

An Interview with  
**Mary Alice Ryan**

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

**8 August 2014**

interviewed by Dr. Blanche Touhill  
transcribed by Valerie Leri and edited by  
Josephine Sporleder



**Oral History Program**

The State Historical Society of Missouri  
Collection S1207 Women as Change Agents DVD 12

## **NOTICE**

1) This material may be protected by copyright law (Title 17, U.S. Code). It may not be cited without acknowledgment to the Western Historical Manuscript Collection, a Joint Collection of the University of Missouri and the State Historical Society of Missouri Manuscripts, Columbia, Missouri. Citations should include: [Name of collection] Project, Collection Number C4020, [name of interviewee], [date of interview], Western Historical Manuscript Collection, Columbia, Missouri.

2) Reproductions of this transcript are available for reference use only and cannot be reproduced or published in any form (including digital formats) without written permission from the Western Historical Manuscript Collection.

3) Use of information or quotations from any [Name of collection] Collection transcript indicates agreement to indemnify and hold harmless the University of Missouri, the State Historical Society of Missouri, their officers, employees, and agents, and the interviewee from and against all claims and actions arising out of the use of this material.

*For further information, contact: The State Historical Society of Missouri, St. Louis Research Center, 222 Thomas Jefferson Library, One University Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63121 (314) 516-5119*

## 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.

Mary Alice Ryan: I'm Mary Alice Ryan, president and CEO of St. Andrews Resources for Senior System.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, how wonderful.

Mary Alice Ryan: It is.

Blanche Touhill: Talk about your youth, Mary Alice, what was your family like; what was your elementary and secondary school; who did you play with; were you a leader in any of those, like, grade school or high school. Who also encouraged you to be what you wanted to be? Just start wherever you want to.

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, I'm a born St. Louisan, down in South City, down by the Bevo Mill. I am one of 10 kids, a Yours, Mine and Ours family and I am in the second five. In fact, I consider myself a middle child of the second five. So I have brothers and sisters who are 20 years older than I and they were still in the house, some of them, as we were coming along. So it was kind of an interesting movement from people getting married and Mother still having children. She had me at age 40 and still had two more after me. So, as I said, I was the 8<sup>th</sup> one, and we lived in South City and the neighborhood was our life. We didn't venture out much outside the neighborhood except for going around walking or taking the bus downtown on special trips. I went to a Catholic grade school, St. John the Baptist and high school, so from kindergarten through high school, they're just a block-and-a-half away. We'd walk and cut through the alley. Mother never wanted us to cut through the alley but we did anyhow.

Blanche Touhill: And that school just closed.

Mary Alice Ryan: The high school closed a little over a year ago and the grade school has closed at the end of this.

Blanche Touhill: It's a long history.

Mary Alice Ryan: It is a long history and it's a parish that my mom got married in and all my brothers and sisters, everything that we did in the Catholic Church, we did at St. John the Baptist. So those were our...people we grew up with. I mean, I had the same kids almost from kindergarten through high school, though in high school, some others came from around the area but

mainly that. So you played with the kid across the alley, down the street, the same ones you grew up with and it was...gosh, you look back now, it's kind of idyllic. We could go where we wanted to go on Saturday, after you got your chores done. Because there were so many of us, we had exact chores we had to do.

Blanche Touhill: What was your chore?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, you know, I hate to say it; mine was the bathroom and cleaning the Venetian blinds, not the most fun. I never really learned to cook or do the laundry because that was somebody else's job in the family. Mother had us quite organized and Mother was really the heart of our entire family. I didn't think about it until later, but she was an amazing woman. She raised all these kids. She took in Dad's children along with hers when they got married and then she did everything. She did the cooking, the cleaning, she made all of our clothes, all the way up through high school, she taught us to sew. She just was...I can just say, an amazing woman. Clementine was there for us. She also was one who cared about the neighborhood and she made sure that we cared about the neighborhood. So we were the scrubby Dutch that was out there sweeping out the alleys. If the snow came, we took our shovels and we went...not just ours but all the way down the street, up to people's homes and in the summer, if we weren't doing something, she would find something for us to do, usually involving some neighbor. In fact, I spent one summer at a neighbor's home, I would have said a very old lady; at this time, I probably would think differently of that. But she made rosaries and that was how she supplemented her income. So I spent the summer making rosaries with her to help out.

Blanche Touhill: That was a wonderful experience, wasn't it?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, it was; it was. I think Mother really instilled in us that you went out and helped. It just was the thing to do.

Blanche Touhill: Because you were really helping that woman to pay her rent and buy her food.

Mary Alice Ryan: We were.

Blanche Touhill: She probably got some Social Security in those days.

- Mary Alice Ryan: You know...
- Blanche Touhill: Well, it depends.
- Mary Alice Ryan: It depends.
- Blanche Touhill: Maybe she didn't get Social Security.
- Mary Alice Ryan: Exactly, but the neighbors watched out for the neighbors. It was a time before air conditioning so everybody was outside all the time. The kids were running around. I can remember very vividly on Saturdays, just going out with the girls and walking. We'd go all the way up to Carondelette Park; spend the day as long as we were home in time for dinner. We were out, we'd go over to Cleveland High School, they had a pool. Sometimes we could get in there and go swimming. We walked down to the Woolworth's, to the counter and got a limeade or if we had some money with us, some French Fries. That was the excitement for the weekend, when we could afford that.
- Blanche Touhill: And there were a lot of bakeries in those days, good bakeries.
- Mary Alice Ryan: Oh, we had one down at the end of the street and it was always a treat, though my mother was a great baker, but once in a while we'd go down. We had the A&P down at the corner so we'd take our little grocery cart and we'd go down to the A&P with Mother on the weekends and look for the things that she needed, always looking for, if something was on sale, because, again, a lot of kids in the house to take care of. My dad was a mailman...well, Mom and Dad both, they were both born in the early 1900's so they went through the Depression; they went through the war. Dad always was working and working multiple jobs to keep things going.
- Blanche Touhill: When you say "the war," you mean...
- Mary Alice Ryan: My dad actually was a seabe in World War II.
- Blanche Touhill: But if they were born...they were in World War I as children.
- Mary Alice Ryan: Yes, so they went through World War I...
- Blanche Touhill: ...the Depression and then World War II.
- Mary Alice Ryan: Yeah, and Dad was over in the Philippines. His job was clearing the jungles to build air strips. So in one way he was safer; in the other, it was,

you figured out later it was the worry about the Japanese coming and then being taken to camps. But he made it through and got a love of coconuts. So he would come home and he'd get his big machete out and he'd whack a coconut for us and we used to love just to take the raw coconut out and eat it. So we had those experiences. But grade school and high school, we were...the Precious Blood nuns, Sisters of the Most Precious Blood from kindergarten on and that's in the days when they were in full habit and it was in the days where you listened, you respected authority and you didn't get out of line because you knew if you did, not only by the sister, but they would call home and then you would be in trouble at home. So I learned not to get in trouble.

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

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, in elementary, actually, I ended up skipping a grade. That was at a time, because my birthday was in late September and I missed the year before so Mother not knowing what to do with me, sent me to the public kindergarten one year so the next year I could start the Catholic kindergarten. But when I got to 4<sup>th</sup> grade, we were able to take a test, those of us of that age, and I passed it and did some homework over the summer and actually skipped a whole year of school and then went into the next class.

Blanche Touhill: And was that hard on you?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, it was hard in a way because kids, they have their little groups and we played on the same playground but now I was playing with this group instead of that but in the other way, it was really nice because I still have friends from the early years that I keep up with and people from my year.

Blanche Touhill: And so, to this day, you still have friends from your childhood?

Mary Alice Ryan: Oh, yes. In fact, once a month, the girls from high school get together for dinner and we always go to the school picnic if we can make it, whatever kinds of things they have, but we keep up. I didn't during college, but afterwards, we got back together again because not that many from my high school went on to college.

Blanche Touhill: Who encouraged you to go on to college?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, actually, nobody. My mother was very much an early 1900's woman: you got married; you had your kids. When there was a chance to go to college courses...at that time there were just a few of them, prep courses.

Blanche Touhill: While you were in high school?

Mary Alice Ryan: When I was in high school. She had me take homemaking, stenography, typing because I could have a job until the kids came along and then, when the kids got older, I would have something I could do to help the family afterwards. But that wasn't really what I wanted.

Blanche Touhill: But you didn't take any college courses?

Mary Alice Ryan: I didn't take any college courses.

Blanche Touhill: How did you decide that you wanted to go on?

Mary Alice Ryan: I didn't want to follow that "get married right out of high school, have children" course. I loved school. I was a good student. The sisters, I have to say, did encourage me in my studies and there were one or two who talked about college but they didn't want to go against my mother. In fact, I signed up for school and my dad signed the papers and it wasn't until I got accepted that we told Mother. She was thrilled at that point but I was the first one out of eight that actually finished college, and being the eighth child...well, first out of ten.

Blanche Touhill: Did the ninth and tenth child go to college?

Mary Alice Ryan: They ninth child did and she became a teacher and the tenth ended up getting married fairly soon out and so he only took some courses in the beginning. But then my sister right above me became a nurse and that was pediatric nurse and that was wonderful. So we have someone now in the family who was a pediatric nurse and myself, who now takes care of the elders. So we've covered.

Blanche Touhill: That's interesting. How did your father react when you said you wanted to go to college and would he sign the papers?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, he knew that I enjoyed studying. He knew that I was good at that and he was kind of one who said, "Is that what you want to do? Go do it," and I think I was just more afraid of my mother's reaction but

when she knew, she was fine. I was just...some people say my mom and I are too close to each other. We were too much alike.

Blanche Touhill: Well, that does happen.

Mary Alice Ryan: It does.

Blanche Touhill: Well, she didn't really understand how to do it either, to go about doing it because you were outside the pattern.

Mary Alice Ryan: Right, and it wasn't her frame of reference. In the neighborhood, in her family, going through what she did, she wanted us secure with a good husband, a good Catholic husband, being able to have children and having a good life. I mean, she wanted all that for us.

Blanche Touhill: And she tried to think of the way that you could get that.

Mary Alice Ryan: Right, and my dad only went through 6<sup>th</sup> grade and Mother only went to 9<sup>th</sup> grade. So they didn't have that. But she also was very much into education. I mean, we were at the library all the time. She bought the encyclopedias, when they came around and sold them. She was really one who encouraged you to do well in school, but she encouraged us to do well in everything we did.

Blanche Touhill: So you go off. Where did you go to college?

Mary Alice Ryan: I went to Southeast Missouri State and I went there for a couple reasons: one, it wasn't too far from St. Louis so I could get there and back, and second, it was a state school so the college costs weren't so high and I had to pay for it myself.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get the money to pay for it yourself?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, I started in high school, working jobs. I worked during the summer and, in fact, I worked two jobs during the summer, one during the day...I worked at the zoo and I always told people I fed the worst animals in the world...I worked the concession stand. And then I had a job down at the stadium. I worked in the stadium club so after working at the zoo, I'd take the bus downtown and clean up and then I was a hostess in the stadium club which was a wonderful experience, got to meet Stan Musial, Marty Marion, so many. In fact, I have to say, who gave me encouragement, I was there one night and I was doing the coat check. It was the first time. I

was just 16 and a gentleman came up and said, "Where do you put the tips?" I didn't know what he was talking about. He went and got a plate and he put a few coins on it and he said, "This is what you do," he said, "You put some coins out but when some more money comes, you take it just so they know what to do." And during that time, he said, "What are you going to do? Are you going to go to college? Where are you going to go?" and so we talked for a long time and then he walked away and someone came up and said, "Well, what was the governor talking to you about?" and I said, "The governor?" I had no idea. But he was very interested and spent that time with me encouraging me. So that was an interesting experience to have too.

Blanche Touhill: Which governor was it?

Mary Alice Ryan: Hearn.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, Hearn supported education.

Mary Alice Ryan: Very much, very much.

Blanche Touhill: Hearn was the one that went around the state to PTAs and got the public to support taxes to support elementary, secondary and higher education. It was remarkable.

Mary Alice Ryan: Mm-hmm. Well, I had no idea.

Blanche Touhill: Superintendents talk about Hearn to this day.

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, all I knew is he was a really nice man and I was so thrilled at that time, which would have been 1967, I made...and I can even remember this...\$54.80 in tips. So I thought I had died and gone to heaven because I was making, like, \$1.10 an hour, working. So we celebrated and we went to Steak and Shake on the way home. That was our celebration.

Blanche Touhill: Did you work just in the summer or did you work during school?

Mary Alice Ryan: No, I worked at school. I worked one to two jobs at school also so I worked on the campus. In fact, I worked in the library doing what you're doing right now. I would tape classes, especially marketing. They would teach people how to do sales presentations and I would be behind the camera and I'd be looking to see if they're being nervous with their hands or if they're twitching a lot and my job was to help them look and see

how they presented themselves on camera. And then I also, when I got to be 21, I worked at one of the local establishments and served drinks, the usual things, working.

Blanche Touhill: And you were able to pay the tuition and your room and board?

Mary Alice Ryan: I was. I'd go home and it was...I was so cute, when I'd go home, as my dad would be saying goodbye, he'd shake my hand and there'd be a \$5.00 bill in it and then my mother would hug me and she'd give me a \$10.00 and she'd say, "Don't tell your father." So they tried to help as they could.

Blanche Touhill: How did you get back and forth?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, we took the bus. There was a bus that went from South County down and at that point, Mom and Dad had moved to South County but there were people who had cars down there and there were always signs saying if you needed a ride home, and you'd pay them a couple dollars and they'd bring you home. So it wasn't bad. But college was so much less expensive. At that point, my tuition freshman year was \$80 a semester and that included your books, rental, and then I paid for room and board because I stayed in the dorm.

Blanche Touhill: You probably paid another \$80 for room and board?

Mary Alice Ryan: I think room and board was a little more than \$80. I can't remember that. And then I got scholarships. The Scholarship Foundation helped me with some loans. I got some other scholarships, any way I could find money in order to be down there. I think I valued my education a lot more because I had to pay for it. And I came out with some student loans but not what they have today.

Blanche Touhill: Did anybody there encourage you to get on to graduate school?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, they didn't. I became friends with the Dean of Women Students back when they had one.

Blanche Touhill: Who was that?

Mary Alice Ryan: Helen Fligny and she was amazing and went to her house a few times for a weekend and we'd sit and talk and she talked about what we were going to do with ourselves but, I have to say, I probably didn't make the wisest decision of a major. I did a sociology/psychology major.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, well. Well, that has paid off for you.

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, it did but when you graduated, I was like the students today. There were no jobs. I didn't know what to do with the sociology/psychology degree.

Blanche Touhill: Even today, you almost have to get a Master's.

Mary Alice Ryan: You did. But I was lucky. Even though my first job out of college, I was the hostess at the Tea Room at Famous Bar South County, but Dean Fligny, I was talking to her over the phone and she gave me an idea. She said her daughter worked for Proctor & Gamble in market research and she knew they were looking for people who had an education, women, and so luckily I was hired. I got an interview. A gal was passing through St. Louis so I went up to the airport and I was interviewed in the airport for the job and I was able to go and I moved to Cincinnati for a year and I worked in market research.

Blanche Touhill: Were there many women in the department?

Mary Alice Ryan: They were all women in the department. It was all women. There were a few men but the men were in one of the other departments that were going to go into marketing per se, but they wanted them to learn about market research and how that applied. So they would come and sit in with us for a couple weeks or a month or so and then they'd move on to their jobs.

Blanche Touhill: So you really did the market research?

Mary Alice Ryan: Right.

Blanche Touhill: Where was the need?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, we went all over the country. They would tell us on Thursday what state, what city we were going to have to be in on Monday and we'd get ourselves there and then we'd set up and we would do market research all by telephone in that town for however long the job took. It could be three, four, five days or it could be three weeks. And then we'd move on to another town and they'd set up a hotel room with telephones and we'd sit there and we'd call people and people were very nice about answering surveys at that point. But it wasn't the job I wanted. So while I was home, I got a job and I got a job with the Girl Scouts and I moved

over and with the sociology/psychology degree, that helped me with the Girl Scouts. But while I was there, they had decided that, to move up to the next level, you needed a Master's and so that gave me kind of the encouragement to go forward with a Master's. But I decided, if I was going to stay there...I wasn't sure I wanted to stay in the Girl Scouts, so I talked to people and I found one of my sorority sisters had just...

Blanche Touhill: From Southeast...

Mary Alice Ryan: From Southeast Missouri, had just graduated in Kansas from getting her Healthcare Administration Master's and she told me what she was going to be doing and how they were desperately really looking for women to break into the field of healthcare administration. So I applied at Washington University and St. Louis University and was just amazed that Washington University took me on as one of the students.

Blanche Touhill: Did they give you a scholarship?

Mary Alice Ryan: I didn't get a scholarship but I did go back to the Scholarship Foundation. At that point I was married. In fact, I'll go back just a minute. When we first got married, we lived poor, as you always do but we decided that we weren't in the jobs that we wanted to do so I had the job with the Girl Scouts so we said, "Okay, I've got a steady job. John, you just get a job. You don't like it, go to another job until you find what you want to do and when you've found what you want to do, you let me know." So it took him a couple years and then he said, "I really like where I am. What do you want to do?" and so that's how I was able to then go on to school but I didn't work during that time because we decided we could still live in that one-bedroom apartment. John was working and he thought it was just wonderful that I was going on and getting a Master's in healthcare administration.

Blanche Touhill: Did anything from your childhood...helping the lady make rosaries, did that affect you?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, I thought about that later on and it did because my mother was also very much into family and her father moved in with us when he got older and he lived with us until he died. Then her first father-in-law. She always made sure she took care of her in-laws, even though her husband died in the late '30s and this was in the '60s. She was still caring for his mom and dad and being there for them. And so when his dad

needed something, his dad moved in with us. But Mother was always one who was taking us in and making sure...and I found that I really did like older people. So when I went on to get my Master's, it was pretty much hospital administration even though they called it healthcare administration. This was the first year they were kind of going out into other fields and I knew I didn't want to go in the hospital. And so...I don't know if you remember Paul Detrick, he was the head of Christian Hospital.

Blanche Touhill: I do remember Paul Detrick, absolutely.

Mary Alice Ryan: So I did my internship under Paul and I told him right away I didn't want to be in a hospital. So he said okay. So he gave me experiences. He sent me a week to a nursing home, a week to a rural hospital, to a health planning organization, to Blue Cross Blue Shield, to a doctors' group practice, and he said, "These are all the things you could possibly do." And I really enjoyed that experience.

Blanche Touhill: That was while you were working for him?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, I was an intern. I had to do an internship, a nine-month internship. So that was along with doing everything through the hospital, going down and seeing my first surgery, taking a call in the middle of the night, going through all the departments and that, but he also arranged for me to do all of that.

Blanche Touhill: Was he head of Christian in those days?

Mary Alice Ryan: He was.

Blanche Touhill: Out in North County?

Mary Alice Ryan: Yes, North County had Christian, Northeast and Northwest so he was over Northwest at that point.

Blanche Touhill: And they had just started, hadn't they?

Mary Alice Ryan: No, they had been there for quite a while at that point but he really was taking his organization out into the community. He started an organization so they were going to do therapy in nursing homes. They were going to do therapy in schools. So he was starting a bunch of small businesses which would bring them out into the community more. So it

was a great time to be there and really learn at how they were looking at more community involvement. But he was very encouraging.

Blanche Touhill: I wonder what made him what he was?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, I don't know. He was quite the Southern gentleman.

Blanche Touhill: He was. I knew him. Everybody loved him and when I knew him, he was head of Christian, Northeast or Northwest and I think he was just retiring and I think Fred Brown came in to that position and I knew Fred. But Paul was always there and people respected Paul.

Mary Alice Ryan: And you wouldn't know this: he raised miniature horses. He had a bunch of miniature horses on his farm and he had pictures of the horse in his truck with him, in the front seat, riding around with him. He was an amazing man. So I have to say, he really opened my eyes to so many things that I could do and I found all the people at Christian Hospital, all the department heads, everybody was just, "What can we do to help you? What do you want to do? How can we make that happen for you?" So I've been blessed. I mean, my mother gave me a great foundation. The sisters really instilled in me a love of learning. Honest, I cannot thank the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood any more. In fact, right now it's so wonderful, we are actually caring for the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood. We helped turn their property out in O'Fallon into a retirement center. So the Sisters are retiring on their property there, but they're bringing the public in because there are less and less sisters nowadays. I have so many people to thank in my life, but I've got to say, my husband was probably one of the most...I would have thought with John, he came from a very traditional family. He was the oldest son and his dad died when he was 18 and he was the number two of eight kids. So he became the head of the family and I always thought of him, even though I loved him dearly, as more of a traditional man but he really...he just said, "What is it you want to do?" because when I went to look at schools and I said, "Well, if I get a job, I can't be assured I'll be here in St. Louis so what will we do?" and he said, "I can work anywhere. You find what you want to do and we'll move."

Blanche Touhill: Now, he went into computers?

Mary Alice Ryan: No, he was in sales.

- Blanche Touhill: Sales? Okay.
- Mary Alice Ryan: He was in sales. He was heavy equipment for a while but he did get into computerized education. He was selling it for a friend of his who had a company that was the first group that was doing education over the internet.
- Blanche Touhill: That's what I remember.
- Mary Alice Ryan: That's right, mm-hmm, yes.
- Blanche Touhill: But basically he's a salesman?
- Mary Alice Ryan: He's a salesman and he said, "I can do this anywhere." He said, "You go find what it is you want to do."
- Blanche Touhill: Go back to, you're an intern and a student at Washington University and I assume it was a two-year program?
- Mary Alice Ryan: Right.
- Blanche Touhill: What you're saying to me is you didn't work during that time? You just took the studies?
- Mary Alice Ryan: Yes.
- Blanche Touhill: Well then, when you graduated, where were the jobs?
- Mary Alice Ryan: Since I didn't want to be in a hospital, most of my class went on and either stayed at the hospital where they did their residency and Christian offered, they said, "We'll find you some work to do. You can stay," and I said, "You know, it's not what I want to do," and I really did enjoy the nursing home. So I talked to my professors and Dr. Don Horsch, who taught in my program, said, "You know, Mary Alice," he said, "I got a call from a woman that I know and she's on the board of a nursing home and they are looking for a woman with education." He goes, "It's in Kirkwood. Why don't you go apply. That's where you live." So I did and I actually walked down the street to her house. She was only a few blocks away from my house and I got interviewed in the board chair's house about taking over a nursing home in St. Louis. And she gave me the job which was amazing.
- Blanche Touhill: And really, you were young and you had no experience.

- Mary Alice Ryan: No experience in nursing homes, no experience being a supervisor, nothing about rules and regulations.
- Blanche Touhill: Then why did she choose you, do you know?
- Mary Alice Ryan: We just got along so well in the interview and she was a wonderful woman in the neighborhood. She was on the board. It was an all-women's board and they had had, for many, many years, a woman running their organization and then when she retired, they had a man. They said he didn't listen to them. He wouldn't listen and take their thoughts and kind of put them as a board to decide and that kind of didn't sit well. So they were specifically looking for a woman. So I don't know how many candidates but they gave me that opportunity and I was thrilled. But I walked in the first day and sat at the desk and thought, what do I do now? But it was before there were as many rules and regulations as there are now and so I was the Administer of the Old Folks Home. That was the exact name of it.
- Blanche Touhill: Why were there only women on the board?
- Mary Alice Ryan: It was started by a women's religious group from one of the churches and they started the organization back in 1907. They bought a house and they took in the first two people, and you look at the history, they had chickens on the property for eggs and in the fall, they put up food, all the church women, for caring for the people and they actually went over to make sure they were okay. And it slowly grew from there.
- Blanche Touhill: Did they only let people from their church in?
- Mary Alice Ryan: No, they took in anyone who needed it.
- Blanche Touhill: Anyone who had need?
- Mary Alice Ryan: Right, but you look at the history and the people came with all their bedding and they came with their furnishings and the women from the neighborhood took care of them until it got bigger. Then they had to hire, at that point, I guess they called it a "matron" or a "manager" of this and then later on, they received a bequest from Flora B. Lee and I have no idea, they didn't know why Flora...the story was that Flora's chauffeur, his sister worked at The Old Folks Home and used to drive her by when she wanted to go out for rides and she saw this place and when she died,

she left her entire fortune to The Old Folks Home and so they were able to build a bigger and better facility from that money.

Blanche Touhill: Isn't that wonderful!

Mary Alice Ryan: Uh-huh, and that's how they figured it out, is that the chauffeur's sister or wife or someone worked for them.

Blanche Touhill: When you arrived, how many clients were there?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, we had 90.

Blanche Touhill: So it had grown.

Mary Alice Ryan: It had grown, yes. We were down in South Kirkwood in the building and we had 90 people and we had mainly people who didn't have families as much, needed some care but not a lot and then we had a small...out of that 90...30 beds were what we called the infirmary. So when somebody really got sick, we had more nursing care there. But the other 60, it was a place for them to retire and be taken care of but they were still able to take care of themselves mainly.

Blanche Touhill: It was more like assisted living?

Mary Alice Ryan: Yes, what you would have called assisted living today, board and care. They called it board and care, and then they called it residential care.

Blanche Touhill: If you were in the nursing part?

Mary Alice Ryan: No, in the assisted living part.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, it moved to that title.

Mary Alice Ryan: It moved to that title because, after board and care, licensure became residential care. But it was all licensed.

Blanche Touhill: By the state?

Mary Alice Ryan: By the state, yes.

Blanche Touhill: Did you get federal money or state money?

Mary Alice Ryan: We didn't at that point. Later, after I left, they started getting involved in the Medicaid program but at that point, if someone ran out of money, we took care of them. We had enough money in the bank.

Blanche Touhill: And how did you get that money, from the endowments or something?

Mary Alice Ryan: Some was from the endowments; some is that any money we had on a bottom line stayed in the facility to take care of people. We got some bequests in. We didn't have a formal fundraising program but we did a strawberry festival in the year to raise some money, these kinds of things. But it was just, people really donated. People would still bring produce in the fall until the state didn't let us take produce from people anymore. They got kind of rigid.

Blanche Touhill: Why?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, it was just the inspector said that we had to get it from a grocer, that we couldn't take it off the farm.

Blanche Touhill: Oh, my. That was a big of a shock, wasn't it?

Mary Alice Ryan: Things were changing. Well, you know, it really had helped us a lot. Now, we did get at that point...there were federal foods that you could apply for so we would get big bricks of cheese or that so they had excess food and we were able to get that every once in a while. And so we would stock up on whatever they had available to help out.

Blanche Touhill: Did you write grants?

Mary Alice Ryan: No, no, at that point. Again, when I started, it was \$20 a day to live there so even though that was a lot of money at that point, it was reasonable but then staff salaries and everything were fairly reasonable too. And we had a lot of volunteers. We had a lot of people from the neighborhood and the board, the board wasn't just a board; they were also volunteers taking care of the residents.

Blanche Touhill: So they came in and visited the people?

Mary Alice Ryan: Yes, had activities for them, took them out if they needed to, doctor's appointments, all of those kinds of things, yeah.

Blanche Touhill: And you liked it?

Mary Alice Ryan: I loved it. I loved The Old Folks Home.

Blanche Touhill: And John was happy you found a niche?

Mary Alice Ryan: Oh, it was, and, you know, you remember all these little things even though that was back in the '80s. We had two ladies...I was right outside the main room and there was a grand piano and two ladies would come out every afternoon, Dolly Westaver and Nell Brooker and Dolly would play and Nell would stand there and sing and they'd laugh and they'd have the best time and people would gather around and they'd sing and Dolly would play and it was just an amazing thing. But I learned a lot about people and also rules and regulations. I've got to tell you one little story. I had a lady who lived there and the doctor had her on a pretty stringent diet and she had big legs and she was a good-sized lady. And whenever the inspectors would come in, they would go into the rooms and, inevitably, they would find peanut butter or something in her room and my nurses would say, "You've got to talk to her." So I called her in...I'll call her Margaret...and I called Margaret in and I said, "Margaret..."...and I'm 29 years old, I'm talking to Margaret who's in her 80's, and I say, "Margaret, you can't do this. You've got to..."...and she said to me, "Mary Alice," she said, "My parents are dead. My husband is dead. My brothers and sisters are dead. My children are dead. Most of my friends are dead. What's a little peanut butter?" And it was like this, what is a little peanut butter? So I said, "Here's what you're going to do. The inspectors can't come in your room if you don't let them so if you hear the inspectors are in the building, you put a note on your door, tape it up and say, 'No one can enter without my permission,'" and she had her peanut butter and I talked to her doctor and I said, "Why are you putting her on this stringent diet?" But it's been kind of my mantra once in a while. I kind of think, when something came up, I go, well, what's a little peanut butter? Why are we so worried about a woman in her late 80's being on a very restrictive diet? What is she looking forward to? Some peanut butter, mm-hmm. So they taught me a lot.

Blanche Touhill: And then what happened to you?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, I met the head of St. Andrews while I was there through our state association and we got along very well and he kept saying, "Someday I'm going to hire you; some day." He goes, "We're not ready yet but we're growing and I'm going to hire you." So he came, about two years later, took me out to lunch and he said...

Blanche Touhill: How long were you at The Old Folks Home?

- Mary Alice Ryan: Five years...and he said, he goes, "I've got a job for you. I want you to come and I want you to help me grow St. Andrews."
- Blanche Touhill: This is the foundation or the nursing...I mean, [inaudible 37:45].
- Mary Alice Ryan: At that point it was the Episcopal Presbyterian Foundation for the Aging and so he said, "We are ready to grow. We have two buildings but the board has put together a big five-year strategic plan and I need somebody to help us." So when I walked in there, we had two retirement apartment complexes.
- Blanche Touhill: Where were they?
- Mary Alice Ryan: One was the old Gatesworth at Union and Lindell.
- Blanche Touhill: Yes.
- Mary Alice Ryan: And later, we moved everybody, when we closed that down, to the Gatesworth at One McKnight, and the other is Tower Grove Manor down across from Tower Grove Park which is still part of St. Andrews.
- Blanche Touhill: And was one a little bit more expensive than the other?
- Mary Alice Ryan: Yes, the Gatesworth was a little bit more upper middle income and Tower Grove has always been much more blue collar, middle income. But that was all St. Andrews was doing and the board said, "That's not enough. We need to be serving the poor. We need to be serving seniors who have other needs than just housing. And so, in the first few years I was there, we got our first allocation to do low-income housing of which now we have 12 buildings for seniors who have less than about \$11,000 a year of income. We started our home service agency and we started that with a card table and a phone and that was how it grew.
- Blanche Touhill: How many do you have in that now?
- Mary Alice Ryan: Well, now we serve probably...well, we serve about 4,000 caregivers through our Caring Workplace Program.
- Blanche Touhill: What is that?
- Mary Alice Ryan: We know that today so many women work and they are having to deal with their children still probably in college or at home and their parents and it's not just women but men also are dealing with this. So how do

they keep a full-time job and deal with that happening? And it's really, there are great studies on the loss of productivity in the workplace, billions of dollars every year because people are taking calls while they're at work; they're taking off to take Mom or Dad to the doctor; they're stressed out or they actually quit their job because they have to do something. So we started a program where we have the employer hire us...and we have 16 companies who hire us in the City and County and they pay us and we're there for the employees, to call us to say, "My Mother is driving me nuts. What do I do?" or "The hospital called and said Mom has to leave tomorrow, what do I do?" or "My brothers and sisters think this should be happening. I think that should be happening," or "I don't know what Mother needs. How can I figure out how to help her?" So our job is to take that stress off of the employee caregiver. So we've got about 4,000 employees from these 16 companies that we are there to help. But then we also serve probably 6 or 800 seniors through our home service agency and another many hundred through our home health agency today.

Blanche Touhill: So you go into the homes?

Mary Alice Ryan: We go into the home. We will be there with the home health after somebody has gone to the hospital and is going home or back to their apartment, wherever they live and they need therapy, they need some nursing services, or they're at home but they're having a harder time living alone. So we will come in, we'll go grocery shopping, we'll make meals, we'll clean the house, we'll do the laundry, we'll give them a bath, we'll take them to the doctor, we'll take you to the symphony if you can't drive at night anymore. We have a home maintenance person so we do small maintenance. Anything that can keep you staying at the home or longer, even in your retirement community, and keep you from having to go to assisted living or skilled nursing because maybe what you need is medication reminders. You need someone to set up those meds. You need someone to remind you about the doctor's appointment, all of those things.

Blanche Touhill: And then how many people do you have in your homes, in your various buildings? How many buildings do you have?

Mary Alice Ryan: We have 23 now so we've grown from 2 to 23. We serve probably about 1,800 people on one specific day but some people come and go so

probably over the course of the year, we probably are closer to about 3,000, especially with our Medicare units. People are there for a couple weeks and then the next person comes in.

Blanche Touhill: And then you have to manager all those federal monies and state dollars, don't you?

Mary Alice Ryan: Yes, Medicare, Medicaid, Title money, Section 8, all of those, yes. It's gotten quite a bit more complicated than The Old Folks Home.

Blanche Touhill: Now, you're the head of St. Andrews?

Mary Alice Ryan: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: So you're responsible for all of this?

Mary Alice Ryan: Yes.

Blanche Touhill: Are there other places in St. Louis like St. Andrews?

Mary Alice Ryan: Oh, yes, Bethesda Health Group has many buildings and they're not-for-profit; Lutheran Senior Services is another wonderful organization. They have places all over Missouri, Illinois. We're also in Illinois and outstate Missouri. The majority is here in the metropolitan area but we also serve in two states.

Blanche Touhill: And are these other organizations like yours, are they headed by men and women?

Mary Alice Ryan: Mostly men. I don't know, in this state, if there's another senior organization our size that's headed by a woman.

Blanche Touhill: Except for yours?

Mary Alice Ryan: Except for us, and I've been the CEO since 1990. I've been at St. Andrews now 31 years. But there are nationally but still, the majority are run by men, right, yes.

Blanche Touhill: So when you first went to St. Andrews, what was your title?

Mary Alice Ryan: Vice president of Operations.

Blanche Touhill: And there was somebody else in charge?

Mary Alice Ryan: There was a CEO, yes.

Blanche Touhill: And was it a man?

Mary Alice Ryan: It was, yes.

Blanche Touhill: When they brought you in though, were they really getting you ready to be the CEO?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, I don't think so. The gentleman I worked for was only my age, a few years older. Our job, and we worked so well together, was to build St. Andrews with actually nothing. We had no money (very much at the bank?). Everything was any way we could figure out how to do it. We never had an endowment, any monies. In fact, we don't have much of an endowment today.

Blanche Touhill: So you're trying to do that now?

Mary Alice Ryan: We're trying to do that now because more people are running out of funds. But yes, but what ended up is my boss was from Canada and he was living here and he got an opportunity to move home and so he took it so I was very surprised when I heard he was leaving. And I was, I have to say, even more surprised when I heard from him that he thought they were going to ask me to stay and be the CEO. And I had to think about it a long time, to tell you the truth.

Blanche Touhill: Why did you have to think about it?

Mary Alice Ryan: Because I really loved what I was doing. I loved being, every day, in with my seniors, in with my staff, and I knew that would change if I became the CEO. But then I thought, well, what if they hire...this is terrible...what if they hire someone I don't like or someone who doesn't like me? And he kept saying, "You can do this; you can do this," he said, "and the board thinks you can do this."

Blanche Touhill: Well, that's who you work with now really, isn't it, the board...

Mary Alice Ryan: Right, I work with the boards.

Blanche Touhill: ...and the friends groups.

Mary Alice Ryan: Yeah, multiple boards.

Blanche Touhill: And then with your team that does a lot that you used to do.

Mary Alice Ryan: Right, yes. And so I've gotten more and more away from the daily being out in my facilities, more into the strategy, into the fundraising, into where the future is going. We just took over a new nursing home a week ago in Eureka. We're still growing.

Blanche Touhill: Do people come to you to take them over?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, we have never marketed to take over people. Everything has come from word-of-mouth, not that we don't have a website and that, but we don't have anybody who goes out there and looks for it. People call us because, over the years, we've got a reputation and we do consulting all over the country. We do a lot of consulting with Catholic Women Religious because the numbers in the orders are dropping significantly and they're no longer outdoing the mission anymore as much as they did and now they have more and more senior women and they're thinking about, well, who's going to, as they say, turn out the lights? Who's going to be there when there's nobody there to be in charge?

Blanche Touhill: And where are the elderly of that order going to go in their final years?

Mary Alice Ryan: That's what we're...

Blanche Touhill: Because some of them do not have nursing homes themselves.

Mary Alice Ryan: No, they don't. They don't and some took care of their own sisters. But they care for them in the convent. But they got to be where most of the sisters were of retirement age so they couldn't care and then they'd have to put out the money to do that. So that's when we started actually the Sarah Community here in St. Louis up at the DePaul Hospital campus.

Blanche Touhill: Tell me about that. That's a very interesting thing. Tell me about that.

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, it started, we were doing some consulting for one order of sisters and they were caring for their own sisters and we actually showed them, within four years they would be completely out of money, if they continued this way. So they said, "Well, what do we do?" So they and we brought together actually about eight or nine different orders and sat around the table talking about who's got this problem here in St. Louis and what? And it came to be, well, why didn't we get together and all do it as one? So we put together an organization where five of the orders

are sponsoring a not-for-profit called the Sarah Community and we went to DePaul Hospital, the SSMs and they had a nursing home on DePaul campus that they weren't really utilizing. So we said, "Well, could we take that over, use it for the nuns but also use it for the laity because there will be a time when there won't be enough nuns to be there and plus, the sisters always want to be in mission. They want to be giving of themselves. So we took over the nursing home, we were able to borrow money to build an independent living apartments and an assisted living building and we moved the sisters in and we started off with the laity and now they have a wonderful campus. We probably have not only sisters from maybe about eight or nine orders, but also a priest and brothers living there along with the laity and it's been a wonderful...so now we know who's going to turn out the lights and St. Andrews helped them through that planning and the construction and the organizing and the marketing and now we run it for the sisters.

Blanche Touhill: That's a fascinating story.

Mary Alice Ryan: But it's what needs to happen and that's when I mentioned my nuns, as I call them, the Sisters of the Most Precious Blood. We did that a few years later and said, when they needed help, could we turn their campus and use these buildings that have had a wonderful history and make it into a new mission for the sisters.

Blanche Touhill: Let me change the subject for a little bit and ask you: If you had been born 50 years earlier, what would your life be like?

Mary Alice Ryan: Oh, gosh. You know, that would have been just at the turn of the century so I'd almost have to look back at what my mother's life was because she was born in 1909 so I would have just been a little older than her. You know, I think I would have necessarily had a much more traditional life. I would have gotten married. I would have had bundles of children because that's the way Catholic women in South St. Louis would have been. But I think that it wouldn't have been enough for me. I really thought about this. You know, it was about 1919 when the League of Women Voters started working for the vote. I have a feeling that I would have somehow gotten involved, looking, trying to get women's rights which came...what was it... '22 or '23 when that happened and then Equal Rights afterwards. But it would have been doing things from the home. I don't know that I would have had the opportunity or been able to get the

education that I know I would have loved to have had but I can't imagine that I could have been totally happy, and I'm not sure my mother was always just totally happy just raising the kids. So she did get jobs outside the home when she could and did a lot. But I think that's why she also reached out in the neighborhood, because she just had so much more to give than just raising a family, even though raising 10 was plenty to do. So it's really interesting to think about that, a totally different life but what you would have seen during that time period of the changes, going through women's rights and the flapper era through two wars...three wars...four wars...the Depression, sending your kids off to war. I can't imagine how hard that would have been.

Blanche Touhill: Is there any award or awards you've received that are very precious to you?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, for an award, I was really honored when I received the Washington U Distinguished Alumni for Healthcare Administration because I was the first woman to reach that and I thought that was just amazing that I did. But I have to say, it wasn't an award but I was elected as the chairman of the board of the American Association of Homes & Services for the Aging. That meant the world to me. I was elected by people from all the states, ran against a man, a good friend of mine, and won. I was only the third woman in 40 years to be elected the national chair and through that, I was able to travel. I gave 20 keynote addresses over that time period in the States. I was involved in the start-up of the International Association of Homes & Services for the Aging and served on their board. I served on two subsidiary boards that were insurance captives. I served on a development corporation board where we were trying to find monies to help grow not-for-profit organizations like mine. I actually helped build their headquarters in Washington, D.C. I was a chair as we were building that and got involved in the design and fundraising for that. I met people from all over the world, I still see them and it opened my eyes to things that we weren't doing here in St. Louis and it gave me friends around the country that I could call up any day and say, "I'm thinking of this. What do you think?" or "I hear you're doing this. Would you share with me how you're doing it?" I think it was the tipping point for St. Andrews when I took that because I was able to bring so much back to them. That gave me more than I gave to them, I got out of that experience.

Blanche Touhill: What made Mary Alice a leader?

Mary Alice Ryan: I could laugh and say necessity being the eighth kid. The only way you got any attention was to be out in front and my brothers and sisters probably would agree with you on that. I wanted to be out of the house. Joining things was a way of being out, doing more, not going home, not cleaning the bathrooms and washing the blinds as much, though I still had to do all of that. It was just something in me that enjoyed it. I was just a joiner. In college, I probably belonged to everything. I was on the Student Senate, officer of that; I was in the National Honor Society. I have to say, being on the homecoming court was much more fun at that point but the others were a lot. I loved it. With the people that I was working with, I got to do so much more than I would do just going to and from classes.

Blanche Touhill: And what gave you the passion to center in on the elderly?

Mary Alice Ryan: I found I really liked them. I enjoyed when my grandparents and our older relatives...my sister, who I mentioned, one of them is a pediatric nurse, give her a crying child, sick child and she's in heaven. Give me one, I'm going to give them right back to you. But I just love sitting down and talking to older people. I love hearing about their lives. One of my favorite things is to ask how they met their spouse. Those stories you hear about their lives. Chris MacDonald, one of the questions I asked her...and I loved her story about it...Peg Griggs, these people who have just...they've had fascinating lives and they enjoy talking about it and imparting what they've learned and how their lives have been and it just makes me feel good to do that.

Blanche Touhill: I know you mentioned your husband, John, earlier. Does he still encourage you?

Mary Alice Ryan: Oh, he does, he does. He's retired now and he takes care of everything for me now. It's just amazing. I come home, he cooks meals. We've talked about retirement and people are asking me that now, which always surprises me and I have no intention of retiring. I don't know when, maybe when I turn 70 or 75, I'll think about it, but I am just enjoying my life and he's fine with it.

Blanche Touhill: And St. Andrews is still growing.

Mary Alice Ryan: St. Andrews is still growing. We took over a nursing home last week. We partnered an organization that we had been working with under management into us, Cape Albion this year. We're looking at some growth in some other areas. There's more to do and there's more seniors to serve and we're really having to think now, strategy because the seniors coming up are going to have less assets than their parents did but they're going to live longer with more chronic disease.

Blanche Touhill: Are you ever going to be able to help accommodate, say, autistic people when they're adults?

Mary Alice Ryan: You know, that is something that we're starting to have to look at. In fact, some of my residents have their children who are autistic living with them and we've allowed them to move in with them but they have to have a plan on what happens when Mom or Dad is no longer in our community. But we see no problem with their bringing their adult children in with them. But it is a big concern but we've got to be able to do it right if we do it and that's what we've got to look at. But we're now working more on how do we keep people more in their homes, the St. Louis Village movement that we're working with right now, which is neighbors helping neighbors and so we could do more and we're kind of their back-up. So if they can't get some volunteers to help them, we'll get St. Andrews in there to help. But we want people on the block, people around the corner to be like my mother was and they're not anymore because people come home and they walk into their house and they stay there too much. So they don't know the seniors down the block.

Blanche Touhill: And how do you reach those neighborhood people?

Mary Alice Ryan: Well, through the neighbors. It's a neighborhood-centered organization and the neighbors run it.

Blanche Touhill: Well, I really appreciated this conversation and I've learned so much and so I just want to say to you, good luck in your future and thank you very much.

Mary Alice Ryan: Thank you, Blanche, it was a wonderful experience. I appreciate it.