Oral History: Betty Roberts

By Clark Hansen

Betty Roberts, the first woman to serve on both the Oregon Court of Appeals and the Oregon Supreme Court, was interviewed by Clark Hansen from March 24, 1992, to September 19, 1994. The recordings from those interviews include thirty-two audiocassettes, totaling over thirty hours.

The interviews include her recollections of her early life and marriage, her time in the Oregon House of Representatives and State Senate, and her experience working in the Democratic Party. She discusses key legislation, various state-wide campaigns, and the way sexism in government affected her work and career. The later tapes are a record of her time as a judge and several cases she adjudicated.

The full, searchable index is available here, on the OHS Digital Collections site.

See below for significant sections of Roberts' interviews, regarding her anti sex discrimination legislation, the creation of the women's caucus in the Oregon Legislature, and her efforts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment.

Tape numbers and time stamps: Anti Sex Discrimination bill, 1969

Tape 11, side 2. Recording # 22 – Time stamp – 00:11:48

Roberts discusses her anti sex discrimination bill with Keith Skelton during the 1969 State Senate session. Skelton told Roberts the House labor committee was working on a similar bill submitted by Constance McCready, prohibiting racial discrimination. He proposed amending the bill to include gender as well as race, and it passed the House with that language. Roberts advocated for a fair hearing in the Senate labor committee. Roberts and McCready both testified in front of the committee. Roberts describes a sexist comment made by a senator and her response.

The Formation of the Women's Caucus, 1973

Tape 12, side 2. Recording #25 – Time Stamp – 00:19:59

In the 1973 Oregon legislative session, five newly elected women joined the House, bringing the total number of women representatives to nine; two women served in the Senate. All eleven women supported ratifying the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Early in the session, they created a women's caucus, which Roberts chaired due to her seniority in the Senate. The women met to discuss their legislative interests and to create a plan for introducing and supporting each others' bills. Roberts describes why the Equal Rights Amendment was their priority issue.

Ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment

Tape 13, side 1. Recording #26 – Time Stamp – 002:43

Roberts calls her efforts to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment "exceedingly frustrating" because opponents too often brought up distracting issues, such as unisex bathrooms and women in the military. Roberts shares what she said about restrooms when she testified about the amendment.

Further Reading
