

2-24-93

Maya Miller and Early League of Women Voters

In 1979 I sent all my LWV stuff, most of the files to Pat Gatts, who helped hold the office down when Nancy Gomes and I organized an office in Reno.

How did you get involved with the League?

I joined the League in Long Beach because I had two little children and it was an adult crew to talk to. We were also very involved in the fight for the United Nations because Los Angeles was a hot bed of far right people wanting to get us out of the United Nations. So the League was a sympathetic vehicle and there was a really nice group of women and some of them were faculty wives. So I had my initiation there.

But in 1959 we moved up here (to NV) and I connected with Esther Nicholson in Carson, who had been a league member forever and who was interested and very good at doing the legislative lobbying. It was around my work on the park that I connected with the League and her. I think around 1963-4 I became the local president and we organized a League that encompassed both Reno and Carson and we started lobbying and got acquainted with Nancy. Leola Armstrong said, "You should recruit my sister because she is bright and does her homework. She is just at home with her two kids."

In 1965, there was a Special Session of the Legislature for reapportionment, which was mandated by the federal courts. All states had to reapportion according to population. It affected most rural states, where ranchers had long ruled. In the early 60s we did League studies of reapportionment. All all of that was new to me.

Did the state legislature become more liberal?

Yes, what it did was to give more power to the population centers like Las Vegas and Reno, and considerably less to the rural towns. The mandate must have come down in 1961 or something, then they must have had studies that would look at them and say, "This is the way." This was Esther's gig and she understood it. There was a lot of studying in this, and I think that's what appealed to me, that it wasn't just chatting. It involved some kind of cerebral activity. And then exchanging it with others who were interested. Actually being able to make a mark on the Legislature was another dimension that I hadn't really engaged in in Long Beach. And the Legislature was right here, and so much more interesting than the City Council. But there was a lot to do, especially with people like Esther.

Esther was a really good teacher. It became clear we needed a League in Las Vegas to compliment our work up north. We had this letter from some woman who had written the national league. She was a black woman who had been a League member in California, and had moved to Nevada and people from an earlier League wouldn't let her in. She had the gumption to complain to the National Board. By the time Esther and I got involved,

we knew there was interest in Las Vegas. We went to Vegas stayed in a hotel and followed up on little leads of people interested in joining.

The great victory came on our second trip down there. We couldn't get anyone to say they would be president. Esther and I had identified Jean Ford as being someone who could be a leader. So on our second trip down we succeeded in talking with her. She was lobbying for a library in her district. She lived in a district that had casinos, the Strip, but no library, so she was indignant about that. So that was the period when she was the Las Vegas president, and I was the Reno/Carson president.

After re-apportionment we took up water resources, and a master plan for state parks.

This is an illustration of how if you're willing to be president you and rig it so that you get just what you want to study. Because you're the one who has the information and this is the chance to do that for parks.

(reading news photo caption) "Howard Cannon discusses impending \$6 billion federal spending cut with Mrs. Richard Miller, state president of the League of Women Voters. _____ urged to resist poverty war cuts." That was in 1968. Everything is Mrs. Richard Miller. They don't do that anymore.

I know, isn't it amazing at how really antiquated it was.

I also see that in 1966 you could send this newsletter for \$.04!

Yes, that made it possible.

So how did you recruit Nancy Gomes into this?

Well, the national League, in 1966 or so, initiated a study – it wasn't called the study of poverty – it was inequality. It came out of the Civil Rights Movement, and in the beginning it was carefully delineated so that it did not include housing or poverty or welfare. It just included education and employment. And so that is what Nancy was interested in joining me in studying. The way the League works is somebody gets the materials in hand, and you get a lot of help on national items from the national League, but you don't get everything. And one of the things the national League had recommended was that each state League do a profile of inequality, employment and education. So there were three of us who worked on that, Nancy Gomes, Bobby Townsend and I. We did an analysis of how many Blacks there were, and how many Indians, and what the state of their living was. We did a really good little booklet that went back to national – really impressed the national people because it was lively, it had pictures and maps. It was a profile of the whole state.

No, we got (state statistics?), I remember Nancy coming out, and just really buckling down to outlining it and writing it, getting it done. And I think very shortly after that, must have been when I became state Chair – or maybe I was by then. When I became

state chair, she became the local President and so then we could wheel and deal quite a good deal. And it was in connection with that that we got the League to support in the interest of free speech, the Poor People's March that was coming to Reno. So they wanted to speak in the Pioneer Auditorium. By that time, the city was really in that kind of emotional state that they can't get into this movement.

What state was that? How did Reno react?

Well the way they reacted was to get their police all out – their police on motorcycles. That was the first time I can remember Claudia and Rick – they joined the Poor People's march. The March came into town and then they started wanting to march downtown. And the League undertook to get the permit from the City for doing this and for their marching from here to there. And I can't remember whether they started at the University or the Park, but they went down to the Pioneer Auditorium. And I remember there being these revved up motorcycles (laughs) with these policemen with their helmets on and all of that.

So who were the marchers?

They were from Northern California. There were two or three Black Panthers, and there were groups from churches and the idea of the Poor People's March was that they were coming from all over the country – from the South, from Los Angeles- marching to Washington.

The League was studying voter stuff. A lot of what I was doing was writing for it and making up brochures and going to meetings and seeing how it all worked. We were also getting ready for camp.

In '62 I was involved with the League. In '64 the Parks Bill passed. All that early parks stuff was just stumbling around trying to get people to understand why it was so important and laying it out. But then with the League it became much more organized. And I could see that by speaking for an organization like that, as well as for the Sierra Club, was a valuable tool. You had facts in hand, and people behind you, though never in vast numbers. But you could rally enough calls to make a difference, and that was interesting.

How did your personal realization about poverty evolve? Was it to do with the League or Nancy?

In that study she was talking about, you began to get some figures that made you understand as well as just seeing the people. The day we went to see the State Hospital, we went to Black Springs. And that was my first introduction to the communities. That was a community where when they weren't allowed in Reno in the earliest days, the man who developed Black Springs was willing to sell it to Blacks. And so it became a Black community with all kinds of problems. And so since one of the things we were studying was water, their water problem was an entrée to studying what they were all about. And

the Westbrooks came over to the legislature over their water system on day, and we went with them to talk to people we thought would have some effect on getting the water supply situation taken care of.

Because they didn't have an adequate amount of water?

No and twice they had some of their houses burn down because there wasn't enough pressure in their water system to put out fires, and people had been killed. And they were very civic-minded people, the Westbrooks, so they took it upon themselves to find a way of getting over there, and getting to the powers that be. They'd been to the ones around the city, and then they began to see who could help them in the legislature as well, Also the League, there was a Negro meeting at the Legislature, and I don't know what that was. The Job Corps had become a national program in the War on Poverty, and it must have been that the War on Poverty was just starting then, and our only piece of it here in Nevada was the Job Corps place, and most of the kids that came from the Southeast were Black.

From Las Vegas?

No, no, from Alabama, Mississippi, and Florida. And so there was also that resistance among both the community itself – Carson – and some of the legislators to having that. That's when I heard in the halls of the Legislature upstairs, Paul Laxalt was saying to a group which included a number of newsmen, that "you wouldn't want your daughter to have to go to a dance with one, would you?" And after that, one of the newsmen, I don't remember who, said it was an illustration of how nonpolitical Paul is that he – Grant Sawyer may have thought that, but he would never have said it (where anybody could hear him and quote him because Laxalt was then quoted in the papers). And even then, that was not an OK thing to say. But the Job Corps itself was our little connection to the War on Poverty.

And how did it get placed here? Was it a Federal program?

It was a Federal institution, right. And they probably just decided where the country might be good. The point was to get poor kids out of the south to have an experience – modeled a lot after the WPA. And felt that there was a virtue in getting them into the out of doors and learning some sort of elementary trades. They did welding and rockwork and things that would service a park, for instance.

And this was down at Clear Creek?

In Clear Creek, yes, And it had education in it as well as training. So the league took a look at that and the league supported it. I mean we spoke to get the legislature. I don't remember why it was, or whether it was Laxalt. He was not actually opposing it. That was just a little sort of offhand remark of his. But that was also an introduction to some of the people. I notice we had a whole Job Corps group for Thanksgiving. And then I remember New Years, with the pool frozen.

They lived at Clear Creek but they had buses to take them down to Sacramento for entertainment. It was incredible! Just the atmosphere in Carson was so alien. Well, I mean, still, there's nothing to do. And if you're Black, you really stick out like a sore thumb if you're in Carson. It's not really a conducive environment.

It's amazing, isn't it? Well, that's why it was so important to have somebody that was both studious, and then somebody like Nancy to actually connect me with those people. TO show me what was happening. And then when you had something like the Poor People's March coming through, that seemed like a really great opportunity to really connect.

Now before that there's a picture of Grant Sawyer signing the Nevada State Civil Rights Act and you talked earlier about Jim Anderson lobbying for that. Were you involved with that, or was the League?

No no. I don't know that the League was. I was only involved in the National Civil Rights Act – was that in 63 or 64? When the National one was up for a vote a little group came here from here – Quakers, white. And the Scotts, maybe Eddie Scott, and Ann and Bill Scott, who were Quakers. And then there was a philosophy professor from the University – I don't know whether he was a Quaker or not. At any rate, they spent the afternoon here, and it was a real education in what just a few people can do. They had had a message from a couple who volunteered in California, who volunteered to stay in Washington during the whole course of the build-up of the Civil Rights Act, when the bill was in Congress. In order to report to the Quakers all around what the state was and what people might do. These people had sent word to Ann and Bill Scott that Nevada was critical because our senators, and particularly, could it be Cannon?

So Cannon was considered a swing vote on the Civil Rights Act?

Yes, yes, and so "Could we get at him through Grant Sawyer?" You know, that we knew. Well, of course, Grant was someplace up in Montana someplace. He was out of town during this critical time.

And was Lyndon Johnson lobbying any of these people? I mean Kennedy was a Democrat...

LBJ? Yes, yes. But I remember there was also one Black young man whose name was John or something. The upshot was that they decided that the person who really had the most moxy with Cannon, was the man who owned the Holiday Inn on the river there. And I can't remember his name but there was a black clad man – he was White – who had been the Black Eminence who had come to all the big Park meetings at the Legislature, and put his negative presence on it. My *bête noir*, so I felt I had no *entré* to him, and who did? They also felt they needed some pressure from the casinos.

And the upshot of it was this long-haired philosophy professor, this Black Nevadan, young man, went together to the Hokliday Inn and knocked on the door. They also went

to places like the Telephone Company and asked to see the head of the company. They actually went and just knocked on the door.

They had no other contacts?

No, and they got in to talk with them. And they had talked with some of the others I think, but not gotten much response. But with this one, the young Black man told about how he'd gone into the War – World War II – and had been in the fighting, and then had come home and he had not been able to get a cup of coffee or something to eat in downtown Reno. And by that time the man from the Holiday Inn was so engaged, he said, "What do you want me to do?" They said, "We want you to use your influence with Howard Cannon to get them to vote for the Civil Rights Bill." He picked up the telephone then and put a call through – while they were sitting there – and got Howard right away and told him that he wanted him to vote for Civil Rights. That was pretty heavy duty, I thought.

It must have been inspirational for those two men.

It must have been. It also is such a good story for the audacity to just tackle the person themselves rather than always having to go through somebody. And it also flows very naturally from the Quaker basis, that there's a little bit of God in everybody and if you can just touch that vein, it doesn't matter what the rest of them is about, that they will respond. So that was an illustration to me of what lobbying can be, other than just going around and explaining to them what a Park would encompass.

When was the Race Relations Center Started?

The Race Relations Center was started after Martin Luther King's assassination. So that wasn't until 1968. So before that, you had the Job Corps here, and the League's Study on Poverty. And Nancy Gomes introducing me to the State Hospital, and the kids there. And you had Black Springs and their take on the water issue. And in relation to the League of Women Voters, which is the subject today, I began to see that you could really put pressure on – through the League – for any one of these. That you could figure out some way of having a consensus about it. On the national issues you didn't need to have a local study. We could, for instance, support the Poor People's March. The National League as a whole had come to the conclusion that they did not believe in inequality of education and employment. So often it seems really slow and labored. One of the things Nancy and I did during our time on the League was to find ways of putting it so that you could get done bolder actions. Because you can always work those things. You can work it to be timid. Or you can work it to be bold.

The day we got the vote on the support of the Poor People's March, we explained that what they were wanting to do in Reno was to explain their position, which was that poor people need some advocates and some laws that they didn't have at the moment, and some money. And so that whole business of just the freedom to speak, made it so that the League actually put an ad in the paper urging people to come to this meeting. In addition,

They lived at Clear Creek but they had buses to take them down to Sacramento for entertainment. It was incredible! Just the atmosphere in Carson was so alien. Well, I mean, still, there's nothing to do. And if you're Black, you really stick out like a sore thumb if you're in Carson. It's not really a conducive environment.

It's amazing, isn't it? Well, that's why it was so important to have somebody that was both studious, and then somebody like Nancy to actually connect me with those people. TO show me what was happening. And then when you had something like the Poor People's March coming through, that seemed like a really great opportunity to really connect.

Now before that there's a picture of Grant Sawyer signing the Nevada State Civil Rights Act and you talked earlier about Jim Anderson lobbying for that. Were you involved with that, or was the League?

No no. I don't know that the League was. I was only involved in the National Civil Rights Act – was that in 63 or 64? When the National one was up for a vote a little group came here from here – Quakers, white. And the Scotts, maybe Eddie Scott, and Ann and Bill Scott, who were Quakers. And then there was a philosophy professor from the University – I don't know whether he was a Quaker or not. At any rate, they spent the afternoon here, and it was a real education in what just a few people can do. They had had a message from a couple who volunteered in California, who volunteered to stay in Washington during the whole course of the build-up of the Civil Rights Act, when the bill was in Congress. In order to report to the Quakers all around what the state was and what people might do. These people had sent word to Ann and Bill Scott that Nevada was critical because our senators, and particularly, could it be Cannon?

So Cannon was considered a swing vote on the Civil Rights Act?

Yes, yes, and so “Could we get at him through Grant Sawyer?” You know, that we knew. Well, of course, Grant was someplace up in Montana someplace. He was out of town during this critical time.

And was Lyndon Johnson lobbying any of these people? I mean Kennedy was a Democrat...

LBJ? Yes, yes. But I remember there was also one Black young man whose name was John or something. The upshot was that they decided that the person who really had the most moxy with Cannon, was the man who owned the Holiday Inn on the river there. And I can't remember his name but there was a black clad man – he was White – who had been the Black Eminence who had come to all the big Park meetings at the Legislature, and put his negative presence on it. My *bête noir*, so I felt I had no *entré* to him, and who did? They also felt they needed some pressure from the casinos.

And the upshot of it was this long-haired philosophy professor, this Black Nevadan, young man, went together to the Hokliday Inn and knocked on the door. They also went

we went to the City Council and got the permit for the march that just gave the City Fathers a little more comfort.

People came, and gend'armes were heavily around there. But the Poor People's March came and gave their talk, and the Black Panthers were up in the eves of the Pioneer State, and they were always expecting to have to do battle. But they were cast in the role of the protectors.

Did they have their guns? Or were they more subtle?

I don't know if they had guns, but the people involved with the police understood who they were. They knew that having poor people come through, organized, was an occasion for alarm. And so that was a fun little affair that Nancy and I did in the name of the League (laughs). Gave them an opportunity to hear from people they wouldn't have heard otherwise.

Then the March went on, through Utah, which was a challenge. But they were out of our earshot by that time.

I guess you would say that overall, the League – that we learned from it, and that it was a vehicle for entry to government that a housewife could have. And that was easier than most to come by. But it had enough structure so that it gave you something solid to speak from, rather than hysteria. And certainly it was a help in my developing consciousness of the issues of poverty. Because then I got involved with more of the poverty issues when I went onto the National Board.

END