

Agnes Doody

Interview and story by: **Christopher Chapin**

This story is based on one of a series of interviews conducted by South Kingstown (RI) High School students in the Spring of 1998. All of the interviews were focused on recollections of the year 1968. In addition to the student's edited story below, you can find on this site the electronic transcript of the interview and a quicktime recording of the encounter, as well as a table of cues and contents.

An Independent Woman: A Time of Social Change

I had the pleasure of growing up on a big working farm in North Branford, Connecticut. We had a large dairy herd, a roadside vegetable stand, and about four hundred acres. When I was growing up, I worked outside with my father. A lot of men left the farm to fight in World War II or work in munitions. I learned to drive a tractor by the time I was twelve or thirteen. I got up every morning to milk the cows and such. I learned how to shoot a rifle and a shotgun.

My mother was a very staunch Republican, and my father was a very staunch Democrat. In 1940, a man named Wendell Wilke ran against FDR. He was definitely left-of-center, and my mother managed his campaign locally. My father managed FDR's, so they sort of canceled each other out.

My father seemed to read every single word in the newspaper. We had a radio, but television hadn't come out yet. My parents subscribed to several magazines-Look and Life which are both out of print now. They subscribed to Time weekly, as well. We were well informed; my parents encouraged us to read a lot. We'd have discussions after dinner about politics. Once, I told my mother I would vote for Mr. Roosevelt. She asked me why, and when I told her it was because my father would. She said it wasn't good enough. She made me give a presentation about Mr. Roosevelt the next night during dinner. They trained us to speak. After dinner we'd have a speech. It was fun.

My dad went into the high school once to make the rifle team coed, so I could shoot with them. He promised the coach I would raise the team's average score. Then he came home and said, "Kid, you're going to have to practice and not make a liar out of me." I got to be a pretty good shot after that.

Amelia Earhart was one of my heroes when I was a girl. I was in love with what she was doing, and I was shattered when I found out that she was reported missing. I thought I wanted to be a pilot. I joined the Civil Air Patrol during World War II when I was in high school. I lied about my age. I said I was eighteen even though I was only fifteen. I did airplane spotting during World War II.

We had cards like a deck of playing cards, and on each one was a silhouette of every American military plane and every German military plane. I had to identify them, like flash cards. Then they let you go planespotting. There was a pavilion which was really just a shed with a deck on top, and you'd sit up there and call in the planes you saw flying to the National Guard. Eventually, I got thrown out of it because they found out I was three years younger than I claimed to be. After that, I thought about aeronautical engineering. I'm terrible in math, so I just drifted away from that.

My parents supported me in whatever I was doing, so I went to graduate school. Both of my husbands felt very supportive of my career. I changed my name legally when I married Doctor Jeffrey, but I never changed it professionally. I was always Dr. Doody. When Doctor Jeffrey died, I went back to my maiden name, and when I married Ellis six years ago, I didn't change my name after that.

During the sixties, I had some hip surgery that had me in a wheelchair for a while. After that, I was stuck with crutches for some time. I couldn't get around, and therefore, I couldn't join the Freedom Riders. I felt very strongly about it, though, and I coached students from the university who went south in the summer to register voters. The son of a very dear friend of mine was in jail for a while, which was very scary from what we'd heard. Northern white kids in the South who were mixing with blacks were the target of kidnapping and murder. When you think about Martin Luther King, he was twenty six when he led the Montgomery bus boycott.

I fought the president of URI. I married my husband in 1962; we had met on campus. In 1963, I got my contract, but I didn't get my merit raise for doing a good job. I went through the chair, the dean, the provost, right up to the president. I said, "Mr. President, I understand you're the one that vetoed my merit raise." He said, "That's right: Your husband is making enough for the two of you. Now that you're married, you don't need it." That was the attitude then. We really argued, and I saw we were going nowhere, so I said I was going down to the town clerk to get my marriage annulled. That was what was in the way of my raise. Then he threatened to fire me. I told him I would take out a full-page ad in the Narragansett Times so everyone would see he was against marriage. He flipped out. He said I wouldn't dare to. I started to walk out the door and he said, "Yes you would! Get back here," and I got my merit raise. It was only a hundred and fifty dollars, but that's not the issue. He looked at me as someone's wife, not as a professor.

I was in a lot of rallies at URI. In 1967, I was chair of the Faculty Senate and there were students protesting, storming the senate. Another time, Nixon and Agnew were calling college students "bums." I helped raise \$1,400 and we used the money to take out a full-page ad in the Providence Journal. It said, "Dear Mr. President. We respect our students; they are not bums." We signed it, "Faculty and Senate." Those were very tumultuous times. In general, I'd have to say that as radical as the behavior during the sixties was, it was an exciting period. A lot of my students asked for a recommendation for the Peace Corps. They really believed they could make a difference. Students put their lives on the line. Freedom Riders were getting lined up to head down to the South. What I saw was a very intense commitment on the part of young people, to make a difference. I cherished that. It was very, very exciting. Now, for a number of reasons, I see kids drifting through. All they're worried about is the next job they're going to get. Part of it is because this generation hasn't seen inspirational leadership. We had great senators. Senator Fullbright and Sam Brady were great. Margaret Chase-Smith was the first woman elected to Senate, and she stood up to McCarthy. That took guts.

I was also impressed with Helen Gahagan Douglas. She was in Congress and Nixon ran against her. He used some dirty tricks to win.

He lied about her voting record and used the Red Scare against her. Nixon was so dishonest. Douglas was the only woman in Congress at the time. I never liked Nixon because I never trusted him, and that lack of trust goes back to the Douglas campaign in 1950. It was wonderful when LBJ decided not to run for President. I felt that he was an opportunist. I respect him for pushing through the Civil Rights legislation, which Kennedy didn't do. I think that Lyndon Johnson's ego got in the way of his decision making ability.

I don't think the counter-culture was the most important phenomenon of the sixties. The most important phenomena were the social issues of the sixties: The Civil Rights Movement, and the emerging women's rights, the increasing awareness of the homosexual community, for examples. The counter culture was attractive. It was a media event. It did have a profound effect on family values, promiscuity, music, drugs, and those kinds of things. But, I used to love going to class in the Sixties, because it was like going to a Halloween party. The way the kids dressed was absolutely outrageous. People at the Salvation Army in Providence would get upset because the college kids would go up there and buy out all the old clothes and wear them to class, while the people who really needed them didn't have access to them.

You had radical change in some of the music, the Beatles, for example. The first time they came on the "Ed Sullivan Show" they were considered so radical. All the pictures had to be shown from the waist up because of the way they were gyrating. If you look at them now, it's crazy. They were tame compared to what followed. I don't care what you think, as long as you think something. If it's anarchy, that's okay. I think our system can stand it. I think burning draft cards was a statement of conviction. Those people went to jail to Waterbury Federal Penitentiary over there. It took courage to do that. Like the Boston Tea Party, it was protest. They dumped tea overboard. It's part of our political heritage, protesting. I'd hate to see us ever give that up.