, but some women in their previous demonstrations had been arrested by the St. Louis police and held overnight. Well, they didn't want that to happen to her. She went anyway and nothing happened because they agreed that they would just make a silent protest. So at the end of the talk that I had with her, I said, "Whatever happened to the sash?" and she said, "Well, I've still got it in the other room. Do you want it?" and so there it is.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful.

Irene Cortinavis: I brought it back to my office and had it framed and it's still on the wall.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, wonderful.

Irene Cortinavis: It's been borrowed a lot of times by women's groups, to take to see it. I think it's the only one in St. Louis.

Blanche Touhill: It could be. You were in a group with Jane Miller and Stephanie (Chrise?) and it merged staff and faculty together.

Irene Cortinavis: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Women to do things for women on the campus.

Irene Cortinavis: Right, yeah. I met some very interesting women. We tried to persuade campus authorities. As a matter of fact, one thing that sticks in my mind is that three of us went over to the campus business office, John...

Blanche Touhill: Oh, Perry.

Irene Cortinavis: Perry, yeah, and asked to see some salary...

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, data, which in a public institution is a matter of public record.

Irene Cortinavis: Yeah, and he said, "Well, I can't do that. People don't like to have their salaries talked about," and I said, "John, everybody actually knows what the governor makes and the chancellor and the president of the university. Why can't we know how much so-and-so makes?" So he didn't do it the first time but after a lot of pressure, then we were able to

get comparative figures and, of course, it was no surprise that the men were making a lot more.

Blanche Touhill: And the university, in time, asked all the chancellors to make a study and they did make...that was under Brice (Rachford?) and he made the salary adjustment and he said to all the administrators, "You have to do it every few years" to make sure that members of the protected classes were treated equitably, the African American that was coming on board and the women. So you left the university and you did what?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, we traveled a lot. My husband had taken his early retirement and I worked two years longer than he did because I was having a lot of fun and I hadn't worked very long to a full-time job and so we traveled a lot and I became a founding member of the Lifelong Learning Institute at Washington U through some friends. Once we started giving these classes for seniors, I became a facilitator and gave, either by myself or with friends, I did four or five with my husband but they were many about history or art history. I did some about St. Louis and the founding and some about St. Louis, historic houses and historic buildings, things like that.

Blanche Touhill: Let me ask two questions that are a little off this topic and then we'll get back to it: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life have been like?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, it's really hard to say except for my academic standard. That's not even my mother's generation. That's my grandparents.

Blanche Touhill: It's between your grandmother and your mother really.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah. Well, when I retired, I became a genealogist because I already had a background in research and that was before the Net came in but we published a little book for our family so I do know quite a bit and I was sort of the recipient of a lot of folklore, especially from my grandmothers. I didn't have any grandfathers. My parents were both children when they lost their fathers but my two grandmothers, I know, were very important in our family.

Blanche Touhill: How did they make a living?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, one grandmother had eight children and some of the boys were out in the working world and so she didn't have a job as far as I know but my father's mother was also widowed when she was in her early 30's and my father was about 14 when he lost his father and she got a job with Laclede Gas Company and this was...

Blanche Touhill: In the office?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, no, not quite. She had never worked so she had no work experience but she did as a homemaker, of course, so that was the time that the gas company was putting gas mains on streets in St. Louis and if you bought a gas stove from them, my grandmother would go to your house, show you how to use it and give you recipes.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful.

Irene Cortinovis: Because people were going from wood stoves to gasoline stoves. As a matter of fact, there's one exactly like she probably worked with in the exhibit at Missouri Historical Society for the 250th anniversary. So she knew every streetcar in town but she worked full-time.

Blanche Touhill: So you think you would have found a job like that or would you have taught school?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, because I was sort of tuned into that grandmother, probably more than the other one, although they were both born in St. Louis. Their fathers both came from Ireland.

Blanche Touhill: So, would you have been a school teacher or somebody out in the entrepreneurial world?

Irene Cortinovis: I can't say.

Blanche Touhill: Is there some award you've received or awards that have a special meaning for you?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, I graduated magna cum laude, undergraduate degree and, as I said, in high school, from the National Honor Society, so I was always a good student, and from Washington University, for my work at Lifelong Learning. My husband and I both were specially honored as a "devoted friend" or something like that.

Blanche Touhill: A volunteer, really?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, volunteer friend, and they gave a big party for us and all my family came and then, of course, this year, I received the Trailblazer Award from UMSL during Women's History Month.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you were a trailblazer, yes.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, because, as I said, when I started collecting women's history, a lot of people didn't think there was such a thing but there is. It's a special category.

Blanche Touhill: What did you really like to do in your life?

Irene Cortinovis: In my house?

Blanche Touhill: Well, in your house or when you worked, what really attracted you?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, I've always been a people person. I've always had a good memory for people until lately and I was always friendly. I just liked to be among people and, of course, the activity, I've always been that kind of a person too and I still belong to some groups, short story groups and things like that nowadays, and the whole idea of collecting just was very pleasing and really even thrilling to me.

Blanche Touhill: The fact that you were so interested in education, did that affect your children?

Irene Cortinovis: Well, yes. We have one lawyer and one graduate engineer, civil engineer. One thing about my two boys is that they both followed in their father's footsteps in that they didn't retire completely but at a very early age, they decided to go into business for themselves.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, and the civil engineer, he saw how much fun his father had that he did not have the pressures of supporting a family until he got older so I think he was maybe less than 40 when he started his own business. So he just takes, even to this day, the contracts that he wants to take and he doesn't like to work full-time, not because he's lazy; he's anything but, but he has so many interests that he likes to keep up his...

Blanche Touhill: Well, and your husband had a lot of interests.

Irene Cortinovis: My husband had a lot of them, right.

- Blanche Touhill: He was more than a scientist?
- Irene Cortinovis: He was, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: How many years were you married to Bob?
- Irene Cortinovis: Seventy years, and he was a great husband. He was sweet, funny, smart, kind, lots of things to make a good person to live with and love.
- Blanche Touhill: And did you have a peaceful home?
- Irene Cortinovis: We had a peaceful home, yeah, not that we always agreed about everything.
- Blanche Touhill: What made you stand up for women and for African Americans?
- Irene Cortinovis: I don't know, just a sense of fairness maybe and I was a dedicated Girl Scout to begin with and I subscribe fully to Girl Scout ideals.
- Blanche Touhill: What are those ideals?
- Irene Cortinovis: That every girl is an individual and every girl deserves to have a life that she can be happy with and make herself, those kind of ideals.
- Blanche Touhill: So you consciously were attracted by an ideal like that?
- Irene Cortinovis: I was, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your life after you worked...not after you worked but while you were working you were able to get time off with your husband. Talk about what you did with that time and then when you retired, you had more time.
- Irene Cortinovis: Well, we had a lot of friends and we had a social life.
- Blanche Touhill: And you traveled?
- Irene Cortinovis: And we traveled. I've always been interested in art museum and been a 50-year member and attended a lot of things there.
- Blanche Touhill: Which countries were especially appealing or was it all?
- Irene Cortinovis: Well, we went to Europe a lot. Some of the countries were quite exotic, like, we went to Burma very early and places like Sri Lanka, that a lot of people don't visit and through Bob's time on the radio, talking to people

all over the world, which was a great influence in our lives, people...yeah, if he would say we were coming to Sweden or someplace, people...

Blanche Touhill: And they'd meet you?

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, they would and entertain us and invite us to stay with them but we didn't but we'd have dinner with these people and things like that.

Blanche Touhill: So you got into the homes?

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, we got into their home, a lot of homes.

Blanche Touhill: And how did that affect you?

Irene Cortinovis: You know, it showed us how people lived in England and some in South America, Brazil and Argentina, we met people. Another thing that we did that had a big effect on our lives and our children, I think, is that when our boys were 12, maybe 14, we started taking foreign students through a program called Experiment in Living so I guess we did that about 20 years.

Blanche Touhill: So those people you knew too.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, boys and girls and kept up with a lot of them, not now but we did. They would be, like, college age and some of them would be in college or just out of college, but just this past Christmas, one of our Israelis that we took almost 50 years ago invited us to the Ritz for dinner.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my goodness.

Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, right, he happened to be in town, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: How nice. You know, it's interesting, your son, I know who worked for Emerson had an international role in the company.

Irene Cortinovis: Yes, he was the president of the international division when he retired but he's gone into business for himself. He got so tired of always flying, or always in the air and it was really beginning to affect his health and so he took an early retirement. He was only about 55, I think, or something like that but he's gone into business and he does a lot of international business and they kept an apartment in Paris and so he has some partners and basically he does what he did for Emerson. They buy and sell businesses.

- Blanche Touhill: But you know what's interesting is when your husband went off to the war, although he didn't go overseas, he got a view of the country and then you traveled together and you got a view of the world, but at least one of your sons really became an international expert.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: So, St. Louis changed.
- Irene Cortinovis: Yeah, right, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Were you ever involved with the St. Louis Institute?
- Irene Cortinovis: No.
- Blanche Touhill: But you did collect the oral histories of immigrants?
- Irene Cortinovis: Oh, yes. I think by now that we have maybe 250 from all over the world and some of them were quite humble but others, like Homer Sayad was a big businessman, yeah.
- Blanche Touhill: Is there anything you want to say to close this up?
- Irene Cortinovis: I don't think so. I haven't thought about my life like that for a long time.
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah. Well, thank you so much for coming and thank you for working in the archives and the Western Historical Manuscripts and getting it set on the right path.
- Irene Cortinovis: It's all been my pleasure. I've had a wonderful life. I've always been lucky, happy and healthy.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. Well, thank you.
- Irene Cortinovis: Thank you.