

An Interview with
Lesley Hoffarth

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

1 December 2015

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Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri
Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 59

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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.

Blanche Touhill: Would you introduce yourself.

Lesley Hoffarth: Sure, I'm Lesley Hoffarth.

Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your early childhood: your parents; your siblings; your grandparents; your cousins; the kids you played with; how did you play, and would you talk a little bit about who in your family or in the early childhood days, who encouraged you to really do what you wanted to do?

Lesley Hoffarth: So, kind of a traveling childhood, I guess. I was born in Dayton, Ohio, the youngest of three kids. I think I was probably three or four, my mom moved me and my brother and sister to live with my grandparents. She was getting divorced, kind of unheard of back then, in the late '60s, but got divorced so I lived for a few years on my grandparents' farm in far southwestern Iowa. That was a good life. Then the man I call my dad now, married my mom when I was five so he's my step-dad but he's been my dad my whole life and we ended up with this blended kind of blue collar Brady Bunch kind of family. So my mom had three kids and my dad had two, so family of seven all of the sudden. My broader family had farms in northwestern Missouri so we lived there until I was in 4th grade and then we moved down by Springfield, Missouri. One of my uncles had moved down there. My dad was a mechanic and worked for a dealership in Springfield, Missouri so we all moved down there. We had a piece of property. It was about 40 acres and the majority of it was wooded so we all actually...what did we do as I was growing up? We built a house together. We literally built a house together out of the rocks and logs from the woods on our property.

Blanche Touhill: This blended family?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes, this blended family. So Mom and Dad both worked full-time in Springfield, half an hour away from where we lived, so nights and weekends we all spent building this house together.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, your parents helped?

Lesley Hoffarth: Oh, yes. Yes, they helped a little bit. So my job was to help mix the concrete with my dad in the wheelbarrow so I'm not sure why I got that job but it was great; I loved it.

Blanche Touhill: Why did you love it?

Lesley Hoffarth: Well, it was just kind of fun, mixing the concrete together in a wheelbarrow and I would pull it one direction with the garden hoe and then Dad would pull it the other direction and we'd mix it back and forth until it was all mixed and then we would lay the stones that we had dug out of the woods, so kind of a crazy upbringing. But when we weren't working, we were playing, just a lot of nature play in the woods and a lot of construction play too. So we had the big sturdy Tonka toys. So boys and girls playing in the mud and the dirt together.

Blanche Touhill: Did you finish the house?

Lesley Hoffarth: We did.

Blanche Touhill: And did you play in it?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, by that time, we were all a little bit older so playing in the house, yes, just a lot of work to be done too. We played outside, inside, all over the place and we didn't have a lot of money so I think we were a little more creative with how we played. We did have some dolls but I'd have to say we were a little more active with our play than playing with dolls.

Blanche Touhill: In this blended family, were you the baby?

Lesley Hoffarth: I was, yes, always the baby.

Blanche Touhill: And did everybody take care of you?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, they took care of me and somehow, strangely, I was always the instigator of whatever was going on. So I've thought about where did my leadership ability come from and I think it's kind of a natural thing. It's so hilarious. We got in trouble all the time. As you can imagine, Mom and Dad working full-time, we had a lot of time to ourselves to get into trouble and we did and they were always asking, "What were you guys thinking?" and brothers and sisters would always say, "Well, Lesley said it was okay" so somehow...and I really don't remember if I actually said it was okay or if it was just, I was a convenient scapegoat but that's always kind of stuck, that "Lesley said it's okay."

- Blanche Touhill: Well, do you think that was the impetus to have you believe that you could do anything you wanted to?
- Lesley Hoffarth: That was probably part of it. My mom was actually a really big influence there. She was constantly telling me, "You can do whatever you want to do. Don't depend on anyone else" and I really think that came from her own life experience and getting married at a very young age, having children at a very young age, not really having the skills to take care of herself and ending up in a relationship where she felt like she was stuck and she was very fortunate to have my grandparents there. They could help her out of that bad situation that she was in. So, it was important to her that her kids grew up to be self-sufficient and especially the girls in the house, to not depend on anyone else. So I think she was instilling that in me as more of a survival instinct but I just kind of took it as, you know, I can do whatever I want and I've never really felt like I couldn't.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes. So it was an atmosphere?
- Lesley Hoffarth: You know, it really was and, in fact, when people tell me I can't do something, I take that as a challenge.
- Blanche Touhill: You know, I was thinking, if you were building a house, you really had to measure it, didn't you?
- Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, it was interesting because it was my mom's vision for this house, kind of set on the edge of the woods and she was a very artistic person. My grandfather that I lived with when I was younger was actually a carpenter by trade and I just remember a lot of heated debates between my grandpa and my mom and dad on what this design of the house should be because as a carpenter, as a professional carpenter, he had his ideas of how it should be and Mom wanted something different. So there were some...
- Blanche Touhill: Well, did you live in the house?
- Lesley Hoffarth: We did, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: You ultimately lived in the house?
- Lesley Hoffarth: We did, yeah. So we started building it when I was probably in 5th grade and I think we finished it when I was in 7th or 8th grade. So my older brothers and sisters were out of the house. There were the three of us

that were my mom's kids, left in the house by the time we finished it. The other two helped build it and then they moved away.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that's really interesting. So you built the family home?

Lesley Hoffarth: I did, literally, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you must have had a designer?

Lesley Hoffarth: No, Mom designed it.

Blanche Touhill: She designed it?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes, she laid it out and it was an interesting relationship between my mom and dad. Mom would always have these crazy visions of what she wanted and then Dad would figure out the way to make it happen.

Blanche Touhill: Because he was the mechanic?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Well, then, she was you? She was responsible?

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, there you go.

Blanche Touhill: He could say to your grandfather, "She told me to do it."

Lesley Hoffarth: That's right, exactly.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that's wonderful. Was it a two-story house or a one-story house?

Lesley Hoffarth: It was kind of a split level. It was before its time. It was an open atrium concept so the main level was kind of a vaulted ceiling and open concept kitchen, dining room, living room, big fireplace, and then there's a wing with a library and bedrooms and it was...for people that built a house out of rocks and logs, it was pretty elaborate. It was great. It was a lot of fun and that's all in your perspective. I thought it was great fun. My sister didn't think it was quite so fun.

Blanche Touhill: You know, I thought you were talking, that you were building a house for the children to play in but you were building a house?

Lesley Hoffarth: Oh, no, this was a real house that we all built it together and then we lived in it.

Blanche Touhill: Did you work on Saturdays and Sundays and after school?

Lesley Hoffarth: We did, yes. There was a lot of work going on in the house.

Blanche Touhill: And in the summers?

Lesley Hoffarth: The summers, a lot of work so when Mom and Dad were not at the places that they worked, we were working on the house. That, and Dad kind of called it a play farm. Since he had grown up on farms, we had animals but they were just...it wasn't like a production farm.

Blanche Touhill: They weren't going to market?

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, but we had cows and pigs and chickens and geese.

Blanche Touhill: And did somebody milk them?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes, we did.

Blanche Touhill: And collect the eggs?

Lesley Hoffarth: We did and those mornings in the wintertime, getting up at 5:30 to go chip the ice for the animals...

Blanche Touhill: You mean, you're really one of those people?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes, this crazy.

Blanche Touhill: I've often heard about people who were saying they got up at 5:30 and milked the cows but you're one.

Lesley Hoffarth: It's true, there are really those people out there.

Blanche Touhill: Now, do you have a longing for the open air?

Lesley Hoffarth: No. You know, it's interesting that I spent so much time growing up out in the country. I do love the country. My husband, who grew up in St. Louis, really thinks that he could live just great out in the country. It's a lot of work so I just say, "I did my time out there in the country and it's a lot of hard work and I loved that time and its fun to go visit but I wouldn't want to live there."

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, okay. It's the opposite of New York City.

Lesley Hoffarth: Absolutely, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Well, then, where did you go to grade school and high school? You moved then?

Lesley Hoffarth: I did, yeah. So I started out in northwest Missouri and finished high school in southwest Missouri. So my kindergarten was in a store. It was the upper floor of this little store in this little town called Pickering which, I don't know, there's maybe 50 people that live there. So the lower level, this little corner store, is a grocery store and then the kindergarten was upstairs. So, yeah, it was kind of a little country schoolhouse.

Blanche Touhill: And then you moved?

Lesley Hoffarth: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And was the school bigger?

Lesley Hoffarth: It was bigger, so Pickering was kindergarten. Elementary school was in Hopkins, the big town of Hopkins, population 565. That was in northwest Missouri, Marshfield High School is outside of Springfield, Missouri and that high school had probably about 500 people. So it covered a large rural area.

Blanche Touhill: So you had about 100 in a class or something?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Which was enough for diversity, wasn't it?

Lesley Hoffarth: You know, it really was.

Blanche Touhill: Curriculum. I mean, they had the academic and then they probably had more of a getting ready to be on the farm, the trade kind of education.

Lesley Hoffarth: They did, right. So there were those kind of classes. So each grade had several different classes. So I was in the...I think we called it the accelerated class.

Blanche Touhill: Did you take home ec?

Lesley Hoffarth: I did not, actually. My sisters did. I got a lot of on-the-job training at cooking and cleaning and sewing at home. So I didn't need to do that at school.

Blanche Touhill: So you knew how to cook?

- Lesley Hoffarth: I did, mm-hmm, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And did you make the meals when your parents were working?
- Lesley Hoffarth: We did, so, as my parents say, there were a lot of burnt offerings in our house. So, yeah, I started cooking when I was about six.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you do some of the boys' chores as well?
- Lesley Hoffarth: I did. We all had to pitch in and help so I helped take care of the animals. I was up at 5:30. I had my axe to chop the hole in the ice in the horse tank for the animals before we went to school. I was much smaller so I couldn't do quite as much heavy lifting but did all the things the boys did.
- Blanche Touhill: So there wasn't much of a differentiation between the boys and the girls?
- Lesley Hoffarth: No, there really wasn't. My dad taught us all when we learned to drive, especially when it was time for us to head out on our own, he taught us basic, how to take care of the car...
- Blanche Touhill: Could you change a tire?
- Lesley Hoffarth: I could change a tire and just a really funny story on that: Dad was trying to teach me how to change the tire and I couldn't get the lug nuts off with the tire iron and he's going, "Well, stand on it" so I stood on it and I'm bouncing up and down and I still couldn't get it to come off and he said, "Well, you're just going to, if you get into that situation, you're just going to have to stand on the side of the road and hope that somebody stops to help you," yes. So, much later...fast forward a long time, I was with my parents a couple of years ago in Arizona where they lived and we had a flat tire and so we all joked about Dad teaching us how to change a tire and the skills came in handy but tires are much different than they used to be so trying to figure out where the heck the tire iron is and how to put it together is much different than it used to be.
- Blanche Touhill: But you learned it again?
- Lesley Hoffarth: We did, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Could you change the oil?
- Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, back then I could absolutely change the oil. Today, no, probably not. It's, again, much different.

Blanche Touhill: See, you were a little ahead of the time. I mean, girls learn that now but I'm not sure girls learned it at that time. Did your friends in school know how to change tires?

Lesley Hoffarth: You know, I'm not sure that they did. I think it depended on...

Blanche Touhill: ...the family?

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, it depended on the family and, you know, I would say, in general, it was a fairly small town. Our town of Marshfield, it was less than 5,000 people so still pretty small. Some of my friends lived in town; some of them lived out in the country. So it just kind of depends on where you live and what your parents did.

Blanche Touhill: Could you drive at 16? Did you drive?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: You did?

Lesley Hoffarth: Mm-hmm. My dad was a mechanic so we had a lot of old cars and so I learned to drive a stick shift. My sister could not get the hang of that so when we had to drive the car with the stick shift, that was my job. So we had some really interesting times, yeah. So one time we had to get to town to pick up her band uniform before the cleaners closed and we had to drive the stick shift and it was very stressful for her. She just couldn't do it so I was not even 16 yet and I...

Blanche Touhill: You helped?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, I helped get the car to town so we could get the band uniform, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: When you went to elementary and secondary school, were you a leader in some way?

Lesley Hoffarth: I would say that I probably was. I was in student council, very good at band, choir, I was a flag girl, a cheerleader, so a lot of situations where you do have to kind of step up and be a leader. So probably student council would be the most straight-forward leadership role and the other activities are really...you know, you have to have discipline to be able to do those things and keep up with your schoolwork as well.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I think the band, in particular. I think if you're going to study music or acting, you have to be able to follow directions. It's not a free opportunity to act as you want to.

Lesley Hoffarth: No, right, so structure is important, very good at band, first tier...

Blanche Touhill: What was your instrument?

Lesley Hoffarth: Flute, so I played the flute, very good at it, very good in a small town atmosphere. I don't know that that would have transferred to being very good had I been here in St. Louis but, where I was, very good, 1's at state contest on solos and ensembles so something I enjoyed very much.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I always heard that the bands in rural Missouri that did compete, not only did the athletic teams compete but the bands competed against each other.

Lesley Hoffarth: We were really good. We got 1's at state contests for years. The marching band was amazing. My sister and I complain about marching bands when we see them today. They just don't have the same...not as good as ours was.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I do like parades and when I go, I always look for the high school, in particular, marching bands because they do have a pride about them.

Lesley Hoffarth: Me, too. They got to make sure the rows and the columns are straight, so, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: Anything happen in high school that really had you sort of refocus your life or even grade school? I'm just saying, in your educational progress...well, obviously it came out that you were good at math.

Lesley Hoffarth: Right. So, you know, I think teachers really have such a significant impact on the direction kids take, whether they know it or not. I loved math because I loved my teacher. He was a coach and he was just one of those really charismatic...

Blanche Touhill: Was it middle school?

Lesley Hoffarth: This was middle school and then he actually was the math teacher for middle school and for high school. So just one of those really great, charismatic people that really got the kids interested in what they were learning. Contrast to that, with history, which I was not good at, I did not

like the teacher at all, and I really think that had a big impact. I wish now that I would have paid more attention to those history classes because I'm just not as strong in that and I really do think that the teacher I had just really kind of turned me off of history.

Blanche Touhill: Don't you think history, though, as you get older, it becomes more meaningful?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, I think you're right. It does. At the time, you're young and you think, what's...

Blanche Touhill: You don't like the dates...

Lesley Hoffarth: ...[inaudible 19:48], exactly. There's too many dates to remember.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. I'm not certain that all of American teachers approach history in a way that is attractive to kids.

Lesley Hoffarth: I think you're right. There's a lot of dates to remember. It's a lot to absorb. Those people that are really good at telling stories, I think, can bring that history to life and make it something that really sticks with kids.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I think that's what history is. It's storytelling.

Lesley Hoffarth: It is storytelling. Some do that well; some not.

Blanche Touhill: And I think the professional historian...and I would say I'm probably a professional historian...we're too interested in the facts still and you have to get the sweep of history to be the good storyteller.

Lesley Hoffarth: Right.

Blanche Touhill: But the stories are wonderful. Does your family tell stories?

Lesley Hoffarth: A lot of storytelling and my husband will tell you, when we go to visit the family, he hears the same stories over and over and over, and you do. You do, but they're really good stories and you just want to tell them over and over.

Blanche Touhill: It keeps the family together.

Lesley Hoffarth: Exactly.

Blanche Touhill: They remember those episodes in their life. Well, were there teachers that said to you, "Lesley, you should go to college and you should study math"?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah. I will have to say, in high school, I don't really remember a lot of counseling going on there. We did have a counselor and I knew that I wanted to go to college. I don't know that I really had anyone helping me decide where I should go to college or what I should study. That was kind of up to me. My parents hadn't gone to college and my mom saying you can do whatever you want to do, be what you want to be, get yourself there, figure out how to pay for it, so it was very much, be self-sufficient. "It would be great if you went to college but we can't afford to send you so you're on your own." So I did go to college. I decided I wanted to go to Mizzou.

Blanche Touhill: How did you decide that? Had you ever been there?

Lesley Hoffarth: I really don't remember...no, I'd never been there in my life. I really don't remember. There was a college in Springfield, SMSU, at the time. It's changed its name several times since then and so a lot of my friends that were actually going to college were going there and thought I was crazy to go to MU. Why would I go to Columbia to college? It was so far away. The college is huge. I would feel lost. I never did. I don't know. I applied somehow. I don't even remember the admission process so it can't have been very difficult back then compared to what it is today. So, yeah, it was the only school I applied to and so luckily I got in and had to pay my own way so I worked a lot to get through college...good working class values that I learned from my parents. I got student aid and so had just a little bit of debt when I got out of college because I worked a lot. I worked 40 hours a week.

Blanche Touhill: That's unusual in Columbia.

Lesley Hoffarth: You know, it really is.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Most of those students, they might work but when you say 40 hours a week, that's a lot of hours.

Lesley Hoffarth: It's a lot of hours. I changed my major a few times before I landed on engineering.

Blanche Touhill: Did you?

Lesley Hoffarth: I did, because I didn't really know exactly what I wanted to do when I first went.

Blanche Touhill: Were you going to be a math major?

Lesley Hoffarth: No, I started out in computer science.

Blanche Touhill: But that's related.

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, it's kind of mathy. So just a very interesting stroll through different majors before I landed on engineering. So I started in computer science and then I did music for a semester.

Blanche Touhill: And that's related, too, to math.

Lesley Hoffarth: You know, it is and I loved music and as I had said, I was really good at it in Marshfield, really was not equipped to compete when I looked a little more broadly. But I did still enjoy it. I still have my flute today but pretty quickly realized that it wasn't the right fit for me and then I thought, you know, I do kind of like architecture and building. I know how to build a house. We didn't have an architecture program at MU and I didn't want to transfer schools. So I tried housing design. This was in the School of Interior Design and Housing Design and that's when I really decided, you know, this isn't for me either because I kept hearing I could only design multi-family dwellings, buildings no more than three stories high. And I kept hearing "Design whatever you want to and then you'll need to give it to a civil engineer to see if it'll work," and I thought, I can do that. You know, I don't need somebody to tell me that this will work. I can figure that out. So I decided to switch to civil engineering. So this was after my...I think I had been through a year-and-a-half of school already. So it was kind of crunch time. It was time to buckle down and figure out what I wanted to do because I was paying for all of this myself. So I switched to engineering and I actually saw my counselor at an event I went to recently at Mizzou and he said, "I remember you. I remember when you switched to engineering. You took 16 hours and it was summer and I told you, 'You are crazy. You cannot do this'" and I said, "I have to get caught up. I'm going to do this," and I did it and then I came back to him and said, "Don't ever let anybody do that again." But I remember it so well. I cried the entire semester because it was so hard and I had taken so many

of my elective classes already and those classes were just so easy. It was like high school. It was easy to get an A and really not even work at it. I was struggling to get C's and D's in engineering but I couldn't get a D in a class now that I had additional classes.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, you needed a prerequisite.

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, and I was just starting out so I was struggling.

Blanche Touhill: Did you work at the same time?

Lesley Hoffarth: I did. You know, it was a good character building experience and it was a good lesson in, if you really want to do something, you've really got to apply yourself and you can make it work. Then the side bonus is I lost the 20 pounds that I had gained my freshman year. So, yes, between the stress and just being overworked, I was able to shed those pounds that I had put on. So there was a good side benefit.

Blanche Touhill: Did you live in a dorm or an apartment or what?

Lesley Hoffarth: My freshman year, I lived in a dorm and after that, I had different apartments each year with friends, some downtown and some on the outskirts of Columbia.

Blanche Touhill: Did you have a car?

Lesley Hoffarth: Had a car. The car I brought to school with me was my dad's. It was that stick shift I learned to drive. It was a '55 Ford. So I called it the "urban assault vehicle." I and 10 of my closest friends could easily pile in it and go wherever we wanted to.

Blanche Touhill: Yes. Well, so you graduated in civil engineering.

Lesley Hoffarth: I did.

Blanche Touhill: And then what happened to you?

Lesley Hoffarth: I went to work for the Missouri Department of Transportation.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, okay.

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, right out of school. I interviewed with them on campus, wanted to stay in that area and there really weren't a lot of consulting engineering firms in Columbia to choose from so MDOT just seemed like a really good

fit. So went to work in the main office in Jefferson City and (stayed at Columbia).

Blanche Touhill: Let me ask you something which I didn't ask before: When you went to engineering school, were there many women?

Lesley Hoffarth: There were not. I was one of three women that graduated from my classes in those years.

Blanche Touhill: And how many were in the class?

Lesley Hoffarth: The civil engineering group was pretty small. I don't know what the overall number was but it was pretty small.

Blanche Touhill: But you were one of few?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: One of a few women?

Lesley Hoffarth: Absolutely, yes.

Blanche Touhill: In engineering, what do women go into?

Lesley Hoffarth: Not a lot of civil, and even today, there aren't as many civil engineer women.

Blanche Touhill: I can understand that. Their background was not your background. You had been in construction.

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, and that's actually one of those challenges that we have today, is getting young women interested in design and construction and helping to build things. It's just interesting that that's not, it's not a direction that a lot of parents or adults mentoring kids steer girls into.

Blanche Touhill: What did your family say?

Lesley Hoffarth: They loved it. They were very proud of me and Mom was one of those people that was proud of whatever it was I did. Whether she was or not, I don't know but she sure acted like it, but very proud of me for getting through school and working for the Department of Transportation, especially for rural Missouri. It's a great place to work. Yeah, so I started out in Jefferson City in maintenance and traffic. It was kind of a training position. I worked for the liaison engineers that worked with different

districts. MODOT is 6,000, it was about 6,000 employees across the state and it was divided up into districts. And so I was working for the maintenance engineers that had responsibility from Jeff City that was helping to set the direction for each of the districts around the state, so a great way to get to know the organization and the people that work there and kind of the structure of it. It was an introductory position so it wasn't meant to be a long-term position. So I did that for about six months. So that was one of their ideas, bringing new engineers in, having these different training positions. It's a great way to kind of get an overview of MODOT and see what might be a good next step for them. So I went to the bridge office and designed bridges for about two-and-a-half or three years after that.

Blanche Touhill: So you became a full-time employee?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yes, and it was a full-time position when I started. It was just meant to be...

Blanche Touhill: But it was training for six months and then they put you in one of the departments?

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, mm-hmm.

Blanche Touhill: How was it to design bridges?

Lesley Hoffarth: I loved it. As you can imagine, it's very detailed but it was so great to be able to design a bridge that people were going to be driving across for the next 50 years. So MODOT was responsible for designing the smaller bridges around the state. The big major river crossings, consultants do those because they're very complicated, take a long time. So the bridge office was the production line for the tens of thousands of bridges across the state. So I worked my way up. It was kind of a progression. You come in as a junior engineer, beginning engineer and you're working with more experienced engineers, kind of learning the ropes of designing bridges.

Blanche Touhill: Were there many women in MODOT?

Lesley Hoffarth: No, very few. When I started in 1988, very few professional women there. Most of the women that worked at MODOT were receptionists.

Blanche Touhill: Well, how did everybody greet you?

- Lesley Hoffarth: It was kind of a mixed review. There were some very nice, welcoming people, men, and there were some men that weren't so sure about having these women professionals coming in.
- Blanche Touhill: With hard hats.
- Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, right. So bridge design for two or three years and then I wanted to come to St. Louis and cross train in construction. So that was an interesting conversation that I had, because I had talked to the state bridge engineer and he said, "Sounds great. Why don't you go talk to the state construction engineer and see if he'll find a place for you to go work in in St. Louis for a while." So I went to talk to the construction engineer and it was one of those conversations that you just have to laugh about. His response to me saying, "I really want to cross train in construction," was, "Ooh, construction. You know that's outside, don't you and it's kind of dirty. Do you think you could do that?" and I'm just thinking, yes, I understand construction is outside. I work for the Department of Transportation. The things we build are outside. So I went to St. Louis, because many of the bridges I designed were in St. Louis. I wanted to inspect one of the bridges that I had designed. So that bridge, it's on I-64 over (Ballast?) Road.
- Blanche Touhill: Doesn't that make you proud?
- Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, it's great. Every time we drive over it, I still think about, that was my bridge; I designed it; I built it. So that was a wonderful experience. At that time, there weren't a lot of people that were cross training like that and the experience of getting to know the contractors and the construction inspectors and talk about the design and why we did things a certain way. They would ask, "Why do you put this detail in here? We never use this" and my answer is, "What? You don't use that? So, to explain, this is why it's designed in there and this is what we thought you would use it for and to learn that we do something differently." It was great information to take back to the bridge office to say, "Hey, I learned some things while I was there over the summer that I think could really streamline our design process." So, that, I think, was just a great starting to open those lines of communication. At the time, the department was...you see this in a lot of older organizations, where it's called the siloed effect where this department doesn't talk freely to the next department and you've got to go all the way up to the top and then go

over to the next department and it filters its way down. So, to have this ability to talk with your counterparts from different departments was not done a lot but it was great. It just kind of opened up a whole new world for me.

Blanche Touhill: Did you open a whole new world for MODOT?

Lesley Hoffarth: I did eventually. It was the start of just a great career, getting to know people around the state in different ways. MODOT was actually going through a lot of learning to be better at what they did, so a lot of quality improvement, total quality management, a lot of buzz words back in the '80s and '90s for this idea of the organization itself working to be better at what it does. So after the construction work, I moved to St. Louis permanently and I moved to the roadway design department. The districts do the design work for roads and then all of the bridges are designed centrally in Jeff City. So here in the St. Louis region, I was working on roadway design projects. By this time, I was three or four years into my career so I was a senior level design engineer and pretty quickly got promoted to a design group leader, a squad leader at that time and was given a lot of really challenging projects. It kind of seemed like, as I was going through the early part of my career, actually, my entire career, I felt like I kept getting thrown into these sink or swim kind of situations, doing things that had never been done before. I was in charge of designing the first developing our sound wall design process.

Blanche Touhill: Which you used on Highway 40 extensively.

Lesley Hoffarth: We did. Before I-64, I did a series of, I think it was 10 or 12 sound walls on I-270 and 55 but developing that process and how do we interpret the federal highway sound guidelines and what does that mean for MODOT and how do we decide if we can afford to do it and does it fit within federal guidelines. So I developed that process. So that was the first time that we had done sound walls on a massive basis. And I was also in charge of figuring out how to seismically retrofit the double deck structure downtown. So that was a process I led to figure out what are we going to do here. It was a new thing back 20 years ago, to think about, how do we retrofit our bridges so that if we have an earthquake, they don't fall down.

Blanche Touhill: Was that due to Browning?

Lesley Hoffarth: It was, yes. So that really changed the industry's philosophy on earthquakes and it made MODOT think more about the probability of earthquakes in different parts of the state and put together different guidelines than we had before.

Blanche Touhill: Well, the one thing that I always thought of you and your group doing was that when we began to put up bridges in the metropolitan St. Louis area, they were much more beautiful. There was an effort to say to the local communities...like, the bridge over 270 and Olive Street Road, that if the community wanted to add some extra money, they could add little beauty structures.

Lesley Hoffarth: Right.

Blanche Touhill: And I always thought that that came in because prior to that time, all the Missouri bridges sort of looked the same.

Lesley Hoffarth: It did kind of come around at that same time. One of the things that I really wish that we would have done and I lobbied very hard for, was to put together urban design standards, to look at the whole St. Louis area and different parts of the region have different characters, so develop...hire...because MODOT had engineers but didn't have architects or landscape architects, urban designers, so to hire someone to help put together these urban design standards so that when you're in North County or South County or the city, you have this set of design standards, the urban design that professionals in that field have put together for you, for the engineers to just take that and add it to their project. That didn't quite happen but it did kind of because it was right around that time that I was starting to...I had worked on replacing bridges on I-70 and I was starting to work on I-64. We did put together design standards for I-64. So one of the things that we worked our way through was having more decorative bridges that weren't just facades that, in 5 or 10 years, are going to start crumbling and look awful, but things that were just designed into the bones of the structure that would stand the test of time, which is what we have on 64, and the decorative fence. Fencing on bridges is very expensive and, if you remember, we had some awful incidents with people throwing rocks off the bridges and so there were changes in height of fences on bridges because of that. They had to be much higher, either very tall or curved top to make it much harder for people to throw things over them. So that was an extra challenge, in

making something attractive and just really working through MODOT's, the way that they'd always done things and wanting this very high level of quality on everything at times drove the cost up to where it was cost prohibitive and we couldn't do it. So I really urged thinking differently about that and "We want something better than we have, how it has to be cost-effective. Let's see if we can find something off the shelf that would suit our needs," knowing that the bridge itself, you want to design it to last 50 years. A fence has a much shorter design life so "why are we paying for a Cadillac fence to last 50 years when it's not going to last 50 years. We can do something that's still good quality, better than just chain link that's going to give us a 20 to 30 year life and be just fine."

Blanche Touhill: Why did MODOT move toward quality and that kind of aesthetic?

Lesley Hoffarth: I think that it was the time where certainly there were people like me within MODOT saying we should be making our things that we build look a little nicer, and there was more of an urging from the community as well. That was the time, in the '90s, that there was a lot more attention being given to what things looked like and working with the community to get our projects done. I-64, that was a project that, in the early '90s, we had more than 30 bridges that needed to be replaced and MODOT's idea was, "Let's add a lane all the way downtown, take a bunch of Forest Park and a bunch of houses." It didn't sit well with the community. Very soon the project got shelved and sat there for years because the public revolted. So by the mid '90s, they realized especially, MODOT had to come up with a way to get our projects built and gain the public's trust back and that's when I was asked to lead that project and figure out a way to get the road rebuilt.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I have to tell you, it did work because people were just saying, "We'll have to sell our house and move downtown" or "We'll have to get an apartment for my spouse that works downtown, nights that the traffic is impossible" and you really pulled it off.

Lesley Hoffarth: It was just such an amazing project. I think everyone that worked on it really felt like, "This is a once in a lifetime opportunity." I mean, really, for me to be able to lead a project from a concept to cutting the ribbon on it in my lifetime, it rarely happens. These major infrastructure projects take 20, 30, 40 years because they're huge. The funding is huge. You go through several different administrations and leadership at the state

level that wants different things and priorities change. So to be able to put the team together and figure out how to get it done and do it really well, to leave the community with that impression that MDOT really can be trusted, they can do things on time, they can do them on budget, they can make it work well for the community during construction and they can leave a very attractive legacy for the next generation.

Blanche Touhill: Well, you not only did 40 all the way down, but you did...it was really from downtown out to where?

Lesley Hoffarth: Out to UMSL, on I-70.

Blanche Touhill: On I-70, and the one thing that I was just astounded about was everybody said to me, "Oh, you can't imagine MODOT. They are so hard to work with because they have the federal guidelines and the state guidelines and the local struggles" and we never had a problem. It was the most astounding thing. If I had a question, somebody would come to me and say, "They're coming this way" and I'd say, "Oh, I really don't want them to come this way," we would just call and it was just wonderful.

Lesley Hoffarth: Well, you know, we're just people like everybody else.

Blanche Touhill: Yeah, but there was a desire on the part of MODOT that if we wanted something to make it a little bit more pleasant, they would adjust.

Lesley Hoffarth: And that really was a change in the mindset and that's something...you know, to me it's just a great example: I've worked for a lot of different leaders along the way and I've learned some good things from them that I've tried to pass on to the people that work for me now but just this idea of the leader really sets the tone for everyone around them and they can either take the position, "We want to work with you and come up with something that works just as well for you as it does for us," or they can take the position, "We're going to do what we need to and we don't really care what you think."

Blanche Touhill: Well, we didn't find that.

Lesley Hoffarth: Well, I'm so glad to hear that. I'm so glad to hear that.

Blanche Touhill: No, we didn't find that. You were wonderful. Do you think that your communication skills are different than some engineers?

- Lesley Hoffarth: Yes, I know they are.
- Blanche Touhill: And I think that makes a difference.
- Lesley Hoffarth: It does.
- Blanche Touhill: Because you would appear on the TV, I remember, for Highway 40 and I thought, well, that's a straight-forward answer that is rational, but I have to tell you, 40 was just an amazing thing because before it started, you just heard all kinds of doom and gloom and then at the end, everybody said, "Well, wasn't that wonderful that it worked."
- Lesley Hoffarth: Well, I do think that, for as much as we hated the bad press we were getting, it was the best thing that could have happened because the press really helped to lower expectations.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes, they did.
- Lesley Hoffarth: So we didn't have a real high bar to get over.
- Blanche Touhill: No, you didn't. Actually, you had a hard bar. It was like a steel gate.
- Lesley Hoffarth: Yes, it was tough. It was extremely difficult but you know, I think with anything that's super challenging in life, the harder it is, the more rewarding it is and that was I-64.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, but you had planning. You knew what you wanted to do. You knew how you were going to do it and you had a team that carried it out.
- Lesley Hoffarth: Right, we did. It was the perfect scenario: great leadership from the top, giving me the opportunity to dream big, and really, it was the I-70 experience that made me think, I want to do 64 better. If you remember 70, traffic was weaving back and forth for six years.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, no, 70 was very dangerous in our section.
- Lesley Hoffarth: You know, it really was and that's the way projects were designed at the time, just an interchange or a little piece at a time and it was just being able to think through: wouldn't it be great if we could do this as one big project on 64, this whole 10-mile stretch and wouldn't it be great if we had all the funding together so it could be one project and not a bunch of little pieces, and wouldn't it be great if we could consider, instead of having two lanes of traffic on the road that you're building and

having...because then you're slicing it up into these little teeny pieces to do it while traffic is still driving through it. Wouldn't it be great if we could just shut it down and build it all at one time? We've got a great road network but having the leadership that allowed us to think through that and then helped kind of clear the path, worked with the business community.

Blanche Touhill: You must have had bosses that let you carry out your plans.

Lesley Hoffarth: I did, I really did and that was the leadership at MODOT so that's where I just really learned how important good leadership is. It really sets the tone and the direction for what their team's capable of doing and so I was able to put my own team together for 64 by that that last five years.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, I didn't know that, yes.

Lesley Hoffarth: It was really kind of an entrepreneurial start-up. I had a budget of \$535 million dollars and the authority of the chief engineer for MODOT and I could do what needed to be done. Now, I had a lot of people I worked with and I consulted all of my experts around the state but to know that I don't have to go through five layers of approvals to do what I need to do. I have the ability to do what I believe is the right thing and to set up the reporting process I need to so that my leaders feel comfortable with the decisions that are being made. That's the way to do it, and in the process, we were able to develop relationships with those around the community that we needed to. We gained the trust of the community that we were working with and we were able to work through some real barriers we've had in the past with working with the county highway department or the city highway department or all the six municipalities that we went through and just really thought about it as, people don't know or care if this is a MODOT road or a city road or a county road. They just want to get where they need to go and they need to know that it's available to them. So we worked really hard to make it a seamless transportation system around the region.

Blanche Touhill: Actually, I think that roads are one of the basic pillars of the Democratic society, that it allows all kinds of socio-economic groups to move from one section to another and to move products, one to the other. But let me change the subject a little bit because time is fleeing. If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life be like today?

Lesley Hoffarth: I would not have been able to do all the things that I do. I think, being a woman leader and a woman engineer, I wouldn't have gone to college. My family was a farming family, just a blue collar laborer kind of family that 50 years prior, it wouldn't have even been...maybe I would have been a school teacher.

Blanche Touhill: Yes, if you were not married.

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, I would have been married, I would have had a lot of kids by the time I was 20 probably and I maybe would have had enough college education to be a school teacher in the little schoolhouse out in the country but I wouldn't have been able to do the things that I do today and I think a lot about that and I think about the time that I came into engineering at MODOT, even going to college, and very few women engineers, very few women engineers when I got to MODOT, no women in leadership positions at MODOT and I look at the organization today and how many women are in charge of parts of the state districts. The interim director from MODOT has been a woman for the past year or so, until they hired their latest director. So women have had the ability to move up through the ranks and get that leadership experience because the men of MODOT agreed, it's time to let them do that. It's a great time for women and I do feel like women before me have worked very hard to make this possible for me. So it does make me feel like I do need to pay that forward and I need to take those opportunities to go to schools and talk to girls and get them interested in whatever they want to do and to not have people tell them they can't do it.

Blanche Touhill: Was there any award or awards that you've obtained that you're really very proud of?

Lesley Hoffarth: Yeah, I have several that I'm really proud of. I've gotten several awards from the engineering community. I think the ones that are most meaningful to me are the ones that I've gotten from the community at large, from the Girl Scouts, as one of their women of excellence; from the CORO leadership organization; from Webster University; from the St. Louis Women's Forum, for being recognized for being a woman that's really helped to blaze trails, open doors, do great things that are touching the lives of the community around us every day.

Blanche Touhill: And I want to ask about your current job. In one way it's not like what you did before but in another way it's very much like what you've done. So you're the director of Forest Park Forever?

Lesley Hoffarth: Right, so it's an amazing opportunity. I've almost been there for six years now so I finished rebuilding I-64 and moved right over to the park. The organization was at a kind of transitional period in their lives, will be 30 years old as an organization next year, but we were formed, just a group of people sitting around the table, great memories of the park, hated that it had fallen apart, wanted to do something about it. So we worked with the city and the community to develop a master plan for the park in the mid '90s, around the time I was trying to figure out how to get I-64 built actually, and we helped to raise the money to restore the park. That was mid '90s, through the mid 2000's, and then we started working on, what do we do now? How do we protect the investment that the community has made in helping to fund the restoration? And the organization went through a year-long strategic planning process. We changed our mission from rebuilding a park to taking care of it forever and started looking for a leader that could help carry out that strategic plan and they found me working on I-64. They were looking for someone that could work collaboratively with the city and the community to advance this mission of securing the finances of the park, more clearly defining the role for Forest Park Forever and helping the city take care of the park going forward and making sure that the community always had a wonderful experience when they came to the park. I loved that challenge. It took a while to figure it out and I didn't want to just clearly define our role. I wanted a true partnership between Forest Park Forever and the city because, coming from the public sector, I know how important that authority is. The city owns the park and they always will and it's hard to give up that authority. We had been proven partners with the city, raising half of the one hundred million dollars to restore the park, taking on landscaping, taking on project management for the projects that were built in the park. It's the logical next step. So we have that true partnership now that was really built on the I-64 model of working collaboratively as a team. We keep our dollars separate but we bring them together to put together a joint budget each year to be more efficient with how we're spending the public and private dollars together. We've secured the city's funding to make sure it comes to the park and not other places around St. Louis and we've agreed to supplement that

with a lot more private funding, growing our endowment to make sure that generations from now there's still money there to take care of the park. That's the "forever" piece of it. It's a generational place. It's where people have those great childhood memories and they come back for all of those important periods in their lives and when they get older and they have kids of their own, they want to bring them back to the park because they want their kids to connect with that same heart-felt love of the park that they had. So, that's what I get to do. I get to take care of this place that means so much to so many people in St. Louis and start imagining, what does the park visitor of the future look like? This park has been here for 140 years. If you think about the changes it's seen over that time, it was two miles outside the limits of St. Louis City at the time in 1875. It's been transformed many times over that period of time. It will continue. That's my job, working with our partners of the city to make sure that the park continues to be relevant to the community around us and to be forward-thinking, what does the community look like in 20, 30, 40, 50 years and what do we need to do to be prepared for that? So I think it's the perfect time for an engineer to be leading Forest Park Forever, working with our partners with the city to really make sure that we're preparing this park for the future that is yet to come.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that's a wonderful statement and I really do feel you've succeeded. Well, you succeeded in 64; you succeeded in Highway 70 and now you're succeeding in Forest Park Forever and they're all interesting and challenging jobs.

Lesley Hoffarth: Very challenging, they're all very different, but they do have some common threads and each one of those experiences was a good, it helped to build that foundation, to make the next experience and really draw from that.

Blanche Touhill: Well, with that, I want to thank you for coming today. I enjoyed talking to you and learning all about engineering and your interest, really, in being a leader. Thank you very much.

Lesley Hoffarth: Thank you, thank you for having me.