

Frederika N. Sargent on
Sister Consuelo N. Bailey

Interviewer
Mary Kasamatsu

MK Coming is an interview with Mrs. Frederika Sargent who is the surviving sister of Consuelo Northrup Bailey, the first woman to be elected to the office of Lieutenant Governor in the United States.

MK As you were growing up, what do you think were the factors that most contributed to her interest first of all in law and then in her public career as an elected official in many ways?

FS Well my father had started to study law in Washington and then he had a bad sickness and the doctors said he should stay outdoors and not, so he never completed it but he always was interested in it. So when Con was about nine years old, she told her father she was going to study law and she did.

MK She never wavered from that?

FS No, she was going to and of course my father encouraged her. I remember one time he gave her a copy of Blackstone for a present when she wasn't too old. But he had a very strong personality for love of country and I think a great deal of it came from his influence.

MK What about your mother?

FS She was an exceptionally strong personality. She did a tremendous amount too. We were brought up on both sides, but of course my father, the law as the one. But with my mother, it was a case of country and doing your duty for your country.

MK So then you probably all grew up with a sense of responsibility to your community and your state?

FS Absolutely.

MK It must have been very unusual still growing up at that time for a young woman, for a little girl to say at nine years old, I am going to be a lawyer when her classmates were probably saying, I am going to be a teacher, a mother or...

FS Well I will tell you. I think my sister had a competitive part of her personality. My two sisters were very different and they both competed. Of course in those days you didn't have T.V.'s. They sang. They spoke pieces. They did things like that which was excellent training for what she went on to do.

MK Did you want to be like her in becoming a lawyer...?

FS I'll tell you. I was the third one and I always was studying both my two sisters. I was doing it when I was very little you see. But my sister Con knew what she wanted. She went after it and she had for instance my older sister was one of these curly haired, blond, blue eyed, very attractive. Con's hair was not curly, but she was determined that she would be a good looking woman and you know she had that determination and she didn't think she could be pretty, but she would be smart looking and she would be well groomed and dressed. She always did it.

MK What did she look like as an adult woman?

FS Well there is a picture up there in the dining room.

MK I mean was she tall?

FS She was smaller than I. She was...the way she looked was very important to her. I mean her clothes and she loved blue. In fact in the days when she was Lieutenant Governor and all they used to call it the Consuelo blue, because she wore blue so much. But it was most becoming because she had blue eyes. The velvet deep blue eyes, not the buttermilk.

MK You said earlier too, that she had a voice that carried.

FS Oh it did. It carried very well and I think speaking pieces and singing; both my sisters sang. I think all of that helped. And of course she got a great deal of influence from my father because before I ever went to school my father had taught me passages of Shakespeare, even though I didn't know what the words meant. I think the rhythm and the feel I got then for a lot of things and I think Con did too.

MK Sure.

FS And of course in those days like on Sunday afternoon, mother always...we were together and we would have...oh if it ws fall, it would be apples or popcorn and Mother would always read to us Sunday afternoons. Very different from the way things are today.

MK More time was spent on actually doing things and not so passive. Not watching things, like the television. Not watching something, not listening to something, so much not necessarily but actually learning it or doing it.

FS Well mother always read. We were read to a great deal. That was Sunday afternoons. You could depend on it.

MK That's nice though. That's nice. I am wondering too whether your sister was...did she see herself as a spokesperson for women all over Vermont. Even the women who were not part of her constituency?

FS I don't believe she would have ever been in the LIB sort of thing. She believed that if you had qualities, they would show up and if you worked for them you did not need any special legislation to make it to encourage you. You would do it, because that's what you wanted to do.

MK Was she particularly interested in any so called women's issues when she was in the legislature or as Lieutenant Governor?

FS She was interested I think, everything was based on what was the best for the state. It didn't matter whether it was woman's interest or not. It was for the best for the country and state. That was her theory all the way through.

MK Do you know whether she ever...did she ever talk about experiencing any prejudice with her colleagues?

FS Any what?

MK Any prejudice toward her as a woman from her colleagues in the legislature or?

FS Of course, she was one of the first and of course she was breaking ground. There was a little skepticism I think, but when people realized how dedicated she was then I think that was primarily it. She did not ask for favors being a woman. She just did what was the right thing to do from her point of view.

MK She was a very strong party person, wasn't she?

FS Oh she was a great republican.

MK In reading about her campaign for, well even before she became Lieutenant Governor,...

FS When she was running for Speaker of the House, she went into nearly every town, but she didn't expect anyone to stop doing what they were doing. If they were milking cows, she went into the cow barn. If they were doing

haying, she went to the haying. She just went where the person who would be in the legislature was to talk to. She didn't ask any favors.

MK That must have been quite a campaign in the sense of the roads being not what they are today.

FS No and of course the interesting thing was that she didn't learn to drive. My father knew his three daughters. He was perfectly willing for my older sister and I to drive. But my sister Con, she didn't want to drive. Actually she was a very good driver, but I can't say I enjoyed riding with her every minute. But she was so quick, I don't believe in all of her driving. She learned to drive in Washington, D.C. which is a little different. But she did. She wanted to drive, so she learned. I think in all of her driving, there was never one accident that required the insurance company except one and that was a very unusual experience. She was in a funeral procession. It was also while she was running for public office. And the cars ahead made an abrupt stop and she hit a car and that car hit another car and the people in the second car ahead said they received injuries. I think it was just a case of making political hay out of an accident you see. So Con told the insurance people to settle it because she didn't have time to go into it. Then I think afterwards she didn't feel it was quite right because they made a settlement without an xray of the persons neck. And that kind of bothered her because it was the second car ahead. The people in the first car that she hit weren't hurt at all. But in the second car. They were not of the same political persuasion as she was and as I say it was political hay. But that's the only time in her driving to my knowledge that she ever had the insurance have to you know call it an accident. She was very quick, but she would drive. She would be stopped for speeding. Of course in those days, they didn't have regulations on the speed the way they do now.

MK There were not uniform speed limits or?

FS No you didn't have to, because in those days with the ruts in the road and all, but of course as it got better you could go better and faster.

MK That's interesting. Do you remember; this is a little bit off the subject, but no I won't get into this now, I will come back to it. I want to ask you about your recollections, your first recollections of automobile travel in Vermont. But we will come back to that. I

wanted to go back a little bit to when you said her colleagues in the legislature realized that she was a hard worker and she wasn't going to ask for special favors that they accepted her.

FS That's right.

MK Up until that time, did she ever talk about the difficulty in getting them to accept her. Was there ever something that hurt her, disappointed her or discouraged her?

FS No because she maintained it was up to her that if she did what was expected then in all probability they would accept her and that was the theory that she worked on all the way through.

MK Did she have particular issues, any kind of issues that were sort of her pet issues in legislature, things that she really cared about more than others?

FS No, everything was weighed on what was good for the country and the state and whatever came up. That was it. Of course she did an awful lot during the bootlegging days.

MK In what sense?

FS When she was states attorney you see for Chittenden County and as that she tried I think it was the second murder case that any woman tried in this country. The first one was with Katherine Walker Willabrandt. She tried the first one, but Con tried the second.

MK Was that a murder case where they had bootlegging involved?

FS It was up Sunderland Hollow. There was a car coming down to go into New York State and they evidently, the police, stopped the car and the man just pulled his revolver and shot in close range. It was very bad. There were some funny things on that because I said I was not going to get interested in her case but I went down to the court house and I did get interested because to watch how it went on and on. There was a woman sitting next to me and I didn't intend to be reading over her shoulder or anything but...they had a recess and the judge very promptly walked out and when he came back he left a note on this woman's desk and I couldn't help but notice what it said. It said, "are you still mad at me darling"? And then he presided in a very very dignified proper way and I

never got over it. I don't think that would go in here.

MK But it is funny though. Did you go to court a lot to watch her?

FS No I didn't. I didn't go to court, but I did go on that occasion. I can't remember...Well I think I did go when she had court with Judge Coles once or twice. And then if they would hold court you see she wasn't driving a car in those days and I used to drive her all around. At that time because that was in the '20's.

MK When did she learn to drive?

FS Not until in the '30's in Washington when she was down there as...when she worked in Senator Gibson's office.

MK Washington can be a wicked place to drive. I am sure it was calmer in the '30's.

FS Well that is where she learned to drive.

MK In looking over her list of accomplishments and offices that she held where she was the first woman to hold that particular office and in a couple of cases in the country, was there anything that she had aspired to that she never attained that you are aware of?

FS Well I'd tell you everybody thought she would run for Governor, but she didn't want to. She had...that would be for somebody else. She had done her bit. And of course her health didn't get so much better. No I think any of the things she tried of course she was very devoted and did a tremendous amount of work with the National Republican Committee and of course she was secretary of that. But you see the reason that they were so anxious to have her and they were was because she had her mind. She could see a person and get their name once. That's all you ever had to tell her. So that when she got into the committees, she could call them by name and do all the things which the average person cannot do. But she had an unusually keen mind. She could do it. And she had one, I know she was working on some project in Washington and she wanted the book and they said this couldn't go out or you couldn't take a pen or pencil in. She went in and looked at it and then went out and wrote it all down. It, to me, was marvelous. Well she took it back in to compare I think afterwards or she made a comparison or somebody did and she had it.

MK That's wonderful.

FS But she was on the National Committee, what was it, 36 years. I think it is the longest that anyone has ever served on the National Committee. Either Democrat or Republican party.

MK That's quite a long time. It goes through quite a period of American History in 36 years.

FS Yes, and of course she had a good sense of humor. Of course when she called the role in Miami and they said about Rockefeller and she says which Rockefeller. I don't think they quite got over that.

MK Could you tell me about that in a little greater detail?

FS No I don't think much more than that. It was while she was Madam Speaker at that time too. She called the role. No I can't tell you anymore than that.

MK It would have been which presidential campaign?

FS It was '72. Just a minute, I can't tell you...

MK I am terrible. I can't remember either.

FS It was '72. I want to be sure. It must have been when President Nixon was nominated, because it was when Gerald Ford was the Chairman of the convention. This was the gavel that she had at that time. She has a ??? of them out there, but they aren't all marked unfortunately, but this one is. So it tells...but Gerald Ford was the chairman of the convention.

MK And she said which Rockefeller?

FS Yes.

MK If we could get off the subject of your sister a little bit or at least off the subject of her political career, I mentioned I wanted to ask you about early automobile travel because that is one thing that we are also accumulating reminiscences about as we go along and I am sure she had some interesting experiences during her campaign swing with automobiles as you say. Do you remember from your childhood the first automobile in your family?

FS Yes I do. We had, the first automobile we had was a Hershoff. And a Hershoff was a french automobile. It was seven seated. It had I think six shifts, reverse and

five of the others. I have never seen one since or the
??? of Herston.

MK How old were you when your family acquired the car?

FS I would say it was about...it was either 1914 or 1915
back then.

MK How did your parents learn to drive?

FS How did what?

MK How did people learn to drive? Did your parents...

FS Well I'll tell you. My father never did learn to drive.

MK Oh he didn't?

FS No. But mother was very good at it. I don't remember
who taught her, but I do remember that in 1916 I had
never taken the wheel and mother was the kind she said
put the car in the barn because of course it was the
barn in those days, not the garage. And I did. So I
started driving in 1916.

MK How old were you then?

FS Thirteen. And I drove and of course they weren't as
strict in those days. You could have a permit just to
drive. I have been driving ever since.

MK Did that car require any cranking or any special things
to get it started?

FS Oh yes. It was a crank car. That was very dangerous
because they could kick back and break your arm. But we
never did. That was the first car. And the second car
we had was a Cole. Never heard of those before. I
think from then on, they were mostly Oldsmobiles, early
Oldsmobiles. But the first, one of the first cars I
remember was a Duryea. That was on our
street. They were the Leopard sisters went down to
Massachusetts every year and with the typical hats, the
dusters, everything. I remember them and you could see
the gears on the side of it because it worked see. You
didn't have a wheel, you had a stick to steer it with
which is interesting.

MK I guess you could get used to that. I was trying to
imagine it. Good, it's amazing. Were they the first
people you remembered having a car in your town?

FS No, no. The first one I can remember is...of course we always had horses and horses were wonderful to me, they still are. The head man of the Shelburne Springs Pulp Mill had a bright red car. I don't know what it was, with an awful lot of brass on it. And so I can remember very vividly of making out, the horse was terribly afraid, so I would get on and hold the horse by the head and the car would have to stop you see while we went by. And then you got a much better view of it.

MK The horse wasn't really so afraid, huh?

FS No, Nobby wasn't that afraid. Nobby was a lovely little morgan. That is an interesting story because this little morgan was I think at the Morgan Farms somewhere. Anyway they had tried and tried to cure a limp that the horse had and they were going to destroy it and dad didn't want that to happen. Nobby was a charming little animal. So he bought it for us. My sister had seen my father take Gumbo Caustic Balsam and treating the animal and he had just bought a new bottle of Gumbo Caustic Balsam. She took it out and she rubbed practically that whole bottle on Nobby's leg and of course it blistered it and my father had to work on it. But you know, the horse never was troubled with the Spavin again. She did such a thorough piece of work. She rubbed it. When she did things she did them. If it was curing the spavin it was, she did it.

MK The horse had to be treated for the burn, but it got rid of the limp huh?

FS She no longer had a spavin. I think that's what they called it then. But Con cured it.

MK That's a wonderful story.

FS Well that's a very true story. But that horse was wonderful. We had it all through our childhood. It was a perfect baby. The horse was. But a marvelous animal.

MK Did she have horses later in life?

FS What?

MK Did she keep horses?

FS No, but we went up later on. I can't think what year that was while the post at Ethan Allen was going and there were a group of women that went up and took riding lessons in the riding stable up there and Con and I went

and we had a wonderful time. That was before they did away with horses up there. That was the last I think of Con's riding was in that.

MK Did she have pets?

FS Oh she loved dogs and cats. Well she loved all animals I think. But she couldn't bear to see anything not being cared for. The last animals (dogs) she had, she had two along the end when she died and both of them were two she had taken in because they were not being treated well. She just took them out from where they were and took care of them. One was a french Briard. You know that dog, it was an exceptional dog I think and somebody told me because they said why how did she have a Briard and I told them that it was because it was being abused and she took it. He said that he was with the army and when they came back from France, they were told they could not bring any pets with them on the boat and an awful lot of them put them in their duffle bags and when the boat was out to sea they got their animals out and in fact they had enough to have practically a dog show and there were Briards in that group and this man always believed that that dog was probably a decendent of one of the dogs that was brought out. But Con always was taking care of something.

MK Is there anything that you would like to add about her that we haven't talked about.

FS Well I can tell that she loved things that were beautiful. Her roses were one of her great specialities and some of her rose bushes we still kept going. But I think she loved to do interior decorating and she had a lot of ability. If she had gone into that, she would have been just as good at it as she was in her politics. She loved that sort of thing.

MK Was that kind of a hobby for her?

FS Yes it was. She was always doing something on that line. But I think it was the theory that if your not building or doing something, your going backwards in life. That was her philosophy. She was always going forward and doing ??? things.

MK Was she someone who could sit down comfortably and allow herself to just spend several hours reading a book or would she be uncomfortable with not...

FS Oh no. She would read, but you see she had trouble with

her eyes from the time she was a little tot. In fact, she had to be careful and that was one of the things that there is so much reading in law business that it was...but she worked at it. It wouldn't have mattered what she was doing. She would have done it. I know people have asked me of course I lived with her all this time because I was trying to help her with her husband who was an invalid and I took care of ??? for years and years. They would say, how could you. I would say well we don't always see eye to eye, but what if she sees is real to her and if I don't agree with it, she will tell me very decidedly, but when she got it all out of her system, it was all gone. A person like that is much easier to live with than one that hangs on to a grudge and nurses it all along. But she told you what she thought in no uncertain terms sometimes. But when it was done, it was done. Much easier to live with. I think she did that in all of her things. If somebody was doing something she would let them know about it, but then she never held a grudge against them.

MK Well thank you very much for taking the time to...

FS Well I don't know how much you can use.

MK Well I think quite a bit actually. It certainly helps me to get a much better sense of her as a person than I had before. Thank you.

FS Well she believed in work. That was her thing. And if you were good enough it wouldn't matter, you wouldn't have to have all these pulls and pushes.

MK Good for her. Thank you again.