Biographical Note

Betty Lucille Roberts, nee Cantrell, was born in Kansas in 1923. She grew up in Wichita Falls, Texas, where her family struggled greatly throughout the Depression. In 1942, she married Bill Rice, a drill instructor in the U.S. Army Air Forces, and after the end of World War II, they settled in Portland, Oregon, where he worked as a banker. Roberts continued her education while raising a family, and she graduated from Portland State College in 1958. Rice objected to her acceptance of a high school teaching position, and they divorced soon after. She soon got involved in local politics and was elected to the school board in the Lynch Elementary School District in East Portland, Oregon. In 1960, she married Oregon politician Frank L. Roberts. In 1961, she earned a master of science in political science from the University of Oregon, then took night classes at Northwestern College of Law in Portland. She graduated in 1965 and passed the bar in 1966. She was elected to the Oregon House
of Representatives as a Democrat while still in law school. She represented Multnomah County in the Oregon House from 1965 to 1968. She and Frank L. Roberts divorced in 1966, and she married Oregon Representative Keith Skelton in 1968, the same year she won a seat in the Oregon Senate, where she served from 1969 to 1977. She ran unsuccessfully for Oregon governor in 1974, and was appointed by Governor Bob Straub to the Oregon Court of Appeals in 1977. She was appointed to the Oregon Supreme Court in 1982 by Governor Vic Atiyeh, and she retired in 1986. After retiring, she focused her efforts on women's rights. She helped found Oregon Women Lawyers in 1989, and she presided over the state's first legal same-sex marriage ceremony in 2004. She died in 2011.

Other Descriptive Information

Forms part of the United States District Court Oral History Project.

Other Descriptive Information

Incomplete transcript (147 pages) is available for in-person use at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library. The transcript includes an additional interview session on February 26, 2007. The audio recording for that session is not part of this collection.

Content Description

This oral history interview with Betty Roberts was conducted by Katherine Huff O'Neil at Roberts' home in Portland, Oregon, from October 24 to November 16, 2005. In addition to the audio recording of the interview, the collection includes 50 digital photographs depicting Roberts' childhood, family, and later judicial career and activities. The collection also includes an index to the photographs.

In the interview, Roberts discusses her family background and early life in Texas, including her father's disability and the financial strain her family suffered during the Depression. She also talks about her early education, including playing on a girls football team. She talks about attending Texas Wesleyan College; meeting Bill Rice and their subsequent marriage; and moving to Southern Oregon in 1946. She describes raising a family, and returning to college late in life to pursue a teaching career. She then talks about getting involved in Democratic politics while attending Portland State University; the difficulty of balancing school, work, politics, and family; and her 1962 marriage to Frank Roberts. She also discusses some of the discrimination she faced due to her age and gender. She talks about studying law at Northwestern College of Law, including her professors and fellow students.

Roberts discusses serving in the Oregon House of Representatives from 1965 to 1968. She talks about her experience as one of the few women in the Legislature, some of the legislation she worked on, and passing the Oregon bar in 1967. She talks about meeting Keith Skelton in the Legislature and their subsequent marriage in 1968. She then talks about serving in the Oregon Senate from 1969 to 1977. She describes the lack of a women's restroom in the Senate and other forms of discrimination she faced. She speaks at length about some of the legislation she worked on, particularly bills focusing on abortion and allowing married women to choose their names. She talks about other women legislators and the formation of the women's caucus in 1973, as well as much of the legislation on women's rights they worked on. She also discusses her committee assignments, practicing law in Portland while serving in the Legislature, and the formation of the Oregon Court of Appeals in 1977.

Roberts discussing serving as a judge on the Oregon Court of Appeals from 1977 to 1982. She discusses her appointment; her fellow judges, particularly Herb Schwab; and the sexism she faced.
She then discusses serving as a justice on the Oregon Supreme Court from 1982 to 1986. She talks about her appointment, her fellow justices, and her experience as the first woman on the court. She also talks about some of the cases she heard and precedents set by her opinions. She then talks about her reasons for retiring in 1986, as well as her work as a mediator. Roberts and O'Neil close the interview by discussing the formation of Oregon Women Lawyers and some of that organization's activities.

Use of the Collection

Alternative Forms Available

Audio, photographs, and index to photographs available online in OHS Digital Collections.

Preferred Citation


Restrictions on Use

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Administrative Information

Acquisition Information


Related Materials

Additional oral history interviews with Betty Roberts, designated SR 1126 and SR 9066, are held at the Oregon Historical Society Research Library.

Detailed Description of the Collection

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**Names and Subjects**

**Subject Terms:**
- Abortion--Law and legislation--Oregon
- Depressions--1929--United States
- Judges--Oregon
- Justice, Administration of--Oregon
- Legislation--Oregon
- Legislators--Oregon
- Sex discrimination against women
- Women judges--Oregon
- Women legislators--Oregon

**Personal Names:**
- Roberts, Betty, 1923-2011

**Corporate Names:**
- Oregon Women Lawyers
- Oregon. Court of Appeals
- Oregon. Legislative Assembly
- Oregon. Supreme Court

**Geographical Names:**
- Oregon--Politics and government--20th century

**Form or Genre Terms:**
- interviews

**Other Creators:**
**Personal Names:**