

Mrs. Susan Sleeper  
August 9, 1988

Mary Kasamatsu  
Interviewer

MK This is an interview for the Green Mountain Chronicles Program. I'm with Mrs. Susan Sleeper in St. Johnsbury and this is the 9th of August, 1988. We're going to talk about Womens' Suffrage and voting in the first election that women could vote in in Vermont.

SS Yes.

MK Um, tell me about that. When was this? Was this in 1920?

SS It was 1920, the first year women could vote. Uh huh.

MK And how old were you then?

SS I was 21 in January of that year, uh huh.

MK And how did it all come about? I'm curious about the, the climate of the times. You know, you told me that you had been in school, was there a lot of talk, a lot of awareness that women were getting a vote?

SS I think so. I was particularly interested because I had had two courses in high school when I was a junior. One was in American History. The other was in Government and Politics of the United States. And my instructor was Ozius D. Mathison. I think he came from Montpelier to Lyndon Institute and he was the principal there. And he was a very able instructor. He had written history himself. And he made us very aware that it was not only a privilege but a duty to vote and that, and at that time I'm sure we knew that women were going to have the right to vote.

MK You were aware that it was something that was coming?

SS Yes and I became very interested in what was going on in the country at that time and I have been all these years ever since.

MK It's wonderful.

SS Yes.

MK Now you said you really haven't missed an election?

SS I think I missed one when I moved from one state to another. I think I I wasn't able to vote until I had lived in the new place six months or something. I've forgotten what it was then, but...

MK But other than that?

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SS But other than that I haven't missed an election and I hope I don't this year though I'm approaching 90, uh huh. I'm expecting to vote in the primary and in the fall election.

MK Do you remember, what do you remember about that first election, about going to the poles, you had to register to vote didn't you?

SS Yes, that, that was a summer that I remember well because that year I married the elder son of the late Dr. Sleeper and his mother and I went with some pride to the town clerk's office and took the Freeman's Oath and knowing that women had never voted before. And we were quite excited about it.

MK I imagine.

SS Uh huh. And the town clerk's office was in Westburg where I lived and it was in the home of Harris and Carrie Colby and she was the town clerk. And she administered the oath to both my mother-in-law, Mrs. Viola Sleeper and myself, yea. And we went, when it came time and voted.

MK That was a presidential election year wasn't it?

SS Yes, yes.

MK Do you remember, I know presidential campaigns must have been, had to have been very different than they are now. You didn't have the media attention focused on \_\_\_\_\_?

SS No, but we had daily papers. I think my mother-in-law had the Boston Post and my husband and I took the Boston Herald for years and years and years and we read about it all, every day you know. We got our paper in the morning, uh huh.

MK So you studied up on the issues?

SS Oh yes, yes, we were very much aware of what was going on.

MK Do you remember any local issues that were especially \_\_\_\_\_?

SS Uh, no, there were some I'm sure, but my memory is a little dim on that right now.

MK What do you remember about the polling place? It was the town hall?

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SS We had to go to Burke Hollow which was half way between East Burke and West Burke to vote. So I waited, we waited til my husband got home from work to drive us over there uh huh, uh huh.

MK And that was when he voted too?

SS Yes, yes, he voted too. He was always very aware that it was an important thing to do uh huh. Yes, he lived to be 80 and he voted every year too. Seems as though prohibition was \_\_\_\_\_ at that time, I'm not sure.

MK That's true. I believe it started in 1919.

SS Uh huh.

MK I believe, so it would have been just getting underway really.

SS Black markets and...

MK Uh huh.

SS Uh huh.

MK Interesting. It must have made you feel very proud to be...

SS Oh yes, yes it did to be one of the first ones you know. And my mother-in-law was too. She was very happy about it.

MK Do you have grandchildren?

SS I have, yes I have great grandchildren also uh huh.

MK Do you tell them that you voted the first time women were able to vote?

SS Well one isn't quite three, my other isn't quite five and I don't think they'd understand that too much yet. One starts kindergarten this fall. I have two boys though that are great grandchildren. They are older so they would know. Uh huh, uh huh and they probably do know because I was interviewed about this before you see and and the piece was in the paper. They probably know about that.

MK Was that in the local paper?

SS Yes in the St. Johnsbury paper.

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MK When would that have been?

SS Well it was the first, I don't know, it was when I lived on Main Street. It must have been three, four years ago probably. I probably have the clipping somewhere.

MK So those children would have seen the article probably.

SS Uh huh, they probably cut it out you know and kept it, uh huh.

MK Sure. Do you recall as you were growing up whether in your own immediate family whether politics was something that was talked about a lot?

SS Well my parents separated when I was, before I was ten years old so I didn't really know about that. But the family that I grew up with were very, very much involved in politics, uh huh.

MK Do you remember whether, were people generally accepting of the idea that women were going to vote or was there still some sentiment that women should not have the vote?

SS No, I don't, I think they were overcoming that uh huh, uh huh. Of course there'd been work done for a long time on that, uh huh.

MK Oh!

SS Among women, uh huh.

MK Do you recall, or did your mother-in-law if you know participate in any of the um state conventions or delegations?

SS No, no, I did later on. I, I went as a representative of the republican committee to Montpelier to vote uh huh.

MK I know there were some, I guess we could call them conventions, womens rights conventions...

SS Uh huh.

MK ...prior to 1920, I think starting in 19, well I believe I talked to one women who went to one as early as, or who knew of one as early as 1912.

SS Uh huh. I think the year I went was when Eisenhower was running.

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MK That was in the '50's, great. That's wonderful though.

SS Eisenhower and Taft I believe. I remember telling the committee how I wanted to vote and I said if you don't want it that way, don't vote for me to go. Uh huh.

MK I'm remembering the first election that I voted in in, the presidential election was 1972. And I remember then of course it was at the voting machine and...

SS Uh huh, I've never used the voting machine. We don't even have one here you see.

MK Yea, well at that particular time I was living in Washington, DC.

SS Yes, uh huh.

MK And I recall going, actually I was living, I was working in Washington, DC, I was living in a suburb in Wheaton, in Rockville, Maryland.

SS Uh huh.

MK And they did have voting machines there. And even though it wasn't quite the same as checking off or marking the X on the ballot, I still remember being very thrilled at the idea that oh, I'm voting in the presidential election.

SS Yea, yes. Uh huh. And every year they say, it's going to be very close.

MK They do every year, don't they?

SS Yea, they say that this year. Uh huh.

MK Now another thing that I wanted to ask you about which has nothing to do with politics, but since you were of high school age at that time, I thought you might have some memories of how St. Johnsbury, with the, St. Johnsbury, Lyndonville area was affected by the influenza epidemic in 1918?

SS Oh yes, it it really was. The schools, I was teaching school that fall and, schools were closed for a time. Yea, at the end of World War I somebody came to my door at school, said to send the children home, the war was over, I remember that. Uh huh.

MK That's wonderful.

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SS We all went out and celebrated that night at Lyndonville.

MK How did you celebrate the end of World War I, what did they do?

SS Well there was speakers you know and and a lot of cheering and the young people were elated you know to think the boys were coming home.

MK Do you remember any kind of war efforts that the citizens at home participated in during World War I? Were there scrap metal drives or any other kinds of things that I heard about from World War II?

SS Oh, let me see. I don't know. I know there was no football during that time at school during World War I. And when I had practiced teaching, I remember one of the teachers at, well she was the principal at Lyndonville Graded School and I was substituting in the eighth grade and she would, she was working on some kind, sort of entertainment shows to raise money for the boys, for some organization for the boys. Uh huh, I remember that. I guess I was left alone with all those youngsters for quite a bit.

MK Yes you would remember that wouldn't you?

SS Uh huh, uh huh. But they were good children.

MK Did you teach music when you were teaching?

SS What's that?

MK Did you teach music when you were teaching?

SS Oh yes, yes, all those years uh huh. Had a music teacher come you know and leave instructions for a week or so, and then she'd be back the next week to see how we did. Yea, that's why I've always kept a piano I think. I used to play a lot for the children, uh huh. Enjoyed that part very much.

MK How many years did you teach?

SS I taught two years before marriage and after my last one was in college, I went back to teaching and taught 21 years. I didn't expect to, but I did. I taught til I was 70.

MK Oh my.

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SS Yea, and I, I thought those were wonderful years. I'd had a lot of experience bringing up my own you know so I had, I love children anyway especially the little ones uh huh.

MK What grade did you, what grades did you teach?

SS I taught some of the time first four grades and some of the time, most of the time I had the first grade though, just the first grade.

MK Were you ever in a one room school?

SS Yea, just one year. My first year you had to when I, to see if you could handle the situation I guess. But the next year I was in a two room school. I had the first four grades. So when I went back to teaching, I went, thought I'd get along better if I started in the first, had the first four grades, but they gradually cut me back to three, then two, then one, yea and I went to school where I had just one, the one room, just right beside that house. I was there nine years uh huh.

MK That's nice. You could just walk from your back door and your front door right into the school.

SS Yes, I could go right up across my back lawn to the school. There's a large lawn back of that house. And that's a nice place to have it away from the road, uh huh.

MK When you were teaching in the one room school that that first year, that was your practice teaching was it or?

SS No, no, that was the real thing.

MK Uh huh, so everyone was required to teach one year in a one room school?

SS Yes, yes, that was your trial. Trial year and it certainly was.

MK Was it difficult?

SS Well it was difficult in this way. When school was closed down for the influenza, I had, I was boarding with a farm family and during that month that school was closed, that family sold their farm and they sold it to a man who was a, well he still, he was a cattle rustler and he stole chickens and he had two sons in my room and they were terrible. They were awful acting children and they were very hard to straighten out and I remember his coming after dark one night, the father, because I had punished

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one of his children to tell me that he would have the law on me. And I said I don't think you want to be mixed up with the law Mr. from what I've heard about you. And I talked good and plain to him and I said now if you were the kind of a father that you ought to be and stood behind your sons in doing right instead of wrong, there'd be none of this trouble at all and your children would be learning. I said the way it is now, they're not learning. And I don't know what happened, but the children were much better after that. Uh huh, much better, but it was very very hard year with those children for awhile. And of course other children thought they could try the same things and...

MK And that being your first year, huh?

SS Yes, and we had a wood stove, a box stove and I went out to the woodshed. I should have sent them of course to get the wood, but I went out to get some wood, and when I came in, they were swing, they had the box cover up and they were swinging a child over those flames. Things like that that you just couldn't allow you know. And they would get up and say terrible things to you you know, awful language.

MK I'm surprised, amazed that you continued teaching after one year.

SS Well, I was boarding then with with a school director, but he was a representative to Montpelier and gone all week and my superintendent had been sent to war and they hadn't gotten a new one yet so I didn't have anyone to back me up you know. But when I did have, they wanted to whale those boys. And I said no, if I can't manage myself I'll quit, but I had the next year, the word got around you know and the next year I had more offers to go to straighten schools out you know, but I didn't take them of course. I'd had time, it affected my health that year, it was hard, but I won out anyway. I made a name for myself I guess, uh huh. Yea.

MK So it was not an easy road for a teacher in a one room school by any means?

SS No, under the conditions, with nobody there to back you up.

MK I can imagine. Did you have children of all eight grades?

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SS No, I think probably six or something like that. I had some adorable little first graders though and second graders that made it happy at times you know. But back then, I know I made cute little curtains for the windows and I taught sewing. We taught the girls. I remember how to make patterns to fit their measurements you know for little nighties and taught the girls how to make little nighties and things. We worked in a lot of things that year and there were things that we taught the boys about using tools.

MK So there were a lot of practical skills that were taught that children in a rural community would need.

SS Lyndon Institute was a very practical school. You weren't asked if you were a girl, you were told that you would have four periods of cooking and four periods of sewing a week and it didn't count in credits toward graduation and we had phys-ed also. So the girls had just one study period at school a week and we had to do all our work at night, all our studying at night while the boys didn't, it was different with them. They used to poke fun at us for taking so many books home. They didn't have to because they had all those study periods at school. But it was a great thing for me all my life you know. I made my clothes and my daughter's clothes. I could even make suits that looked tailored. Well I did take them to the tailor for the buttonholes and the final pressing and so on and they really looked well. I learned an awful lot there in the four years. It was a very practical education as well as as your regular studies you know. You had all that too, but you had a lot on the practical side that helped you get through life. Of course we were lived through the 1929 depression and oh, it helped so much to be able to do so much yourself you know.

MK What kind of work was your husband doing?

SS He worked in a railroad office in Lyndonville. He went back and forth on the train every day. He was in the Payroll Department I believe.

MK Was he able to keep working during the depression?

SS No, he wasn't because the Canadian Pacific bought out the Boston Main Line. He went to Woodsville, New Hampshire, his job did. After awhile we moved down there and then there was what was called bumping somebody that had worked more years than you could bump you off your job. Well he could have done the same thing, but he wouldn't take another man's job away from him at a time like that, so he

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went into a food store to work. He said there's a place that people have got to eat. He said the pay isn't big, but we'll have a job. So that's what he did for quite awhile. Sold groceries and those were busy years. He didn't like it as well as working in an office though.

MK Did you find yourself, my mother tells stories now about the kinds of food that they had as kids during, growing up during the depression...

SS Uh huh.

MK ...and I think she, I think one of the things she talks about is bread and butter and applesauce.

SS Uh huh. We had gardens then you know ourselves and did a lot of canning to help us through the winter. Yea, and the children helped weed the garden and that was good for them. They didn't think so, but we did. Kept them out of mischief.

MK I want to thank you for taking the time to talk with me this morning.

SS Well I enjoyed it.

MK Thank you, so have I.