

Transcript–Ruth Elizabeth Cooke Peterson '14

Narrator: Ruth Elizabeth Cooke Peterson

Interviewer:

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Track 1

Ruth Elizabeth Cooke Peterson: [00:00] My first appointment this morning, so you'll excuse me, I have to change my clothes to go to the doctor's, so I didn't bother.

Q: That's OK. We're talking today to Ruth Cooke Peterson, class of 1914. What did you major in when you were at Pembroke?

RECP: Classics.

Q: Classics. Why don't you first – you were telling me a little bit about your decorating school. Why don't you tell me about that? It's in Pawtucket.

RECP: Do I begin back where I began, why I began?

Q: Sure.

RECP: I think that when I was nine years old, my mother gave me my grandmother's tray, which she had cherished all these years. I am the youngest of six children, and the only one now living. There being 14 years difference between my oldest brother, [01:00] Dr. Charles [Osmond?] Cooke, he graduated Brown, [THB, AM?] in Biology. Yale University, MD, where he was

granted also Sigma Psi, and was invited to join the American College of Surgeons, a worldwide organization. He and I were very close, and he took me on various expeditions.

So, a couple of years ago, I found a little green snake on a raspberry bush, and I picked it up by the tail, much to the astonishment of a friend with me. She said, “How do you dare?” I said, “When I was a little girl, my oldest brother told me it wouldn’t hurt me. Therefore, I believed him. [02:00] And so therefore, if I meet a green snake, I pick it up by the tail.” That is the way my life began. I was educated in the Providence schools, always very much interested in nature. Always very much interested in all kinds of decorations, and aided and abetted by my mother, who could see that I wanted to work with my hands, as well as with my accurate interpretation of color. So, my first accomplishment, may I say, in this field, was to lie on the floor in the days of making big chains on individual loops, which my father had bought for me. [03:00] Copying the designs from an Oriental rug, and each knot in an Oriental rug, I interpreted as a bead, and when I went, one time when I was about 18, to a lawn party from – held by a group in the church, the fortune teller asked me where I had bought the bead chain. And I replied, “I made it.” She said, “You made it? Then you are either going to be an artist or a thief.” Now, remember, this is when I was about 18 years old. And little did I ever think I would do anything but teach classics: mathematics, English, or whatever, at Classical High School, from which I had [04:00] graduated in 1910, and to which I returned immediately as a teacher, with a room of 50 young people upon graduation from Pembroke.

Q: You were sure when you went to Pembroke that you would be a teacher? Why had you been so sure about that?

RECP: Because I was always able to explain to other people how I did something, which they had had no experience with. My mother was a teacher in a country school. My father wanted to be a professor. His mother said to him, “Because you are going to get married, William, I will send you to a business college.” He hated every line he wrote, but his bookkeeping was really [05:00] a work of art. He was a collector of minerals of all kinds, and I was fortunate in being able to accompany him on many of his local expeditions looking for minerals in Rhode Island, which is quite rich in many, many specimens, if you know how and where to look for them. Diamond Hill, so called, because of the large and tall cliff of granite, which sparkles, is filled

with quartz crystals, and Rhode Island garnets, which are very, very opaque compared to what an imported garnet is. And those at Diamond Hill [06:00] if you hold them to the light just right, and they're not too large a crystal, you can see the red through, but it's a very black red, whereas a diamonds [inaudible] got from the Middle East – I speak of garnets because they happen to be the January birthstone, which is mine. So, from the Middle East, they come in different shades of red, and many times identified by a novice as a ruby, from which they are a long way off. As to what has gone on since, I've never given up teaching. I immediately began to take lessons when I had the time on toll ware, [07:00] and I have a huge collection of 41 inch trays, supper trays, canisters, I furnished my whole kitchen with old toll ware, and those are the designs that I used, as I interpret them from the original decorations.

Q: When did you leave Classical High School to open a decorating school?

RECP: I left Classical High School when I was married in 1925. I did not open my own studio until 1939, but I had always given lessons at home

Q: So, you taught at Classical High School when you graduated in 1914 until 1925, [08:00] and then you got married.

RECP: I taught from 1915 to '25. I taught the classics. I also coached athletics. I was athletic coordinator for all the high schools in Providence.

Q: Were you an athlete when you were in college?

RECP: Yes.

Q: What sports did you play?

RECP: Always a center on basketball, and my right arm responds in such a fine way that at that time I could sling a basketball from one end of the court to the other.

Q: And make a basket?

RECP: No, because we did not – we played women's basketball. We did not play men's basketball, and it was always very prescribed where you stood. There was not the free shooting there is in the present day basketball [09:00].

Q: Were you a high school athlete also?

RECP: Beg your pardon?

Q: Were you an athlete in high school? When you went to Classical High School as a student?

RECP: Oh, yes.

Q: So, you've been athletic all your life.

RECP: Yes.

Q: How many sports did you play when you were in college?

RECP: I really concentrated because I worked my way through on basketball. It was all the time I had. I did take athletic dancing and social dancing, which during my term of teaching at Classical High School, I was able to pass on to the juniors and seniors to get them ready for their proms and whatever social events they had. [10:00] It was very, very distasteful for me when I had had such fun to see 350 children sitting in a ring around the room not knowing which foot was where. So, I devised a way of teaching, because in high school in those days the constituents were rather shy, and their mothers and fathers were interested in their education, not in social activities. But when their junior prom came, it seemed very awful to me that they could not enjoy it. Therefore, I went to the principal and asked if I could get the junior class and the senior class ready for these occasions, [11:00] and he very readily consented, and gave me the privilege of the big assembly hall for practice. And I found it very necessary to have the young people make

a large circle, and progress under my direction with the different steps individually toward the center of the circle. Eventually, it seemed right that there should be a more comfortable position, since social dancing is generally in couples, and I proceeded to have them take elbows, and then hands, [12:00] and eventually accomplished the dancing position, for which I was very fussy. It had to be right, or they were corrected. So, if they did not know social dancing, and many of these young people had refused to go to professional dancing schools, and many a parent came to me and said, “You are so great to give your time, and you have done what I have tried to pay to do – have done, but no good.” Because this was a school activity, everyone cooperated.

Q: I think this is very fascinating information. I can see you’ve always been someone full of energy, and you like to teach people different things, and so I’m not surprised that [13:00] you were someone who your parents saw fit to send to college in the first place. Maybe you could tell me a little bit about why you went to Pembroke? Why you went to college, and why you went to Pembroke?

RECP: Brown University, in my mind, was as fine a place as anyone could graduate from, and because I was to work my way through, it seemed better that I live at home, and then I could keep on with my athletic coaching, which helped me. I also did teach a certain amount of enjoyment of games at the Providence YW to a group of children, which was sponsored by a very interested and generous woman, [14:00] for which I received some remuneration.

Q: And what classes did you take when you were in college?

RECP: Latin all the way through. French, Latin, Greek, French.

Q: Do you remember any of the professors that you had?

RECP: Yes, indeed. I had Professor Manatt in Greek. I had Professor Harkness, grandson of the man who had written Harkness Latin Grammar, in Latin. I had Roland B. W. Richardson in mathematics. French, a Dr. Johnson. Can’t give you his first name. [15:00] English –

Q: You don't remember?

RECP: Can't remember.

Q: Yeah. You must have some favorite memories of when you were a college student?

RECP: Oh, I loved it. Every bit.

Q: Tell me about some of the most special things.

RECP: Well, college was all very special to me, especially as I had come very well prepared from Classical High School to continue on with the classical subjects. And [16:00] I was able to augment my class work with athletics. So, after playing I also coached basketball and supervised athletics at Lincoln School until they had their own department. I think that working, teaching young people how to throw a ball correctly, how to use hands, how to use different parts of the body, is as important as developing the mind [17:00] because a good athlete is generally an A student.

Q: Do you remember Dean King? Dean King?

RECP: Oh, yes. She was there all the time I was there.

Q: Did you know her well?

RECP: In those days, when I went to college, the Dean was very knowledgeable of the members of the different classes. Very knowledgeable of what was going on. Shall I give an incident?

Q: Sure.

RECP: As a side issue, I was leader of the Banjo and Mandolin Club, and no activity was supposed to go on outside the college without the Dean's supervision or permission. [18:00] One

time, I was engaged to go to a small church with my Banjo and Mandolin Club and a storyteller. As it happened, my program was so full, I did not have the opportunity, or perhaps I should have said I didn't make the extra effort to make an opportunity to go to the Dean, and have her supervise the program. Therefore, I was called in later, reprimanded, and told that the activities of my club were at an end. This discipline I unquestionably deserved, but it was very hard to take because of my situation [19:00] of working my way through college, and trying to carry on and enjoy not only my academic curriculum, but also my extracurricular activities.

Q: So, that was the end of the club? There was nothing you could do about it?

RECP: One never could question Dean King's judgment. It was always very honest. It may have seemed very difficult at the time, but I never did find her unfair.

Q: What other kinds of restrictions did you have as a college student? [20:00] What about with respect to the men's campus?

RECP: What, what?

Q: What about restrictions with respect to the men's campus?

RECP: We took classes, many of them, with the men, because there were not enough professors to have separate groups. There were not enough students taking each one. So, I did not share too many classes on the hill, because most of my courses were given at Pembroke, or in the recitation house, which was later acquired. My science, obviously, my biology course had to be done on the hill. But may I interpose a light note here from a song written by [21:00] a graduate of the class of 1906? "Always wear your veil, and gloves, and hat, and do remember that, when you go over to Brown."

Q: Do you remember any other songs or songs that the Brown men had about Pembroke or the women had about Brown?

RECP: No. It was quite different then. It was really, while we did have a Brown University degree, classes were kept very, very separate, and professors came to Pembroke to give their courses. The students did not go to the hill with few exceptions. We did not have a laboratory, [22:00] therefore all laboratory work had to be done on the hill.

Q: So, you must have gotten to know the other girls in your class very well.

RECP: Oh, yes. I've been present for 15 years. I was chairman – always chairman of the social committees, and I made it my business. I didn't go to college just to spend all nighttime with the girls I had known all my life. I wanted to know the others. One of my most intimate friends came from Woonsocket. She later married and moved to New Jersey, and as long as she lived we were friends. And as far as 1914 is concerned, we'd meet three or four times a year. Now, socially. And we either go to lunch at a commercial place, or someone in the group [23:00] entertains the group. And I look back upon my years at Pembroke with great pleasure, and I'm always proud to be a graduate of Brown University.

Q: Do you ever get down to the University now?

RECP: Oh, yes. I have been throughout the years, because I had a hip and so on. I don't get around that much, and I've had a cataract operation, which is inhibiting at night, and I go when the opportunity is right.

Q: It must seem awfully different to you. What are some of the biggest differences that you feel when you go down there now? [24:00]

RECP: The utter freedom of which people are allowed to go in and out and move about, and the greater variety that they have in classes, and I'm sure if I went back I would have great difficulty in choosing what I would want to take because so much is offered. And I have all the years that I taught, I took an extension course in French, or in English, or in some subject which was related to which I was spending my hours, or to enrich my mind. Other extension courses, which were

offered, which had not been offered at any time [25:00] up to that time. Different courses in biology, inheritance, and all of the different freedom of the sciences.

Q: So, it was much more restricted though when you were there?

RECP: Very restricted. "Always wear your gloves, and veil, and hat, and always remember that you are a Pembroke girl."

Q: Did you take part in the campus dances and other social activities?

RECP: Oh, yes. Always.

Q: Tell me about those. What was that like?

RECP: Class night?

Q: What was that like.

RECP: With all the campus lighted with paper. Japanese lanterns strung on strings, from the different elm trees, from the different buildings, Class Night was thee night.

Q: When was that usually held?

RECP: What?

Q: Was that in the springtime?

RECP: Oh, the Class Night comes during commencement week. [26:00] And all of the fraternity houses are open, all the buildings at Brown are open, and it's a gala occasion.

Q: And what did the women at Pembroke do on that night?

RECP: They hoped that they would have an invitation to go. The women did not, as a rule, go uninvited or unattended. Although, other people, if you so wished you could, of course there was a fee charged, you could go whether you were a graduate or not, provided you wished to sit in the middle campus and listen to the wonderful concerts which were always provided, both by talent from the university, but largely by talent [27:00] hired for the occasion from the different opera companies, from the different orchestras. And we had some of the finest singers from the [National Parliament?] come, and it used to cost about 500 dollars, but that would be the big expense of the whole evening for the university to bear. Campus Night is just great. I went to it as long as I was able to, really.

Q: Do you remember the dances in Sayles gym? Weren't there dances on the women's campus?

RECP: Oh, definitely.

Q: What were those like?

RECP: A receiving line, where before you danced you took your escort up to meet the Dean. [28:00] Did I do something?

Q: No, that's OK.

RECP: And they were much more restricted, and much more dignified than they are now. One was not allowed to leave the building if the dance was in Sayles gym, in the gymnasium. Once in that was it. There was not the freedom there is now when you go from building to building and you either stay at the dance or you go out, or whatever. Everything was really quite restricted.

Q: Did you have a steady beau when you were at Pembroke?

RECP: Let me see. Yes and no. [29:00] I had a would-be, but it was no good.

Q: I've heard some stories about the different things that the girls in one class would have to do for the girls in another class, for example, that the freshman had to hold the doors for the seniors.

RECP: Definitely.

Q: What other things like that went on?

RECP: Course, every senior had a freshman. In other words, there was always an upperclassman to look out for an incoming person, and you did as much as you could for that person by advising, if needed, or by now and then having an afternoon over an ice cream soda. [30:00] Never a cup of coffee.

Q: Why not?

RECP: Young people didn't drink coffee in those days. I was 28 before I ever had a cup of coffee.

Q: So, they didn't have coffee in the dining hall?

RECP: No. We generally had – well, I don't know because as I say, I didn't drink it when I was in college. I know there was always tea, and I know there was always milk, and I remember that I generally drank milk rather than a bottle of soda, but that's a matter of taste.

Q: So, you were assigned to a senior when you came in as a freshman? You had a senior looking out for you when you first came to college?

RECP: Oh, yes. [31:00] Alice [Holman?]. Big, tall senior. Played basketball. If you were in athletics, you got to know the upperclassman far more than those who did not enter into – every freshman had a senior, and there was not the freedom of mingling. Nobody had time for social life in those days.

Q: Studying too hard? Why was there no time? Too much studying to do?

RECP: Too much studying, too much – everything was very restricted. College was, at that time, not too different from Classical High School in its restrictions. Because that really should be the other way around, but one had to stick to the courses to the time of lectures, [32:00] which were 50 minutes, and there was so much preparation, that after your classes were over, it was to the John Hay library, or another library. Pembroke Library had a wonderful collection. And everybody was bent on business. There were none of this meeting and getting all the gossip and having all the merriments, you know? We were really too serious. But that's the way it was. But we still meet. We are going to have a meeting here in May, here, my class. And we had a meeting earlier at Eileen Darling's*, and we had girls from outside the city, as well [33:00] as –

- End -

Track 2

Q: [00:00] OK. Why don't you start telling me that again? You don't think you had enough lectures?

Ruth Elizabeth Cooke: I feel that after every 50-minute period of concentrated exercises, it prepared information, that it should be a time, not necessarily every day, but possibly every month, or every few weeks for that course to be expanded, as only a professor could do it. Someone who had made a much wider study of the situation than would be prepared, or could be used by a student.

Q: So, you think there should [01:00] have been more lecture time?

RECP: There should have been more overall orientation after a certain length of time on each course, instead of just having examinations to find out how much we knew, it would have helped. And one thing I will remember, when I was taking solid geometry, about two persons out of a

rather large group were able to pass the examination. The reason being that the very clever professor had twisted a proposition around, and only a very few were able to catch it.

Q: That doesn't seem quite far.

RECP: It wasn't. He was just, well, [02:00] – of course, a situation like that would perhaps test a person who was mathematically minded, but a person who was classically orientated, and who took mathematics and was able to do well in it, but not especially interested, would not be up to always that a solid geometry proposition might be turned around and mean the same thing.

Q: So, that was you?

RECP: Right.

Q: How do you think going to college changed your life?

RECP: College gave me an opportunity to [03:00] realize how much there was to learn, and how many different aspects there were on each type of life, and to learn more and more about what had come to make Rhode Island. As you know, we're built on seven hills Providence – built on seven hills, and then we have marvelous waterways all the way up, and you realize that Roger Williams landed on the Seekonk River, opposite the Narragan.... Brown University boathouse, the Indians came up and gave him canoes, and he paddled down there to the – down the Seekonk to the Providence River, down the Providence River to the Bay, and [04:00] to the Bay until it began to get too much for the canoes, and he saw an inlet, and he turned his canoe into Wickford Harbor, and from then into a lake, and it's now memorialized in the Cocumscusoc restoration, which is where he did all his trading with the Indians. I am ninth generation. Named after Roger Williams' mother, Ruth.

Q: I was wondering if you had any advice or anything to share with women at Brown today who might listen to this tape.

RECP: My advice would be for everyone to have a worthwhile hobby, [05:00] and some direction other than that which their program leads them to. We are a much mechanized nation, but never forget that things began with hand work.

Q: OK. Well, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything more about college life we haven't talked about?

RECP: I wouldn't know.

Q: Anything that's in your mind that's dying to come out that I didn't ask about?

RECP: No. I constantly meet people who are in college through their parents, and their parents usually turn them over to me to see what I think about college [06:00] and what they should do, and I am always willing to give a college education a boost, for the reason that it widens the horizon of whoever goes so much, and it gives opportunities found nowhere else.

Q: I guess not too many girls went when you went.

RECP: We had 49 in my class. The largest class Pembroke had ever had. An out of that 49, I think about 15 went from Classical High School. The others came from New Jersey, or Woonsocket, different places in Rhode Island, but they also came from [all over?]. We had one girl that came from Seattle, Washington, and immediately, of course she stayed at the dormitory. The dormitory was quite a sociable place. [07:00] In other words, the girls there would very frequently invite the town girls to go up to their room for a further chat or something, and I would say that my college life was too little social and too much business.

Q: Did you get a chance to go over the dormitory sometimes?

RECP: Oh, yes. I went. I had very good friends over there. One friend, Seattle. One friend from New Hampshire. We had girls, in my class, from almost every state in the Union. People wanted to go. I have no way of knowing. I know why I chose Brown. Many reasons. [08:00] But other

people had opportunities and other, I think – sometimes, teachers, if they had gone to Brown, recommended Brown. And I think otherwise, a great many teachers tried to suit the higher education to the student. Each woman's college has a reputation for this, or for that, or for something else. And whether it works out that way, I wouldn't know.

Q: What was Brown's reputation as a women's college?

RECP: Intellectual.

Q: You said there were – oh, sorry, I didn't mean to interrupt you.

RECP: Especially, it was sitting in [09:00] a very pretty position, because the professors from Brown University, the men's college, were able to come over and teach us, or we were able to go to them, and it would be very difficult for a women's college to have such a faculty available. And then, of course, Providence, also historically lends itself to higher education and to research because of its historical background.

Q: Is that one of the many reasons that you went to Brown?

RECP: I went because I would not have been able to go to college except if I could live at home, and also because my respect for Brown was great. It's always had standing. [10:00]

Q: I guess your parents were an influence also in your going to college at all.

RECP: I beg your pardon?

Q: Your parents must have been a big influence in your decision to go to college.

RECP: Well, yes. They were both graduates of the Lapham Institute, which was a seminary, and from which the graduates went into all different walk of life. Many of the finest surgeons all over the country went to Lapham Institute. From there, they could go to any college or university that

they chose. That's the standing they had. It was a very high quality [11:00] institution of learning. It was run by the Presbyterians, and Elder Brewster was a very fine educator, and people came from Florida, they came from California, they came from all parts of the country to go to Lapham Institute, and from there, they became – they could go to any college, any medical school, anywhere they wanted to. So, Rhode Island has been very rich in opportunities for education.

Q: Well, thank you very much for agreeing to talk to me.

RECP: (laughs)My pleasure.

Q: OK. Let me turn this off.

RECP: I hope I did right.

Q: You did very good.

- END -

*A local restaurant.