

Transcript – Marjorie Roffee Milroy, class of 1943

Narrator: Marjorie Roffee Milroy

Interviewer: Paul Cobbe

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Track 1

Paul Cobb: [00:00:00] This is Paul Cobb here at Brown University, class of 1991, interviewing Mrs. Marjorie Roffee Milroy, class of 1943, for Brown oral history interview on May 6, 1988 in Maddock Alumni Center.

(break in audio)

Something too, isn't it? Okay, Mrs. Milroy, I wanted to start this interview with having you give us a brief description on your family background and you growing up and hometown and high school and how you became interested in Brown.

Marjorie Roffee Milroy: All right. Well, my mother, the youngest of five children actually, and she attended only high school and did office work for a brief period after that, married my father when she was 21, [01:00] and he himself has an accounting degree from Northeastern University and was married at the age of 23. He spent his entire life at one place working for the General Electric Company here in Providence at the Providence Base Works and retired after working there for 45 years. He enjoyed his work I know very, very much and had occasion to travel with it and did volunteer work at a lot of work-related organizations. My mother is no longer living. She died at age 63 from cancer and my father is 90 now and he has lived with me for the last five [02:00] years. I'm an only child, regrettably to my own way of thinking. I would like to have been one of a dozen but I wasn't.

I was born in Warwick but I came to the east side or the family came to the east side of Providence when I was five and so I grew up here in the east side area and basically, except for college, I stayed here until I was married and that was in 1949.

Now I attended Hope High School and always enjoyed all school experiences. School was really great as far as I was concerned. I always loved it. And I just automatically assumed that I [03:00] would go to college. There was never any question in my mind about that. And I think my family always assumed likewise. I guess they felt I was capable of doing it so – that I would go.

I had, as I say, no brothers or sisters, but a lot of cousins that I was quite close to and most of the cousins had gone to Brown so I knew a lot about Brown. But when the time came and I was a senior in high school I did develop this interest in journalism and Brown didn't really seem to deal in anything like that. So I looked around a bit and the result was that I applied to Syracuse –

PC: Really?

MM: Syracuse University which had [04:00] a very good journalism school. And I applied to one place. That was it. Not like today. I guess people apply to, what? Six or seven or eight schools today I think. Anyway, I applied to Syracuse and I was fortunate enough to be accepted. So I did go to Syracuse for two years. I arrived here in my junior year. Now you probably didn't know that? [laughter] But that's the sum and substance basically of the family.

I knew, of course, as I say, about Brown through my cousins. We lived right here in the area. I knew about it anyway. For really medical [05:00] reasons is how I ended up here, coming here my junior year. But, anyway, I was happy I did and I stayed.

PC: Wow. I guess this was probably late in the 1930s. You had just gotten into university. I was wondering what some of your first experiences and memories are of attending college in the United States.

MM: You're right. It was in the late 1930s. It was actually in the fall of '39 that I started off. Going away from home, of course, was quite an experience in itself. Most of the dorms were these large Victorian style houses called 'cottages' [06:00] and I lived on the third floor of one of these with two roommates. A very large room that had a circular turret that I just loved. It had windows all around the turret and we all had our desks in this particular location. There were 15

girls that lived there and it was about a block from the main campus. My two roommates were both from upper New York state area: Lake George, that vicinity. I became especially close to one of them and this roommate and I pledged the same sorority which was the Phi Mu which [07:00] naturally kept us, probably, at a closer relationship than I was with the other roommate.

The courses I had my freshman year were very, very different, of course, from anything I'd ever had in high school. Zoology, and we called it "poli. sci.", Political Science. I don't think they call it that name now. It has another name. English and Spanish. Journalism and Philosophy. Those were the courses that I had my freshman year and I loved them all with the exception of Zoology. Zoology had three-hour labs [08:00] and it was necessary, of course, to dissect animals in these three-hour labs, and that really did not appeal to me a great deal. So I survived Zoology. I didn't flunk it. I did survive it but it was not the most pleasant of experiences. But the other courses were just great as far as I was concerned.

PC: Now were these courses that you had chosen or was this a set curriculum?

MM: Well, what we had to do – they had these distribution-type courses and you had to pick one from these different areas. There were various choices. You couldn't have, you know, two in one group and that kind of thing. I was not too heavily inclined toward the [09:00] sciences so Zoology, once I had gotten through that, I had filled my science bit for the distribution areas. I kind of stayed away from the sciences after that. I was much more inclined toward social sciences and English and things like that.

PC: During these first two years of your college experience, was the sorority the main social part of your life? I guess you were involved with other fraternities and social events. Was there any other things that you would do with your friends?

MM: Yes. I would have to say that the sorority probably was the main social [10:00] life. Of course, it was all very exciting anyway. To me it was totally different from anything that I had ever done before, just the whole rushing experience was kind of fascinating and then getting bids from these different sororities to join. In the end I did go with Phi Mu, probably I suppose maybe because of my roommate but I was very happy there. My roommate also did know several upper-

class girls in the sorority which may have affected our choice somewhat. We always went to the football games in the fall and went off to other campuses: Cornell [11:00] and Colgate. I do remember how impressed I was with each of those campuses. The sororities and fraternities gave dances, sometimes in the houses and sometimes in a local hotel.

One of the highlights of my freshman year was attending the senior prom, which was a real big thing for a freshman, at the Hotel Syracuse with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra and Frank Sinatra, who was just coming into prominence then. He didn't look the least bit like he looks now. He was really almost painfully thin at that point which is quite different from the way that he looks now. Winter time was very long in Syracuse. The snow can come in October and it lasts until [12:00] May but we had all kinds of winter activities. Carnival weekend, ice sculpture contests. We skied at Drumlins which is the local country club. I can remember my freshman year attending a winter weekend at Norwich University, which was in Northfield, Vermont. I had gone to visit a high school boyfriend. Nobody had cars then at school. If we went anywhere we went by train or by bus. So to go from Syracuse to Northfield, Vermont, took about 10 hours of train travel. For one weekend this was quite a period of time, of course, to put into it. It seemed like the end of the world going up there [13:00] but a very enjoyable weekend just the same.

I can remember my schedule of classes, which was kind of interesting. On Monday, Wednesday and Friday the day began at 11:00 and on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday it began at 8:00 a.m. We had Saturday classes then, which I don't think anybody has now. So because I lived in one of the smaller dorms where we took our meals in another larger dorm which had a dining hall, so on the early class days I would always get to breakfast. On the later class days, of course, I didn't do that. I would sleep late [14:00] and have breakfast in the student union. And I can remember that breakfast on those days was always the same. It consisted of a large Coke and a cornetto, which you probably have never heard of. I haven't seen a cornetto in years. But it's a tubular-shaped pastry which is filled with whipped cream. A great thing to have for breakfast, right? [laughter] But anyway. It was a favorite of mine and maybe it had something to do with the fact that it was during these two years was the only time that I ever gained weight. Since I was 12 years old I've always been the same but those two years, all of a sudden I gained 20 pounds. And maybe that says something [15:00] psychologically – I don't know – about what was happening. Besides eating the cornettos, of course, the family sent us food. Like care packages but they didn't call them care packages. They were just food packages. And then, to

supplement this, I would buy jars of peanut butter and eat it with a spoon. Do you do that? [laughter] You do? All right well then. Eating peanut butter with a spoon is not maybe as outdated as I thought it was. But anyway, I hope it doesn't do to you what it did to me because they say it made me gain 20 pounds. But that was one thing that happened to me there.

PC: Okay. You spent two years at Syracuse and then you came to [16:00] Providence and Pembroke, I guess, in 1941. Was it the fall of 1941? Now, being from Providence, did you live in a dormitory, or were you living at home, or what was that situation?

MM: No, I did not live in a dormitory. At that particular period in time it wasn't customary for people to do that. It was much more the exception than the rule. Most of the students who were local did live at home and I did too. I only lived a mile and a half away so it was not really difficult for me to [17:00] get here. I could come by trolley car which I did if I was late or I walked if I had plenty of time. We were known as city girls but one thing, I never heard any reference ever made to city boys or city men. So I have no idea what they were called but there were just as many local men who were – in fact, more because, of course, Brown – there were more male students here than female students, obviously. But I was just thinking about that the other day, that there was really was never any [18:00] reference to what they called the male students here on campus.

We had a place over on the Pembroke campus called the City Girls' Room which was located in the basement of Pembroke Hall, which is still there. That would be the place that we would go and convene in between classes and forth. And then in another building called East Hall, which is no longer there, one side of East Hall was the bookstore and the other side was a smoking room and there was as much convening [19:00] in the smoking room as there was in this other building over in Pembroke Hall. One of the famous activities in between classes was bridge playing. I don't know, do students still play bridge?

PC: Students do. I know my mother tries to play with me. [laughter] Now I'd like to backtrack a little bit and ask you a bit of a more general question with regard to women going to university. I was wondering whether in the late 1930s, early 1940s, whether or not it was a very normal thing

for women to be going to university or whether you were kind of breaking the norm by doing this?

MM: Well, I think I would have to say that it probably was [20:00] not actually a normal thing. At least it wasn't normal to go away. I think only though, probably by the group that I traveled with in high school. Let's say there were about 15 of us that were relatively close in high school and they were middle- or upper-class, upper middle-class families. Nevertheless, out of that group, there were three of us who went away to school. Of the 15, there were five who went to college but two of them did stay locally to go to school. And, as I say, three of us went away. [21:00] So it was not a common thing to do at that time. And I suspect this is maybe one reason that I wanted to do it is because most people didn't and I thought that it would be an experience that was interesting to have. I found it very interesting. It had a totally different flavor than this campus did. It's a large, co-educational school. I say large. It's still large relatively speaking. At that time it had about 7,000 students which is not large by today's standards but it was by standards then. And it was much more like a Midwestern school than a school in New York State. [22:00] It bore absolutely no resemblance to any New England college whatsoever.

They used to tease me about my speech out there. When I went out there they would say "Where on earth did you come from?" [laughter] Incidentally, out of the 7,000 students, there was one other Rhode Islander there besides myself which was kind of a unique feeling, to think that there was only one other person there besides yourself.

They told me that I put *r*'s after words that didn't have *r*'s and that I took *r*'s out of words that should have them. And that my *t*'s never got [23:00] pronounced in words like "battle" and "bottle". I did not pronounce the *t*'s. At that point – unconsciously I must have done this; I know I didn't really try to do it – but I must have modified my speech to the degree that now people will often ask me where I come from and say I don't even sound like a Rhode Islander. So, I don't know, but that's one thing that happened to me when I was there.

PC: I guess, when you had come to Brown, about the end of your first semester, the United States entered into World War II. So you probably [24:00] noticed some changes in Brown upon this entering into the war. How did the role of women at Brown change as the male contingency left to go fight for their country or support the war effort?

MM: Well, you're quite right. There certainly were some changes at Brown during that year. I entered in the fall of '41 and then the war came about in December of that year. The ROTC, of course, appeared – the NROTC actually it was here at Brown – appeared on campus and the men were increasingly joining that. They built [25:00] Brown Town which probably has long been forgotten by most people but I lived fairly close to it so I remember it quite well. Brown Town was housing that was built for married students over at the corner of Elmgrove Avenue and Session Street, which is really where the football stadium, of course, is located, and it was on Aldrich Field right across from the football stadium where this was located. It was housing for married students. Before this time, of course, it was very uncommon for a student to get married while they were attending Brown; but with the advent of the war, it began happening in increasing numbers so they did have to have [26:00] available housing for them. Brown Town served this purpose. It wasn't terribly attractive but it was functional and the married students were glad to have a place to live.

When the men graduated, they were graduating not only – provided they had participated in this – they were graduating not only with a degree but also with a commission in the Navy and so then they were ready to go off to be officers. The number of men on campus were diminishing and the number of women relatively increasing. At the time that I graduated, though, in [27:00] '43, this was not as apparent as it was in the years following my graduation year because there really hadn't been time for it to take that much of an effect on the campus in '43 as it had. The men were really not returning to the campus until probably about 1947. This is what happened to my husband. He left, just left to go in the service and did not return and come back until 1948. So consequently [28:00] he graduated a number of years after I did. He didn't graduate until the year 1951.

PC: Along with this, was the number of male students, did it decrease in large sums?

(break in audio)

PC: Now I'd like to move on to the topic of the rules and regulations of the women at Brown during the early forties, particularly the social rules and the dress and dorm procedures that were to be followed. How did you feel about those?

MM: Well, definitely there were, of course, rules and regulations as far as living in the [29:00] dormitory was concerned because, as I had to do my first two years, there hours that you had to be in at night. You had to be in at eleven o'clock on weeknights and weekend nights you could be out until 12:30. For dances there were special permissions. You could be out until two o'clock on nights that there were dances. Of course, living at home, I was not subject to that, especially by dorm rules; but, nevertheless, my family had certain expectations as to hours and things. It really was not that much different from what the dorm girls were [30:00] doing.

I think they had much more of a dress code, probably, in those days than they do now. I wouldn't exactly call it a uniform, but just about every college girl wore the same kind of an outfit to classes, and that consisted of a sweater and skirt and saddle shoes and ankle socks. We never heard of jeans. I don't think if anybody had used the word that we would have known what jeans were. The closest probably that we ever came to knowing about jeans, we would have called them overalls, that the farmers wore. That's the only people who [31:00] wore things like that.

When we went downtown it was really expected that we would wear a hat and that we would wear –

- End of Track 1 -

Track 2

MM: [00:00] And, of course, there was no such thing as pantyhose then either. There were just stockings, period. That's what we would be expected to wear. We never wore pants or slacks, really, very much either. Unless we were involved in some kind of sport activity. Then we would be inclined to wear that but otherwise it was a sweater and skirt.

PC: Now, were there any sort of similar rules or regulations placed upon the men or were they allowed to do fairly whatever they wanted to?

MM: There were no rules of that sort imposed upon the men, at least not house rules of any sort. This was just the women and the men could more or less do [01:00] as they chose to do. Of course, as I say, if the women were in they couldn't do much dating obviously, even though they didn't have any rules pertaining to it.

As far as the dress code goes for the men, they, too, really dressed differently in those days than we do today. They were very apt to wear a jacket or a sweater and a dress-up type shirt. Again, for them, there was no such thing as jeans involved.

PC: Now along with some of this social behavior were the traditions at Brown, [02:00] specifically May Day and Ivy Day which I know was very important in the Sophomore Masque and Spring Day and, of course, Commencement. I was wondering if I could have some of your views on these traditions and specific days?

MM: I did miss the Sophomore Masque by not being here but I don't believe, to the best of my knowledge, that it was being held in 1943. At that point, I do believe, it had vanished because I never heard anything about it and I'm pretty sure that I would have. I do remember distinctly Ivy Day which was a procession through the campus where the girls all wore special white dresses and there was [03:00] this ivy chain and then climaxed by activities and awards et cetera in the chapel. And at the end of Ivy Day was Ivy Night and we did have a special dance, very much like – well, I say like the campus dance. It was nowhere near that size because this was restricted to the Pembroke campus and the girls would invite their dates and, of course, the female part of the campus being smaller and the campus itself being smaller, it kept the numbers down. But it was a very pleasant affair, outside on the Pembroke Green. That was the end of Ivy Day. This was Thursday [04:00] which was the very beginning day of commencement weekend. And then, of course, on Friday the traditional campus dance was held as it still is today. There was no concert then. I think we're about to have the 25th one of the concerts so I guess that means the concert must have started in 1963 which is a little bit after. [laughter]

PC: I wanted to ask you about the women's place in commencement exercises, how Brown held their commencement with regards to the men and the women.

MM: The order and things like that?

PC: Yeah, the actual way it was held.

MM: [05:00] The men, for commencement, you probably know how it takes place. The gathering takes place up here on the Green. Then they march through the Van Wickle Gates and then down College to Waterman and then down the rest of Waterman Street to the First Baptist Church. At the time that I graduated, and I believe it is still done this way, the beginning of the procession is the group from Brown and the group from Pembroke follows secondly. That's the way [06:00] it was. I have to admit I didn't ever see anything particularly unusual about it. I may have had my mind on a couple of other things during commencement, though. I have mentioned this to you before about a couple of things that did happen to me which were a little unique.

First of all, when I did come in in my junior year nobody ever asked me to take any entrance exams. I was just admitted, period, that was it; however, as we arrived at commencement I suddenly found myself in the position of having to take the entrance exam. Another thing that I had to do [07:00] was to go to the gym and tread water every day. [laughter] This was a requirement of graduation. And so I think those two things were really on my mind. I was marching down to commencement but I wasn't really sure that I was commencing because I wasn't positive about having passed this entrance exam – which obviously I did – but I didn't really know at the time. And also I wasn't really sure that I had done this treading water to the satisfaction of the –

PC: I have heard war stories about the instructor.

MM: – the instructor. So that was a funny thing. I enjoyed athletics and sports and all that sort of [08:00] thing but gym was not my favorite cup of tea. It was just sort of an intrusion in the day, shall we say. [laughter] And maybe that's the reason I never concentrated on my treading water.

PC: With all of these rules and regulations and traditions – with these traditions and rules – did the women ever question being forced to, for example, wear hats in public or wear gloves?

Question the validity of these rules and regulations while the men did not have any of these same rules?

MM: I don't think it ever occurred to us to question these things, to tell you the truth. Of course, later on [09:00] there were changes made. We all know that. But this was quite a bit after our time. I think in the 1940s we were still quite traditional in most things. Now I myself, I know I was interested in different experiences. As I told you, I was interested in going away to school to have the dormitory experience rather than live at home my entire four years; but that doesn't mean that I wasn't a traditionalist. I think I was completely and totally a traditionalist because this was just the way things were supposed to be. I don't think we had any resentment of the men. I remember my [10:00] relationships with the men on campus were always very comfortable and everything was fine. I don't think I resented anything that they did. I always thought of myself anyway – and I'm not quite sure why this is – but I always thought of myself as going to Brown rather than going to Pembroke. Now this is years before the name changed and the Pembroke name was really eliminated. I'm not quite sure why this was. Maybe I thought Brown had more prestige than Pembroke. Maybe that was it. I don't know but I [11:00] thought of myself as being a student at Brown and whenever anybody asked me where I went to school, this is what I told them. I never said Pembroke. I always said that I went to Brown.

Consequently, when this came up later about the name change and there were some people who were quite upset about it – I know that – I wasn't one of them. The 1940s people were probably somewhat divided. I think the classes that came along before us felt very strongly that they wanted to keep Pembroke in the picture. The classes that came along after us were, I think, maybe more Brown-oriented [12:00] than Pembroke-oriented. But during that decade of the forties there was room for different kinds of opinion. I was just more Brown-oriented than Pembroke.

PC: Upon graduation, what degree did you finish with? A degree in journalism?

MM: Of course, I really didn't because Brown did not offer anything of that nature here, along the journalism line. I think I mentioned before, basically the reason I came here – I started out with the idea I was going to spend an interim year here and then go back to Syracuse my senior

year. By the time I had finished the junior year I was really [13:00] totally delighted to be here and enjoyed it that much that I really wasn't thinking about journalism any more. I had become quite immersed in psychology. I had decided to make my major. I was taking all kinds of courses in that. Everything that was available in psychology I think I took. So the whole atmosphere of the place really appealed to me at that point. I had had the experience that I'd gone away for. I liked the ivy atmosphere which is not prevalent at Syracuse at all. So I decided it would be better for me if I [14:00] stayed and graduated from here; but I didn't get the degree in journalism if that's what you're asking. But at that point I didn't really care.

PC: Upon graduation, did you pursue a career in psychology? I know you mentioned your husband had gone to Brown.

MM: Right. I did. What I did was I became a social case worker after graduation and went to work for the Department of Child Welfare which is the State Department. That's what it was called then. It has a different name now. I worked there for 16 years. I graduated in '43 and we were [15:00] married in '49 and I stayed there until 1959. Basically the reason I left at that point was because we were very anxious to have a family. We'd been married for nine years and we hadn't had any family. So being a social worker was really a 24-hour job and you could get calls at all hours of the day or night. And so I finally decided that it would probably be better if I just stayed home and didn't have any of these pressures and then we might be more successful in having our family. So I did leave in 1959. [16:00]

PC: Now that we're coming somewhat to the end of this interview, I wanted to ask you if you had anything that you felt was important that you would like to add with regard to your experience at Brown and Pembroke?

MM: Well, yes, there is one thing. I don't think we've said too much about relationships with the faculty. I would like to say there was quite a difference in my two school experiences. The first two years I never really did develop any particular faculty relationships because the classes were so large it was almost impossible [17:00] to do that. When I came to Brown in my junior year I found the classes much smaller and so it became possible to know the faculty on a much more

intimate basis than I had before. Neither of these people are here on campus any more, of course. This is going back a number of years ago. But Professor Hunt, Professor Joe Hunt was on the Psych Department there and I think that he was very influential in my becoming a psych major because of the interest he took. And also [18:00] I became very fond of Professor Coolidge. In addition to taking all the psych courses I could at that time, the other ones I took were music courses, and I was fortunate enough to have him for all of them. Actually, we're still friendly 40 years later. I still see him and I always think it's remarkable that he still knows me and is able to call me by my first name. Not 40 years later; this is 45 years later, which makes it even more remarkable. I mean, I don't see him that often, you understand. It's a periodical kind of thing but I think it does indicate that they certainly knew who their students were.

PC: That they cared.

MM: [19:00] He certainly had a number of music classes and a number of students in each class and you multiply that by the years, I think it comes out to be quite an accomplishment. And I would have to say that he is responsible, too, for an interest that I've had in music ever since and it has never left me.

PC: Well, I wanted to thank you very much for having this interview with me. This has been a very interesting experience seeing the perspective of someone who was basically in my shoes 40 years ago. Thank you very much.

MM: You're very welcome. It's been interesting for me also. So I hope it all works out very well for you. [20:00]

PC: Thank you.

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