

Interviewee: Elizabeth Walker
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Date: November 13, 2008
Place: Worcester, Massachusetts
Transcriber: Elise Van Galen and Kimberly Malgieri



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Abstract: Elizabeth Walker was born in Brooklyn, New York on December 27, 1949 to Mary and Thomas Thompson. She has two other sisters and she is the middle child. She lived in New York until she was three when her and her family moved to Rhode Island for her father's job. They eventually moved back after four years, but then ended up moving to Connecticut until she was about thirty. Elizabeth is now married to Homer F. Walker and has two children, Ben and John. They live in Holden, Massachusetts, and she and her husband both work in Worcester, Massachusetts. In this interview Elizabeth Walker discusses her experiences in college during the 1960s and her work as a teacher and with the telephone company as well as her view on politics, equality in the home, and Roe vs. Wade.

E.V: Where were you born?

E.W: In Brooklyn, New York

E.V: And just for the record, let us know we have your approval to do this?

E.W: Oh yes you have my approval to do this and use my name okay?

E.V: And how many children do you have?

E.W: I have two

E.V: And do you have any grandchildren at all?

E.W: No

E.V: How old are your kids?

E.W: They're 20 and 22

E.V: Awww good ages! What cultures do you identify yourself with like your background?

E.W: Well my family is really Irish so, so that's what I think of myself as my grandmother came over from Ireland in 1925 and my grandfather was Irish too. It seems to be our culture but we think of ourselves as Americans

E.V: Now it says on this that you're married. What's the name of your husband?

E.W: Holmer Walker and he's from Texas

E.V: And how did you meet him?

E.W: I met him when I got out of graduate school. I went to the University of New Mexico. We met through mutual friends out there

E.V: Now you were talking about your parents can you tell me little bit about them?

E.W: Well my mom is an identical twin and she was born in 1925 and she's from Brooklyn, New York. She was one of five children. And my dad was born in Montreal Canada and as a very young boy lost his father and lived with his mother and three siblings in Brooklyn, New York and that's where my parents met

E.V: How did they meet?

E.W: They were both working at a federal reserve bank in New York and my mom worked during the day. That's what she did after high school and my dad worked there at night. He was taking some college classes during the day and he would go to work at night and as she was leaving and he one day waved at her and somebody else, another woman thought he was waving at her, [laughter] and then she waved so he didn't wave back for a while and then eventually they talked when one went into work and one left and then they started dating and then he went into the Coast Guard during World War II

E.V: How long were they married for?

E.W: They were married for 46 years. My mom died while relatively young, she was 62. She died in 1986 oh 1988

E.V: Yeah, that's young -- my dad is 61.

E.W: So yeah you know, you know if you just hear the number or something, but you see how involved your dad is so and my and my dad lived to be three days short of 89 he died almost two years ago.

E.V: I'm sorry. Now you said you lived in Brooklyn, New York. Did you live there your entire life or did you move anywhere?

E.W: I lived there until I was about three and then I moved to Rhode Island and we lived there for maybe four years and then we moved back to Brooklyn. This was all for my dad's job and then when I was in second grade we moved to Connecticut and then I stayed there until I was almost 30.

E.V: Did the constant moving around though like have an affect on your relationship with like your peer groups and like with your family and stuff at all?

E.W: You know I was really young which was a good thing and I, when we lived in Rhode Island I eventually started first kindergarten and first grade there and I didn't want to leave but when we moved back to New York we were near our favorite cousins and that I, I think that really eased it and my mom's twin, they were so close and they would just a few streets away and I went to school with them but only for a year and then my dad's job took him to Connecticut and at that point I was happy to go there. I think my parents talked about it really well and then we didn't move again so that was good. It was harder on my older sister because she was just finishing 6th grade and you know that whole junior high, middle school, junior high thing I think she never really settled in as well.

E.V: How many other siblings do you have?

E.W: I have a younger sister and she was just a baby so she had no idea what was going on.

E.V: So then how did you end up moving to Worcester city?

E.W: Well, it's a really round about route. So I stayed in Connecticut, went to college in upstate New York at Nazareth College, and I was teaching in [inaudible] Connecticut as a language arts reading teacher. So actually my first job was for two years in a Catholic school in Manchester and then three years in a school in Coventry and I had to get a master's because you just have to do that to keep your certification. I was taking a few classes at UConn but I was really busy with school and all that and I thought I was never gonna get this done on time. So I took a year's leave of absence and I ended up going to the University of New Mexico cause a good friend of mine from college was from Shrewsbury, married someone who took a job at the University of New Mexico, as an electrical engineering professor, and I visited them on my April vacation and I really liked it out there and at UNM they had a really good master's program in adult and secondary ed and I was thinking maybe I'd like to apply to adult ed, teaching adult ed so I thought well I'll just apply to that program and have a big adventure for a year and turn 30 and come back with my Masters and I'll be all set. And so as it turned out just I really liked it, it was like a full year master's -- August to August. So I finished the program and while I was there I got a fellowship and so I, it didn't even cost me money so that was great and had a great internship with the telephone company with their educational materials coordinator and then they hired me. So then I tripled my salary from being a teacher and stayed in Albuquerque and resigned from my job in Coventry and so that's how I ended up out there. Met my husband who's a math professor and he was visiting at University of New Mexico and we met through my good friend and her husband and we eventually decided to get married and in the meantime I had moved to Denver with the phone company so I was working in Denver and he was back at the University of Houston where he was from and from there we were there probably a year and a half and then he took a job at Utah State University so he really liked it out West, out West and so we were there for 12 years and a job came up that was at Worcester Polytech for him and I was really excited to come back and be here near family and our boys were going into third grade and going into fifth grade and we decided to come here. So we live in Holden and we lived there for a year. I didn't work, just kinda got kids settled in school, volunteered a lot at their school and then took a job at Holy Cross as a development writer so that, I worked and lived in Worcester.

E.V: What has working like at Assumption and like meant to you?

E.W: Well, I really like it a lot. It's interesting to come here because I had driven by Assumption for ten years and because I'm always up and down Salisbury Street and I first lived right off Salisbury Street in Holden and the only time I came to Assumption was to pick up babysitters. So for the first few years when we lived in Holden, you know, we just met some great students, but I was always coming here at night, you know, I'd drive way back to around here and, and then drop them off later so I really just you know came by Assumption and noticed they had this great science building, the science center and wow they have a parking garage now and all that and, and then I ended coming to work here, and it was just like this whole new place that I had just driven by for ten years and I really liked the community the faculty the students and staff . I found it was very welcoming, really very nice people, very great busy students. I'm amazed at how busy the students are. You all take on a lot between class and projects and service and [laughter] and I really think the campus is really nice I started coming back here at night with my dog and walking him because I knew it was a mile and it's just a beautiful campus it's really like a mixture of woodland and forests and so I've been here a year and a half maybe a little more and I just love it.

E.V: So when you started working with Holy Cross is that how you got involved with the Woman's Oral History Project?

E.W: Well, I heard of it, and, but Linda Rosenlund asked me if I would, you know be interviewed so I said fine. But I've really not been involved with the project.

E.V: And now you said that you moved to Holden before you started working at Holy Cross you stayed home for a year to take care of your kids and get them settled, did you notice like a big change from when you were with them and just staying home with them, taking care of them to when you started working, was there a big change in the housework that had to be done and like did you and your husband help each other out with that?

E.W: Well, it was a good thing it wasn't the first year because my husband was more like a ghost. He was so busy he was the department head of the math department of WPI and he had so much to do and it was a little better the second year but when I went back to work I didn't go full time because I just find it so much better -- I was working four days a week which is what I do here. I didn't work on Fridays and it works out really well because that way, oh if someone was sick or something happened Monday or Tuesday I could still make up time and, and the kids always came first because you know it wasn't like I was a nurse and someone would die if I didn't go to work and so I didn't have that pretty healthy kids and well what I first did was rather than take Fridays off I made shorter days so I could be there when they got home

E.V: So like mothers' hours in a sense?

E.W: Yeah, and so as time went on it was kinda of like what full time four days and so that worked out really well and my husband's really helpful, you know, he's the kind that you know if I was home before him I would just make dinner if he came home and there was no signs of dinner you know because you figure something's gone wrong with the day, he's just the kind that, "hey do you want me to pick up something for dinner?" or "hey the Cheerios aren't really

crisp,” he just doesn’t care. He does the alternative he would have to be [laughter] he doesn’t make a bad situation worse which is a very good father and husband.

E.V: Now you said you have two boys?

E.W: Mh

E.V: And they are both like around college age?

E.W: One’s in college and one isn’t. And my son, my older son Ben is 22 as we say has not been to college yet. Keep our fingers crossed. We think maybe he’s thinking about attending a class or two at Becker next semester, but he just uh school’s never been his favorite place to be and he graduated from Wachusett in June 2005 and he has worked and then last year he wanted to go to San Diego which is-- he’s a skateboarder so that’s the place you know he wanted to go to skate empty swimming pools and just be surrounded by skateboarding stuff so he did that and he came home in June and said I can’t afford to live in California. So he in fact just a month ago he moved out. He has an apartment not too far from WPI and he works at Boston Billiards, he’s working full time and I think at some point he’ll start taking classes but he’s the kind who has to have an immediate need for that information and then he goes to classes and then my younger son, John, is a sophomore at Sarah Lawrence College in Boxfield New York and he’s just always been somebody who loves school, loves to learn, and loves to learn in class you know where Ben loves to learn what he wants to learn and he’s a big reader, but so John’s interest is French and he spent last summer in Paris for 11 weeks

E.V. [oh,nice]

E.W. Yeah it was, he so much did not want to come home to Holden or Worcester for the summer that he got an internship at a language school that he had attended a couple of summers ago he just was there for a week or two and learned that they have an internship program so last February he started working on getting an internship and he found out, it was actually after he got home, oh he came home and started working in catering in Hookset and Holy Cross and then he worked on the inventory here at the bookstore at Assumption, he said it’s not that bad being home I thought it was going to be really bad and then he got an e-mail saying the internship was on so he left two weeks later.

E.V: Now what does he want to do with the French major?

E.W: Right now he says he wants to teach so I don’t know. I think he wants to stay in France you know and do something else. He, this year says he is going to take a math or computer class next semester and he’s just, he’s kinda good at everything but his heart has never been in the sciences or math but now he’s more interested. He’s been taking more humanities things for a while study get into some math and science stuff so he’s a mystery to us, we have no idea, you know and we just say do whatever you want, take whatever you want but you only have four years [laughter] and uh so he, in high school he went to Worcester Academy and he’s very involved with theater and stuff like that and so he took a theater class first semester freshman year at Sarah Lawrence and then said I’m really done. Said I had a great experience in high school and I have other things I want to do so he’s in an a capella group and he’s their business

manager too. If he wants them to be more active and go other places the best way to do that is to be the business manager.

E.V: He has a good head on his shoulders then?

E.W: Yeah [laughter]

E.V: Now, what I don't know if it's okay to talk about politics and, and what's been going on but, what did you think about the election were you happy with the results or

E.W: I was ecstatic, yeah, I was really supporting Barack Obama because I really liked his program and he seemed like a very steady influence and I just did not see that in John McCain. So I was very happy with the results of the election.

E.V: What did you think of McCain's idea of like woman's rights and in a sense with like birth control and trying to overturn Roe vs. Wade?

E.W: Yeah, I support Roe vs. Wade and I really think it's a woman's right to choose I would say probably be described as pro-choice and uh I just, I just think that has to be a personal choice that women would not take lightly.

E.V: What did you think about the now our new Vice President Senator Biden?

E.W: While I was, during the campaign

E.V. He was senator, right?

E.W. Yeah from Delaware, and uh I learned a lot more about him during the campaign. We never always heard his name but I remember, I don't know if it was president-elect Obama talking about Biden or just things I read. I read a lot. I read the New York Times on Sunday and try to read the Wall Street Journal so I try to read a lot of stuff and like everybody else very interested in the campaign and uh I was very impressed with him as a person admired him as I admired John McCain and I think he's really deserving of every [inaudible] for all that he went through for you know for this country and so if with Senator Biden I thought it was a very telling moment because I had read about him and his wife and daughter I think that who got killed in a car accident and his commitment to come home every night for his sons so he takes the train home that's what got me a chill. And so when uh uh the other vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin was just talking about mothers and this and that and he just spoke right up and said something like don't dismiss me because I'm a man, I know about family issues and I thought that was a really important moment really telling moment [he was really good to have a guy that we need right now to try to get like men more into the idea that they can be part of a family at home life and be the working guy so that they don't think they're just a financial appendage for the family [yeah, like they're the paycheck] right] and that's the only contribution. I have a I had a good friend at Utah State I worked there for about five years while we lived there also doing the same kind of thing just getting out the good news and good stories of the university and there's a professor there he was a sociology professor and he and a colleague did a lot of research into the what do you call it, it was kind of a home life balance and what they did was look at not

this whole idea of men and women being doing each doing 50 percent of the work. He said you really have to look at the contributions you make at home and so they looked into the tasks at home and one area of that was looking at how couples divide up what they do. So he said if you look at that you see well the, you know, the tasks at home could add up to be equal but if the husband has on his list mowing of the garage, you know oil the this and the that, and the wife has picking up the children, taking them to doctors and doing this and that they said there is a different emotional level in the kind of work you do with different stress levels because the person who is cutting the lawn can look out on Saturday and say hey I'll do it Sunday but the person who is picking up the children at school or at someone's house and all that you can't put it off so you really have to look at things that are more critical to be done at a certain time and that includes the stress.

E.V: Now you said that in the thing you filled out for us that your belief is a Catholic?

E.W: Yes

E.V: Did having like Catholic religion background, uh play an important role in your life or especially considering you said you're pro-choice that

E.W: Yeah, that's kind of a definite thing, you know, I am a woman of the 70s you know. I, it it's I think it's been a difficult relationship you know as I've gotten older with the Catholic Church. There's much I admire but I'm no, you know I read things about American Catholics. Interesting you know there's this tension between American, the new American Catholic Church and the Roman Catholic Church. At some point Americans seem to, what do say, want to be cafeteria Catholics and pick and choose which, well I believe this, well I don't believe that, nor will I follow this and that and I don't feel like that, but, but I just have to, you know, depend on my own conscious and so that's what I do.

E.V: Now what about, this is kind of off topic, but going back to the politics what do you think about the war in Iraq and Afghanistan our soldiers there?

E.W: Ohhh well I'd like to see it all end and uh this is part of the reason why I voted for Obama because I believe you know there is a lot of room for negotiation I know there is a lot of cultural understanding that needs to take place and there are things that we would just never understand and accept about you know the other cultures in countries that we are in conflict with. You know paternal societies but there has to be a way to stop killing people I think war is a bad idea I don't see how killing people really furthers..

E.V: If you look back in your life though do you feel that the choices that you've made are the right ones or do you have any regrets of anything?

E.W: Oh yeah, but I mean my biggest regret is that I don't , I didn't know back when I was like 20 what I know now, you know? And I just feel as though you now I feel I have the proper picture but I'd say for all of the regrets in my life, I, I'm happy. You know I have a happy life and and I, I didn't get married until I was 34 and I didn't have my children until I was 36 and 38

and I didn't even know at the time that I probably just should have been you know frantic because you know the window starts closing so it was just kind of in retrospect that I thought I am so lucky I have children you know and so I think you know of course nothing's perfect and you know I would never have thought my husband and I my son wouldn't be going to college you know because he didn't particularly like school but but it's like you're just able to figure it comes with maturity and say that's not what I want you know it's just we have this terrific person you know with both boys are great they're different they're interesting and they're good kind people so what more can you ask for. So I'm, I guess stuff like that I think just for regrets it probably is just like opportunities I didn't know enough to take but one of the good things about having children later is you realize it's not like well [inaudible] I would think brain surgeon, you know, I wasn't going to be the brain surgeon and so I think its an equal to pretty much doing anything you wanted to do.

E.V: Now when you look back though at how woman are now and how woman were when you were growing up do you see any major differences, like when they were allowed to date or how they were treated in school?

E.W: Oh yeah, I'm really like I was on the cusp I graduated from high school in 1968. Went off to Nazareth College in Rochester New York which was a woman's Catholic college and that's what my parents really wanted. And I got some scholarship money so it was, I mean probably regret is I wanted to go to school in Boston That would have been so much fun driving up the freeway, but so it was pretty planned and you know I remember my dad saying well it would be very good to be a teacher so then you will have summers off with your children and if your husband dies you will have something to fall back on.

E.V: It sounds like an old world idea?

E.W: It really was and so I stayed at school You know had your matching outfits, you have skirts and dresses to meals and all that and then Kent State, the Vietnam Wars, Kent State shootings happening and it really changed. I mean it really started changing by my second semester and you know everybody was wearing jeans (inaudible), lighting candles for like the vigils against the Vietnam War so, and I think you know it was so many opportunities to just be more aware and you have Betty Friedan and Germaine Greer and obvious war horses of feminist movement just like opening I think the eyes of young women like me to maybe limitations that we've had and make you know coming read Greek literature except you know like don't just keep reading the poetry of woman who committed suicide because they were so unhappy you know and just realizing that there were women in history women in literature that . I'm a real you know, major feminist in a way, where I just I will always heard this as being an editor to-- I'm always correcting in my mind usually but I hear people say well something about oh well the doctor he probably is a male and they don't know if it's a male or female I'm like I have to say something so, so I guess being open have your eyes open to realize that women can do anything.

E.V: So you feel like woman have come a long way since the 1970s

E.W: Oh yeah

E.V: And the whole like 70s really got going and got really involved

E.W: M h mh , yeah. I really think so in the last, I mean in the last seven years when my boys were probably in late elementary school, middle school you know whole like girl power stuff used to be really annoyed at it because it seemed like there were so many more interesting opportunities for girls than boys but we did like engineering camp at WPI and uh so I think, I think girls have more of a sense now, at least until they get to later middle school, that they can do anything they want. So I think there are more pressures about looks and hiding smartness stuff like that and it probably gets worse through high school.

E.V: So like that kind of stuff?

E.W: Yeah, I think so

E.V: Now it says on the sheet that you were born in 1949. Do you think that the way woman date today is completely different than from when you were a young girl?

E.W: Well [laughing] it's hard for me to know because I just have boys now and I learned a lot from growing up you know like having boys grow up at my house. In fact I was just saying to Ben just not long ago "you know I haven't seen Heather lately" you know you know a girl he was dating and he just kind of smiled and said "we broke up" and I said "how did you get her to break up with you?" it's kind of a pattern in him he said "well you know I just tell her it's time to [laughter]" and he says "I don't know why I date anybody because I'm so re".... , oh he didn't say date, but "I don't know why I go out with anybody because I'm so relieved when it's over." Yeah I know he's really happy when they're going out

E.V: Yeah, some guys can be like that.

E.W: He said I like to be free. He's a really nice guy but, but really kind hearted and everything but now I understand the angst of all these years. Girls are so earnest and guys are so simple.

E.V: They can be.

E.W: Yeah, it just seems that they are younger longer, I think, not all

E.V: I think girls act much younger than they used to I remember when I was young I wasn't allowed to date but I had relationships before that but I never got serious with anyone until I was older.

E.W: Yeah neither of them got real, real serious because they like their own time and do their own things so I noticed more group stuff -- do more stuff in groups and while the girls call and yeah, yeah I do think it's different. I think girls are more in charge of things, I think girls are just more assertive which I think is a good thing instead of just like waiting hoping he'll call it's just not a good way to live your life.

E.V: We're the ones that call them now [laughter]

E.W: Yeah

E.V: Kim, do you have any questions you want to ask?

K.M: Just follow up questions. How old were you when you met your husband?

E.W: Uh, I was 31

K.M: And how long have you been married?

E.W: It will be 25 years next summer.

K.M: Out of all the places you've lived which did you like the most?

E.W: Oh boy, you know, I loved the towns where in life I was, I like it here, I really do. I'm a really an East coast person but I really liked Utah. There are issues in Utah for us not so much the adults but we were a minority you know we were in a heavily Mormon town I think without the university there [inaudible] I think Mormonism is more than a religion [it's a way of life] so it's all kind of a social fabric and you're in or you're out, you're welcomed in but if you don't really want to join it just you know depending on the people you know a lot of our neighbors were older and had lived other places and were connected to the university so they would just say things like "oh you want to come to this, its not religious, yeah know" but for children its harder. That's part of the reason we moved back here.

K.M: And I know you mentioned the phone company that you had a job at in New Mexico, what is that, what was that?

E.W: Oh, what it was? I worked for, called Mountainville Belle System, way back, there used to be one telephone that was called the Belle System and all the phones in the whole country all worked and we rented our phones. You'd pay every month for your phone. You didn't buy phones and you usually have one phone in your house. And then I remember in the, I think it was the late 60s we got Princess phones so they were all hard wired in and so anyway I worked for the telephone company in their public affairs office, public relations office, and the Bell Telephone Companies were under the umbrella of AT&T. And ah so that's what everything was dated around, and so AT&T produced educational materials that they made available free to students and they were great materials and so part of my job was to visit schools, school districts, and promote these free educational materials and it was a very easy job. And I really enjoyed it having been a teacher, I could really appreciate getting free stuff whether it was videos, headphones, study guides, so that was my job.

K.M: Oh, great well that's all I have.

E.V: Finished up mine. Thank you very much for meeting with us and thank you for letting us interview you and hopefully this will be able to be of some use to somebody else some day.

E.W: Yeah, yeah, I think it's a great idea doing oral history.