



**MS 317. Archives for Research on Women and Gender Oral History Project**

**Helen Jacobson Transcript, April 2, 1997**

Ruthe Winegarten Interview with Helen Jacobson, April 2, 1997 at her home in San Antonio

Helen is still very active in volunteer activities. For several years she has been involved in raising money for the Cancer Therapy and Research Center in San Antonio, one of the top centers in the country. They needed a new building as they had outgrown their old one. Over the past two years, she helped raise \$15-16 million and the new building was dedicated in 1996.

The Center is not part of a medical center but it has an association with the medical school, where the Center director is also a professor. They now have two buildings-an old one and a new larger one. The CTRC has been in existence for 20-21 years, and Helen has been active with them since the start. She and her husband have both had cancer. She has served on their Board, helping set policy. She doesn't want it recorded but the way she got on the board was as follows--she noticed there were no women on the original board. When she pointed this out, she was asked to suggest possible female appointees. She suggested Edith McAllister and Helen Mays. Those two, plus Helen, were appointed.

Helen is still involved with UNICEF. She is now an honorary board member. Also on that board is the daughter of Marie Curie, Eve Curie Labousie, whom Helen knows quite well. Eve is in her high 80s now, a lovely, dignified, smart woman. She has written a bio of her mother, Marie Curie. She lives in NYC. Her husband, Henry Labousie, was the director of UNICEF.

UNICEF's priorities are helping children in the developing countries and responding to emergencies. Land mines are an urgent issue now - in African countries and in Cambodia. UNICEF urges that the manufacture of land mines be stopped and that treaties to this effect be adopted. They have had a devastating impact on children who have lost limbs and been killed. Vaccinations have pretty much been taken care of. There are medical diseases such as in Guatemala, kwashiorkor, a protein deficiency disease. It can be solved by administering a simple formula of a grain cereal packet.

Helen still keeps up with the Child Guidance Center. She is the only life board member. She occasionally goes to meetings.

She is also involved with AVANCI (Advance), a wonderful organization founded in San Antonio which is now national and growing. There are chapters in Houston, The Rio Grande Valley, and Puerto Rico. It deals with parenting. Members feel it's too late to teach parents those skills when the children go to school. Need to start early. They work with parents, mostly mothers, teaching parenting skills. They provide child care while parents are studying. Some parents have become literate, gone to college and some have become nurses. Barbara Bush has a chapter on AVANCI in her book.

Helen is still interested in the public library on whose board she served and whose president she was. They recently honored her with the title Library Champions #1. The director is June Garcia who could provide a program of that event.

Helen interrupted to tell this "funny story"—some years ago the Methodist bishop and his wife attended Sabbath services at Temple Beth El. Helen was in the receiving line greeting all the attendees by saying, "Good Shabbas" [good Sabbath]. The bishop's wife said, "My, you certainly have a lot of people named Shabbas in your congregation.

Helen recalls that when she was active with the library board, it was a time when there was a far right organization called the Minute Women, which wanted to censor books. At that time, in Oklahoma there was a book burning. It was a very scary time to be on the board which was evenly divided. Censorship vs. freedom. You didn't dare miss a meeting even if you were sick, because the balance was so tight. Helen often went home with a headache. Right wingers would bring things up such as their desire to have access to the proposed purchasing lists of books before purchases were made by the librarians. The board voted that down. The right wingers never did get any books thrown out.

Before 1954, the library board received an inquiry from another city who wanted to know their policy about "Negroes." The SA board had never had a policy. There was a library on the East Side attended by blacks, the Carver. So the board immediately made a policy that the library was for everybody. Blacks had never gone to the downtown library but after the new policy, they saw they were now welcome.

A Dr. Karl Preuss of Austin has recently written articles about rabbis in the civil rights movement and interviewed Helen's husband, Rabbi David Jacobson.

Re lunch counter desegregation, Rabbi Jacobson, Bishop Everett H. Jones (Episcopal) and Archbishop Robert S. Lucy (Catholic) got agreement to desegregate major restaurants by talking to owners beforehand. On several occasions when David was trying to eat with black friends, he was refused service. There were no sit-ins in San Antonio.

Today the Hispanic population outnumbers Anglos in San Antonio. There are lots of prejudices against them in the city. Helen read in today's San Antonio paper about current rental practices in which Hispanics still have trouble renting. In test cases, one-half the blacks and a few less Hispanics experienced discrimination. The practices are not always overt. They have difficulty making appointments and are systematically kept out.

Helen met a Mexican woman married to a Jewish man. She said she couldn't get served in San Antonio because she was Mexican, and couldn't get served in NYC because she had a Jewish name.

Helen recalled some Jewish women friends telling of a time they tried to make a telephone reservation at a fancy Eastern resort. The clerk asked, "Are you Jewish?" They answered, "No, we're two Presbyterian whores."

Re Faye Sinkin, Faye, Helen, and Amy Freeman Lee were asked to put on a performance during the celebration of Old San Antonio (San Antonio 100). She said that Faye was originally from New York, is 80ish, very bright, outspoken, has been concerned with water problems. As a former president of the League of Women Voters, she put the League on its feet. She is also active in Temple Beth El. We can tell Faye that Helen recommended she be interviewed.

From 1977 to 1979, Helen was chair of the Mayor's Commission on the Status of Women. (The Mayor at that time was McAllister.) The Commission made a study of women in city government, looking at how many paid women employees were above a certain salary level and how many served on decision-making bodies. The answer was "none." They made several reports to the City Council which got a lot of publicity. This led to Jane Macon becoming city attorney and Norma Rodriguez, city clerk. They also studied the 13 school districts in the S A area. None had female superintendents or junior or senior high principals. They held no positions with any authority. The Commission got very big publicity from this study, leading to women becoming principals of two junior highs.

Although women could be on the police force, it was difficult for them because they had to pass a physical endurance test difficult to manage with a woman's anatomy. So the Commission found that the military had come up with a substitute exercise that women could perform and that was substituted for the previous one used by the S A police.

Women still have a long way to go. San Antonio has just gotten its first female bank president. (Helen said that Katie Jones' daughter is Ruth Jones McClendon, the state rep. Is this correct? )

Helen founded the Girl Scout paper, Scout About. The name was chosen as a result of a contest among the girls.

Her advice to young women today: If you are willing to give your services to help, there is also a place for you. It depends on what area of service interests you the most. You don't have to be rich to be a leader in San Antonio.

She and David are still active in the United Negro College Fund and participated in a recent M.L.King celebration. There was no telethon this year because the TV stations wouldn't take it. The UNCF is still doing pretty well. Leaders include Katie Jones and Col. Eldridge Burns.

Re donating her papers to the UTSA Archives, Helen wants to discuss it with her daughter, Liz Helenschild, who works in radio in Mendocino, Cal and will be visiting in

San Antonio after this Passover. Helen would appreciate someone coming and helping catalog them.

Helen describes herself as a born feminist, a women's righter. At the age of six, she took her copy of Robert Louis Stevenson's A Child's Garden of Verses, and everywhere he used "he" she penciled in an "s" before the "he". She still has the book.

The honor Helen really appreciated was one she received a few weeks ago from the Cancer Center Council - a new honor for Lifetime Achievement, and she is the first recipient. This center is as good as M.D. Anderson, one of the top six in the U.S. It is a Phase I center, certified by the National Cancer Institute.