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Oral history interview transcript with Shirley Billings

Shirley Billings

Norma Smith

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SHIRLEY BILLINGS
INTERVIEWED BY NORMA SMITH
EWU Women's Oral History Project
EWU 984-0094 #6
APRIL 7, 1983

N. SMITH: Okay, this should be working. . . it is.

S. BILLINGS: Okay.

N. SMITH: This is Norma Smith interviewing Shirley Billings and the topic of our conversation is going to concern the Cheney planning commission and her involvement with it. The date today is May the 7th, 1983. . .

S. BILLINGS: It's April the 7th.

N. SMITH: Oh crum, I did that earlier. It's April the 7th okay, 1983. So I thought maybe before we started talking about that particular thing Shirley,. . . that you might tell us a little bit about your background. . . about where you grew up and school and somewhat about your family.

S. BILLINGS: Okay. I was born in Sydney, Australia . . . practically on the beach and I met my husband when he visited Australia. When he came back he was going to graduate school and wrote to me and I came over and we were married in Kansas City. . . to back track. I had a wonderful childhood sitting out in the Bombay Beach. I was educated at a private school and then at Sydney Technical College and my major was Medical Technology, which I did not complete. I came over to be married before then. The first place that. . . I lived in this country was Columbia, Missouri where my husband was in school finishing his Masters Degree. Then, after that we went up to Cleveland, Ohio which is one of my less memorable experiences. We lived there for some years while he was a professor at Cleveland State University. I was employed while I was in Columbia, Missouri, I was employed as a medical technician, at the hospital there. When we went to Cleveland, I was employed at as a statistical quality control analyst in Mallory Battery Factory. It was doing quality control on all the varieties of batteries that they made at that time. The reason for the switching careers was basically that my husband objected strongly to my being on call weekends and holidays and those were the days when you said, "Yes, darling." and went along with it.

N. SMITH: Oh yes. That's right.

S. BILLINGS: Which I have since regretted, but it's ancient history. After 10 years, we went on down to University of Arizona at Tucson where he taught. That was a fantastic experience. We lived there 9 years. I loved every minute of it. I was deeply involved in the University Art gallery where we had a wonderful collection. We had a Crest collection. I think there are only 29 of them in the country of Renaissance art, also a very excellent modern collection. I was involved in setting up the desert program there, which was fascinating. I took a lot of art history courses at the same time since it's nice to know what you're talking about when you're talking to people, it helped. I set up a school program that would bus school children in from the various schools. In Arizona at that time and undoubtedly still now, many of the children were very insular, in that they never had gotten outside of their own little world and many of. . . Mexican American background and so forth and we felt that this was just giving them a little bird's eye view on the rest of the world and it was one of the most rewarding experiences in my life. The

letters that I've had from those children, the things that they saw in paintings that I didn't see and I'm sure you wouldn't see, it was a learning experience for me, they taught me, I didn't teach them.

N. SMITH: By the way, was this a volunteer kind of thing?

S. BILLINGS: That was volunteer partly, and then later they hired me but it was, yes, mostly volunteer. Also while I was there, I worked as a market research analyst which was a lot of fun. There was a central location where the jobs were funneling through and you could accept them or not accept them and I did some really interesting things. I interviewed doctors on the feasibility of a chewable tranquilizer. At first I thought it would be very difficult, but they were most anxious to be interviewed, surprisingly enough. I did some work for Gallop. I did some work for Johnson & Johnson, the drug firm. I did some work for Clairol. It was a lot of fun; I enjoyed it. It was very people-oriented and enjoyable. I think my whole time there was enjoyable. I swam every day, it was...the sun burned the whole time. To the extent now that I've ended up with three or four skin cancers which I wouldn't have had if I hadn't of done that but anyway, it was worth it. It was wonderful.

N. SMITH: Well, how in the world did you get up here?

S. BILLINGS: Well, Lloyd had a very good offer from the University here when they were setting up their MBA program. So, like the dutiful wife, I trot along with him not realizing at that time, though I should have, that he fits into a slot, I go back to ground zero knowing nobody, having no identity. This is one of the very difficult things for a woman who's married to a man that's mobile. You establish an identity and you lose your identity. They go from one job to another, it's the same job, and they fit into a slot. I saw an article in the Wall Street Journal about managers being transferred in big companies and the problems that the wives had because of that and I realized that that applies to faculty wives too. They're uprooted and suddenly they come in and you're back to ground zero again.

N. SMITH: Right, and I think military women. . .

S. BILLINGS: I'm sure that's true. I'm sure that's true. Yeah. But you learn. You learn from everything.

N. SMITH: Okay. So you did come to Cheney in.... When was that, do you remember?

S. BILLINGS: We came to Cheney in August of '69 to find there was absolutely, absolutely no place to live. . . which was fantastic [sarcasm]; because we left a nice home and a swimming pool and the whole bit. So we rented a small place, because it was all there was left to rent in Cheney at that particular time, behind the IGA and, we found that after we'd rented it that the landlord had already rented out the downstairs to three college students. That spring, I learned more about sex than I ever dreamed because their windows were open. Anyway, we bought a house as soon as we could and got established. That was not one of my more memorable experiences. I have always, many years been a member of the League of Women Voters. I was in Arizona. I was on the board there, and when I came here I joined the League of Women Voters also which is a very wonderful organization because you'll find women who have like interests, you know. That's very helpful.

N. SMITH: That's true. Now, wasn't Patsy Otto involved in that?

S. BILLINGS: I was going to say, Patsy Otto was very involved and very helpful to me.

N. SMITH: Right. Who were some other women that you recall?

S. BILLINGS: Oh, Martha Shannon, who was later on the. . . I was on the board of the League here and Martha was Chairman; Sherri Barnard, who was very active. Marian Moose, several women that. . .

N. SMITH: What kinds of. . . while we're on this subject before we get to the other one, this is a topic that we've talked about too. What kinds of things did the League of Women Voters do that, maybe, were specifically geared toward Cheney, anything at all?

S. BILLINGS: Very little. There was so little interest in Cheney. We tried very hard to keep a group going in Cheney and it failed. We finally came to the conclusion, there were so many women in Cheney, who were working at a full time job that they were just too tired at night to go to League Women's meetings, because the League demands a certain amount out of you. You've got to be prepared to study. To have some ration to make rational decisions about things participate in committees, this sort of thing. So anyway, both Patsy and I maintained our membership with the Spokane League, but as far as Cheney was concerned, they did very little. We did set up the first candidates meeting that I attended here in Cheney which must have been in about '70 something like that, which have been carried on since but not by the league. I was very disappointed that we couldn't get more activity in Cheney but I certainly understood after I'd lived here a little while what the situation was.

N. SMITH: Are you still involved with the League?

S. BILLINGS: No. I haven't time now myself.

N. SMITH: So what other things maybe have you been involved with in Cheney prior to us getting to this Planning Commission, unless you'd prefer to go ahead and talk about Planning Commission?

S. BILLING: No, no, no, what started me, really, when I first came here, if I may be absolutely honest, we drove down the Main Street and I burst into tears. I thought, "Dear God, where has he brought me?" So there were many of us that came in that particular year. There was an influx, this was '69, and many of us were not satisfied with the quality of life, not satisfied with the. . . what was being offered to us in the retail stores, not satisfied with a lot of things. So, I don't know if you remember it or not, somebody, and I don't really remember who, it may have been Jerry Blake that. . . contacted the University of Washington, and they sent a team here for us to do a study on, like a survey of Cheney.

N. SMITH: I can remember that. I can remember that.

S. BILLINGS: We set up an organization called PIC [pronounced "pick"].

N. SMITH: Now who's we?

S. BILLINGS: People Interested in Cheney. Well, there was Jerry...

N. SMITH: This was not an organized group? This was just a bunch of people who were interested?

S. BILLINGS: It just happened, yeah. We sort of came together. We were all people that hadn't been here, or not all, there were some old timers that were involved too because they were just as interested in improving things, like Pete Smith. Anyway, it was called People Interested in Cheney and anyway, we had an election and I ended up as Secretary and Jerry was President and I think George Doors(?) was on the committee and

Pete Smith, what we did was did a survey of the. . . first of all we wrote the survey, then did a survey of the residents of Cheney to get their reaction to certain things in Cheney and their needs and desires. This proved a political stepping stone to some of the members. Jerry became Mayor, Bill Weyen was elected to the City Council, Reagan Mill was involved and he was elected to City Council. Naturally, nobody ever suggested I run for City Council, raising three children. . . .

N. SMITH: Were you the only woman at that time?

S. BILLINGS: Yes.

N. SMITH: Okay.

S. BILLINGS: Okay. But when Jerry became Mayor, there became a vacancy on the planning commission. He knew I was particularly interested in planning from many points of view, zoning, land use management, transportation, traffic patterns, that sort of thing. So he asked me if I would join, which I did. This was in. . . must of been about '71, '72, something like that. I was on there, filling up an unexpired term, so at the end of the term, I was reappointed. They were six year appointments. Now, as somebody pointed out, you get less than that for murder in California, but anyway, a secure appointment. I was on altogether I think 9 years. But at that point. . . .

N. SMITH: You're speaking of City Council?

S. BILLINGS: No, City, Cheney City Planning Commission.

N. SMITH: Nine on the City Planning. Oh, I'm sorry.

S. BILLINGS: I've never been on the City Council. We were at that time involved in producing the first Cheney comprehensive plan. It was almost finished when I got into the commission, but anyway, it was passed and it provided well, lord knows it had many flaws, it provided a basis for the city to be able to get grants. It was impossible to get grants unless the city had a comprehensive plan. Which a lot of people didn't realize, the goals and objectives of the comprehensive plan at that time didn't please a lot of people and they were not necessarily particularly, realistic, let's say in light of the economic situation. Nevertheless, goals and objectives don't have to be realistic. They are goals and objectives. Anyway. . . .

N. SMITH: It had caused a lot of people to get their contract.

S. BILLINGS: Yes. Yes.

N. SMITH: That's true.

S. BILLINGS: If you don't have goals, you'll get nothing. No good saying there isn't the money. The goal is, "this is what we want, now how do we get it?". So anyway. . . then in 1975, I became chairman. It was a rotating chairmanship so it was no esoteric reason that I became chairman, it was simply rotating. We couldn't think, well. . . . they were an extremely nice bunch of people and it was an interesting experience, all in all. I had my problems. At that point we were. . . we had started rewriting the zoning ordinances which was just a fascinating experience. Going through every zoning ordinance, tearing it apart word by word, it's. . . until you've done that, you really learn a respect for the English Language. You don't realize the ambiguity of certain words that are used far too liberally in ordinances such as 'as usual' or that type of a thing.

N. SMITH: Now, you were talking about the ambiguity of languages and so forth on writing.

S. BILLINGS: Yeah. Shall I just press on?

N. SMITH: Sure, just go right ahead.

S. BILLINGS: Okay. Words like ‘a reasonable distance’. Now what’s reasonable to you and me might not be reasonable to somebody else, ‘avoiding aesthetic decisions’. We have no right to write into an ordinance, legally, our own personal aesthetic feelings. I might like every house in town painted purple, but it doesn’t mean that’s aesthetically pleasing to somebody else. ‘Requiring landscaping’ . . . well, who’s gonna pay for it? You know, you can require certain barriers, but you can’t require that somebody go out and plant a hedge of evergreens on their property. You realize the art of the possible. It’s a great learning experience. Of course with the Planning Commission, the whole point of it is that it’s a group of citizens. These are not people necessarily trained in any particular area, but they are simply representative citizens of the community who are bringing their views as an advisory group and their opinions which then go to the city council. They have certain powers, and they have. . . like writing the ordinances, changing zoning, that type of thing. . . but all that had to be approved by the City Council before it could become law.

N. SMITH: Did you have a lawyer in your group to help you with the wording of this?

S. BILLINGS: No, no, we did not. But we were all pretty sensible people. It becomes very obvious after a while when you’re really tearing into it. That some things are simply not reasonable, you know, many people criticize planning commissions because they don’t do this and they don’t do this. “Why don’t they beautify downtown Cheney?” How? With who’s money? Whose land do you commandeer? There’s just. . . “Why do you allow so many filling stations?” Well, if you have zoned a land for industrial use, what goes in there unless it’s specifically excluded? You can’t say, “This filling station can go in but this one can’t.” This is free enterprise. If they want to lose their shirts. . .

N. SMITH: Well, honey, a lot of that’s because people don’t truly understand what a Planning Commission does.

S. BILLINGS: They don’t! What ground can be zoned for a certain use, but you cannot control the fact, for instance, industrial or a downtown business or something. . . you cannot control how many of the one kind of thing that goes in there. This is their choice, if they want to lose their money, that’s up to them, as many of them did, unfortunately.

N. SMITH: Well let’s talk a little bit more about your particular reign when you were chairman of that . . .

S. BILLINGS: It was very interesting. There were some terrific people on the commission with me. Rachel Piero, Dale Stradling, for a while, he later resigned. He had some problems of his own. Shaddack(?) had resigned at that time. Who else was on it? That’s terrible. They were the two that stand out because they were very supportive.

N. SMITH: Well it was quite some time ago. You were the only woman at that time on the. . .

S. BILLINGS: I was the only woman. When I came on, I was the only woman. I might add, the first meeting I went to, they all smiled at me and said, “Oh good. You can take notes,” and I said, “No” and smiled at them.

N. SMITH: Did you?

S. BILLINGS: I certainly did not.

N. SMITH: Good for you.

S. BILLINGS: Then they provided somebody from the city who was the . . .

N. SMITH: A recorder or . . . ?

S. BILLINGS: planning or zoning administrator at that time, who would take minutes, and record them. I said, "I'm here to voice my opinions, to have views, to listen. . . NOT to take notes of what you're saying," and I'm sure if I hadn't of been a woman they wouldn't have said that in a million years.

N. SMITH: This is something that I've heard from other people who have been in positions that may have been similar to that kind of thing too. It's this old thing that was always going on. The woman was the one that did all these kinds of docile sort of things.

S. BILLINGS: Yeah, but it tickled me because I suddenly found myself. . . I was rather surprised at myself you know. I thought, "No, I'm not doing this."

N. SMITH: Okay, good. Now while you were doing your job as. . . having you know, the chairman of the commission, was there anything that you felt as though you had accomplished because of your commandeering this position.

S. BILLINGS: Well, I didn't commandeer the chairmanship. . .

N. SMITH: Well. . . whatever you expect. . .

S. BILLINGS: I felt we achieved a great deal. We finished. . . we did rewrite the zoning ordinances, we did send them to the city council, and there was some debate over some of them, as there should have been. We held open meetings for the people of Cheney to come down and view them and give their opinions on them. We. . . they were finally accepted by the City Council and I felt that was a giant step forward because they certainly needed rewriting. They hadn't been in. . . I don't know how many years, and while I certainly don't credit it all to myself, I do think and they'll all admit that all the special meetings I've called didn't hurt any. We got the work done anyway. That's what it boils down to.

N. SMITH: Well, are there any disappointments that you had, when you were still in the commission or on the commission?

S. BILLINGS: Oh I think everybody has disappointments. You have certain goals for yourself, but that's something else I learned. You compromise. Compromise is the art. I mean, I came on with ideas which changed radically, because I realized that the business community was entitled to a view just as much as anybody else. I tended towards the highly environmental point of view, but then I realized that any sane person is an environmentalist, it's just a question of a rational approach to things and that fairness is the bottom line, really.

N. SMITH: Okay. I thought maybe we might talk about your being a woman on the planning commission and your views about being a woman on the planning commission.

S. BILLINGS: Well, at first they tended to pat me on the head which was very sweet and all that but not very productive. Within a couple of years, I know I'd earned credibility because I did my homework, because I came prepared, because I learned as I went, and you know, they say a woman has to be twice as good as a man to get any recognition, sometimes that was necessary too. Most of the men I worked with were delightful men. This could not always, naturally, we can't generalize about this. . . the city employee who was our secretary was a man. . . was a middle aged man. . . this was when I was chairman, who had great difficulty in accepting the fact that a woman was chairman. We had some problems with that until I had the men remove him, which was the only sensible solution to the whole thing. But actually most of the men were delightful, even if we didn't agree with each other, we would listen to each other and

they'd listen with respect and I'd listen to them with respect. They were a well chosen group I think, and some of them were better than others, of course.

N. SMITH: Well, I think you find that with any sex. I mean it doesn't matter as to the sex but it's just probably the way most people had been raised, grown up and were led to believe during what you might call our lifespan and I believe that may be changing somewhat.

S. BILLINGS: Hopefully.

N. SMITH: Yeah. Right, for the. . .

S. BILLINGS: Well, they were all around my age bracket which I shall not disclose but, relatively middle aged people and the men had been raised with a somewhat chauvinistic attitude towards women but it's certainly, maybe their led a little. . .

N. SMITH: Right, now you are now associated. . . was there anything more you wanted to talk about concerning the commission?

S. BILLINGS: No. Except that I think that they've done a terrific job and still are. There's a terrific group of people on it. I finally resigned after nine years. I felt they were reinventing the wheel from my point of view. It was time, somebody needed to come on. But they are an excellent group. They're doing a terrific job and a lot of personal involvement of personal time.

N. SMITH: Right. Since that time there have been other women?

S. BILLINGS: Yes, Patsy Otto was appointed. Jessie Lang was appointed while I was still on the commission. There's another woman whom I don't know that's on now. I believe she was appointed to replace me.

N. SMITH: There was a woman prior to your time who was gone, right?

S. BILLINGS: Yes and I wish I could think of the lady's name but I never met her. But she was very highly spoken of.

N. SMITH: Okay. I thought maybe we might ask a little bit about other things that you may have been involved in, in Cheney. We spoke earlier prior to the taping the fact that there has been somewhat of a dissension between we call it quote, the town-gown, unquote... and you remarked earlier about how, that you had felt that doing the kinds of work that you have done maybe could help to close the gap or break the barrier and so if you would now talk something about other involvement and, if you feel comfortable in it, talk about this feeling that you have encountered with town-gown?

S. BILLINGS: Well really when I felt I penetrated it a little more was on the Community Service Council which is made up of representatives from churches and city groups and service groups of the whole community. Unfortunately, there doesn't seem to be much of a way for the university people to meet and become really acquainted with many of the townspeople that have been here for a long while. On the commission, I certainly felt that there was a degree of hostility, quite often from the business people who took the attitude that these people from the college. . . which I really wasn't, at that point my husband was employed by the college, but I wasn't. . .

N. SMITH: It was that association to the college.

S. BILLINGS: Yeah, but the association was there. But yet they must realize that since 90 percent of their business, I'm sure, comes from there that we're a cooperative group and we should form one community. But I've found Cheney to have a very amorphous center. It's difficult you know, some communities you can feel, "This is the center of the community." This community is scattered. It's amorphous. That's been

my experience anyway. But the people I met on the community service council were, as I said, representatives of all the service groups and so forth and the great majority of them were people who had lived, possibly had been born here. That gave me a little better acquaintance, but not as much as I would like to have had. Of course if I were a churchgoer, I'm sure that would have helped, but unfortunately, I'm not.

N. SMITH: Right. Now you were a representative to the council from what group?

S. BILLINGS: Well I started out as a representative from PIC, the People Interested in Cheney. Reporting on what we were doing, what our goals were. This was very widely accepted in Cheney. It was a really great experience and that's how I started out. I can't quite remember how, but I suddenly got to be chairman and they told me I was the first woman chairman but I can't see it's of any significance whatsoever because the job was there to be done whether you're male or female and it's a group that I have the greatest of respect for. You don't hear a lot about them, but they do things that I think are vitally important in any community. Look after the needy, look after the hungry, establish a food bank, have a place where people can go. Ginnie White did a wonderful job on that. She was welfare chairman, for years; and she really was the heart of the thing, as far as I was concerned. The Chairman was kind of peripheral. You called meetings and.... But I was very proud to be involved with it.

N. SMITH: Now I'd like to ask if there are any other issues or programs that you've been involved with that you'd like to speak to.

S. BILLINGS: Well, one thing I was really very proud of was my involvement, through the League of Woman Voters, in the establishment of an equal rights amendment for the state of Washington. It was a battle, but our side won. I was part of a consortium as a representative from the league along with NOW, AAUW, and the YWCA each of whom had a representative. We worked together very beautifully, we went and spoke with the managing editor of the Spokesman-Review. Had a long, long interview with him along with Dorothy Powers and a couple of his editorial writers, and much to my surprise, they came out in favor of it; which I thought was a giant step forward for women because it helped a great deal. I wish women had been that successful federally, but one of these days. . .

N. SMITH: Women in their places.

S. BILLINGS: Yeah. 'Cause I have a mother that was always extremely independent and thought for herself and a father that committed her room to do it, so I think that helped.

N. SMITH: So you'd grown up with that idea and saw how beautiful it could work and see how beneficial it is I think to everybody.

S. BILLINGS: I've also seen how it can't work, too. I know how important it is to have a man that gives you room, gives you space . . .

N. SMITH: Now I think too, you have been very involved with what is happening at the Women's Center, or are interested in it.

S. BILLINGS: I'm not as involved as I'd like to be.

N. SMITH: But very interested in ...

S. BILLINGS: Yeah.

N. SMITH: ...having something on campus that is here to help women, to give them support, too...you know to...

S. BILLINGS: I think it's absolutely vital that something like this exists, and I think the greatest thing in the world would be to be able to work it out of existence because it would prove that the need no longer exists. But as too, the divorce rate goes up as more and more middle aged women are left with. . . who lived in quite decent circumstances and suddenly they're divorced and out on their own and absolutely no means of supporting themselves. These returning women I think desperately need support, and I would be more than happy to do anything I can to support any organization that does that.

N. SMITH: Right. Now you are involved with the college now? You are employed...?

S. BILLINGS: Yes.

N. SMITH: At the college; and would you like to speak a little bit to what you are doing with the college now?

S. BILLINGS: Well I'm assistant...

N. SMITH: Well, I should say university. That rather dates me here doesn't it?

S. BILLINGS: Well, I say the same thing. I'm assistant registrar. I started out about 10 years ago working three days a quarter and it sort of grew and grew and grew. I thoroughly enjoy it. It's a challenge all the way, it's people oriented you're dealing with problems, you're dealing with people that perhaps you can help. Sometimes you can't but at least you try and it's a job I enjoy immensely and I work for a woman which is wonderful. Woman registrar who is, I think, twice as good as any man registrar they've ever had.

N. SMITH: Okay. Why do you say that?

S. BILLINGS: 'Cause she is! Because she works twice as hard, because she's creative, because she's gone out and . . she hasn't sat . . .

>>>>>>End of Side 1<<<<<<<<

>>>>>Beginning of Side 2<<<<<<

N. SMITH: All right. I think we were going to talk about why you thought she was such a good registrar. She being who?

S. BILLINGS: She is Melanie Bell, first woman registrar at Eastern University but hopefully not the last. Because she's an activist, because she doesn't sit back and let the job happen to her which would be very easy and has certainly happened in the past, because she actively goes out and becomes involved in her. . . in our national organization. She is a member of the committees of the national organization. She has spoken at conventions. She also was primarily responsible for the purchase, which we hope to get maybe five of them, a massive software system because she started the first committees, she got people interested in, she got the information together,. . . she. . . she contacted friends around the country who were registrars to get the information that we could all study. She is a really quite remarkable woman and did this through some very trying times of her own I might add.

N. SMITH: Okay. Now you have been involved with her in many of these same things. Is this not true?

S. BILLINGS: Yes.

N. SMITH: Okay.

S. BILLINGS: But she's the spark.

N. SMITH: She was instrumental in seeing that things happened, to begin with.

S. BILLINGS: Yes.

N. SMITH: And then involved you....

N. SMITH: Now, what I wanted to do was to ask you about any other issues or programs that you've been involved with that you'd like to speak to.

S. BILLINGS: Well, one thing I'm very proud of is my involvement with the passage of the Washington state equal rights amendment as a board member of the League of Women Voters. I belonged to a consortium with NOW. . . a member from NOW, from the American Association of University Women, and from the YWCA. We each had a member, all of whom worked together extremely well. We interviewed the general manager of the Spokesman-Review, along with his editorial staff, and apparently we were convincing enough that they came out with. . . or maybe they just had good sense enough to do it. . . came out with in favor of it which was rather a surprise. We also had a television program. . . a phone-in television program which was really fun. I've never been so terrified in my entire life and it was a terrific experience. But in the two hour program, we must have had 50 calls asking about bras. I wish. . . about bra burning. . . which I really got a little tired of. But. . . they filled up the calls so it didn't make much difference. But it was a fun experience and to me a terribly important one. . . and it passed. Only by a whisker but it passed. I would say it failed dismally in this area, but we did our best.

N. SMITH: Right, and I think we had been talking a little bit, prior to this mis-taping that we did, concerning the women. . . who come to this university and maybe the support system that they need here and what we now have for them.

S. BILLINGS: That's something I'm deeply interested in and I think that the Women's Center is vitally important in this area. I've seen so many of my friends and acquaintances who are left at middle age by divorce or widowhood and suddenly thrust into a world that they're ill prepared for because they have been mothers and housewives all their lives for 20 years, 25 years. These women are terrified. They need all the support they can get, to come back to school to prepare them to earn a living. To become part of what's happening now and to develop their own identity, which I think is very important too. I think the Women's Center is doing an excellent job in that. I think the greatest thing they can do is put themselves out of business by making it so these women no longer need society will reach the point that women no longer need these kind of support systems.

N. SMITH: Okay. I think that day may come but it may be quite a while.

S. BILLINGS: It may be a LONG while. [both laugh] One of my goals.

N. SMITH: Right. Okay, I think you probably have a lot of . . . speaking of . . . do you have any goals for yourself now, other than what you have just spoken of?

S. BILLINGS: Short range or long range? Travel. . . my husband is semi-retired now. As yours is. But for the next few years, I plan on. . . maybe the next five years, I plan on keeping on working. I hope for greater effort. . . greater opportunity to grow in my job which I have never been denied, and again that's thanks to Melanie Bell the only woman registrar.

N. SMITH: Oh good.

S. BILLINGS: I'm very happy with my life as it is, but I think that once you stop growing, you might as well dig a hole and fall in it because. . .

N. SMITH: OK. Well, are there any other issues or anything else that you would like to speak to or voice an opinion about?

S. BILLINGS: Well, the Federal Equal Rights Amendment, I sincerely hope it gets back on the books and we were able to get some passage on this. There are some issues I feel strongly about. As a medical technician in Australia, I saw women die because of botched abortions. I feel very strongly about that abortion is an issue between a woman and her doctor. It is not an issue that the state or the federal government has any right in. I have seen this happen, it impressed me deeply, and it's something I feel very strongly about.

N. SMITH: Okay. Are there any other issues that you recall that had an impact upon you or your family, say during the '60s or the '70s? Remember Kent State and the involvement with Vietnam?

S. BILLINGS: I think one of. . . in spite of those things, I think the thing that had one of the deepest effects on me was the assassination of John Kennedy. I suddenly looked at myself and thought, "What the hell am I doing? Why aren't I doing something for society?" You're not put here on earth just to exist and smile and give tea parties and enjoy life. You can enjoy life in other fashions, by reaching out a little. I became politically involved and politically motivated. It had a great effect on me, of course, because of my involvement then, the other experiences became more intense. Vietnam? I started out believing the government. I always. . . I still have this British feeling that the government is right which God knows the British are losing too. [both laugh] That I started out believing what they were doing was right, like many people. I ended up knowing they were absolutely wrong.

N. SMITH: Were you involved with any of the say the marches or the protests that we had in this area?

S. BILLINGS: No, I wasn't here then. We were down at the University of Arizona in Tucson, at that time.

N. SMITH: Oh, that's right. You came here in '69.

S. BILLINGS: We were involved. . . Mo Udall was our congressman. He's a fantastic man. We had many meetings with him as groups from the University. We were very involved. The university community was very involved. Marches? No, meetings, yes, letter writing and so forth. All too little effect, obviously.

N. SMITH: Well, but that's one way for people to be heard. I mean it's one of the avenues that we have. . .

S. BILLINGS: The only regret I have is that I supported it at the beginning. I believed.

N. SMITH: I think you were not alone in that. I mean, many, many, many people were swallowed up with that. So, I think the youth at that time were the ones that truly got us going and got to us thinking that maybe they were. . .the government wasn't always right and there was something wrong and why are we doing this and that whole era.

S. BILLINGS: It's a very painful because growth is painful, lord knows, but, it's a very painful thing to have some of your pet beliefs shattered, and I think we tend to cling to security, and security was believing everything's lovely and the government knows what they're doing. Well, we learned better.

N. SMITH: Right and I think we're probably all better off for it.

S. BILLINGS: Oh I suppose.

N. SMITH: Oh, I think so. Well, I think I've asked about all the things I can think of to ask of you, Shirley.

S. BILLINGS: Well, I've enjoyed it.

N. SMITH: I've enjoyed it very much too.

S. BILLINGS: I didn't expect to, but I enjoyed it. [both laugh]

N. SMITH: Thank you very much.

>>>>>>>End of Interview<<<<<<<<