

An Interview with
Sharon McPherron

at *The Historical Society of Missouri* St. Louis
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Oral History Program

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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?
- Sharon McPherron: I'm Sharon Martin McPherron. I live in the City of St. Louis and I am now retired.
- Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about your early life: your mother and father; who did you play with; your elementary and secondary school; your grandparents. Were there family members that said to you, "Sharon, you have ability. Go and be what you want to be" or was that a school teacher who said, "Sharon, you're really talented..." ... in some way; were you a leader in school. Just talk about your youth.
- Sharon McPherron: Wow! You're going to have to prompt me. I was born in Terra Haute, Indiana in 1938 and that was probably about the time that Terra Haute reached its peak in terms of, was a railroad, steel, creosote chemicals center. It was a small town, 80,000. I can't remember when I made the decision but somehow, in between when I was born and when I was 17 and went off to college, I decided, I'm never going to live in this town as long as I live. I can't remember any moment when that happened. I just knew that whatever my fate was, it was not going to be in Terra Haute, Indiana. When I think about my parents, I think I was very fortunate in that I was born in a hospital. My mother had good pre-natal care. I had all the typical child immunizations and care and had good medical care all my life and I don't think this is inconsequential, and it was linked to, my father was a member of the Brotherhood of Locomotive Engineers & Firemen and so my family had medical insurance when we lived in a community where very, very few people had medical insurance. So I think I got off to, from the point of view of health, a good start, particularly for my time period and my generation. I lived in a house with my mother and father and my widowed aunt, Hannah. Aunt Hannah was a widow for over 50 years and she undoubtedly was an influence in my life because she was there every day. I went to the local grade school which was Montrose which was a block away. I walked. I can remember a lot of the teachers. I don't remember any being unusually encouraging of women or careers.

I do remember my 5th grade teacher with great clarity. I think she must have been...well, to me, as a 5th grader, I could swear she was 85. She was probably 70. I knew she was well past retirement age. She reminded me at frequent intervals of my father and my uncles and aunts that all sat in her classroom and that they had been good students and that she expected the same from me. We did something in her classroom which I think is important. We stood and we had spelling bees and when you missed, you sat and we had multiplication bees and when you missed, you sat. There was great competition to be standing at the end and I think she instilled something in all of us about preparation, staying with the competition and that it was important to be the person standing at the end. I know that seems very small. I also remember in grade school I learned to play basketball. You had to play basketball with the boys. It was fun basketball. It was push, shove, it was at recess, it was dusty, dirty. Again, you wanted to be the person standing at the end. I remember 6th grade as a total reversal of Miss Lee. I remember 6th grade as awful. It was our first male teacher which all our parents thought was going to be wonderful for us and it was just the opposite. He was extraordinarily patronizing to the girls. He sat is down, he corrected us orally, loudly, he told us we were wrong, he gave us negative encouragement and so that meant old Miss Lee became a fairly important role model in some very positive ways. I remember two other things about grade school: There were students in our class who were very poor and when the coal miners went on strike, they stopped coming to school. They didn't have the quarter for milk money; they didn't have the quarter to buy a bond. As the winter progressed, they didn't have shoes. So I think we were very aware of inequalities, all the way from the coal miners' children to those of who felt really very fortunate. So these were very important, I think, influences. I'm not going to go straight to junior high school. I'll go back to my father. I think another very important early influence was, I grew up in a union family in a union community and there was this sense of social justice, there was this sense of working together for goals, a sense that people could accomplish things, and I lived very close to the birth place of Eugene B. Debs. He was a local hero. He stood for

free speech and so I think all these things were not inconsequential and Terra Haute was sort of a liberal hub in a far more conservative community of state and I think the contrast helped us realize that there were some differences in how people believed and how people felt. In our household...and again, I'm not going to junior high school yet...the maiden aunt was, I think, a very important influence. She had been widowed when she was 25 years old. She never remarried. She went to work...and I don't know how she made the transition from widowhood to work, but she worked her entire life. She worked, again, until she was in her 70's. She worked as a head bookkeeper at a poultry company. It was a very responsible job. She sat with ledgers in front of her that were this wide. Her most important tool was a fountain pen and nobody touched Aunt Hannah's fountain pen because it had to be ready as her tool for the next day's work. There could be no blots, no misses in this company's books. She went to work every day in a suit, a blouse, a pin on her lapel, a hat, a purse, and an appropriate coat over her arm, and I don't think anybody owns spring coats anymore, but Aunt Hannah had a winter coat, a spring coat and a fall coat. She probably only had three and she probably only had three hats to go with these three coats but when she left for work, she was what a working woman should look like, a professional working woman. She certainly didn't have the education of a professional woman but I think the way she conducted her life and her career, you would consider her a professional woman. When she came home from work, she did not cook, she did not help my mother with the housework which was always sort of an edge in the family, but she undoubtedly was a very important influence. She had a purse, an old purse which she kept in her closet and she put in cash certain amounts of money in this purse every week. We were told that that money going in Aunt Hannah's purse was for me to have my teeth straightened, and then it would go to college tuition. So it was always there. I was first generation in my family to go to college, as were all my cousins but it was always assumed that we were going to college, that we were going to complete school. It was always "when you go to school," and my father would occasionally say, "Well, if you don't want to go to Indiana State

Teachers' College..."...which I didn't because that meant staying in Terra Haute and being an elementary school teacher and, unconsciously, that wasn't part of my life plan. He would sigh and say, "Well, you could go to secretarial school" but it was clear that would be a disappointment to them, that that would be a second choice, and besides, if I had gone to secretarial school, I would have been a failure. I can't touch type to this day. I would have never been able to hold a job had I gone to secretarial school. I don't know what I would have done if anybody would have insisted I had to go to secretarial school. Oh, I am really wandering. The other thing I was going to say, there were boys in my class and I remember two, and I'm sure they're dead, so I can mention their name: Richard Ford/Sammy Taylor, and they were bullies, very poor, but they would bully me on the way home from school and I didn't have to walk very far. But they would do things like take my shoes in the winter because shoes in their community were important, and they'd hide my shoes, and then I would end up home barefoot in cold weather and my mother and father were furious because I didn't know where my shoes were. My father would have to go out, re-walk my route to school and look under all the bushes and find what Sammy Taylor and Richard Ford had done with my shoes, and I think they bullied me because they saw me as the girl in the class that always had new shoes, that always had good shoes. And so I became a target for their bullying. I think I lived through it. I cried a little bit but I learned that you didn't cry when Richard and Sammy came for your shoes. You let them take them and then you figured out, you'd get them back later. I went to junior high school, 7th, 8th and 9th grade. We walked, of course. There were no such thing as school buses. It was a pretty good walk, at least to a 7th grader, I felt like it was uphill against the wind and in the snow. It was probably a mile or a mile-and-a-half but it took a good solid half an hour and as I walked, I just have been the furthest because as I walked, I'd knock on other girls' doors and by the time we got to school, there would be five or six of us all walking together. It was a big building. It was a big junior high school, fairly new, big cafeteria. We passed from class to class and had various different teachers. I don't remember any outstandingly wonderful teachers in junior

high school. We did start Latin. I have a very vague memory of 9th grade Latin and I have more of a memory of very bad science teachers, just terrible science teachers. I left, at least 9th grade, thinking all you did in science was memorize things and I was an adult before I discovered what science was really about and if I had to criticize my education, it would be that science was memorization.

Blanche Touhill: What about math?

Sharon McPherron: Math was decently good and social studies were very strong and very good and in high school, English was very good at literature. Again, I think the timing of my birth was very good. I think I went to a public high school in the 1950's which were the glory days of the public school. I think we had a caliber of teachers that we would not find any longer in the public schools, particularly the women.

Blanche Touhill: Could they marry?

Sharon McPherron: Oh, well, I remember the dean of women was not married. I would have to say I don't know because I don't think of any of them being married. My image of them was not of married women. So even if they were, it was very quiet. It wasn't talked about. Now, in grade school, I definitely had some married teachers, two I remember. One we thought was very glamorous and one I knew was married because my father knew her husband. From that point of view, they certainly were not role models. If family was there, it was pushed to the side; it was never talked about and the memorable teachers were not married. They were older, they were career teachers.

Blanche Touhill: Were you a leader in elementary or secondary school?

Sharon McPherron: In elementary school, I'm not sure of leadership. I think leadership in elementary school was taking care of yourself, negotiating the boys, being willing to play basketball with the boys, being willing in Miss Lee's classroom to be among the last standing. I did belong to Girl Scouts. I joined Girl Scouts very early and I would say the Girl Scouts were a very important influence on me in terms, later, when I was in high school and then early in college, I

met some very wonderful women through Girl Scouting. I was in Girl Scouts in the time period when it was very oriented towards liberal issues, was into one world, flew the world flag higher than the American flag, Joseph McCarthy cracked down on the Girl Scouts and the Girl Scouts prevailed. So I think that's where I began leadership, was in the Girl Scouts and they were very different from the Boy Scouts. They were very anti-militaristic and camp was wonderful because summer camp in Girl Scouts, you can do anything you want to do. We can hike; we can swim; we can camp, and we did something called "primitive camping" and at the primitive camp, we ran around in our bras and pants and threw off clothes and swam in the lake with nothing on and had this sort of marvelous experience. They can't fire the director of camp because she's long dead, I'm absolutely sure, but if I publicly said we swam in the lake on the camp site naked, she'd probably be run out of town. But Girl Scouts had the leadership opportunities. I was a junior counselor and then a counselor and then a waterfront director and then an assistant director. I worked in camps and that probably was leadership opportunities.

Blanche Touhill:

Did Girl Scouts teach you to swim?

Sharon McPherron:

No, my Uncle Guy taught me to swim in a memorable way. I used to have to...I use the word "have" to spend three weeks every summer with my Uncle Guy and Aunt Nelly and my cousin, Nancy because my father was the youngest of his family by 10 years. When I was 10, my cousins were 45, 55 age groups with the exception of my cousin, Nancy, and so I always had to spend three weeks every summer with Nancy. Nancy and I fought tooth and nail. We were not compatible. We went to a swimming pool in Nancy's neighborhood the first day of the three weeks of one of my summers. I must have been five, six, someplace in that range. Nancy swam beautifully. She went on to become a collegiate swimmer and collegiate diver and had a very good career doing this then as an adult coach, diving, and married a diving coach and all this, was very, very good. She pushed me in the deep end. I struggled and struggled before anybody realized that I was bobbing up and down and I couldn't quite reach the very high side of the pool and then finally I was pulled out. I was furious at

Nancy. I was angry. She said, "You won't tell my father," and I said, "You bet," and Uncle Guy was probably on the driveway when I marched out and said, "Let me tell you what Nancy did to me." And so Uncle Guy said, "I think you need to learn to swim." He said, "Go upstairs and get your bathing suit" and he said, "Give me 15 minutes," and Uncle Guy came down with his bathing suit on and a towel around his neck and we marched down the block and into the park and into the swimming pool and Uncle Guy said, "I'm going to teach you how to float on your face and you're going to learn how to swim" and so Uncle Guy taught me how to swim. In two or three days, he taught me enough that if I fell in or got pushed in the deep end, I could tread and I could grab the side of the pool and by the end of the summer, I could swim, not as well as Nancy, but I could swim.

Blanche Touhill: How did Nancy react, that you got the attention of her father?

Sharon McPherron: Not well. The whole idea of me learning to swim and being taught by her father did not go over well at all.

Blanche Touhill: How was high school?

Sharon McPherron: High school was extenuated because it was just 10th, 11th and 12th grade. Again, I think I was very fortunate, as I said, to go in the golden age of high school. The city had three high schools and those of us who passed Latin in the 9th grade went to one high school; those who didn't pass Latin in the 9th grade or chose not to take it went to sort of a general commercial high school; and then there was the high school that was technical and I don't remember any of the girls going to the technical high school at all. They went to the middle route, with the idea of learning how to type and all these kinds of things. And so I went to the academic high school.

Blanche Touhill: How many girls went to the academic high school out of your class, do you remember?

Sharon McPherron: I don't remember. I think if I looked, the enrollment was pretty much 50/50. Now, the enrollment wasn't 50/50 in physics and chemistry and math. I think there were two of us in some of my math classes, a handful of us in chemistry and maybe two or three

of us in physics. So there was a division in the school of the girls more into language and social science and the English courses. I continued with Latin. I wish I hadn't and I did take the full social studies and English sequence. Typing was an alternative. One of my huge disappointments of high school was the basketball program. We wore long one-piece outfits which I'm sure you remember which were purple or blue. Half the class wore purple and half the class wore blue so we could divide into teams and they had bloomers underneath them and basketball had six players on a team: two guards, two forwards, two centers. You could not pass the halfway mark. You could not run the full length of the basketball court. Guards could not shoot and forwards could not guard. You could dribble twice and then you had to pass. It was miserable. It didn't resemble basketball in grade school with the boys at all. It was miserable and gym and physical education was fairly miserable. We couldn't run over 100 yards and I have told my grandchildren this, my granddaughters and they think it's funny but it wasn't funny at the time. We were told by the gym teacher that if we persisted in running over 100 yards at one time, we would break our hymens and therefore we would go to our wedding night not as virgins. Now, I always thought that was...I think at the time I thought it was a big fat lie but how could this person in a school room and a person in authority tell us that? But she did and it sounds like just a funny tale but it's not a funny tale. It's an indication of how people felt they could lie to women. I mean, this is a period...one of my aunts had breast cancer and nobody knew that she'd had a mastectomy and lived 40 years until she died and in taking off her clothes and caring for her when she died, we discovered she had breast cancer. So this was the era when people lied to women. You went to the doctor and your father or your mother, then your husband was supposed to go with you. My husband never went to the doctor with me. And the doctor told your husband or your father what was wrong with you, didn't tell you and if it was cancer, you were never told. So this was sort of the era and I think the gym teacher telling us that we would break our hymens and not be perceived as virgins was part of this, it was okay to lie to women; it was okay to discourage

us from doing things that we wanted, by lying. When we got to college...I'll tell you an even bigger lie.

Blanche Touhill: Okay. So let's go to college.

Sharon McPherron: I was in the National Honors Society. I did get a scholarship. I looked at four colleges. In my heart, I wanted to go to the University of Wyoming. I knew I could never sell that. It was accredited in forestry and library science, neither of which were my interests. So it was clear that I wanted to go for some motive other than that. I decided...and I think this was an important decision in my life...I would not go to Indiana University, and so that left either Indiana State Teachers' College, and I would not go to a teachers' college, and that left Purdue University and I think that was a very good and very interesting choice for a woman in the '50s but it didn't come by a positive leadership kind of choice. It came by, I wouldn't do these other things. Indiana University, to me, was a plaid skirt, a cashmere sweater, crew cut long sleeves and a white dickey. Do you remember dickeys?

Blanche Touhill: I do.

Sharon McPherron: And a cardigan over all of that and I was going to have none of that...and a string of pearls. I was going to have none of that.

Blanche Touhill: And the two sweaters matched.

Sharon McPherron: Oh, yes, the two sweaters matched and they matched the plaid and I was going to have none of that. I didn't know how we were going to dress at Purdue but I knew I wasn't going to dress like that. So I went to Purdue. I was the only girl in my high school graduating class to go to Purdue. Until the last 20 years, I'm the only woman I know. I didn't even meet women who went to Purdue and it's been in the last 20 years I've met women who went to Purdue. Part of that was because when I arrived on campus, the ratio of men to women was four to one and of the women on campus, 90% of them were in home economics.

Blanche Touhill: And I would assume, by the time you graduated, that number was even higher.

- Sharon McPherron: The ratio of men to women?
- Blanche Touhill: Yeah.
- Sharon McPherron: I think it was about the same.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, do you? Okay. The ones that went did finish?
- Sharon McPherron: Yes, because I think the ones...and I will have to think of the girls...I remember my freshman year, one or two drop-outs.
- Blanche Touhill: But if they were going to drop out, they dropped out early?
- Sharon McPherron: And I remember one of them's plan. It was the first time I was ever taken aback by a calculating plan. She came from Indianapolis. She announced to us all in the freshmen dorm that she was going to be in the homecoming court, that we were all going to vote for her, that she didn't have a lot of clothes and we were all going to lend her clothes for these various events, that she was going to meet a boy in one of the rich fraternities, she was going to be engaged by the end of her freshman year and then she was going to drop out of school.
- Blanche Touhill: And did she?
- Sharon McPherron: She did all of those things and I will have to say, in a sense she was a role model to all of us because we all stood there flabbergasted that she had such...linking sort of adult welfare and getting married and was so blatant. I'm sure all of us thought that we certainly wanted to marry a successful man and that we certainly didn't want to have to be on our own because we didn't know what being on our own meant, but none of us were so blatant. None of us had such a well thought out plan.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you lend her the clothes?
- Sharon McPherron: Oh, we all did. She was as tall as I was, certainly. I don't think I had very many clothes that she liked. She explained to us she would have gone to IU but she thought the better chances of finding this man in a year...and she only had resources and time for a year...was better at Purdue. So this was very well thought out.
- Blanche Touhill: Did she marry a man that was a success?

Sharon McPherron: I don't know. She left at the end of her freshman year with a great big engagement ring.

Blanche Touhill: So how was Purdue? What did you major in?

Sharon McPherron: I dabbled for two years. I didn't know what I wanted to major in because I didn't know what I wanted to do. I had this long list of things I didn't want to do and I think it's very interesting I didn't want to be a teacher, which I ended up, of course, being a teacher but I never even thought about women being college teachers. When I think about the faculty at Purdue University that I had outside of physical education, I can't remember meeting a single woman faculty. There were no female role models. Because I chose to go to Purdue, again, the pattern of high school was repeated. There were two or three years in a math class of 180 boys. There were five of us in the physics lecture and there were 250 boys and we struggled, we struggled very hard in the labs because we didn't have the hands-on skill of the boys. The lab assistants weren't interested in us. The faculty weren't interested in us.

Blanche Touhill: Did you help each other?

Sharon McPherron: But we were incompetent, is what we were. I remember things like resistors, you can tell the quantity of the resistance by a series of color bands. Well, nobody told us this. We had never taken radios apart. We didn't know how to solder, we didn't know how to read all these little clues on the instruments. I never held a pair of calipers in my hands. We were awkward with the calipers. We were a disaster in labs; we were an utter disaster in labs. And we were never in the same lab section. I mean, there were 250 of us in lecture and 25 of us in each lab section, so no, there wasn't. We just struggled and I took a social science course and I loved it and I took another one and I loved it and I thought, huh, I've sort of found my niche and sort of moved forward, sort of weaving. My husband teases me that I'm one of the few people he knows that has a BS in sociology and that was because the State of Indiana only allowed Indiana University to give BA's and Purdue to give BS's and so we were in this environment with the boys and we had to get a BS. Then when I applied for graduate school, they

looked at my transcript and said, "You have a Bachelors of Science Degree?" but I said, "Look, there's Language, there's all the courses you're supposed to have." It's just an artifact of the Indiana educational system.

Blanche Touhill: Were you a leader in college?

Sharon McPherron: I belonged to several honorary groups which were leadership groups. I can't remember what I did in order to earn my way into them but I obviously must have held office in student groups and done student things because I was in these groups. One of them was Gold Peppers and one of them was Tommy Hawk and they were sort of leadership fraternities that I remember very little about. You were tapped and you were initiated. I don't remember very much about them.

Blanche Touhill: So, did anybody of the faculty say, "Sharon, you have ability"?

Sharon McPherron: No.

Blanche Touhill: Okay, so you graduate.

Sharon McPherron: I'm going to tell you one other thing because, again, this is one of these stories that I tell that people think is just a funny story but it's not. It's indicative of the time period. An experiment was done in the Seven Sister schools and about five of the Big Ten schools in the '50s which became notorious when it was discovered that Hillary Rodham Clinton was in this study and her pictures and mine were archived in the Library of Congress. Women only had to take a one-hour health and hygiene course our freshman year and we had to take it before we could enroll for our sophomore year. It was a requirement. Furthermore, it was a requirement for graduating from receiving your degree from Purdue University. Furthermore, within this course, you had to sign a sign-up sheet for a date and a time and have your picture taken and it was labeled "a posture picture" and we were told that it was to see if our posture improved but there was never an after picture taken and this one-hour course was a textbook course and unless we put the book on our head and walked around the room, I didn't see how it was going to improve our posture. But we walked into a room, not different than this room, except we were handed a

sheet, we were told to take off all our clothes and the word emphasis was on “all” our clothes, and two pictures were taken, one profile and one frontal and our faces were included in them and we did it and I think the thing it says about my generation of women is, we didn’t protest that this course was only required of women. We didn’t protest that it had to be taken our freshman year, and if it bumped out a three-credit course or put you in a different lab section, that was too bad, and none of us protested, that we walked in there and had this picture taken of full frontal nudity. I can’t imagine a college freshman today walking in and allowing her picture to be taken with such a bogus explanation and walking out and not saying anything for 30 years and finally, I don’t know who found Hillary’s picture, all our pictures were there with Hillary’s picture and my immediate reaction was, oh, my God, I’m in the Library of Congress naked. But we accepted it and that, to me...and my granddaughter asked me what was the most important decade of my life and I immediately replied, the ‘60s. To me, the ‘60s was the golden decade and I think the reason was, it was such a sharp change. Had I been in college in the ‘60s and somebody said, “Take off your clothes. I’m going to take your picture” I would have said, “I’m going to punch you out and I’m going to organize a group and we’re going to protest and we’re going to have a demonstration,” and that change from the ‘50s to the ‘60s was so abrupt that it got all of our attention that something was happening to us and to our lives and I sort of tell people, I felt like I grew up in the ‘60s. That’s when I felt like I developed leadership skills and that’s when I began to feel sort of my life was...I no longer was going to take off my clothes and have my nude picture taken and let it be put in the Library of Congress. Those days were over and I think they were over all over the United States and probably all over the western world.

Blanche Touhill:

I think that’s right. I think that is absolutely right.

Sharon McPherron:

And when I look back on the ‘60s, I mean, they were, in some respects, a miserable time.

Blanche Touhill:

For this country.

Sharon McPherron:

Oh, race riots, assassinations, confrontation between protesters and the police, the Democratic convention, all of these things were just pure misery. But through it all, I think we all felt hope because women's roles, civil rights, all of these things that we had been lied to about suddenly were apparently lies. I tell another story which people think is funny and I don't think is funny: I went to a Laundromat in Leesburg, Florida...and I said I grew up in a liberal community and a liberal family; you'll have to remember that...the washing machines were labeled "colored" and "white" and I thought, how nice, because washing machines were sort of rag tag then and if somebody had washed white clothes, you got lint all over your black clothes. So I very carefully put all my colored clothes at one end of the Laundromat and put all my white clothes in a machine at the other end of the Laundromat and I think it was several years before I realized that there was yet another lie. I had just fallen into white clothes and colored clothes rather than white people and colored people. I didn't figure it out. So it's funny and it wasn't funny and all that was dismantled. In the '60s, I worked as hard as I could in political campaigns in the City of St. Louis. My husband and I lived in an interracial neighborhood. We put our children in an interracial schools. I chose a pediatrician who had an integrated practice. I worked very hard in the campaign of an African American woman who ran for the Missouri State legislature. She was defeated by 38 votes. She was defeated by a candidate who admitted he did not live in the district, that he lived in University City and when asked why, he said, "Well, I wouldn't put my children in those all-black schools in St. Louis City," and he was elected because people felt sympathy for him. They wouldn't put their children in those schools in the City of St. Louis either. So I felt like that's when leadership skills came forward, was getting involved in those issues.

Blanche Touhill:

I know you have a Master's Degree. Where did you get your Master's Degree?

Sharon McPherron:

Washington University.

- Blanche Touhill: So when you moved to St. Louis, I know your husband was getting a Ph.D. wasn't he in physics?
- Sharon McPherron: Electrical engineering.
- Blanche Touhill: And you were getting the Master's in sociology.
- Sharon McPherron: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: And how was that?
- Sharon McPherron: That was...well, they're not all dead but that was a horrible, miserable experience. The department was fragmented.
- Blanche Touhill: Oh, it was.
- Sharon McPherron: It was incoherent. Very good people came to the department, did no writing or research, left the department and went on and had brilliant careers. I thought I was sort of willing to get into the struggle which I was but not into the way the people in that department thought you should and the department was cruelly divided. There was no way you could find a mentor.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, it eventually just sort of died, didn't it?
- Sharon McPherron: Died, because they wouldn't give people tenure. Nobody could get tenure because it was so factional. No women could get tenure. It was a terrible place and when the time came, the American Sociological Society sent letters to a great many of us who they knew had some connection with that department and said, "Would you go out and protest and work for the Administration to demand that a major university needed a sociology department," and I and some of the women I knew who had been in the department at that time said, "No, thank you. There's no way we're going to work to keep that department alive." It hurt too many people. It hurt too many careers. It damaged too many people. It was a vicious and wicked place. So I took some more graduate courses, passed the Master's but I also had four children in the '60s and I will tell you, the work place wasn't very open to women with four children. I was told, first of all, by my immediate supervisor...well, my first career was in an all-female organization and that was a disaster. I was pregnant

while I was there. They didn't like the fact that I was pregnant. I had decided very early on not to wear a wedding ring as sort of the symbol of the kind of marriage my husband and I wanted and the wedding ring, we thought, was the wrong kind of symbol and they harassed me about being pregnant and not wearing a wedding ring and what would board members think and what would teenage girls who came in think in this all-women's organization and I thought, well, maybe the teenage girls coming, their thinking will be, there's an alternative to what you're being told. But then I went to work and my immediate supervisor had to ask the board for a maternity leave for me and he told me that he was embarrassed to do it, that it embarrassed him to have to ask for a maternity leave. That one was my second child. I was docked salary and docked \$25 for not coming to commencement. Now, I could have pulled myself together and I could have gotten to commencement but the pregnancy had not ended happily; that pregnancy had not ended happily and so I really wasn't willing to do it. Then the next time I was pregnant, he was still my immediate supervisor and we had to have very serious conversations about, would my energy be diverted from my work because I had children. And then I came up for tenure and then my husband's job was brought up in the tenure hearing. My husband, I was told, made so much money that I really didn't need tenure. Why didn't I just sort of drift off and work part-time, and I was amazed to hear Ruth Bader Ginsberg, who's, I think, six, seven years older than me, say that in her first tenure hearing, the fact that her husband had a good salary was held against her. I can remember one of the people on the committee saying, "Your husband's an engineer and engineers make lots of money" and I felt like saying, "Well, you could have been an engineer too. Did you have trouble with that first calculus course?" But the whole tension of trying to work and have children. I had a full-time housekeeper which was absolutely marvelous. I didn't have to use daycare, I never used daycare. I was very privileged in that respect and we had a wonderful housekeeper. She stayed with us 20 years or maybe 25 years and she made my working possible but I was always asked, would I put my full energy into my job or would my...then when my husband went into "corporate America,"

would my energy be dissipated by entertaining people, would I have to entertain and therefore I wouldn't put attention to my work. It was very interesting.

Blanche Touhill:

Now, I know that eventually you entered academic administration.

Sharon McPherron:

I went through academic administration. I came into it. I had a very good experience in my career. I went to the American Sociology Association meeting in, I think, 1970 and I heard this person speak, called Hans Meuschke from the University of Missouri-Columbia and he talked about the fact that he wanted change in college teaching and everybody sort of rolled their eyes and looked at him and he said, "I'm looking for volunteers who will join my movement to improve the quality of college teaching" and I raised my hand and said, "I don't know and I know you don't know me and this is my first time to attend the American Sociology Society meeting but I'd like to join your movement" and he said, "You're enlisted." He was on the faculty of the University of Missouri-Columbia. I had never met him so that was not the connection at all and he was one of the most amazing people in my life. He put together a team of three of us as his co-leaders who worked immediately under him. He had us write a proposal for the Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education which I think was sort of a '60s movement that didn't last very long and every time we'd bring him a draft of our part of it, he would say, "Well, is that all? Don't you people want to change the discipline?" and we would say, "Well, yes." He said, "But you can't change the discipline with a project of that little tiny scale. Don't you want to change college teaching? Don't you want to change the world?" and we'd all say, "Well, yes, yes," and he'd say, "Well, go back, go back, rewrite it; make it bigger; make it more elaborate; dream" and we would say, "But Hans, the budget is getting too big and it would take 40 people to do this and you're talking about us having contacts with 150 sociology departments and publishing. This has got to be crazy" and he'd say, "Just write it. Just write it. We'll work it out." Well, we got funded. We were one of the biggest projects under the Fund for Improvement of Post-Secondary Education. They loved us. I think within the

profession of sociology, we were very successful. I think we influenced anthropology, psychology and some of the other social sciences to look at teaching and effective teaching and I think that we were the people from whom the improvement of college teaching and the fact that teaching was important spread and he was a remarkable person. So I consider him my real leadership mentor and my preparation for administration. I don't think I would have...and I think my administrative style was very much his, which was, do it and ask questions later. Don't really worry about it. The idea has got to be big enough to have critical mass. The idea has to be big enough to change things. Now, I certainly don't think, once I got on my own campus, I had that kind of impact because it was very bureaucratic and a lot of people didn't want change but he was...and he was not only an influential person in my life, of the 20 or 30 of us that he worked with, we all said the same thing: he was very influential. He was a very exciting person and I saw him tap you on the shoulder but I'll still tell a little story. I remember being in Montreal with him and we had arrived several days before the ASA meeting and this is not the crux of his leadership training but it was a very important experience in my life. He was, of course, obviously much older than I and he died while I was still teaching and it was a very tragic death. He probably died because of his lifestyle, which was to embrace life at its absolute fullest. He was from Vienna. He had been in the U.S. Army as counter intelligence because he was from Austria and he was a bigger than life person who I don't think the University of Missouri appreciated the person that they had. His office was in a Quonset hut, but he said to me, "We're going out tonight." He says, "I like to have pretty young girls on my arm" and from Hans, that wasn't a put-down at all. It was, "let's go out and have a good time and you're a young girl and I'm an older man and that's how we're going to do it. It's going to be a fabulous experience." I don't remember where we went for cocktails but we went someplace for cocktails where the band was jazz and it was very low music and it was very savoir faire and avant-garde. Then we went to an absolutely gorgeous restaurant for dinner and Hans ordered for us and it was course after course and then he said, "No, we're not going to have dessert here. We'll

go someplace where we can overlook the whole city and have dessert” and it was a dinner that started at 6:00 and ended at midnight and it was magic. And so he came into people’s lives with that kind of experience and I was still the young lady from St. Louis, Missouri at that point and it was a wonderful experience. The award is very straight-forward and very clear. The honor that I feel most honored with is the Hans Meuschke American Sociological Society’s Award for The Improvement of College Teaching in Sociology and I’ve very proud of that. I shared it with a person called Charles Goldschmidt who had taught at Oberlin and that’s probably the award. I’m not sure I have the exact title. I’ll have to look it up.

Blanche Touhill:

What about if you were born 50 years earlier?

Sharon McPherron:

I look at my aunts because, as I said, my father was very tail end. His brothers and people were much older than him. So I look at my aunts and I think my life would have been like my aunts and perhaps my mother’s life. My mother went to work after my brother and I finished high school and had a long career but I guess the aunt who lived with us who was on her own and had to find some kind of career and had to work it through would have certainly been an alternative. My other aunts all married. They had, interestingly enough, very small families. I don’t know why. And they were, I think, happy, though I know some of them had some real discontents about how narrow their lives were. I had one aunt called Aunt Minnie and I know that she was very discontent about the constraints on her life. Aunt Minnie took a subscription to National Geographic and Life Magazine and I knew exactly when those magazines were going to be delivered to her house because I would arrive with the mailman and Aunt Minnie would sit and we would talk about National Geographic and we would talk about Life Magazine and her message was very strong, that there’s a world out there that you can see in these publications that you don’t see in Terra Haute, Indiana. So I think it would have been marriage to a respectable man...

Blanche Touhill:

Would it have been in Terra Haute?

- Sharon McPherron: It probably would have been in Terra Haute unless I had had...I think it probably would have been Terra Haute which, at that time, probably wouldn't have been as bad because that was a period where the town was growing. There was probably some opportunity and, as I said, it was a more liberal community. You could still vote for Eugene B. Debs in Terra Haute but I think it would have been very constrained.
- Blanche Touhill: I want to ask one quick question: I know you were on a team in Purdue for swimming.
- Sharon McPherron: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Would you talk about that a little bit?
- Sharon McPherron: Well, it was a club team, as most women's sports were in that period. We had a good time. Purdue was not very competitive because there was absolutely no emphasis on women's sports at all. We swam in cotton knit suits which nobody can even probably imagine and when we had meets, we swam in wool knit suits that, rather than making you slicker in the water and sleeker in the water, it sort of inflated.
- Blanche Touhill: They were more modest?
- Sharon McPherron: Yes, they were modest, but they sagged when they got wet and they inflated and they filled with air and water and when you did your racing start, they plopped against the water with a big bang. And then, as I told you earlier, the women's pool was a 20 yard pool, not a 25 yard pool so when we practiced, we had an extra turn in 100 yards or in a 50 yard race. It was very low-keyed.
- Blanche Touhill: Did you have an athletic scholarship?
- Sharon McPherron: No, I had an academic scholarship.
- Blanche Touhill: Well, did anybody have an athletic scholarship?
- Sharon McPherron: No women had athletic scholarships and I think if we want to talk about an impetus for change in women's lives, it was Title Nine. I think Title Nine...and I was teaching and working at a college when Title Nine happened and Title Nine was a changer. That and

the other thing I look at that I think was a changer on the college campus, but on live in general, was the Americans Disabled Act...what is it, American for Disabled?

Blanche Touhill: ADA.

Sharon McPherron: ADA and Title Nine I see as changers and I see them as equally important because they said something about how you live your life.

Blanche Touhill: I know we don't have a lot of time but can you talk about the rest of your career, what highlights there were? You were an academic administrator for how many years?

Sharon McPherron: Oh, goodness, I was at the college for 26 years. I was probably administrator for 16 or so of those years.

Blanche Touhill: And you held an interesting administrative position because it was a position mainly held by men.

Sharon McPherron: All the administrative positions were mainly held by men but I preceded a woman that we both know. I mean, I followed, I should say I followed a woman that we both know. I followed Betty Duval. So I had a good role model in Betty. I probably have minimized her importance as a role model.

Blanche Touhill: If you just have a few minutes, what would you like to say as we're leaving this interview?

Sharon McPherron: I have trouble conveying to women...my granddaughters I look at, the 16 to 18-year-old group, of how, in 50 years, from 1959, 1960 to today, women's lives have changed and I, as I said, sometimes when I tell them things, I think they see them as funny stories, not indicators of pervasive change and I get concerned, particularly in what I think is happening now, this sort of glorification of motherhood which I'm all for motherhood; I don't want to put motherhood down but it's been around for a long time and it's suddenly become, I don't know, this highly skilled...and yes, it takes skills to raise happy, successful children, but motherhood has sort of been put on a pedestal in the last 20 years that I really don't like and I think that women are almost denying themselves

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some of the breadth of choice and I see them timid about leaving St. Louis, about leaving home, worrying about being victims of crime in far exaggerated versions which then sort of close in on their lives and creating artificial boundaries for their lives rather than realizing the wonderful potential and sort of closing in, rather than looking at the world, and I thought one of the things we did was look out for the first time. The '60s were turmoil inside but we looked out.

Blanche Touhill:

Thank you very much.