

Interviewee: Rosamond Riley Bennet
Interviewer: Katherine Kowaloff
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Abstract: Rosamond Riley Bennet was born in 1918 “on the corner of West and Salisbury on the dining room table” in Worcester, Massachusetts. Aside from the three years she spent in New York with her husband during World War II, she has lived in Worcester for her whole life. A widow and the mother of five children, Rosamond is a long-standing member of Worcester’s Unitarian Universalist Church on Main Street and a volunteer for Planned Parenthood. She plays tennis daily and sings in a number of local choruses. While frustrated with her fading memory, in this interview, Rosamond works hard to recall her early experiences in Worcester. She speaks about her education at the Bancroft School and the different places she lived in the city throughout her life. She discusses her desire to become a surgeon while studying at Smith College, and her disappointment to realize that she would not be accepted in the profession as a woman. She speaks fondly of her extensive world travels and reflects upon her privilege in life. Rosamond also touches upon some of her well-known relatives’ roles in establishing some of Worcester’s central business and cultural institutions in the 1920s, including Riley Stoker, the Norton Company, and the Higgins Armory Museum.

KK: Today is Tuesday October 23rd at about 2:15 in the afternoon and I’m here with ...

RB: 3:15.

KK: (Laughing) Okay, 3:15. Would you tell me your maiden full name and then your married name?

RB: Rosamond ...

KK: And your married name?

RB: Rosamond Bennett, no, no, Rosamond Riley Bennet.

KK: And when were you born?

RB: ... 1918.

KK: And can you tell me where you were born?

RB: I was born on the corner of West and Salisbury on the dining room table, because Mother didn’t want to go to the hospital with all the flu.

KK: That particular year there was lot of flu going around?

RB: Yes.

KK: Now was that just in the Worcester area, or was that a national epidemic?

RB: I don't really know, but it was certainly prevalent in Worcester.

KK: Was there a doctor there when you were born, or a midwife?

RB: I really don't know. (Laughs) My brothers and sisters would have known, but they're all gone.

KK: Uh, huh.

RB: So I don't know.

KK: Okay. Do you have any children?

RB: Yes, I have five children.

KK: And can you tell me, about them?

RB: Ahh, well, there's four of them live around here and the fifth one did for a while, but now he's moved to Florida because he likes to play golf. The oldest one is a doctor, the next one is a girl, it's boy, girl, boy, boy, girl. Is that right? No, it's boy, girl, boy, girl, boy. (Pause) I think. I don't have to answer these questions very often. I don't think about it. But, as I said, the oldest one is a urologist, in Worcester. And, Becky is—lives in Worcester, and she's divorced from her first husband. And—my brother Chapin died recently. He was living on the west coast. He worked in Riley Stoker for a while.

KK: What, what was Riley Stoker?

RB: Riley Stoker was a company my father started. It's—I don't know what happened to it, but it's not [inaudible] any benefit me.

KK: What did they do, what was the company...?

RB: Well they made stokers, kept houses warm.

KK: Like heaters.

RB: Yeah, I didn't know much about it because he died when I was seven.

KK: Your father died when you were seven?

RB: Yeah, so I really didn't know him.

KK: What did he die of?

RB: I think he had cancer, but I'm not sure. In those days they didn't know how to treat it.

KK: Any your mother never remarried?

RB: No, she didn't remarry. No, she became a much different person after he died. Before that, she the old fashioned quiet woman. And, she was quite well known around Worcester, because he died in 1926. I think—yeah. And she was into a lot of things here. So...

KK: So how did she change after he died?

RB: How did I change?

KK: No, how did she change? You said she was quite different.

RB: Oh, well, she came into her own. She had previously been the old fashioned kind of wife that did what her husband told her to do. And, she was quite active. But all the people that lived near her then are dead, so I doubt [inaudible].

KK: Was she involved in charitable organizations, or did she work?

RB: Yes, no, Travelers' Aid—that was the thing she kind of started and was her interest. Otherwise, I can't remember.

KK: Mhmm. And, you were married?

RB: Yeah.

KK: And how long have you been widowed?

RB: Ah, I think Bob died in 1998—something like that. So it's six or eight years.

KK: Eight years, right. And, what did he do for a living?

RB: He was a doctor. He was OB-GYN. So—I'm trying to think what he died of—can't remember. Cancer or some sort of...

KK: We talked a little bit about your parents already; you said you don't remember much about your father. What do you remember about your...

RB: Well, he went to, I know he went to WPI, 'cause that's where Mother met him.

KK: Was she a student there too?

RB: No, she lived at the corner of West and Salisbury, and Salis—WPI was right up the street. And... she was—this is a nice story as a matter of fact—she was wanting to jump rope and she needed somebody to hold the other end of rope. She tied one end to a tree or something like that. And he came walking down the street from WPI and she got him to do it. And... they stayed on seeing each other.

KK: Mhmm...

RB: So, ah, that was kind of a nice story. There's a building named for him at WPI now. Isn't there a Riley Building? I think there is.

KK: I don't know.

RB: I think there is.

KK: Now, do you know how old they were when they married?

RB: Ah, no, I don't.

KK: Now is the same, the house that your mother grow up in, is that the one you were born in?

RB: Yes.

KK: So she spent her whole life there.

RB: Yeah.

KK: Is that home still there?

RB: No, it was torn down. It's now something for WPI, some kind of laboratory for WPI. So... otherwise I really don't know much about it. Except my Uncle Aldus Higgins was the one that started the Norton Company. He lived right in back of us on the corner of West and Salisbury.

KK: His name was Aldus?

RB: Aldus, Aldus Chapin Higgins. He was much better than [inaudible] the rest of us.

KK: Do you know when he started that?

RB: What, the Norton Company? No, you'd have to ask him.

KK: Okay. Have you lived anywhere but Worcester during your life?

RB: I lived three years in New York during World War II 'cause Bob was interning there. That's all, otherwise I've been in Worcester.

KK: So when you married your husband, was he still in medical school?

RB: I don't know; he was an M.D. [inaudible].

KK: Do you remember where in New York you lived?

RB: Ah, 72nd Street, East 72nd. Which was near the hospital he was operating at.

KK: And you were there for three years? Do you have any memories what it was like living in New York City during World War II?

RB: Well, it was fine. I had three children there, so... maybe I had four. I can't remember. (Laughs)

KK: And in Worcester after you married, where were you living?

RB: Ah, I'm trying, oh we lived very briefly in an apartment on Salisbury Street opposite the art museum.

KK: Is that the same art museum that's there now?

RB: Yeah. Again, we went to New York, I mean, ah, New York for three years.

KK: And when you came here...

RB: And when we came back, we lived, gosh I can't remember, I don't know, probably 228 West Street where we had those...no, I don't think that's right, I don't know.

KK: Can't remember, huh? Um, and now you're at ... When did you move here?

RB: I've been here more than five years.

KK: And where did you live before you moved here?

RB: Ah that's right, I can't remember. Isn't that terrible? Ah, I don't know; my children could tell you. I have no memory at all—which you are finding. (Laughs)

KK: It's hard when you get older. I'm already beginning to forget things, too. You said that you went to Bancroft School?

RB: Yeah.

KK: From kindergarten, or did you not have kindergarten?

RB: No, they did have kindergarten and I went there for kindergarten. I skipped the first grade. And I was there until I went away to the Masters School in New York.

KK: And that was for like for your senior year of high school?

RB: Junior and senior year.

KK: What was that?

RB: What?

KK: The Masters School.

RB: Oh, it was called Dobbs. It was just a regular girls' boarding school.

KK: Do you remember why you went there instead of staying at Bancroft?

RB: Ahh, I can't remember if it was I wanted to or—I did want to, but, it just was the thing to do in those days. Maybe to a couple of years of high school and then you go away to school.

KK: Did your sisters do that too.

RB: Yeah, I think so, I'm trying to think. She was 12 years older than I am.

KK: She was what?

RB: She was 12 years older than I, so I didn't really know her.

KK: What was her name?

RB: Katherine.

KK: Oh, named after your mother?

RB: Yeah, didn't use a middle name, I can't remember what it was.

KK: So, after you came back from Dobbs, um, then you went to Smith?

RB: Then I went to Smith, yeah.

KK: What were you studying at Smith?

RB: Ahhh, I can't remember what I majored in, but I remember I wanted to be a doctor, but I knew no one would go to a female surgeon in those days.

KK: You were interested in being a doctor, a surgeon?

RB: Yeah, so I married one instead. (KK laughs) And, ahh, let's see... We lived a year on Salisbury Street off [inaudible] the art museum. Then we went to New York for three years, and then we came back and—where did we live?—at 228 West maybe.

KK: Mhmm... After college did you work, or did you get married right out of college?

RB: Oh no, I—what did I do? I think I did volunteer work for some [inaudible]. I never had a regular paid job.

KK: Do you remember what kind of volunteer you did?

RB: Well, I'd help out at the hospital with one thing or another, things like that. Can't remember.

KK: Is that where your husband practiced?

RB: Yeah.

KK: And how old were you when you got married?

RB: Ahhhh, I don't know; I must have been 22 or 3.

KK: Was there any one person in your life what you can remember that was a role model or a mentor for you?

RB: No, I can't think of any. I was a very active Girl Scout, which you could call a mentor.

KK: Mhmm. Now I know that you're a long time member of the Unitarian Universalist Church on Main, downtown.

RB: Yeah.

KK: How long have you been a member there or attending?

RB: Well, I went to Central Church until Mother found that somebody that she admired was teaching at the Unitarian, so I went there in the first grade I think, or less, I don't know.

KK: You've been going to the same church since first grade? What was the Central Church?

RB: Central is Congregation, it's still there.

KK: And who was the minister at the Unitarian Church, do you remember when you first started going?

RB: When I first came? Ahh, I can't remember. I could find out, easy enough.

KK: What do you think have been the major changes in the church since you were there?

RB: Practically none.

KK: Really?

RB: No—you have a change in minister, but the Unitarian Church makes a point of not having any particular beliefs, so, ah, that's the way it is.

KK: Now did you, when you were home with the children, did you—when you ran the house, did you do your own housework or did you have someone come in and help you?

RB: I probably had somebody come in to clean; I have that here. I didn't have a nurse or anything like that.

KK: Um, it was, was it considered primarily your responsibility or...?

RB: Oh, yeah, definitely.

KK: Did the children help you at all, was that part of the...?

RB: In what way?

KK: Oh, dusting, or picking up their rooms...

RB: They didn't do housework, no.

KK: Set the table, anything like that, any expectations?

RB: No, I think I—I don't remember who did that; I probably did.

KK: Mhmm. (pause) Ah, have you been involved in any, any political movements, or parties, or elections?

RB: No.

KK: No. You said you have volunteered at the hospital, um, any other volunteer commitments now?

RB: Well I, I volunteer for Planned Parenthood and I—what else do I do—I do that once a week.

KK: What do you do there?

RB: Oh, I file.

KK: What made you get involved with them?

RB: Because I believe in what they believe in. Mother actually had something to do with the first, original Planned Parenthood, during the 1920s. And so I kind of grew up with that kind of thing.

KK: (pause) What about health issues—have you had any major health issues in your life?

RB: No.

KK: Um, any problems with access to healthcare?

RB: No, not when you're married to a doctor, you don't get that.

KK: Mhmm. (Laughs) Is there anything about your, any experiences in you life that you would like to make sure to have included, or that you think were particularly interesting, or unusual?

RB: Nothing in particular.

KK: Any memories of events in Worcester, during the Depression, or the war, or...

RB: No, I can't remember that much. Ahh, I was born during the depression, so that didn't affect me, I was too young. No, the one thing I insisted on doing was having my five children quickly, because, being the youngest of five, when my oldest one was 13 years, 13 years older. It's no good in the family. They didn't know me, and I didn't know them.

KK: So you felt it was too spread out, and it was better to have your children together?

RB: Yeah, so I had all the children as fast as I could, and, they all get along real well, and it's—so it's worked out.

KK: So what, how, what is the difference in age between your oldest and youngest?

RB: Five years, five and a half years maybe.

KK: So you had five children in five and a half years.

RB: Yeah.

KK: So you were almost always either pregnant or having a new baby.

RB: Exactly, yeah, yeah, that was my job.

KK: Yeah, (laughing) I guess so. And, was, ah, you said your husband was an OB-GYN—when, did you deliver at Memorial for all your children?

RB: Ah, no, I had the first—oh no I didn't. I had, I think I had two or three in New York, during that period, and—I don't think I ever went to Memorial to have a baby. I just had them at home.

KK: Really

RB: I think I did, I can't remember.

KK: Did, do you know if there was a doctor or midwife in attendance?

RB: I don't know. Maybe it was my husband. I really, I have no memory. You should have talked to me ten years ago. (laughs)

KK: When you were pregnant, was it considered okay to go out and be seen pregnant?

RB: Oh yeah.

KK: It was not something you had to hide.

RB: Or if it was, I didn't know it, which is possible too. You know my family was fairly well known, in that my mother's sister, Olive [inaudible] wrote books that were pretty well known.

KK: Who was that again?

RB: Olive Higgins Prouty.

KK: And who was she?

RB: She was Mother's sister.

KK: And what kind of books did she write?

RB: Oh, I've got a bunch of them here—novels. She was—I'm trying to think. She was married to Uncle Aldus, I think. Uncle Aldus [inaudible] had started Norton Company.

KK: And, is he also the one who started the museum, the Higgins Museum?

RB: No, that was John Higgins .

KK: And he was...

RB: He was...

KK: An uncle of yours, too?

RB: Yeah.

KK: Is this on your mother's side?

RB: Yes.

KK: Do you know why he, was he particularly interested in armor or medieval history..?

RB: I don't know, but I do know that the, his—the house where he grew up, which the parents are living in now on the corner of Williams Street and Park Avenue was the name of the other street. But anyhow, why did I start to say that?

KK: I was asking you about the Higgins Armory Museum, why he started the museum...

RB: I don't know why, except Uncle John obviously had a great interest in, ah, what do you call it?

KK: Armory.

RB: Armory, yeah.

KK: What did he do for a living?

RB: Well, he ran the armory.

KK: Where did he get his money? You had one uncle stated the Norton Company.

RB: Yeah. (pause) I don't know; they had enough money. I'm convinced of that. (laughs) Those three companies were started about the same time—it was in the early '20s maybe.

KK: And it was the, what was the name of your father's company again?

RB: Riley Stoker.

KK: Oh, yeah, Riley.

RB: Which has been sold and the name changed.

KK: So it was the Riley Stoker, Norton, and, what was the name of the other company?

RB: Ah, the, Armory

KK: Mhmm,...

RB: The Higgins Armory, the building that's there now had a factory of some sort at one end of it. [inaudible] don't know if that building's still there or not. But, he started the Higgins Museum. I don't know, that's why I said you should have talked to me ten years ago. (laughs)

KK: Now the, yeah you were just playing tennis today. How long have you been playing tennis?

RB: Ever since I was in high school.

KK: Did you take lessons?

RB: No, I don't think so. It was a long time ago—can't remember very much.

KK: What other activities do you, you go to Planned Parenthood, and play tennis, go to church every week.

RB: I go to church Sundays, yeah. I sing in the chorus and I sing in the choir.

KK: Which chorus?

RB: Which chorus?

KK: Are you a soprano or alto?

RB: No, I'm a tenor.

KK: Oh (laughs).

RB: I sing in the Worcester Chorus and then the church choir, I sing in. And.... another chorus, oh the [inaudible] chorus. I've been that—that I sing in.

KK: And do you still play tennis every week?

RB: Yeah.

KK: Who do you play with?

RB: Various people. They're all [inaudible].

KK: Any other activities that you enjoy?

RB: No... I like gardening, and I like, I love having snow. I never saw it last year and I missed it.

KK: Have you ever skied?

RB: Oh yeah. I skied off and on all through school and college.

KK: Downhill or cross-country or both?

RB: Both. I brought my cross-country skis here, but I didn't bring my regular ones.

KK: Have you always had pets?

RB: Yes. (laughs)

KK: You have a dog and a cat now.

RB: I have a dog and a cat, yeah. Sort of runs in the family. My daughter has four or five cats, a ferret, and a dog, and something else—I can't remember.

KK: Did you have pets when you were growing up?

RB: Well, we usually had a dog, or a cat, and a horse. But I love animals. We [inaudible] traveling and I would want to go, 'cause I like to see animals. I've been to Alaska *and* South America and Africa.

KK: Were these organized tours that you went on?

RB: Usually were. My husband and I did a lot of boat trips to various places. We went to the Antarctic when it was first opened. And that was fun. So, it...

KK: Do you remember about what year that was?

RB: Well, I probably have a book about it. I could look it up, but I don't remember (laughs)

KK: So you've been to Antarctica, Alaska, and South America?

RB: Yeah.

KK: Oh, and you said Africa too.

RB: Yeah, various places in Africa, from the bottom to the top, and... South America [inaudible]. We used to take cruises, which is the way to travel. You don't have to unpack.

KK: (laughs) Would it be just the two of you going, or was this with your children, or with another couple?

RB: Well, sometimes, sometimes it would be all of us, but then as they grew up I made a point of taking the children on a trip; when they were 12 to 14 we'd go on a cruise. We had a lot of fun with that. So, as I say, I can't remember.

KK: What would you say has been the hardest thing in your life, for you?

RB: I've been lucky, nothing was terrible hard. I worked hard bringing up children and things like that, but, ah, I don't think... I was pretty much on my own with my husband being an OB-GYN. He was gone all the time. And people complain about not being able to sleep at night. I would answer the telephone and say, "Oh no, he's not here; he's at the hospital," and go back to sleep. Most people couldn't do that. I can't think of anything very interesting.

KK: Did you do all the cooking for this large family of yours—or did you have help with that?

RB: I sometimes had a kind of a nursemaid, and I think I did the cooking. (pause) I don't know. Before I was married we always had a cook, and a second maid—what do you call it, I can't remember.

KK: A parlor maid, or housekeeper?

RB: Yeah, I think she was called a... she used to serve us the dinner. That's all I can remember. But that was all when I was living at 228 West which is, used to be at the corner of West and Salisbury.

KK: Before you married

RB: Yeah, and after I was married. You can't drive on West Street anymore.

KK: No?

RB: I wonder why. No. We used to do a lot of driving and walking [inaudible] Bancroft School was—I always walked to school.

KK: Where was Bancroft located then?

RB: It was on Sever Street.

KK: Sever Street.

RB: It had moved from Elm Street. I think my sister went there. They didn't take boys, I think. I can't remember. The boys all went away to schools.

KK: To boarding Schools?

RB: Yeah, I think so. I can't remember.

KK: How old were you when your mother died?

RB: Ah...I'm trying to think. I lived on the corner of Salisbury and Flag. There's a house in the V there.

KK: Oh, I know that house!

RB: Yeah, and I lived there for the first three years and then I moved out to what is now the Jewish Community Center. We'd taken a house at the top of the hill, which was wonderful. It had a swimming pool. And, ah... I'm trying to think where we lived when Bob died. I can't remember. I could probably look it up in a diary [inaudible].

KK: Okay, that's fine. Well, if there isn't anything in particular that you really felt you wanted to, ah, include...

RB: I'm a big fan of Planned Parenthood. That's one thing that I care about.

KK: Well, you obviously care about music too.

RB: Yes.

KK: You're in a couple different... do you have a favorite song or a favorite composer?

RB: No.

KK: Did you dance, like to dance when you were dating?

RB: I guess so. I can't remember.

KK: Do you remember how old you were when you were allowed to first date, and how you met your husband?

RB: Well, I was not popular at all through school, so I never had a date.

KK: So how did you met your husband?

RB: At the hospital. I was volunteering there. But that's—as I said, nobody would come to a female doctor, I'd marry one instead. So I headed for the hospital [inaudible] work there.

KK: How long were you dating or seeing him, or did you know him before you married?

RB: Ah, well, a year or so, not very long. We lived at the corner of West and Salisbury as I told you for a while. We went to New York when he was training [inaudible]... New York hospital, maybe.

KK: Do you have any kind of advice you would give women today?

RB: (laughs) No, I don't think so. I don't remember having given it to my children. But, we all had good time together, which is fun. (pause) I don't... I just do what needs to be done. I did an awful lot of knitting and sewing, and I sewed all those things.

KK: Oh, that's like needlepoint.

RB: Yeah, it's needlepoint. What's this? I made that.

KK: That's crewel.

RB: Yeah, that's crewel. I made that.

KK: They're beautiful. Now where did you learn to do this?

RB: You just do it; you don't have to learn it.

KK: Nobody taught you?

RB: No.

KK: Because there are different stitches.

RB: Yeah, but probably I had instructions that [inaudible] the one behind you. That's the needlepoint one.

KK: Oh, yeah. Beautiful. This is very tiny stitches here, it looks like a petite point.

RB: Well, you have to have good light.

KK: Did you teach your daughters any of this? Or did they take up needlework?

RB: Ah, one knits a lot, and the other one paints pictures. She did that one over there, she may have done all those on those walls. (laughs)

KK: And who plays the piano? That's two pianos there.

RB: Two pianos, yeah. I do. I was lucky that I decided to move here just as they were building this top layer of houses, so I got one of my sons who's very good at special things to redesign the place so I could get the two pianos in, because I already had the two pianos. And, when he gave the plans back to be done and they sent it back, the architect had one piano way over there and one here—that wasn't much use. However, this—I don't know if you've been to any of the other buildings here, but this one is large.

KK: It *is* a very nice layout.

RB: Yeah, people come in here and say, "oh, this is so nice." (Talking to the dog-) You want to go out, don't you? Oh, the cat wants to come in now. Yep, okay, now you come in too.

KK: How old were you when you started learning to play piano?

RB: Three.

KK: Very young.

RB: (laughs) Yeah.

KK: Did you have a teacher come to the house, or did you go to somebody's house?

RB: Oh, I can't remember. I played *at* it for a while when I was three. After that... I really can't remember. But I took lessons all the time.

KK: And you were telling me earlier, your daughter- in-law was involved with Mechanic's Hall? What was her role there again?

RB: Yeah, Norma Sanderson. She's my, she's my son's second wife. All my children have been divorced, except for ... So, ah, I can't think of anything else. But they all get along together, and that's worth a lot to me.

KK: So what would you say has been the most important thing to you in your life?

RB: Well, I never thought about it. I don't know. (laughs) I've been very lucky financially; I've never had any problems on that. But, I don't know, my children are very important to me. But they're out of my hands now. I don't know. I don't spend a lot of time thinking about that.

KK: Well, I want to thank you for sharing all your, all the events of your life and your memories.

RB: I think I sound kind of stupid, but... (laughs)

KK: No you don't. (laughs)