

Interview of Mary McMillan by Oonagh O'Connor, continued; 1995

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We'd walk over to the store because it was a change from our store. That was the only other store there was then, so it was a big deal. *Do you remember what kind of things the store sold?* Everything. Everything from horseshoe nails to... I don't know if they sold clothes. I don't think they sold clothes. *Where did you get your clothes from?*

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Vancouver.

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Did you think your mother liked living on Cortes?

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Yes, I think my mother liked it. I don't know. I think she and dad liked it there.

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But... *Did they stay for a long time?*

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Quite a long time. And then they...

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Dad had a brother up to the Peace River

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and they moved up there and bought a farm. And... They left. There it is. *Did you raise your family on Cortes?* No. I have one daughter and she went to 23 schools before she graduated from grade 8.

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Wow. You moved around a lot.

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Yeah. I was married twice. The first time I was married, I was married to a construction engineer, wife of an engineer. And he's the father of my daughter. And we moved. Every time there was a construction job. They last about a year, a year and a half or something, as a rule. So we moved all over the place. And then, during the war, he went overseas and Pat and I came back to Cortes Island. And Pat went to school at Cortes. And then she trained for a nurse in, well, for high school I took her to Vancouver, we lived in Vancouver. And then she trained as a nurse in St. Joseph's Hospital, the old hospital, nuns. And she graduated as valedictorian of her class, pediatrics. And she graduated from high school in Port Alberni and again she was valedictorian of her class. So I don't think her 23 years of rambling around hurt her any!

When did you return to Cortes? Well, let's see, 1974, I guess, fall of 74.

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As much food as... she raised as much food as she could.

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You know, we ate potatoes and all the vegetables that you kept all winter. And we had a root cellar, and my brother and I packed sand from the beach and washed it. And then Dad built bins in his root cellar, and we put, put in a layer carrots, a layer of sand, a layer of carrots, same with potatoes and onions, and they kept beautifully.

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How long did it take from when they went there to clear the land and set up the farm before

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you actually had enough carrots to preserve them?

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Oh, the second year we were there we had a garden. *Were there lots of trees?* Not very many. Some alder, I think. I guess they had been logged off at one time.

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I'm not sure. *Did you have any other social lives besides the dances?* Oh, they had, uh...

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Well, as I say, they had this Christmas party thing,

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and then they used to have a fall fair where everybody took jam and pies and stuff to be judged. *And so someone would get a prize for making the best pie?*

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Oh yeah

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Oh yeah. *Do you ever remember who won?*

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No, I don't remember who won. Oh, they paid jams and pickles and all kinds of stuff. You know, kind of a farm fair.

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Would there be games for the kids to play?

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Nobody did as much worrying about kids in those days as they do now. Kids were kids and they just ran around and played themselves. You couldn't amuse yourself, it was too bad.

Nobody arranged any amusements for you. You did your own thing. Like we used to, when I was, even when I was going to school with Nelson, we used to get out of school as quick as we could and play grass hockey or baseball or some damn thing. Now you see kids come out of school, they're dragging along. Then they have to have an instructor to tell them what to do. Plah! Never had that problem.

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We never shot other kids or stabbed them or anything.

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Well, not at Whaletown particularly, but even in Nelson and Vancouver they didn't have that kind of nonsense.

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In those days people still had some respect for human life. I don't think the kids have anymore. I don't know whether it's because their parents are both working and neither one of them is paying enough attention to the kids or what.

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Do you remember any interaction with natives?

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Oh, the Indians? *Yeah*. They used to come to the dances.

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Oh, yeah?

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Mm-hmm. Everybody danced with everybody. There was no segregation or anything.

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No. *Do you remember any draft dodgers?* What? *Draft dodgers?* I wasn't on the island during the war that much. I don't think there were any draft dodgers on the island,

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but there were lots up in the Kootenays and different places where we lived. They didn't have such things as hippies and stuff. Didn't have any of those. And that was later, that they had a lot of young people move in.

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Did you go out in boats very often?

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Sure. It's the only way you get around.

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So would you row?

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Yeah, usually. Well, my mother and I used to row a fish rowboat. And then, but if you were going to go to Campbell River or anywhere, you'd have a gas boat. You'd get somebody's gas boat.

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Would you go to Campbell River very often?

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Not often. *How about Vancouver?*

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Oh, once in a while. But that wasn't a very frequent trip either, especially during the Depression. There's no money to go on trips.

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Did your father find a way of making a living on Cortes?

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Oh yes. He logged.

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He worked for a logger. And he did odd jobs. My father was a carpenter. And he built an addition on to Pete Police's house one time, and Peter had ordered some food for the pigs, and he had ordered some food for the pigs, and it hasn't come. So, the pigs are squealing and not getting enough to eat, and Peter had dumped out everything he had, like oatmeal or stuff like that, to feed these pigs. Very tragic. And so, Dad went up there this morning, this one morning to work on the house, and here's Peter. Peter, he's holding the gun, and tears are streaming down his face, and I thought, well what the hell happened to Peter? So he asked him, what's wrong? Peter said, I had to kill the piggies, I had nothing left to feed them. He had nothing else he could feed them, so he killed them. So Dad helped him scrape them and fix them up.

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Did your family ever go hungry? No. Did you ever hear of people on the island going hungry, starving?

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No. I don't think anybody needed to starve. As I say, if they could shoot, they could get grouse and venison and they could fish. There was lots of fish in those days. And they could dig some clams and oysters and this.

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Were there oysters then?

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Oh yes, sure there was oysters.

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Do you remember a fellow who had an oyster lease at the North end of the island?

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Or have you heard of him?

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Who was it?

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I can't remember, but someone mentioned that there was a fellow with the oyster lease.

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How many years ago? *A long time. It may have been Dunc that told me about it and that these were the original kind not the Japanese oysters. They must have been very original.*

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Yeah.

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Because I don't remember anybody talking about oyster releases until much, much later.
Yeah, I was quite surprised to hear that. So when you would find oysters, did they be

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the...

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The original.

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Yeah.

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Yeah. It was before the Chinese, Japanese oysters were introduced.

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Were they plentiful?

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No. They were hard to get, but they were worth it. They were really good oysters.

Do you remember hearing about Whaletown and why it was called Whaletown and what the whaling station was at?

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Did you ever hear about the stories about the days of whaling?

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Oh yes, they used to have a whaling station across from where the town of Whaletown, the store is. On property that was owned by Lear [?]. It was owned by... Well, Scotty McKenzie had a piece there and Mr. and Mrs. Byers, Scotty's in-laws, had a place there. Mrs. Byers had a beautiful garden. But, whether there was a lot of whale oil in it because of the whales they killed or not, I don't know. But it used to be a whaling station.

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Is that picture up there of Mansons or where is that?

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Tofino.

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Oh. It could almost be Mansons. I mean it does right now. Yeah.

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The dock's not in the line. [?]

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Yeah. It's out of line. *Do you remember any colorful characters besides...*

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Oh, John Poole. Yes, he was very colorful.

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Who was that?

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He lived... He lived in a house where Gilean Douglas lived later. He built that house and the stone cottage as well. And he was the Justice of the Peace for quite a while.

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I haven't even heard of him.

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So why was he colorful?

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Well, he was emphatic and sort of, I don't know, he came from, he was English, then he went to Africa teaching, and so had his wife, Mrs. Poole, and they both taught in Africa, and they

got married, but they never lived together. He lived in that house down on the bank, on the beach, and she had a house and a chicken up, let's see, where John Carr is now. Carr's house is, that used to be Mrs. Poole's chicken yard. And she always wore the same clothes to feed the chickens and stuff. And Mr. Poole, well he used to go up and help her with the chickens once in a while and he'd stand out there and he'd swear at the chickens. And she'd get a kick out of him.

Do you know who used to live next door to them?

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In the piece of property next to the Pooles?

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Next to the place where Gilean Douglas lived?

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Thompson's, yeah. *How about the other way, towards Whaletown?*

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That's where he lived?

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Thompsons lived there and Sinclairs.

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The family called Sinclairs.

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Sinclair was somewhere in the South Sea Islands or somewhere. And he and his wife, I think they had three daughters. And they bought that place. I think they had it before Thompsons.

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Which Thompsons?

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Douglas Thompson, he had two sons, Billy and Jim. And Mrs. Thompson. She used to walk up from there quite often to things with Paul, to the post office and everything. *Is that the place that the McGee's later owned?*

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Oh, the McGee's...

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It wasn't McGee, it was McKee.

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They lived down there, but they just sort of rented it from Thompson's and were caretaking

it. He and his wife lived next door to Mother and Dad after a while. His wife's name was Ann, and they lived on the place to the right of us. *[Phone rings & recording is stopped than resumed]*. After she died he lived on on the island himself. *What's his name?* Alec McKee. He had a daughter in Powell River, and she was the only child. And so, some years ago, he moved down to Powell River to be near his daughter. He had some grandchildren down there [??], so he moved. But he was about 92 when he died, I think. But he lived in a... well, he lived out of Coulter Bay, too, for a while. He had a shack out in Coulter Bay.

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Did you know the Bordens?

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Were they were very close to you?

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No, they were on the road to Carrington. But, well, about halfway up to Pete's place, I guess. Mrs. Borden, and there were four kids, two girls and two boys. And one of them was Lorna. I remember her. She was... One of them's living in Powell River now. No, one more. I think he came back to the island.

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Vern

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Vern. He's back on the island. Yeah, I think he... I think somebody just said he came back to the island. But the Bordens had lived there a long time, but they finally moved to Powell River. *Did they do that while you were living on the island?*

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I don't remember when they moved.

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I know they were living on the

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the island for quite a few years. I think Mrs. Borden's mother and father lived there too. But they had a house right up by the lakes. I think it remains, it's a log house and I think the remains of it are there still.

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At Barret's lake?

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Mm-hmm. Barret's lake.

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Did you have much contact with the outside world other than Cortes? Did you know what was going on in the world specifically?

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Well, naturally people do.

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How would they get the information?

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Well, newspapers and radio.

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So you had a radio? Did your family have a radio?

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Uh-huh. And you had a battery, like a car battery almost, to run the radio. But, that was the thing.

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How would you charge it? Somebody had a charger, I guess. I didn't pay much attention to that angle.

Do you remember when the Second World War started? Oh, the Second World War, sure.

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And did, well, do you remember the First World War?

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No, I was only two years older, so I don't know much about that.

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So did anyone you know leave for the Second World War?

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Oh, well, I told you my husband went to war. And there must have been other people I knew who went to the war.

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You weren't on Cortes at the time, though, I guess.

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No, I...

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Oh, okay. I was confused about that.

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I came back to Cortes. I lived on Cortes during the war. And my mom and dad. *And did they stay at that homestead that they started?* Yep.

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Yeah, that's where they were all the time?

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Yeah, and during the war I ran the post office for a while. And I lived in that house on the rocks right behind the store.

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I ran the post office for four years. *Was that an interesting job?*

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I don't know. *Did it pay well?* No, it didn't pay anything practically. You just got a percentage of sales of the stamps. And you sold unemployment insurance stamps and regular stamps. Money orders and stuff. When I ran the post office, I used to have people come down from Stuart Island to get a money order. They said they got the best service at my post office. And one man, he was a logger, and he was from Norway, I think, and he wanted to send a parcel to Norway. And he'd been in two or three post offices down the coast. Nobody knew what to charge him. So he came into my post office and he pushed this big parcel across and he said, how much? So I picked it up and put it on the scales and said five dollars. And he said, okay. So he gave me five dollars. The parcel cost \$4.95 to mail, when I figured it out to [??]. I mean I had to go through all this performance, and I knew him, and I thought, oh, he won't want to stand around and wait while I figure that out. So I just told him \$5. It was okay. I had a customer for life. Saeterhaug [*sp?*] is his name.

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Had you got any jobs on Cortes, like paying jobs when you were younger?

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No. There weren't any paying jobs on Cortes.

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You fished and you hunted and it took a lot of time. Effort. Never anything. *Did you have to leave the island to find work?* Oh, yes. There wasn't any work on Cortes. *So what was your first job?*

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Uh... In a hotel in South Slocan. It was a construction job there. They were building a power plant. And the hotel was very busy. It had about 17 stay boarders and everybody that came in off the street enrolled. And so I worked there.

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How old were you?

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Seventeen. Well, going on to August, August was the fall, going on to be eighteen.

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And how long did you stay off Cortes?

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Oh, I was off Cortes for quite a long while. Oh, yeah. And then, but I went back to visit and stuff. My mother and dad were still there. But...

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Do you remember what your wages were?

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No. About \$15 a month, I imagine. I can't remember exactly.

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Are you still in contact with any of the people you knew when you were on Cortes? Oh, yes. I use my phone back and forth

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and see their reading once in a while. And Bill Matthews. And Dunc. And Joanne. I mean, I know her. I haven't seen Joanne for ages. But, yeah, I knew quite a few. There's a lot of people I know around.

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Do you get back there very much?

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No, not much. Sometimes.

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Well, thanks, Mary. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

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Don't think so. Thanks for asking.

Disclaimer: This text is transcribed from an audio recording. Although the transcription is largely accurate, in some places it is incomplete or inaccurate due to inaudible passages or transcription errors. It is posted as an aid to understanding the oral history, but should not be treated as an authoritative record.