

**Project:** YWCA Centennial: *100 Years of Challenge and Change: Whatcom Women and the YWCA*

**Interviewee:** Mary Robinson, long-time YW member, Board President (1972-1974)

**Interviewer:** Dr. Lynne Masland, YWCA Centennial history chair

**Date:** April 29, 2008

**Place:** Mary's home at 206 Morey, Bellingham

**Transcriber:** Lori Torres

I'm Mary Robinson and I was President of the Y in Bellingham in around 1972 I think, you can check in the records.

*I know you have some notes so would you like to go from those first? And then I do have a couple questions to follow up on.*

Well, I guess I got interested in the Y because of my mother; she was President of the Y in Ashtabula, Ohio and I was a Girl Reserve. I can remember sometimes doing a little worship service for the Board of the Y when I was quite young but in high school we had Girl Reserves. It was part of the extracurricular activity, and I was president of that group, and I guess my interest in the Y continued. One of my early jobs was as the Executive Secretary of the YWCA of West Virginia University. That was just for one year.

Later on I worked in Beirut [Lebanon] at the American University of Beirut as the first Dean of Women and was on the Y board in Beirut, and it was a wonderful experience. It was quite interdenominational and quite international. There were women who were part of the Greek Orthodox Church and there were other faiths represented, the Protestants and so on. And that was just great because I got involved in what they were doing. While I was there they built a new 7-story building, and it is still right in the heart of the Muslim district downtown. It's wonderful because it served the people of that area. There was a nursery school on the second floor, or rather the first floor; they were going to put it on the second floor but I suggested that it would be better for the children if they could come directly into the building into where their place was. And during the troubles in 67 it was interesting that the parents, the fathers particularly, of these children looked after the Y, made sure nothing happened to it because their children had benefited from the services that the Y offered.

*And then you came to Bellingham.....*

I came to Bellingham in '69, the fall of '69, and started getting active in the Y here because it had been a part of my life for all those other years. At that time Sybil Tucker was the Executive, and she was getting considerably older and probably with not so many new ideas. She was a wonderful woman, and I really was sorrowful that the Y had not provided any retirement for her because she certainly had contributed so much through the years. But I did sort of gently ease her out because we just needed some new people in there. And then I think some of the programs – there were different people who came

in – some of the programs attracted younger people, which is really what we wanted to do. And one of the groups was this Eco Action Group that came, that started there and blossomed into – and it was very typical of programs that we have – they would start or emanate at the Y and would be taken over by some other organization, which was really a good thing because then we had time to delve into some new issues.

I remember one of the groups was a lunch bunch kind of thing where people brought their sack lunch, and they just talked about women's' issues. There was one woman who particularly wanted to come, and her husband was very anxious about this, thinking that it was something that she should not be involved in. And he didn't want to let her come, but I think some of the group sort of pushed her and helped her – you know, [telling her] what to say to get her there. And she did blossom after that. One of the things that happened in the 70s was we owned a building that is currently owned by the [Whatcom] County Extension, and the building is down at the end of the block where the Y is. It was kind of rundown. It had a leaky roof, and we sold it to the County without their knowing that, or maybe they did. Anyway we got a pretty good price out of it. That helped a lot on our budgets because in the early days we were getting some grants but that sort of dried up after a while, and so we needed some cash. Of course, I think the Y has always been short of money, although they seem to be in pretty good shape today.

***You touched on this with the lunch bunch but “The Feminine Mystique” was published in the late 50s and had, along with other books, a profound influence on women throughout the next few decades. How would you describe how women at the Y were beginning to develop themselves, particularly ones, as you mentioned, who were married and might not have led such independent lives?***

I think the Y has always been up to date on new trends, and part of it is the function of the way the National Y worked. As an example, I went to the Y convention – I think it was in San Diego – and they had a march and I participated. It was the first march I was ever involved with. It was for the farm workers, Cesar Chavez, that period. Things like that that happened. And I think a lot of that came from the National, and International Y as well, because the programming we're inspired by was what was happening in other places. And they did have these conferences. And, well, it was costly and a lot of Ys couldn't afford it, but we always tried to send somebody down there and sometimes at their own expense.

Another trend that I didn't mention - it happened in Ashtabula, Ohio, when my mother was President of the Y and my father was President of the YMCA. They decided it would be – in a community which was then about the size of Bellingham when I came here – that it would be more economical to just have one building, so they did merge. And as a result, there's no longer a YW anymore in Ashtabula. Well, when I was President, one of the moves was to do that here in Bellingham, and I was fearful of what had happened in Ashtabula might happen here. We did have some meetings about it, and everything was cordial but we decided not to do that. And I'm really happy that we have not joined, although we have good relations with [the YMCA]; but they have done very well because

of their pool and their sports things. And also they have the men who have the money and who've contributed a lot there. And while we had the pool we could see the handwriting on the wall that it wasn't going to pay for itself and it was just too costly. So we did close it, and now as they [the YW] start remodeling, which just began this week, they will be covering over the pool. And I think their plan is that the room will be offices down there that the executive and so forth will be on that lower level.

***Another trend that I was interested in was the impact of the civil rights movement. There were things that happened in the end of the 50s heading into the 60s and the[emergence of the] civil rights movement that sparked the civil rights movement today -- the integration of schools, the Supreme Court ruling on the integration of schools, and then the ensuing integration in Little Rock and so on. And then, of course, by the 70s or late 60's and 70s... Was the YWCA here deeply involved in the civil rights movement? And, along with that, I know the Vietnam War peace movement was very strong here in Bellingham and I know it was very strong at the Y, so do you have any recollections about civil rights and also the peace movement that came out of the Vietnam War?***

I think again because there were pushes from National, this was important here. We had people of color living in the residence. I think we haven't mentioned that the Y really got its push when Western was a normal college and so there's that influence there.

***And I know a number of Western students throughout the years lived at the Y.***

Right, absolutely, and there were many people of color and the different nationality, and that was a wonderful thing, too, because there were international students coming, and we didn't always have room at Western to accommodate all of them, so the residence hall at the Y was used to a large extent for some of those international students. To this day, I think people hear from those women who are now of course married and probably grandmothers, but their stay at the Y had a lot of influence. At Western we had started a host family thing, and some of those people were Y people as well who took these international students in during holidays and invited them to dinners and so forth.

***I did that, incidentally, at the University of Nebraska Omaha for a group of probably about 15 or so people who came from Afghanistan, men and women, very nice people. They were working on Masters in Education degrees. And I've often wondered what happened to them in the ensuing time because they were lovely.***

We had our first Afghani, the first women from Afghanistan that came to the American University of Beirut while I was there, and they were not academically qualified in the Liberal Arts but they were Public Health nurses who were getting more training and they were quite an interesting group.

***Before we get to Vietnam, I know that the World Fellowship Program went on for a long time at the Y. I mean it was one of the earliest, in fact the earliest, because***

*women from the Normal School adopted a child in India in 1900 so that was the beginning of interest in people from abroad. But I'm wondering if you have some thoughts about the World's Fellowship fundraisers and teas and international dinners particularly there was one held in November annually at the Y up until at least the 80s.*

Oh yes and even since then. There's a woman, Amory Peck, who used to be President of the Y. I think she was quite active in bringing people in and she was, I think – No, it wasn't the Vietnam War, it was another issue that she was involved with.

*Were you involved with some of the international dinners and so forth?*

Only more through Western because when I came here there wasn't a group that was doing that for students so I was involved in those but not so much the others at the Y.

*And then Vietnam, the peace movement at the Y...*

Again when I came here, I came in '69 and that's when they [anti-war demonstrators] had the march on the freeway. And also we had demonstrations at Western, and I felt like I was back in Beirut. I remember one of them where there were recruiters on campus for the services and a lot of the students were very opposed to that. And then, in the Career Planning Placement office, they took one of the recruiters' briefcase and Ray Romine and some of the other student affairs people, including myself, were there, and one of the Graduate students grabbed the bag from the other student and passed it over their heads and we quietly got it out of the building.

*We did an interview with the Eco Action ladies, the ones that we could get together, 6 of them, and they all said -- and this is my recollection when I came in the 70s, too -- that the Y was the place to be.*

Right, because we were welcoming to new ideas and letting people express them and maybe not necessarily always agree with them.

*And do you have some details about what kind of new ideas those might be?*

Well, just any of the issues of the day one would say.

*And it was also a place where you had speakers on the issues of the day, right?*

Yes we did, and that was one of the things that Amory Peck [Y Board member 2001-7] and (others) more recently have done and continue that idea.

*And those were the lunches right?*

Yes. I like those and so many issues were on the Middle East, the Palestinian question and Amory was particularly good at that, organizing those things. And I can remember, I

think there was a group from Lynden that came and they were more of the Christian right and some of those groups that are very conservative are very much in favor of Israel – which seems a little incongruous – but they were promoting settlements and so on. That was a right divisive issue.

***And you [the Y] also had [a recent] one on predatory lending [2007] that I remember.***

Oh right, I think they've done that. The Credit Union, of course, does that, too, but that's been a big thing because it affects people of low income and people without much knowledge of the way finances work.

***Do you have any other thoughts that you'd like to share?***

No, I guess I pretty much exhausted what I have. [Hands interviewer a copy of a speech.] This is from a talk that I gave at the YW but I really don't have much about the Y. I've been going through all my files, throwing out my speeches. I worked for a woman once who did that, she was sorry forever after because she had to start over again.

***Do you think that the Y of the 70s was really a particularly active period?***

Maybe we'd been more conservative for a while there, there hadn't been a push for new things. But again I wasn't here before then, I was overseas then so I don't really know. I think also that a lot of those early women, their names are very prominent now, the people are gone now but there were prominent people involved with the Y.

***Yes they were...***

That's was something that I was always hoping that those records are kept well because some of those we could go back and it's a good source of fundraising for us.

Mrs. Sharninghouse was one. Have you ever heard that name Sharninghouse? I think her husband was a doctor but she lived out in Edgemoor, she's gone now I think.

***No I haven't heard of her. Chris Sharninghouse, what period would that have been? I think I know her son ...***

Before I came, I think probably the 60s.

***Yes and I would say in regard to that, as is so many things, with the 80s, people had less time, things shifted hugely, not just for women. The Eco Action Group laughed and said 'well we empowered ourselves when we went off to work and then we weren't available.'***

That was part of it.

*Definitely and then Polaroids and instant came in big time and so newspapers began to start cutting their coverage so the photographs fell off dramatically. We have a lot of snapshots in the files from the 80s particularly, late 70s, 80s, 90s but they are not nearly the quality of photograph, not very reproducible: They faded, they often were blurry. So the photographs that are available are not as good and of course with digital you don't save them in the same way either and so that's an issue. Also those wonderful women who kept scrapbooks, and there were some amazing ones, also kind of fell away and newspaper coverage changed. We had fabulous papers and coverage from the 50s, for example, because Jack Carver worked for the [Bellingham] Herald and they covered these things.*

There was some relation [of his] that taught swimming at the Y.

*His aunt was Jessie Carver, [Western Athletic Director] Sam Carver was his uncle. She taught swimming. So what with one thing and another, [the Y] was well covered with excellent shots for event publicity particularly and all of that has fallen away so I appealed to people to ...*

I wish I had [some photographs] somewhere. I think I did give Julie [Foster, Y Executive Director] some I had. I don't know where to look right now though I've been going through things like that.

*If you come up with anything let me know.*

I will, sure.

*How long were you president? Was it one term two terms*

It was a couple years anyway, it could have been more than that but again I hope she [Julie] has all those records

*Well I meant to bring you and I will get it to you I'll make a copy and put it in the mail I have the Herald article, a copy of it, when you were installed as President was in 1970 [further checking: 1972].*

Boy, it didn't take me long.

*I think its 1970, it has a nice picture and it's a nice piece so I will send that to you for your scrapbook.*

Ok, I'll send it to...I have an I Love Me file for my nieces.

*Oh great, well these are wonderful, you know my grandmother and my mother both kept wonderful scrapbooks, the old fashion ones.*

I did too.

*I did too as a matter of fact, mine got lost... I'm not sure where it is but all through junior high school and high school.*

Well that reminds me, I think I gave...you know last year my twin and I had our 80<sup>th</sup> birthday and my niece wanted a whole lot of pictures for that day and I just sent all my photo albums to her. So I don't know if they're any [Y photos] in there.