Molly Graham: [00:03] This begins an oral history interview with Suzanne Tully McCarthy on August 2, 2023, for the NOAA Heritage Oral History Project. The interviewer is Molly Graham. It's a remote interview with Mrs. McCarthy in Portland, Oregon, and I'm in Scarborough, Maine. Mrs. McCarthy, I would love to start at the beginning. Can you tell me when and where you were born?

Suzanne McCarthy: [00:31] Roanoke, Virginia, October 28, 1936.

MG: [00:38] I'm really curious about your family history. It seems like you know more about your mother's side. So maybe we'll start there. Can you trace your family history as far back as you are aware of her side?

SM: [00:49] Well, my parents separated when I was quite small. So that's why there's a lack of information about the Tully side. You can call me Suzanne if you want to. That'd be fine.

MG: [01:02] Thank you.

SM: [01:06] My mother was born in Wheeling, West Virginia, and her father's side came from Germany and Switzerland, and his father was born in Switzerland. My grandmother on that side, I don't know anything about her except her name was Catharine, and that's what my mother was named after. On my grandmother's side, her father was English, came to the United States during the Civil War, and was an orphan. I don't know anything more about it. Her mother was also Germanic, probably born in the United States. But I'm not sure of that either, really. The few times that I have looked up on Google those names, they haven't really panned out a whole lot. So, that's the story.

MG: [02:01] Yes, I was curious how an English orphan would arrive in the United States.

SM: [02:05] Oh, I don't know. In steerage. Worked his way across. I don't think he came as a child. Probably as soon as he was an able-bodied person who could scrounge his way around the world, he went to Richmond, Virginia, worked there, then worked in an iron works, and then went north to Wheeling, West Virginia, where he worked. He was apparently a foreman in the steel mill and had one family, the wife died, and then married my great-grandmother. The story goes that he was canny enough to buy stock in the company, and when he died, the manager said, "Mrs. Row, we can relieve you of that stock." She said, "Well, if it was good enough for William, it's good enough for me," and she kept hold of it, which was good thinking on her part. That's about all. There are a lot of stories. I heard lots of stories. But the Arbenz side, which was my grandfather – they trace their way back in Switzerland. They even have a book that they published in German, which I have a copy of, [which] I can barely look at. But they go back a long way in eastern France and Switzerland.

MG: [03:42] What was the impetus for immigrating to the United States?

SM: [03:47] Well, I think the one section that came over here came over under some sort of a cloud. Like they got some girl pregnant or something like that. They weren't the pride of the family at that point. They just said, "Well, I guess I'll go to America and get away from all this."

MG: [04:08] Would that have been your grandfather, Herman Arbenz?

SM: [04:11] No, it would have been either his father or his grandfather. My grandfather, Herman Arbenz was born in the United States.

MG: [04:19] That's right. What would have brought the Arbenz family to Wheeling, West Virginia?

SM: [04:30] Maybe other people, but I don't know. That's a good question.

MG: [04:35] I was reading about the history of Wheeling, West Virginia. Many German immigrants settled there in the mid-19th century. These folks were anti-slavery and were involved in the labor movement in the United States. I was curious if any of your family members were part of these groups or identified with them.

SM: [04:51] Well, all I know about my grandfather – no, I don't know. My grandfather was a civil engineer and was employed by the city of Wheeling as their civil engineer, but his brothers were musicians and lawyers and people like that. So they all valued education quite highly. My grandfather had a college education. The fact that somebody – that was uncommon that long ago. So they prized education.

MG: [05:38] You said your grandfather was a civil engineer. What kind of work was he doing?

SM: [05:43] Probably roads.

MG: [05:50] It seemed like this was an era of prosperity for Wheeling. There was a railroad that reached Wheeling in the mid-1800s and led to some expansion.

SM: [06:00] Well, I left there just before I was eight. So I don't have a lot of further knowledge about it. But they did have an active steel mill, Wheeling Steel, and several other industrial moneymakers. They were close to Pittsburgh with all of its steel mills. They were doing all right.

MG: [06:26] I found a copy of your grandfather Herman Arbenz's draft card. He was forty-four years old at the time he signed it. He listed his present occupation as a civil engineer for a company, I think, called Wheeling Metal, something or other. I couldn't read his script.

SM: [06:42] Well, my goodness gracious, you've done a lot more than I've done. [laughter] If you can tell me how to get that, I have some cousins who are named Arbenz, and I think they would be interested to get a hold of that.

MG: [06:57] I'll send you a copy. There was also a record of his, I think, marriage certificate. So I was curious to ask how he met your grandmother, Emma.

SM: [07:04] Well, they were ten years apart in age, but I don't imagine Wheeling was that big of a place at that time. She was from Wheeling. I know he was born in 1874. She was born in 1884. So that's a little bit of an age difference. I mean, they wouldn't have gone to school together. I don't know how they met.

MG: [07:31] I think your grandfather died when you were about three years old. Do you have any memories of him?

SM: [07:36] Not the slightest.

MG: [07:38] What about your grandmother, Emma?

SM: [07:41] Well, she was a strong woman. She died when I was twenty, so I have a lot of memories of her. She and Herman had six children. She played the piano quite well and was known to be – when visiting artists would come to Wheeling, she was sometimes asked to be their piano accompanist. My parents split up when I was more than three but less than four. My mother took me back to my grandmother's house. Then my mother, a little bit later, went on and got a job. My grandmother was taking – she was in charge of me for a year or so without my mother. She did things like make me a whole outfit from my twelfth birthday. I had a girl cousin; we were just three or four months apart, and she would make us matching dresses. She was just a strong woman. She took care of a lot of things. I had an aunt who developed Lou Gehrig's disease. That aunt was on her second husband, and that marriage was not particularly happy. But at the time, doctors said, "Well, you might delay the progress of the disease to go to a hot, dry climate." So my grandmother picked up, took my aunt and my cousin out to Arizona, bought a house – I mean, this takes some ability to take control of your situation, which she did a lot of. She cooked and sewed, and I don't think she ever really liked those things. My mother would tell me that she didn't want to teach her daughters how to do all that domestic stuff, so she didn't want them in the kitchen all the time, which is sort of interesting but also kind of short-

sighted because you might need to be in the kitchen whether you want to be there or not. So anyway, that's Emma.

MG: [10:09] She sounds like a resourceful woman.

SM: [10:11] She was, yeah.

MG: [10:14] Would she share stories about her childhood or what her life was like growing up?

SM: [10:19] A little bit, not too much. She had a sister and a brother. Apparently, she told the family that she had – there was three girls, a boy, another girl, and then another boy. She told my mother at least and maybe her two other matching siblings – my mother was the second one – [that] she never wanted any children, and if she had children, she wanted boys. So she ended up with six of them and three girls in a row. I'm sure she loved all of her children, but that's not exactly what you want to hear as a child. I don't remember her talking about stories too much really.

MG: [11:14] Would she tell you what Wheeling was like when she was growing up there?

SM: [11:21] No.

MG: [11:25] I know you know less about your father's side of the family. But what can you tell me about that side?

SM: [11:33] Well, my father was born in a suburb of Charleston called East Bank. But by the time he would have met my mother, they had been living in Wheeling for a while. I have a picture of him [in] eighth grade in a school in Wheeling. He graduated from high school in Wheeling and probably had a scholarship to play football for the University of Pittsburgh. He was the youngest of seven. One of them had died in infancy. My parents were living in the Roanoke area when I was born, which is why I was born there. It was the middle of the Depression. He was a salesman for medical supplies, so I guess he went from doctor's office to doctor's office. Did that fail to provide enough? Or did he just get tired of being in Virginia? I don't know. But when they went back to Wheeling, we lived for a few months with this family. I remember the house that we lived in. And he was a policeman. So, did he hear that they were hiring police and it was a steady job? Or did they just want to get back to Wheeling? I don't know. Nobody ever told me any of that at all. The Tullys were in Virginia for a long time and then migrated West. My grandfather was born in Charleston, West Virginia, either in 1864 or 1865. My father was born in January 1908. On his birth certificate, it's listed my grandfather's age as forty-three. So, had he already had his birthday in '08? Possibly not. There's a good chance that he hadn't. So, he was either born in 1864 or 1865. By then, West Virginia was, in

fact, no longer Virginia but West Virginia. I think they broke out in 1863. He could have been born in Virginia a couple of years earlier. My grandmother was from that same part of West Virginia. I know nothing about the Jarrells. There's a Rutherford name on her side of the family. That's a name from that part of the world. Due to Ancestry, which I did, I found out that there are a lot of people I'm related to in West Virginia [and] Ohio. Interestingly, when I get something from Ancestry, it's generally from the Tully side; some third or fourth cousin I've never heard of and will never ever meet says, "We're related." But there was a reference to a Tully way back. Albemarle County is where Charlottesville is in Virginia. That's how long they've been here.

MG: [15:07] Is it that side of the family that accounts for the English and Scottish in your heritage?

SM: [15:13] Probably, except for that one orphan, William Row. He's one – what's a great-grandparent – eighth. He might have been Scottish. Who knows? I mean, that's hard to tell.

MG: [15:31] It doesn't sound like you got to know your father's parents very well.

SM: [15:37] No, I didn't. I don't remember my grandmother at all. I do remember a couple of things [about] my grandfather. I used to drink warm, sugary, milky tea with him. He would pour it in a saucer, and I'd have some with him. I can't remember what he looks like, but I can remember that event.

MG: [16:00] What do you know about your mother's life before she met your father?

SM: [16:06] Well, she went to college. She spent a year in France [inaudible] college, traveled a bit, majored in French – not surprisingly, after the year in France – and minored in art. And then worked in New York City for a while. [She] also studied art at the Art Students League in New York. I think she had an unhappy love affair. Went back to Wheeling. Gave up the New York life. My aunt was in New York also; she was an aspiring actress, which she made some reasonable success at. But my mother went back to Wheeling, was home, and decided to take teacher ed training at a small West Virginia State Teachers College north of Wheeling, and that's where she and my father met. Now, I never knew what he was doing there. I don't know whether or not he ever graduated from Pitt. I mean, a lot of football players don't. And maybe he didn't back in the 1930s. I don't know. But he was there at the same [inaudible] State Teachers College, and that's how they met. My mother did a lot of painting. I have probably fifteen or twenty paintings around the house. I'm the only child. I have no siblings. I never really managed to mention that. Everything that she had I got when she died.

MG: [17:46] What kind of painter was she?

SM: [17:49] What do you mean, what kind?

MG: [17:51] Did she do landscapes, or was her art more abstract? What was her style?

SM: [17:56] Not abstract much at all. She did landscapes and still life, basically. I don't think she ever painted a portrait of anybody, which is another whole talent. She did watercolors and oils. She had a very exact eye, really. I mean, when I look at things that she's drawn, she had an eye to really reproduce what was in the world on a piece of paper or canvas and without mechanical aid. I mean, there's no shame; a lot of painters use mechanical aids just to make sure they get the proportions right, but she didn't.

MG: [18:43] Did you ever get the sense that she missed an opportunity living in New York and being connected to a more metropolitan life?

SM: [18:53] No, we did go back to New York. That's another chapter. I think the breakup with my father saddened her quite a bit. I think they still cared for each other always. They never bothered to divorce, and yet, neither one of them was really an easy person to live with. She was not really – she had some happy moments, but she, in her later life, was not a particularly happy person. She perceived lots of things that weren't right.

MG: [19:45] Did she attend Smith College?

SM: [19:48] Yes, and graduated.

MG: [19:50] Yeah. I found a reference to an article she had contributed to a literary magazine. I just was curious about what subjects she was interested in or other pursuits she had.

SM: [20:03] Good heavens, you have done a lot of work. I did not know she ever wrote for that. Her older sister, Mary, graduated, also – was there – and the younger sister Sarah went but did not graduate.

MG: [20:20] Smith?

SM: [20:21] Smith. All three of them. My mother would have possibly contributed sketches and drawings. I don't know what she wrote about at all. She never said she contributed to a literary magazine. No, she never told me.

MG: [20:39] I couldn't actually find the article. But I found a reference to an article she had submitted to a magazine, maybe at Smith or somewhere else. What brought your mother and her sisters to Smith College?

SM: [20:58] Nobody ever told me. Did my first aunt, the oldest one, say, "I want to go there?" and my grandmother said, "Well, all right?" Or did Mary –? She was the one that wanted to be on stage. Did they have a good theater department at that time? I don't know that either. Was there somebody else in Wheeling three or four years ahead that had gone and said, "Oh, it's a great place; you got to come?" Or it was just presented as a – what is it? – *fait accompli*, a fact? Boy, you ask more questions than I ever thought of. I never thought to ask these questions. What was I doing? Loafing away my childhood, not getting all this information?

MG: [21:51] It's just so interesting to me. I wasn't aware of your mother's interest in French and French culture. Do you know where that came from?

SM: [22:01] No. She was a reasonable basketball player, got an award in West Virginia High School, and [was] a very good swimmer. I don't even know that she took French in high school. I mean, if you were in the first half of the 20th century and you were taking a collegiate preparatory course, you would have had Latin. I'm sure she took Latin. But why French and not German? She knew some German. I mean, the whole family leaned toward German more than French. But if she was interested in art and painting, I do believe there are more French painters than there are well-known German ones, at least in the modern art world. I don't know.

MG: [22:59] Perhaps that was the draw to France.

SM: [23:01] I would think so, yeah. She studied at the Sorbonne and then came back to the United States and finished up her collegiate career.

MG: [23:13] She must have been very bright.

SM: [23:16] Well, I think she was. Everybody on that side of that family really valued academic education. There are all kinds of intelligence, and I think that was the heavy side. There's body awareness and ability to perceive cultural situations and all kinds of things like that, but they were smart in the academic sense.

MG: [23:52] Do you know what year your parents were married?

SM: [23:54] Yes. 1935. September 2nd.

MG: [23:59] And then you came around about a year later?

SM: [24:02] Yes. Right.

MG: [24:03] Tell me a little bit about your early childhood. You might have to trace the moves again for me. You were born in Roanoke but came back to Wheeling, and then at eight years old, you moved away again.

SM: [24:14] Right. Well, by that time, my parents had separated, and my mother had really had a bad time. She was just depressed. Her youngest sister was married and living in New Jersey. The adjacent younger sister, Sally, was also in New Jersey. My mother went to visit that area and found a job in New York City in the middle of World War II, reading incoming mail from Europe, and particularly because she could read French, she was one of the people who would read letters that were in French. This far removed from World War II, people don't necessarily realize all the things that went on. But one of the things that happened was that every piece of mail that came into the United States was censored. That's what my mother did. So she was living in New York, and she'd gone there to visit her sisters and to recuperate from the breakup of the marriage and left me with my grandmother. I was fine. I was happy staying in Wheeling. I didn't mind. This is an interesting thing in my mind. I went to visit my mother at the end of the summer in 1944. By then, I was about to enter the third grade. When you're entering the third grade, you know when school is going to start. I'm looking around, thinking, “I'm supposed to be in school. Why am I not back in school?” Well, it turned out, and nobody bothered to tell me much, I was staying there. Now, how that decision went on between my mother and my grandmother, I don't know. They never told me about it, and I never asked. I wasn't always happy, especially at first. I wanted to write to my grandmother to say I wanted to go home, but I couldn't figure out how to get a stamp for the letter, so I never did. I stayed with my mother. I never went to live with my grandmother again. So that's how I got to New York. Okay. The end of the war. Censoring letters jobs stopped. My mother was unemployed for a while. By then, that grandmother had taken the sick aunt with Lou Gehrig's disease. So that wasn't available anymore. One uncle, one of the people I've not mentioned yet, had gotten out of the Army. He and his wife and family had settled in this small town in Virginia, Clifton Forge, which is near Roanoke, as a matter of fact. He also was a civil engineer. He followed in his father's footsteps. He was working for the C&O [Chesapeake and Ohio] Railway. My mother got a teaching job in that small town in Virginia. So that's when I moved back to Virginia. For the next ten years, that was my home, Virginia. As I said, she was not an easy person. I don't think that was the best place for her, that little town. Eventually, my uncle and aunt got transferred to Richmond. So, well, there's some family. We moved to Richmond. I finished high school in Richmond and went off to William and Mary. At the end of William and Mary, when I was graduating, I went to work for the Coast Survey.

MG: [28:18] There are a few things I want to ask you more about. What other work did your mother find after moving back to Virginia?

SM: [28:25] Okay, well, she taught school. She taught fourth and fifth grade. She did not get a contract. After five years there, she was not offered a contract. I'm not sure whether there was – I don't know why particularly. She was not the kind of a person that rolled with the punches, and you have to do that to be a teacher in a small town and a culture you don't really necessarily understand all that well. But we had nothing to keep us there anyway. There was no long-term family, no cousins. As I said, my uncle had been promoted and moved to Richmond. Richmond was a better place. When she lived in Richmond, she did substitute teaching, and that was good. That's a job that doesn't take a long-term toll on you. So, she did that and worked in some retail from time to time.

MG: [29:38] What was your relationship with your father like after the separation?

SM: [29:43] Well, very much not there. During the war – both of them were older. I mean, born in 1907, my mother, and 1908, My father. By the time 1941 came around, they were past draft age, really. But my father either was drafted or enlisted in the Army. He never was sent overseas, but he was stationed on Cape Cod. We saw him maybe half a dozen times there while we were in New York, and he was in Cape Cod. After the war, he drifted. He was an alcoholic. I'm sure he kept sober while he was in the Army, but then he didn't have any particular aims. He drifted, eventually ending up in California. I would get the occasional birthday card from him.

MG: [30:51] Do you know his life and career unfolded after the war? Did he find work?

SM: [30:55] I don't think he had [a career]. He worked. He didn't have a career. He had jobs. How they ended up, I don't know. That was never mentioned. They were probably just jobs. What he might have studied in college, aside from playing football, I don't know that either.

MG: [31:28] You mentioned your uncle was in the service. Did you have other relatives who served in either World War I or II?

SM: [31:40] Yes. The other uncle turned out not to be able to be in service; he had a heart murmur. So he was 4-F. But my aunt, the one who was the actress, joined the Women's Coast Guard. She christened a ship, probably a small one, in Cleveland, Ohio. So, it was [in the] Great Lakes. And went on through there. They had a theatrical review called [*Tars and SPARS*]. The women were the SPARS. You already know this. You're smiling. You already looked this up. The Tars were the guys. They made a movie of it. I don't think there was much of a plot. But she had a small role in that movie. After she got out of the Coast Guard, she went back to Smith [and] taught for a while. She'd gotten a master's degree at Columbia right off the bat. But she

taught at Smith and then moved on to the University of Illinois, where she got a Ph.D. and taught and directed theater. That's where she retired from.

MG: [33:06] That's so interesting. I think very few people leave the Coast Guard to get into theater.

SM: [33:10] Well, she'd already been in the theater. But she retained her reserve status and retired as the rank of a captain, which is pretty darn good.

MG: [33:29] Was this an auxiliary unit of the Coast Guard? I know the Coast Guard wasn't integrated with women for a while. [Editor's Note: Women have been serving in the United States Coast Guard since 1918, initially as part of the Coast Guard Women's Reserve (SPARS) during World War II, and eventually achieving full integration into all roles in 1973]

SM: [33:40] I don't know. It was pretty active during World War II. They probably deactivated it. They had the WACs [Women's Army Corps] – were the Army. The WAVES [Women Accepted for Volunteer Emergency Service] were the Navy. The SPARS were the Coast Guard. The Air Force wasn't the Air Force until after World War II; it was the Army Air Corps. So the women joined, and then there were women Marines. But none of those – they were all separate, distinct services. I don't know. Integrated? No. But did the SPARS continue? She was in the Coast Guard Reserve. When that administrative transfer happened, I don't know. But she never really got out of it because it helped. She attended Reserve meetings. She got pay [and] got retirement pay. So, it stayed with her.

MG: [34:43] I mentioned Herman Arbenz's draft card. Did he end up serving in World War I in some capacity?

SM: [34:54] I would doubt it. I doubt it. Born in 1874. [In] 1914, he's already forty, father of four children. It's unlikely, but nobody ever said he did. And nobody ever said he didn't. My uncle was in the Army Corps of Engineers. He was in the South Pacific, probably building airstrips and things like that on different islands. He was in the Army, maybe the Reserves, but in the Army before Pearl Harbor. He and my aunt got married in May of 1941. And the pictures of them – he's in his Army uniform as a formal outfit. I'm not sure he wore it every day, but that's what he got married in. Maybe he did wear it every day. I don't know.

MG: [36:16] You would have been about five years old when Pearl Harbor happened? Do you have a memory of that event?

SM: [36:22] I don't have a memory of the day. I have memories of the immediate aftermath. Even in inland Wheeling, West Virginia, the house was outfitted with blinds because we were

afraid of air strikes, and they had blackouts. So you would put big blinds over your windows. The street we lived on had a trolley track. I don't know whether – there was a lot of obtaining of scrap metal. My impression was that the trolley tracks were being torn up for the defense. Maybe it was just a public works event that was going to happen anyway. I do remember the trolley tracks being torn up and the street being repaved. There were ration books, and cars had ration stickers in their windshields. There were different grades of rationing. I mean, the individual family car wouldn't be entitled to as much gasoline as, say, the doctor who had to make rounds – that kind of thing. How it was worked out, I don't know. But there were red and blue – I think you had a coupon, but then the little red and blue tiny, little coins – I think they were the change. But everybody had a ration book. There was a twenty percent tax on things that were considered luxury items. That included leather and even imitation leather, surprisingly enough. Jewelry, fur coats, anything that you didn't really have to have had a twenty-percent tax. That lasted until probably 1947 or so. I don't recall people going off to war other than the ones I've told you about. My last aunt, Ruth – her husband was an Episcopalian minister. He never served. I don't know why. I don't know the story of that, whether or not he asked for a deferment, or whether he got a deferment, or what, but he was never in the military. Of course, he had an essential role back home. So, I don't know. I think you would probably have had to volunteer to be a chaplain, and maybe he didn't want to do that. He also had a family. He had a wife and two children, and maybe he was just not anxious to put them at risk. I don't know. It's interesting. The questions you're asking, I'm thinking, “Well, why didn't I ask that? Why don't I know that?” But children don't. They make assumptions, but they don't necessarily ask questions.

MG: [39:56] We also think we have lots of time to ask these questions.

SM: [40:00] That's true, too. Right. The son of the woman who died from Lou Gehrig's disease was my closest cousin. He was only two months older than I am, and he died suddenly last Christmas. “Well, I’ll ask John that. I’ll talk to John about it.” And now he's gone. And he was the only one. I mean, all the aunts and uncles are dead; the parents are dead. He and I are the two oldest cousins in that family. He’s gone. I can’t ask him.

MG: [40:39] I'm so sorry to hear that, Suzanne.

SM: [40:41] Well, yeah, thank you. It happens. He was eighty-six, and I'm eighty-six. We have limited time left. I mean, I'm not sitting, quivering over it. But we don't have a whole life ahead of us.

MG: [41:06] Were you following along with the events of the war in school and in the newspapers?

SM: [41:11] Yes. I don't think there was a whole lot of it in school. Another way of raising money was savings bonds. You had a little book, and you'd buy a stamp for a quarter, and then you get your savings bond. So there was that. I can remember hearing about the fighting in Italy and certainly knew about D-Day. I remember the Battle of the Bulge because that was Christmas 1944/January 1945. Then, of course, May 1945, it ended in Europe, and that was cause for great rejoicing. I saw my father when the war with Japan was over. I was looking things up recently about when that was. The atomic bombing was early in August, and the Japanese didn't actually surrender until the first of September. [Editor's Note: The atomic bombs were dropped on Japan by the United States on August 6 and August 9, 1945, on the cities of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, respectively. Japan surrendered and officially ended World War II on August 15, 1945, with the formal surrender ceremony taking place on September 2, 1945, aboard the USS Missouri in Tokyo Bay.] I mean, there was sort of an informal surrender, but they didn't really do it formally. I'm not sure exactly when that was, but I do know that was one time my mother and I went to Cape Cod, and we visited with my father. Everybody was just really pleased over the fact that the war is finally over. It was not until many years later that I found out that they'd been fighting a lot earlier in Europe – two whole years ahead. I didn't know that – and how relieved they must have been. God, it's terrible. Yeah, but we followed it. I don't remember hearing it – I don't remember teachers saying, "Okay, kids, now we're having current events" and talking about it. That didn't happen.

MG: [43:13] And how would you get the news? By radio? Newsreels?

SM: [43:23] Radio and newspaper and people talking. That was it. Television didn't really exist in the ordinary person's home until after that. It began in the late '40s.

MG: [43:41] Tell me a little bit about the schools you attended growing up.

SM: [43:45] Okay. First off, in the Wheeling days, there was a Catholic school right across the street. The family was not Catholic, but it was right across the street. So, I went there for kindergarten and first grade. With a birthday in late October, by all rights, I was a year ahead of where I should have been. I started first grade when I was five. When my mother went off to New York, that kind of ended my going to the Catholic school across the street, and I went to the local public school – second grade. I don't recall a whole lot about it. I was just learning to add and subtract and write. That was about it. I remember a couple of incidents, and I remember walking to and from school, but it was just a box with classrooms in it. Years later, like fifty-five years later, I went back to Wheeling, and that school had been torn down. The Catholic school was still there, though. I stopped in, said hello, and said I was there for kindergarten and first grade. But the public school was gone. I don't know why. Then, in New York, I went to PS-41 on Greenwich Avenue for two years. We had lunch in the basement cafeteria. My third-grade teacher was Mrs. (Zerner?). I remember her name. And about halfway through the spring

term, somebody came to the door of the classroom, called me out, and said, “Here, we're putting you in Miss (Poirier’s?) class.” So they advanced me another half term. Some school systems have offset years where you finish up the term in the middle of the winter – or a grade. So, instead of being in the second half of the third grade, I was in the first half of the fourth grade. I do not remember the slightest conversation, preparation, introduction, explanation – nothing. I went from third grade to fourth grade. “Okay, now you're here.” Was there ever? I don't think so. I did all right. I finished up fourth grade. Then, the next year, I don't remember who my teachers were, but I clearly started the second half of fourth grade in the fall and the first half of fifth grade in the spring. That was 1946. I was nine and a half. That was the summer that we moved from New York down to Clifton Forge. They didn't have that half-year system, so I moved into sixth grade. Here I was, quite young. I graduated from high school when I was sixteen. Interestingly, Virginia, before World War II, only had seven grades in their elementary school. So children did not, as a rule, start school until they were seven rather than six. They all ended up at the same age. I was in class with a lot of kids who were two years older than I was, which was all right. The older I get, the more I realize there is nobody that grows up without some sort of disconnect or some sort of way that they aren't, quote, “normal.” I mean, everybody's normal. But this was mine. Other people have other things. I mean, some kids can't hear very well. This was mine. It helped form me. I was friendly enough with the girls in the class. But when they were all ready to date, I certainly wasn't. I was kind of a late bloomer anyway. So here are all these fourteen- and fifteen-year-old girls going out on dates, and I wasn’t, which is probably a good thing. [laughter] Then we moved to Richmond, and I finished up my last two years of high school at Thomas Jefferson High School in Richmond.

MG: [48:44] It sounds like you felt a little socially out of sync with your peers.

SM: [48:48] Yes, definitely.

MG: [48:50] Academically, you must have been doing very well to be skipped ahead so many times.

SM: [48:55] I was. I got all A's. I moved from this little high school to a big high school with lots of things, and I got all A's. No matter what subject I was taking, I got A's. Sometimes, I’d get a B. I was going to go to Smith. My mother went to Smith; I’m going to Smith. Got [inaudible]. Got accepted. Got a scholarship. Thought, “I don't want to be the one who has the least money in this school where people are probably from privilege. I don't want to be that person.” My dear uncle said, "Why don't you think about William and Mary? That's a good school." It was down the road. It was a state school. I figured it'd be a bigger mix of people. Besides, there were guys. Even though I wasn't dating at fourteen or fifteen, and even sixteen, there was still the hope that maybe I might at seventeen. I could have gone to Smith academically, but I just didn't think that was the right fit.

MG: [50:17] I want to ask you more about this, but I'm also curious to hear more about how being younger than your classmates impacted you.

SM: [50:31] I don't know. I mean, how do you know? Things were so different. Because really, in the 1940s, there weren't that many single mothers. Everybody had a family. How do I know what went on behind their front door? I didn't, but I could envy it, nevertheless. I could envy the idea that they had a daddy. I knew my father loved me, but he wasn't there. I could envy the fact that they had brothers and sisters. I especially got annoyed when people would say, "You're an only child; you must be spoiled." Because I knew darned well I wasn't. It's one of those things that kids say because they see piles of presents on Christmas Day or the ability to wheedle their way through one parent or the other. I don't believe that single children are spoiled anyway, even if they do have a nice family life. That persisted through college. "Oh, you're an only child; you must be spoiled." So that got a little bit of – raised my fur a little bit. I had girlfriends, but they weren't always ready to do the things I wanted to do. I was just a little bit behind, tagging along. I think that's basically it. To this day, I don't like to be on the end. If there's six or seven people sitting together, I don't like to be on the end because I found that people were always talking to their buddies over here, and I had nobody to talk to. That's an interesting little shaping. I mean, you develop these little coping mechanisms. And sure, I'll sit on the end if I have to, but I don't like it.

MG: [52:45] Could you characterize your relationship with your mother during these years? How was she navigating her single motherhood?

SM: [53:55] Oh, well, I don't know. Nothing is normal. She got a lot of help from my grandmother, financially and otherwise, and she was close with her brothers and sisters. And she always considered that she was being ignored. One thing that I have realized as I've gotten older is what I didn't – what every child chafes at, I thought was my mother being excessive. In many cases, she was just being a good parent. I didn't have anybody else in the family to back her up, explain her reasons, or calm me down. I think that's what you miss when you – and there are plenty of people who were raised by one parent. It's the way it is, lots of times, and it turns out fine. But that is one thing that you miss is that counterbalance of the other parent. How did she navigate? I didn't think very well at all. The older I get, the more I realize she was doing what she had to do.

MG: [54:28] Were there any other adult figures in your life that you could talk to or who were mentors to you?

SM: [54:34] Well, I talked easily with my Aunt Mary, but they didn't understand my mother either. The advice they gave me was not particularly helpful. So, no, I just did my own thing, and I left home. I did not go back to live with my mother when I finished college.

MG: [55:00] It sounds like Smith was always part of the plan for you. It's interesting that you didn't end up going. Can you talk a little bit more about that decision not to go?

SM: [55:13] In the days after World War II, when my aunt was teaching there, my mother went back to a reunion. We stayed at my aunt's. I just thought it was a really cool place. It has a great reputation as an excellent women's college. So why wouldn't you want to go there? But nobody ever talked to me. Nobody. My mother didn't stand in my way, and she did help me fill out all the papers that you need to do to get a scholarship. She did not argue with me. I don't recall that she ever said, "I want you to go to Smith." She didn't come up with that plan. I was going to be heading off, and I imagine she probably – considering how much parents love their children [and] don't want to see them leave, she probably was, in the long run, happier that I was only sixty miles down the road. She probably was just as happy. I don't think she pushed for it at all that I go there, even though she was proud of having gone herself.

MG: [56:33] What other experiences up to the point of graduating from high school have we not talked about? I'm curious about the things you did for fun and how you spent your summers. Did you have a summer job?

SM: [56:44] No, I never worked in the summer.

MG: [56:49] What were things you did for fun, then?

SM: [56:53] Well, the most fun thing I did was to go someplace and go swimming. There was a park in Clifton Forge that you could walk to that had a swimming pool. And there was a lovely state park out of town. We, at that time, didn't have a car. So it had to be dependent on other people going. Sometimes, I went with groups of friends. Then Richmond, with its slavery background, did not have a wide variety of swimming pools. There was a state park fifteen or twenty miles south of Richmond. There was a gal, again, two years older than me, but down on the corner from where I live. She had access to a car, so the three of us would go swimming – she, my mother, and I. Her mother was not well. She walked around the house, but she wasn't well. She wouldn't go swimming. That was it. I don't remember doing much of anything. You'd go to the movies. I don't recall a whole lot of doing things for fun. I read a lot.

MG: [58:12] What kinds of books did you like to read?

SM: [58:14] Oh, mostly fiction and fairy tales. [laughter] Stories about young girls doing things. Sometimes girls and boys doing things. I'm a big fiction reader.

MG: [58:27] You eventually majored in math at William and Mary. Did you enjoy your math classes in grammar school and high school?

SM: [58:36] No, not more than anything else. Again, this is an odd set of reasoning, maybe. Math was okay. I liked studying languages. But I think I'm probably better at not doing languages. But I got to college, and I realized that at the end of that, unless I'm going to get married, which you can't count on, I'm going to need to get a job. Now, what were jobs for women in the 1950s? Teaching? No. Nurses? Absolutely not. Okay. Do I want to major in biology or chemistry? Long lab times, not so much fun. Don't want to major in a language? I'd end up teaching. Not that, either. Oh, mathematics? I could probably get a good desk job with mathematics. That'd be great. I can do math. I don't know if you ever heard of a shallower set of reasoning to pick a major. I guess it wasn't that shallow. But it didn't really – I didn't really have a passion for studying any of it. I could do fairly well in all of it. I picked what I thought was a practical, straightforward course.

MG: [1:00:16] That does sound very practical.

SM: [1:00:22] I don't know. I don't know whether other people do things like that or not. That was my decision.

MG: [1:00:32] Were you worried, though, about the workforce you'd enter and the lack of opportunities for women at the time?

SM: [1:00:36] No. I didn't look for a career. I mean, again, it's a very interesting change in the country's persona that even in the 1950s, what a woman wanted to do was get married. In my case, the burgeoning group of women who said, "I'm tired of this domesticity; I want out. Let me out. I want a career" – that was growing at the same time that I had looked at my reduced family upbringing, saying to myself, "I want a family. I want a husband and a family." It's kind of like I was swimming in the other direction. I don't regret what I did. I mean, I was happy working. When I look back and think, "All these women want to throw off their aprons and put on their high heels and get their briefcases," I was ready to go the other way. It just shows you what you miss is what you're looking for.

MG: [1:02:02] And it's not an anti-feminist approach. You really just wanted to build a family, and you wanted to have that option to build a family.

SM: [1:02:11] That's right. Yeah. I'm not an anti-feminist. That's not the case. It just was when I look back and think – I had my first child, and I quit work. It was my husband who said, "Why don't you take some more math classes?" When the kids were – I had three children. The youngest one was – oh, God. I graduated in '75, so he would have been – he wasn't ten yet. I took one class a year and got a master's degree. But, it was my husband who suggested that I go back to school and take some more math classes. And the kids were small. But I enjoyed it. It was nice to be a wife and a mother.

MG: [1:03:17] Are you okay to continue going for a little bit longer, or would you like to take a break?

SM: [1:03:21] I think we ought to probably take a break. You can stop recording.

MG: [1:03:31] Okay.

---END OF INTERVIEW---

Transcribed by Molly Graham 8/8/2023
Reviewed by Molly Graham 8/10/2023
Reviewed by Suzanne McCarthy 8/17/2023
Reviewed by Molly Graham 9/10/2023