

Interviewee: Caroline Lavallee
Interviewers: McKaela Flannigan and Nicole Bell
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Transcribers: McKaela Flannigan and Nicole Bell



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Abstract: Caroline Lavallee was born in Worcester, Massachusetts in 1936. She attended Oxford High School. She met her husband Norman Lavallee when she was twenty-two years old at a Polish Dance Hall. They married a year later and together they had four children. Caroline Lavallee worked multiple jobs; her most memorable was her position as a clerk in a Worcester Post Office where she retired in 1999. In this interview, Caroline discusses the struggles and joys of her life in the Worcester area. Growing up on a farm, Caroline learned the value of hard work—she watched both her parents, children of Polish immigrants, work hard to provide a good life for her and her siblings. She adopted her parents' drive and carried this outlook throughout her life. Caroline elaborates on the limitations she faced in education and her success in raising well-educated children. Caroline furthermore discusses the importance of community and gives advice to women of today.

McKaela Flannigan: We are completing a city-wide oral history of the lives of Worcester women aiming to collect stories about a broad range of experiences. Based on the goals of the 1850 National Women's Rights Convention in Worcester. We are focusing on the areas of women's education, health, work, and politics and community involvement. We want to focus today on the evolution of women's experiences.

Nicole Bell: Caroline Lavallee, do we have your permission to record this oral history on November 8, 2013?

Caroline Lavallee: Yes you do.

NB: Thank you for your help for this important project.

CL: You're very welcome.

[background noise]

MF: What is your full maiden name and if applicable, your married name?

CL: My full maiden name is Caroline Shivick [spells outs] and my marriage name is Lavallee [spells out]. But I am widowed and I still go by that.

NB: Alright, and when were you born?

CL: I was born [] 1936 in Worcester, Massachusetts.

MF: What is the name of your previous husband?

CL: Norman Lavallee.

NB: And do you have any children?

CL: I have four children.

NB: How about any grandchildren?

CL: Seven grandchildren and two great-great grandchildren.

MF: What cultures of ethnicities do you identify with?

CL: American. Polish.

NB: Now tell me about your parents.

CL: My grandparents came over on a boat and they get off at Ellis Island in New York. And, they – when they came over to this country, they settled in Worcester, Massachusetts on Alpine Street where there was a Polish community.

NB: And where – and so they moved from Poland?

CL: Yes and they married here.

NB: And what about your parents? Where did they grow up?

CL: My parents. They, they grew up in Worcester...in the area towns of Oxford and Webster.

[Paper turning]

CL: You recording it?

[Laughter]

MF: Where have you lived during your life?

CL: Most of my life I've I lived in Oxford, Massachusetts. Til I got married. And then I moved – when I got married I moved to Webster. I had one child, my oldest one and then I moved to (_____???) Southbridge. Then I moved to Webster and the landlord was nasty so we bought a house in Oxford. And then our children could make all the noise they wanted.

NB: So what was the neighborhood that you grew up in generally like?

CL: I lived on a farm, there weren't many children to play with and we had chickens and pigs. We had a cow, a pony, a horse. We had to feed the chickens before we went to school. We hated when the bus came and we were carrying the water bucket so all the kids could see us.

NB: So how do you think growing up on a farm made your experience as a child different from other children's experiences growing up?

CL: Well I had chores to do where a lot of children didn't have chores. But after school a lot of the neighborhood kids came down and we played baseball with the boys and girls of all ages. And I had to help in the garden, weed the vegetables and things like that.

MF: Kids these days don't have to do all that.

CL: And my mother didn't even drive a car so I always had to stay home whereas a lot of kids joined a lot of things and I couldn't.

NB: So if you don't mind me asking, what did you guys use the animals for on your farm?

CL: We used the pigs, my father, we sold them and made and he would have some killed. And chickens for their eggs and sometimes for food of the chicken. My mother she would take them and chop their head off. The chicken would be jumping around in the cellar.

NB: So you would do it in the cellar?

CL: When she was going to cook a chicken.

NB: [Laughs] Why wouldn't you do it outside?

CL: Because they would run off into the fields somewhere.

NB: Oh, I guess that makes sense.

MF: That's traumatizing!

[Laughter]

CL: She had a chopping block I guess.

MF: Is there any other interesting things about your childhood that you look at today's kids that are different?

CL: Well they, a lot of children are going to college and we didn't have the education because our parents couldn't afford to send us to college so we just didn't go. I thought about going in the service, but I was too scared. [Laughter] So I didn't.

NB: So what grade level did you make it up to?

CL: Twelfth grade. I went to Oxford High School and after school I did go to a college for like a year but that was part time.

NB: What college did you go to?

CL: It was a secretary school. But I can't remember the name of it now. Then I got a job at – my first job was at an insurance company in Worcester. I had a terrible boss so I finally got another job at Wyman Gordon's which was a good job and after that I go in the Post Office. Then I retired from the Post Office in 1999. I enjoyed going, I delivered the mail and then I worked inside as a window clerk. I enjoyed meeting the people every day.

NB: Was it common for women back then to have jobs outside of the home?

CL: No. I stayed home when my children were all growing up. And when the last one, well my husband got sick with cancer, that's when I got a job working in the Post Office and I continued to work until I retired because I had to. But most people didn't work in those days out of home.

MF: What has work meant to you?

CL: It meant bringing in extra money so we could do extra things with our family, go on little vacations and go to the movies or do different things. I like to travel.

NB: So other than work outside of the home what were your primary responsibilities in terms of housework?

CL: Well, I had to prepare the meals and do the laundry. Get the children to school, pick them up when they needed to be brought anywhere. Go grocery shopping. We didn't have a dryer in those days, we had clotheslines and I would hang all my clothes outside.

NB: Did your husband help you with this housework?

CL: Occasionally. His help was taking all the children to a park on Saturday while I cleaned the house.

[Laughter]

CL: And he would come home and everything would be nice and clean and then they'll all mess it up again.

MF: Did you have your license when your children were smaller?

CL: Yes I did. I got it in high school. It was maybe – I was – well you had to be, 16. I turned 16 in my senior year, I went to school when I was younger. 'Cause my birthday was late in the year. So we always had to take my mother to Worcester and so she could go shopping or have her hair fixed or we'd fix it for her. And she visited her mother.

NB: So did your husband work outside of the home? I know you mentioned that he got sick at one point and wasn't able to work and that's why you went to work. But what did he do for work before that?

CL: He was an engineer. He had a good job but he didn't make a lot of money until later. Later in life he made a little more but then he couldn't work anymore. He got laid off and had no job for a while.

NB: And do you remember the company he worked for?

CL: He worked for Rayovac, and for Simon Cutting Tools and for a company out in Plainville, Mass[achusetts] he worked his last job. But he wanted to move to Maine so we sold our home in Berlin and moved to Maine. York Beach Maine. And he loved it there, so... But our dream was to go to Florida in the winter. So we bought a trailer in Florida and he got very sick there, so we had to come home.

NB: So you lived in a lot of different places?

CL: Well we just lived there for the winter. Maybe two months and then came back to Massachusetts.

NB: So how do you think that life here in Worcester was different or the same than the life that that you lived out in the other places?

CL: Well I had more responsibility in Worcester. Work and whereas when I went to the other places I didn't have to work. I just lay on the beach or had fun. My children were pretty grown up then. Getting ready to go off to college and...

MF: So all your children had the opportunity to go to college?

CL: Yes. The youngest one never went 'cause he didn't know what he wanted. So when he said I want to go to school but said it was too late, I said it is never too late. But then he changed his mind. Well he went to trade school, my two youngest boys went to trade school, they took electricity and they have good jobs now.

MF: So going back to education for a little bit, what did you enjoy studying the most growing up?

CL: In education? I really liked school, it was fun.

NB: What was your favorite subject?

CL: My favorite subject was gym. [Laughter.] Or music I guess.

NB: Were you required to do home ec[onomics] in high school?

CL: Yes we did.

NB: And what did you guys learn in home ec?

CL: We learned how to sew and we did some cooking. And I was a Girl Scout for a while actually. We had a Girl Scout fifer-drum club. I played the fifer and my sister played the drum. We used to go to competitions in Riverside Park, which is now Six Flags. We had a lot of fun doing that. Met a lot of boys. [Laughter] And the big bands, they would all be competing, marching in parades and everything.

NB: And so when you were in home ec class was it only girls?

CL: Yes, it was just girls.

NB: And do you know what the boys did instead of home ec?

CL: They had shop.

MF: Now girls can take shop and boys can take home ec. Times have changed.

CL: Yeah they made, they made napkin holders and different things. They'd bring them home, "Look what I made Mommy." "Oh boy!" [Laughter] Nice, they were nice things. I still have them... And shopping, my husband did a lot of the shopping. Cause it was hard going with four kids shopping, they were running, they wouldn't listen and they wouldn't sit in the cart. They would be running up and down the aisle.

NB: So that's another way that he helped you with the housework?

CL: Yes.

NB: So outside of paid work and housework, did you do any volunteer work within the community?

CL: Yes I did. I did more volunteer work in Maine. I worked for the food pantry and I volunteered to take people to the hospital when they needed a ride.

MF: What role has religion played in your life?

CL: Religion has had a big role in our lives. Because my husband was – he had gone to Catholic school and we brought our children to go to church every Sunday and our three boys were altar boys. My daughter wanted to be an altar server but they wouldn't let girls in those days. But look at them now, now they're all out there!

MF: So growing up too, religion was a huge aspect of your life?

CL: Yes. And I still like to go to religious things with my sister in Maine. We go to a retreat house and we go to meetings. They have Masses during the week that we go to.

NB: And what religion were you brought up with?

CL: Roman Catholic.

NB: And do you still practice Roman Catholic?

CL: Yes I do.

NB: So I know you talked a lot about how your husband became sick, but how have any health issues impacted your life?

CL: I have I had health issues myself with cancer and I also had a stroke after my husband died. So it limited me to have to give up my license and I can't walk like I used to. So it took away my independence. I have to depend on people for rides, which is hard.

NB: And has religion helped you get through those times?

CL: Yes, definitely. Especially Assumption College, a nice Catholic school. My little niece – my little granddaughter is going to be a nun. None such, none of this, none of that.

CL: Sorry. I'm getting away from the subject now and I apologize.

[Laughter]

MF: That's okay.

MF: She must be a great granddaughter.

NB: Yeah she must be.

CL: She's great alright. She has a beautiful voice. I say sing over by the window and I'll help you out. Or so low I can't hear you. But she is a wonderful girl.

MF: Have you visited the Assumption College campus?

CL: Yes, it's beautiful.

MF: It is.

CL: I love the chapel the best.

MF: They renovated it recently and it's beautiful.

NB: So now that we're back on the topic of education, how do you think that your life would have been different if you were able to attend college?

CL: I think I would have probably had to have a babysitter so I could have a full professional job. I did want to be a nurse, but my grades weren't high enough so my teacher recommended that I didn't go on to college. Which was a disappointment, but I couldn't afford it anyway.

NB: Was that common back then for teachers to tell students not to go to school?

CL: No it wasn't common, but that wasn't right for that teacher to tell me that.

MF: Everyone should have the opportunity.

[Paper turning]

MF: What did your parents' education consist of?

CL: My mother went to grammar school and she went to trade school. My father had to quit in the fourth or fifth grade 'cause his father died and he had to get a job to support his family. Cause they were like three brothers and four sisters. So he went to work.

NB: Do you know what he did for work at such a young age?

CL: I think he just did a lot of odd jobs. But his dad worked in a bakery. And he did a lot of odd jobs. And he always had the farm animals, he had to collect garbage for the pigs and a lot of dirty work. Then he worked in the steel mill, U.S Steel. He was a crane operator. So he would get out of work, have to go get garbage, go home and feed the pigs. He didn't get much sleep. He'd say to my grandkids, "If I fall asleep at the light, wake me up when the light turns green."

[Laughter]

[Paper turning]

NB: So it seems like you and your family had a pretty difficult life. How did you guys get through these tough times?

CL: Through prayer and going to church. We did a lot of things as a family together; we didn't have a lot of money but we'd go to Greenhill Park and see the buffalos. They had buffalos in those days. And we'd swing on the swings and then we'd go to Coney Island, that was our day, our treat. Or a lot of times we'd go to the beach for the day, every Saturday. We'd go to Hampton Beach, pack a big lunch.

NB-So did anyone in your community help you through all of these tough times?

CL- Yes. When, when they helped with the food. Well I had a lot of friends that brought meals over when my husband was sick because I was in Boston most of the day and they knew I wasn't at home so they would bring me a meal at supper time and after I would write thank you notes as I got things from people.

MF- The goodness of people really come in that difficult times.

CL- They were wonderful.

NB- So even though you had went through a lot of difficulties growing up do you think that you had any successes in life?

CL- Yes, I think I was very successful in raising a nice family and try to give them a good education that I didn't get even though we had to get loans and things.

NB- And how do you think your version of a successful life has changed over time? Do you think it is the same or different today?

CL- I think today you have to have an education to get higher up in the world. Otherwise you don't make enough money...and there is so many people out of work now...

NB- You're right.

CL-...everybody blames the president but I don't know if it is his fault...Obama...Obamacare and all that.

[laughs].

NB- Well since we are talking about politics how do you how do you view your political activities do you view yourself as being active politically?

CL- I try to find out who's running and... but I'm not that active but I do try to get to vote.

MF- Were you able to vote in the latest election?

CL- No. I was there wasn't anything there to vote on for me cause I just didn't vote. As I got older sometimes I do absentee ballot and can bring it in ahead and not have to sit in the in the booth and look at every question and try to figure it out. So that worked out good...I was... When I was a young women I was asked to work at the polls on election day and we checked off the people as they came in and went out and then after the polls closed we counted the votes and people came in from the community to feed us lunch and dinner which was a nice treat. But I enjoyed working at the polls and I would have did more if I knew what I was doing.

[laughs].

MF- Do you remember which election this was?

CL- Hm, probably presidential and town elections.

NB- Do you remember who was running for president though? If you don't it's ok.

CL- I don't remember...

NB- That's ok.

CL- ...But I worked at a lot of them.

NB- So who was the first presidential candidate that you were able to vote for, like what year was the first year, who was running?

CL- [Laughs] I know I was there when I had a vote when I voted for [cough] excuse me, Eisenhower. I'm usually, I'm a Democrat but that year I voted for a republican because I didn't like who he was running against. Then of course Truman dropped the atomic bomb when I was growing up that was a terrible tragedy for the Japanese and the Americans.

NB- So how was life, how did your life change during World War II? How old were you?

CL- How old was I?

MF- World War II began in the early 40's.

CL- In the 40's right?

MF- Yup.

CL- So I was born in '36. I was probably in high school. Maybe I was 16. Sorry I just, I was a farmer in the Dell. [laughs].

NB- And the, how was that hard for you to grow up and see all of that violence around you?

CL- It was but we didn't have T.V like they have today.

NB- Mhm.

CL- We were one of the first ones to get a television though and all my aunts and uncles came and we sat in this little room and they kept turning the rabbit ears. It was all fuzzy and we thought that was awesome. We would have popcorn and see the T.V. but we were one of the first ones to get it. But look at us today, we all got T.V's maybe four in a household.

NB- So going back to the war was anyone in your family sent away to fight?

CL- I had an uncle who was sent away to fight. He was in the Philippines. He got malaria that disease they have over there.

MF- That's terrible.

CL- But he lived to be maybe about 80.

NB- And what other historical events do you remember growing up?

CL- [thinking] I guess there weren't any [laughs]

MF- Do you remember the bombing at Pearl Harbor?

CL- I was just going to say do you remember Pearl Harbor? [laughs] Yes. I went over there to see that. When I went with my husband to Hawaii we went to the Pearl Harbor. But the seas were so rough we couldn't get out there for a couple of days. Finally we were able to go out and we could see the ship down there and there's still oil coming up from those ships and those men are still buried under that water in those ships.

MF- Such a terrible tragedy.

NB- And what about the Vietnam War? You were alive for that right?

CL- Yes.

NB- And did anyone in your...

CL-...it didn't affect me at all

NB- No? None of your family fought in that war?

CL- No. [hiccup, laugh] excuse me. Well my husband was In the Korean [hiccup] excuse me [laughs] Korean War but he was in the coast guard so he really didn't fight.

NB- And were you in him already married when he was sent -

CL- No...

NB-... To the Korean War.

CL- I met him when he was out.

NB- Where did you guys meet?

CL- We met at a dance.

NB- Ohhh. So you liked to go to Dance Clubs.

CL- Yup!

MF- What kind of Dancing was it at that...?

CL- Polka!

NB and **MF-** Polka!

[laugh]

CL- Polish hall. My husband was from Webster which is half French and half Polish so he could polka real good.

[everyone laughs].

NB- And he just caught your eye on the dance floor?

CL- Well actually my girlfriend met him first she said, “I got this cute boy, she said. “He’s too tall for me, but I said I got just the girlfriend for you she’s nice and short.” [everyone laughs] So we met the next day at a club and he liked me and we started going out and we just kept going out until we got married eventually.

MF- So how old were you when you met?

CL- I was about 22 years old he was 23 maybe.

NB- And how old were you when you got married.

CL- A year later. [Laughs]

NB and **MF-** Ohhh. [everyone laughs]

CL- We didn’t go out long. He said it’d be a long hot summer to have to wait too long.[laughs]

NB- So was dancing one of your favorite hobbies back then?

CL- Yes and I used to play the accordion and the fife. My father wanted us to play the accordion and play in a bar room called the Bucket of Blood...[Everyone laughs]

CL- ...my mother said they’re not going in there!

MF- So you must have been good.

CL- Yeah. [laughs]

NB- And do you still partake in those favorite past times.

CL- Yes, but I can't dance anymore but I like to listen. Should I put the polkas on?

[Everyone laughs]

NB- We can have a little dance session. So was Polka your favorite type of music to listen to.

CL- Well that's one of them and I liked Elvis too.

NB- Elvis.

CL- Elvis was out at that time.

NB- And what was your favorite song.

CL- [Sighing] Love me Tender, Love me true

[Everyone Laughs]

NB- Did you ever get to see Elvis live?

CL- No.

NB- No.

CL- I saw Neil Diamond and Sweet Caroline [laughs] and I saw Dolly Parton and what's the white haired guy? He was just on the awards the other night.

NB- I have no clue.

MF- I'm not sure.

CL- Kenny Rogers!

MF- Oh [McKaela and Caroline laugh]

CL- And I saw Tom Jones in person.

NB- Which one of those concerts was your favorite?

CL- I think I liked Neil Diamond. I liked them all though and then I saw Williams I forgot his name [thinking] something William and the Osmond kids were on that show.

NB- So since you went to a lot of concerts did you ever go to any of these with your boyfriend?

CL- Yes I did

NB- And when were you allowed to start dating?

CL- 16.

NB- 16.

CL- I couldn't wear lipstick or anything. My mother was very strict she'd sit in the rocking chair and wait until I got home every night if I went out.

MF- Where would you go on these dates?

CL- We'd go to a movie or a basketball game or a dance.

NB- And how do you think your experience dating have changed from today?

CL- Very much. My mother would say don't get in trouble whatever that meant she never explained anything. Now the kids know everything and they just live together before they get married most of them. Not all of them but some.

NB- I know you talked about how your mom wouldn't let you wear lipstick when you out. What was the considered fashionable when you were a woman? A young woman?

CL- Well they wore high heels and stockings but I always had sore feet and had a hard time wearing high heels. [laughs].

NB- And did they dress a lot differently though then they do now?

CL- Yes, we had broom stick skirts and women didn't, a lot of women didn't wear long pants. My Aunt Celia never wore long pants she said she always had to wear a dress. But I think they are very uncomfortable.

NB- Dresses or pants?

CL- Dresses.

NB- So is there any advice that you would give to a young women of today?

CL- I'd say just if you meet a fellow that abuses you just kick him out and take care of your teeth...[Everyone laughs] 'cause if you lose your teeth you can't get them back. There's the kind of teeth you have when your older they come out at night

[Everyone Laughs]

NB- Is there any other type of advice that you would like to give women about their education or their work or upbringing?

CL- Work hard at your job. Study hard and get good marks because that is what makes the world a better place. The smarter you are you can help out a lot in the world.

MF- How do you feel about women in politics?

CL- I think if the woman is qualified I think she should run for office because if you want the job well done you hire a woman.

[Everyone laughs]

MF- I like that. Would you like to see a woman president?

CL- Yes I would.

MF- Me too.

CL-... Well then some of the history of the times was when President John F. Kennedy was assassinated on November 22nd. It was a tragedy that the whole world felt and then when he lost

his brother, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King. So a lot of great people were murdered that were wonderful that would have made the country a lot better.

NB- So you were what do you remember about when Martin Luther King was assassinated. Growing up during in the civil rights movement how do you think that has affected the U.S to become where we are today?

CL- I think it was a great help in getting the blacks voting and things...[She makes a face-laugh] Well we gone a long way from when Martin Luther king was speaking to America to today where we have the first African American President, President Barack Obama. And we've had tragedies from the Taliban and the bombing at the [Boston] marathon this year and we won the World Series. We have a lot of wonderful things going on in our country even though there is sadness still...

NB- Yea, you are exactly correct.

CL- ...And this is the best country and we love America...

MF- That we do.

CL- ...God Bless America [begins singing while laughing] land that I love stand beside her and guide her-

NB- You got a nice voice.

CL- Now we go to daycare and we, we listen to music artists that come in and play the guitar and we sing. They say what song do you want to sing and I raise my hand and say let's sing God Bless America or something about our country because that is what it's all about. Amen.

NB- So for our final question we want to ask you if there is anything else you would like to include to tell the fuller story of history of women in the United States?

CL- I think women should be allowed to get the same pay that men get for doing the same job because women aren't getting paid the salaries that they should be getting that the men get. It's not right, they work just as hard. And when I first worked at the post office I was the only woman and now there's more than half of the postal workers are women. So we have come a long way.

NB- Well, thank you very much for letting us interview you and for being a part of this study.

CL- Well you are welcome and I feel honored that you chose me to interview and I thank God every day that I'll be a good mother and a good person in this world. Amen [laughs].

MF- Thank you!

CL- [singing one last song from her times]

Oh Annie Bliss went out to pick some flowers, out in the grass up to her ankle bowers. She went in the coop to let a poor chicken out, the chicken shivered in her hand. Poor Annie Bliss... and there was Grandma Swinging on the outhouse door without her nighty scandalized the whole down town as if she owned it scandalized the whole down town. Amen.

[Everyone laughs]