Interview with

Rose Miller Roitman '31

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Q: Why did you want to go to college? Was it for vocational preparation, for social reasons, or just to extend your education?

A: It was mostly for an extension of my education. It was just a family concept that I would go to college. I was supposedly gright in school, and college was just another step. Also for independnce: My mother, although of that generation, was a very much liberated lady, and she felt that girls should have just as much of an education as men. So it was just assumed that I would go to college.

Q: Did you see it as preparation for a career?

A; Yes, that it would help make me independent. Social reasons were not there at all. It was so I could stand on my own feet.

Q: So you did plan on having a job afterwards?

A: Mmm hmm. And I did. When I got out in 1931 I couldn't get a job. There was about one job offered me, which I didn't want, at the state institutions. I was a major in bacteriology. A job was offered to me in the clinical laboratories at the state institutions. and I found that a depressing atmosphere so I turned it down. Meanwhi le I was being encouraged to go to graduate school in bacteriology.

Q: Doe s that involve mostly research work?

A: Yes, or clinical. You work in a hospital or clinic for diagnostic purposes, or research work.

So I went back to graduate school. I got the offer from the

professor of bacteriology, who at that time was Dr. Charles Stuart, and he encouraged me. He was having some altercation on a basic zoology problem with another member of the faculty. (This was in-house fighting, which I didn't realize existed. Now, in my cynical old age I realize it goes on all the time, and its terrible.) He wanted to prove a point, and therefore had me working on something that was entirely other than bacteriology. That was the summer after I graduated. I got one course credit, so I got my degree in one year, mt masters. That work had nothing to do with bacteriology. It was almost an ecology project, on these very primitiveorganisms. If you disturbed their living conditions in some way, you disturbed their reproduction, whether it was by the heat, by manipulation, shaking, things like that. Their progeny turned out male or female, you could almost control it at that time.

Q: Was it unusual for a woman to be doing lab work, or to be in the sciences?

A: No.

Q: Were there a lot of other Biology majors at Pembroke?

A; There were, at that time, quite a few. We were in a minority, but then women students were in the minority anyway. A lot of the boys, young men, accused us of majoring in biology because we wanted to be with the men. Biology classes were coed, whereas at that time all others were seperate. There weren't enough women in biology to hold seperate classes.

Q: Do you think that your experience as a student was different from that of women who majored in the humanities and had all female classes?

A: I don't think so, not necessarily. Or I wasn't aware of it.

Now we had, of course at that time, required courses, and everybody had to take a basic course in biology. That was given by a woman, and that was an all women's class, every girl had to take it.

Q: Were there any other women professors that you had when you were there?

A: She was the only one.

Q: What did you think of her?

A: As a young student, how did I look at her? As kind of prissy.

Q: How old was she?

A: She was mid-age, I would say. She was in her forties probobly, at that time. And even then, when they had what they called sex lectures, that was by a guest lecturer. A woman doctor came in to give those, and believe me, even after she finished you still had no idea what sex was all about. It was sexual anatomy. I still don't see why this other guest was brought in to lecture.

Q: Did it seem as if the regular professor just didn't have the nerve to bring it up?

A: Probobly even to talk about it.

Q: Did students talk much about sex? Did they think that it was funny that the woman didn't get around to the point?

A: I can't explain, because I think I was maybe an exception. My husband tells me that I was terribly naive, and I think I was. We had a romantic outlook: You know, you had a crush on someone in your class but that's as far as it went. Somebody asked you out and you'd go out, you'd go to a dance, you'd go to dinner (not much dinners in those days because we were poor). But I don't know, as far as sexual intimacy ...Now I know it went on, but in my case, or my friends...

Q: Did people disobey rules, parietals?

A: Well there were rules for those who lived in the dormitories. They had, I think, ten o'clock curfew. And weekends you could sign out till maybe twelve o'clock. During the week I think you were allowed without sign-out until ten, but people abused that, too. They didn't sign out, and they climbed out windows. I know that happened, and I know girls got pregnant at that time, and of course they left school. Some of them were secretly married, and then they were expelled when it was found out. It was a school rule that a student couldn't be married.

Q: What did you think of Dean Morris?

A: I thought she was very haughty, and kind of unapproachable. She seemed to look down her nose at the students, and there was always a reference to "When I was at Bryn Mawr, this and this".

Q: A kind of intellectual oneupmanship?

A: I think so. However, I know something about her that she did for a very poor student that would change my opinion This student was very poor and very bright. She wanted to go to medical school but had absolutely no way of going, just couldn't pay for it. Dean Morris got some rich person to subsidize her. She was in the class of '28 . . . Actually she was a three year student, so '29. She made it in three years, with all the physics and chemistry, and whatever pre-med courses were required.

Q: Does anyone know who funded her?

A: I don't know. I don't think she herself knows who it was. Dean Morris did that for her, and she was a Jewish girl. I also had the feeling that Dean Morris was sort of anti-Semitic.

Q: Why?

A: In just a superior attitude, and some of the girls that she befriended. Now that's from my viewpoint, but I know this story about her, so I'm entirely wrong, I guess.

Q: But the way she was perceived was important. She wasn't someone who you would want to model yourself after?

A: No. I think most of the girls at that time, if they had any problem would go to Eva Moar, the dean of admissions.

Q: What was she like?

A: She was a very warm, plain Jane kind of lady who you could just talk to.

Q; Was she a woman who people felt they could emulate?

A: It could be, I don't know. Everyone I knew respected her, loved her.

Q: Were there any other women faculty, or anything?

A: The only one I could think of was this biology teacher, Maggie Wilder who remembered every student by name. Now remember, every Pembroker had to take this course, and four years after she remembered everyone. That was a very flattering, people who have that facility. Did she give a good course? I don't know what to say. Now she had women laboratory instructors, aides, not professors. As far as I know she was the only woman professor.

Q: How did male professors act towards the women students?

A: Were they condescending? I don't think they were condescending. I think they treated us as they would anyone else, young men. It depended on the individual professor. I had a history man who used to talk like this [strikes a stiff, aloof pose] He looked down his nose, and he was very sarcastic, but that wasn't for women. I think he would have treated men the same way.

Q: So you feel the Pembrokers were respected as highly-

A: Yes, I think so. Of course women were more conformist, I think, at that time, so probobly it was easier for the professors. You

argue with a professor, you'd just accept whatever he said. You took your notes, and you gave it back to them the way they gave it to you. Now that's a different approach to education entirely.

Q: Did the men argue more?

A: I think they probobly would have. I don't know. Biology is very cut and dried, although it isn't that you can't approach it from a philosophical standpoint.

Q: Were there any male professors in the biology department who were particularly encouraging towards you, concerning your career aspirations, or your work?

A: Well, my bacteriology professor was the one that wanted me to go on, didn't want me to quit. So I would say he was encouraging. But they didn'e help you when it came time to job hunting; it was a terrible experience. This was now, '31. I only had that one offer, of course, and that was local. In '32, after I got my degree, I got no help whatsoever from the department. I felt that Brown was a little bit weak, I pointed my finger.

Q: Did you think thet they could have helped, and they didn't?

A: I think they could have. Maybe they didn't know of openings, but they had contacts in the academic world, and they should have at least made some suggestions to you. What I did, actually, was I wrote a resume, had 100 resumes printed, and sent them out. I got one response, and that was from the state department of health in New York. It was working in the state laboratories in Albany.

Q: Did you go?

A: Sure I went. I got it by phone and it was one of these things that I had to be there before July first, because it was something about a fiscal year. I didn't know whether it was a hoax or not; you know, somebody offering me a job over the telephone, without any interview, without anything.

I stayed there for two years. I hated it, I hated it! I liked my work, but I hated Albany, and it was the first time away from home. I had, I guess, a very strong family, and I was the only girl, I had two brothers. My mother was weeping and crying her eyes out every time I would come home for a holiday or something. She was weeping as I arrived with the thought that I would be leaving, so this was a hard thing to take. But I liked the work. However, since I was not civil service, I didn't get any promotions, or other benefits of civil service. Nothing opened up, and I was a little bit mad at that.

Q: So there wasn't anywhere to go with that job?

A: No.

Q: When did you get married?

A: '38. I knew Mr. Roitman in school as a senior. He was already a year ahead of me, so he had graduated. A mutual friend of ours introduced us and he took me out a little bit in my senior year. But then he went his way and I went to graduate school. He was a playboy; He didn't want anybody who was interested in studying, who had to work

hard, and I did have to work hard to get my degree in one year.

Q: So did you work up until you got married?

A: Yes.

Q: Where did you go after New York?

A:After New York, let me see...where did I go? I went to the Truesdale Hospital in Fall River and I worked there a couple years. The reason I worked there was they were cutting expenses, and they fired someone and put the load on me. It was just more than I could, or wanted to handle. My mother was sick at the time and I had to go with her to Florida, and all that sort of thing. When I came home I got a job at the Memorial Hospital in Pawtucket. Then I got married.

Q:Did you continue working after that?

A: No, cause when I got married I was 29 years old and I wanted a family. I did some volunteer work, cause then the was came along. What did I do as a volunteer? There was a civil defense group that somebody sponsored, I don't know who it was. In case of an emergency, of course laboratory workers should be prepared to do emergency work, so I gave a course at Brown for just this purpose. We got people who had been in this field before and had given it up, to brush up other people who wanted to take it. It was very basic clinical work, matching bloods, doing urine analysis. stuff like that. So I did that for civil defense.

Q: Did a lot of the women you graduated with get married right after college, or did they work?

A: I would say a lot of the got married, if they had the where-with-all to get married, or if they married someone a little bit older who had. . . You know, these were terrible years for us, until the war came, which got us out of this Depression, so people weren't earning any money then. There weren't ant jobs to be had.

Q: Were there any student jobs at all?

A: I wasn't aware of it. There probobly were. But I do know as a graduate student, there were some girls who were almost au paire girls, who took care of children, or houses, preparing dinner and washing dishes for the free room and board. They couldn'e have been on any kind of scholarships, or maybe they got part financial aid.

Q: How did the Depression affect campus life?

A: I really don't know. We still had our dances. I think part of it is that I didn't live at school, so I wasn't that aware of what went on on campus. And also the fact that I was a serious student, taking all these heavy courses in sciences and spending a lot of time in the laboratory . . .. I'm not sure.

Q: How do you think that living off campus was different from living on campus?

A: There was a definite cleavage between the two. You were a city girl, or you were a dorm girl, and it made a big difference. City girls would

cling together, we didn't mix that much. I think those who lived in the dormitories sort of looked down their noses a little bit at the city girls who had to commute.

Q: Do you think you missed out on anything?

A: Yes, I think so. Living off campus, you'd finish your classes, and you'd go home. We had a place at Alumnae Hall, I guess it was opened just when we got there in the '30s. We did have a place to hang around there, we had lockers there and so forth. But there was no way for good friendships to develop. Now I know some of the girls played cards, they would have a card room, they would smoke(also you only smoked in certain areas). But I wouldn't know about it, I wasn't a card player. Maybe I'm not a good example of the period.

Q: Rules at that time were becoming more lax, in terms of smoking and chapel attendence. Do you think that people's attitudes were changing towards morality, and what was proper behavior?

A: At that time? Well, we used to resent chapel.

Q: Why?

A: It was four times a week. And it was just the idea of going to something that you didn't feel you got anything out of.

Q: What was it like?

A: I think once a week you had a strictly religious service. Other times student government would have a program, and sometimes you

might have a speaker. But it was only fifteen minutes, so even if you had a speaker, it wasn't that much. Or you might have a glee club. It just seemed like a waste of time. However, I will pay my respects to Dean Morris in saying that she once put it this way: Even though a lot of us resented it, it didn't hurt anyone to just sit down quietly for fifteen minutes, whether you listened or not. To meditate, if that's what you wanted to do. So it was fifteen minutes of quiet, and I think she was right in that. I think that would even hold today. It doesn't hurt anybody to sit down for fifteen minutes and just be quiet. We live in such a crazy, rushed life.

Q: When the service was religious, was it denominational?

A: It was Baptist. We always had ministers for our presidents, until Mr. Wriston came along. I don't know whether it was in the charter of the University, but it was always a Baptist minister who was president of the school.

Q: How many Jewish students were there?

A: Few. It was on a quota basis, whether it was understood or not.

Q: Did you feel different at all?

A: I didn't. An awful lot of my friends were non-Jewish. In fact, I was not with a Jewish crowd. I came from Pawtucket, where there weren't that many Jewish students who went to Brown or Pembroke. I continued my friendship with those girls with whom I went to high school.

I guess it is that familiarity. It's what the Third World students today say in defending that seperatism; that they're comfortable with people they know, or are like them. So, it continues on. So most of my friends were not Jewish. Ane even today, we correspond. For years and years and years, I've been head of the fund drive for the class, so I keep in contact with a lot of the people. Those with whom I went to high school are still (or were; a lot of them are dying off now) . . .

Q: There are still bonds?

A: Yes.

Q: Were students politically active at all, or interested in politics? Did people feel politically motivated by the economic situation?

A: I personally was, and I think that history teacher I mentioned had sort of turned me on politically. He was talking about Prohibition (of course that was the time of Prohibition, too), and that nobody liked Prohibition, especially the liberals who said you shouldn't impose on somebody else by the law. But he painted the picture of the fellow who did have a job, who came home with his fifteen dollars a week,or whatever it was, and gave it to his family, as contrasted with the guy who went to the bar with his fifteen dollars and spent it. So it just sort of made you think that maybe Prohibition wasn't such a terrible thing.

We poo-pooed the WPA projects, only because it was a make-work thing. As I look back on it now, maybe it wasn't that bad

But there were an awful lot of people standing around watching that one man work. Now maybe that's true of all government work, where there isn't a corporation or somebody watching over it. These are public funds, and they get dissipated.

But activists? I don't know how activist . . . You know, in a small group you'd discuss: Hoover was terrible, Roosevelt was good, . . .

A: So there was discussion, not organization?

A: Not that I was aware of. I'd be interested in what kind of answers you get from other people.

Q:: A book on Pembroke mentioned that there were a lot of cultural activities at Pembroke, like musical productions and literary speakers. Did you go to those?

A: Once I went home at night, I didn't go back. So we [city girls] did miss out on a great deal. All our kids went to Brown. The girls lived there -- no way would they live at home. Oh, I definitely think we missed out.

Q: Do you think the Depression affected the way women thought they would work out their career and marriage goals?

A: Well, I think most women thought they were going to get married, and the career was unimportant. Most women did.

Q: Did a lot of them see Brown as a place to meet men?

A: If so, I wasn't aware of it. Probobly yes, and I think that's been true up until very very recently. They talked about the ratios, men versus women. Now they're about equal, but there used to be always 75% men, 25% women. It was a good place for girls to go. That has changed just recently, I think. Maybe I wasn't aware that that's what they were going for, because I wasn't.

Q: Did most of your friends plan careers also?

A: No, I would say most of them didn't. They just fell into careers. I would have to think very hard of what people did after school. Most careers were whatever opened up to people. There was no money for most to go to graduate school. Social work was a big career for people. But that wasn't an end, a career. At that time it was just until they got married. If they didn'e get married, they stayed in social work. Those who couldn't get anything else took their education courses, practised teaching, and they became teachers with the view that if some of them got married that was fine, and they dropped out of teaching. Of course there was a period there when you couldn't be married and teach.

Q: Were the women who taught at Brown married?

A: Miss Wilder was not married . . . I didn't know any married women. Dean Morris wasn't married, Miss Moar wasn't married, and none of the gym teachers were married.

Q: Did you feel that it was unusual for you to be going onto a field that was so -

A: Well, number one: When I first started I though I might be a teaher too. In fact I laugh at ot now, I thought that it might be Latin. But I just became interested in biology as a major because they had a terrifically strong department with wonderful teachers. So they were just stimulating. Now, was it unusual? Then what do you do with that major? To teach it you've got to have these terrible education courses, and that didn't interest me. I just wasn't interested in teaching, although I did give a course in chemistry for the nurses in Truesdale Hospital, because they needed somebody, quick. But that's all.

Q: When and How did you end up working at Planned Parenthood?

A: I can't remember when. I've always been very pro-Planned Parenthood. Before it was Planned Parenthood, it was called Maternal Health, and I always raised money for it, and did work in that respect. Then I was sick of fundraising. This must have been ten years ago. I would have liked to have gotten back into the laboratory field, but there had been such advances, and I had been away from it for so long. Oh, I had volunteered after I was married. I was working for Miriam Hospital one day a week, in a laboratory there. Then I stopped that, and didn't get back to it. Later I was looking for some sort of work, and I would have been very happy to go to Miriam, but not to answer the phone, or push the book-tray or something. And if I couldn't do something professionally, I thought,"Well, let me try Planned Parenthood". I started in the clinic there, and I found that was not laboratory work; everything's sent out, all the blood work is done elsewhere. Then I also found it very difficult on my back, standing on my feet and bending over for blood pressures and things like that.

So I said, "Well, let me try the interviewing". So that's how I ended up, just because I was looking for something that I was particularly interested in.

Q: How long have you been doing that?

A: I would say about ten years, maybe less.

Q: Do you like it?

A: Yeah, I like the interviewing. There are a few things that bother me about the place.

Q: How do you feel about the clients?

A: I have a hard time not being judgmental. I know we're not supposed to be, and superficially I'm not, to the clients,we call them. . . . Patients, girls,... . But I am judgmental. You ask how many partners they've had in the last three years, how old they were when they became sexually active, and that startles me, it really does. I had a girl a couple weeks ago, in the last three years she couldn't remember how many, eight or nine partners. And the reason I want very much to go to the [Planned Parenthood] conference tomorrow is that they're going to have speakers on teenage sexuality, pregnancies, and so forth. I still have to learn.

Q: Do you think they sometimes hesitate to tell you because you're -

A: ...so much older? I don't find any hesitation. 'Cause I'll tell you, I'm very routine about asking. I'm questioning all the time, and so I fall into those questions. At first I was uncomfortable, but I don't make a big deal out of it. I ask "How old were you when you first started to menstruate" the same way I ask "How old were you when you first became sexually active. I think some of them hesitate when you ask about venereal disease, or anything else, because I have found very few who say they might have herpes. Now from statistics I ought to be getting some. But I don't think age, the fact that I'm older, makes them hesitate. I think they might look at me more as a mother, or a grandmother figure, but somebody who's removed from their own family so they can talk more freely. Just the way I can talk more freely to them than I could talk to my own children.

So that's how I got to Planned Parenthood.

Q: How did your expectations of how your life would work out compare with how it actually did?

A: I feel that at that time I was very accepting. This was the pattern: You got married, you brought up your kids, your husband supported you. If you did anything outside the home, if you had extra time, you did volunteer work. If I were growing up in this new generation, I think I'd pursue a career. I might have gone on to medicine. But I accept it, and I've been very happy, I'm not disappointed. But if the times were different, I might have gone on to medicine.