

Basic Detail Report

Title Interview with Catherine G. Roraback

Date 2004 May 4

Description Oral history interview with Catherine G. Roraback who was interviewed by Howard Klebanoff on May 4, 2004 and September 14, 2004 for the Connecticut Bar Foundation's History of Connecticut Women in the Legal Profession Project. Topic Discussed: - Personal Background: Catherine Gertrude Roraback was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1920. She experienced the Depression during her childhood and high school years. Her family emphasized education and social consciousness. - Family's Legal Involvement: Many of her family members were involved in the legal profession. Her grandfather became a lawyer in 1873 in Salisbury, later serving on the Supreme Court of Connecticut until his retirement. Her great-uncle, J. Henry Roraback, was a well-known political figure and "Republican Boss of Connecticut" until his death in 1937. Her uncle, Clint Roraback, practiced law in the family office in Canaan until his death in 1955, and Catherine inherited that office. - College Life and Activism: Catherine enrolled in Mount Holyoke College in 1937, majoring in economics with a focus on labor law, labor history, and political science. She was involved in the Student Industrial Club (which she later headed), meeting factory workers to understand their lives. She also participated in student political organizations like "Students for Democracy" (SDS). During the lead-up to World War II, she was active in student movements and a student parade for Roosevelt in the fall of 1940. In the summer of 1939, she joined a Peace Caravan, a pacifist project of the

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Friends Service Committee. She also attended Hudson Shore Labor School, an independent school for women workers. - Early Career and World War II: After graduating from college, Catherine sought employment during the Depression, which ended with the entry into World War II. She worked briefly in an unemployment insurance office after Pearl Harbor. She then accepted a Civil Service job in Washington D.C. with the Department of Agriculture as an analyst on public opinion surveys. She later transferred to the War Labor Board in Detroit, which settled labor disputes during World War II. - Law School and Early Legal Practice: Catherine attended law school immediately after the war. Her class had 30 women out of 450 students. As a Roraback, she found herself accepted in the legal community, though she stood out as a woman in the courtroom. - Smith Act Cases (1954): She was involved in the Smith Act Cases around 1954, during the height of McCarthyism, defending Communist Party leaders in Connecticut who were arrested on charges of conspiring to advocate the overthrow of the government. - Civic Activities (NAACP): After law school, she joined the NAACP, assisting individuals with affidavits for police complaints in a then-segregated society. - Griswold Case (beginning 1958): In 1958, she was approached by Fowler Harper of Yale Law School to participate in the Griswold Case. This litigation challenged a Connecticut statute prohibiting contraceptive use. Earlier, the Nelson Case in the late 1930s had upheld the statute's constitutionality, leading Planned Parenthood to close its six birth control clinics in the state. Catherine argued the Griswold case in the U.S. Supreme Court. The case focused on the right of married people to privacy. - Feminist

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Movement: She became more conscious of the feminist movement during this period, recognizing that the courtroom was predominantly a "man's world". -

Divorce Cases: She represented a woman in her fifties in a divorce case, who was afraid to leave her unpleasant marital situation due to fears of losing her

children. - Vietnam War Protests: Catherine was involved in cases related to

Vietnam War protests, including a march from the Yale campus to selective

service headquarters and a demonstration in Hartford at the Welfare

Department. - Black Panther Case (late 1960s): For two years in the late 1960s,

she was involved in the Black Panther case in New Haven, representing

members of the Black Panther organization to assert Black rights and self-

protection. - Wounded Knee Case: She represented women arrested during the

Wounded Knee occupation in South Dakota, with the trial held in Federal Court

in Lincoln, Nebraska.

Dimensions Duration (c: May 4, 2004 interview): 1 Hour, 43 Minutes, 22 Seconds

Duration (k: September 14, 2004 interview): 1 Hour, 59 Minutes, 18 Seconds