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“I Credit the Girls with Keeping the College Going!”: Bryant Women in World War II

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Bryant University

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Bryant College was founded in 1863 in Providence, Rhode Island with the intention of providing a fast and intensive business education for Civil War veterans. Unlike many other colleges, Bryant focused on two-year programs in Accountancy, Finance, and Secretarial studies. The majority of students were enrolled in these two-year degree programs, with each semester being twenty-four weeks long.¹ At the end of World War I, Bryant's two year programs became appealing to veterans and enrollment increased to over 1,000 students.² In the late 1930s, Bryant also began offering a small, four-year degree program in teacher training and business education.

With the onset of World War II, men from college campuses across the United States were drafted or volunteered to support the war effort. This left schools, like Bryant College, with a predominantly female student body. This paper examines the experiences of two students, Dottie Hines O'Connell and Mary Walsh Fournier, who graduated from the four-year teacher training program and later joined the faculty at Bryant. Both women recall their time at Bryant College as being the most positive, memorable, and rewarding experience of their early life.

In 1937, Dottie Hines and her older sister, Alice, enrolled in the four-year teacher training program.³ Classes were small in order to ensure that there would be teaching positions available in nearby schools once the students completed the program.⁴ After three years of classes, students were required to teach for a semester in area high schools. In the 1944 Bryant yearbook, the *Ledger*, seniors joked that this experience would be "six months of torture in the form of student teaching".⁵ Dottie focused her studies on shorthand and typewriting, two subjects in high need at local community schools, and Bryant released her early to fill the demand and begin her student teaching experience.⁶

While enrolled in the teacher training program, Dottie became an active member of the Bryant College campus. As a result of her scholastic achievements, the Key Society, Bryant's academic honor society, inducted her as a member of their prestigious organization.⁷ In 1941, Dottie's sister, Alice, was

elected Vice President of the Key Society, and both young women participated as *Ledger* staff typists.⁸ Dottie also served as the Secretary for the Teacher Training Junior Class and as a Class Day Speaker.⁹ These positions proved that she was well regarded by her classmates and faculty members. Dottie also participated in the Glee Club and in Beta Chi Tau, the teacher training organization.

After completing her teacher training, Dottie graduated in August 1941 with a Bachelor of Arts in Commercial Education. Directly following her graduation, she was hired as a shorthand and typing instructor in the two-year Secretarial program at Bryant. Dottie was personally called into the office of Bryant College President Harry Jacobs and he immediately offered her a position. The same day, her sister, Alice, was offered a job at an area high school.¹⁰ Dottie's experience was rather unique, as the students she would now teach had been her classmates only a year before. The caption for her 1942 faculty photo in the *Ledger* reads: "It is certainly hard to call her by her title, especially after being associated with her as a student last year. Everyone is bound to slip a little, and sometimes she is called 'Dottie,' purely accidental of course".¹¹ Yet, Dottie remembers being treated with the utmost respect by her students and colleagues.¹²

As a teacher, Dottie also remembers the changes that occurred on the Bryant College campus as a result of World War II, specifically the dwindling number of men that were seen in the corridors, classes, and at campus functions. She credits the women with successfully maintaining the campus in their absence and in a recent interview stated, "Well, if it weren't for the girls, Bryant probably would not have survived because when Pearl Harbor came, the school had so few boys that you could count them on one hand. And at the time they called them rejects, which I thought was quite cruel because there was a reason why those men couldn't serve. But I credit the girls with keeping the college going at that time!"¹³ Nationally, the enrollment of civilian men and women students declined by 45.8 percent at all educational institutions during World War II.¹⁴ Many colleges and universities made up the

difference by qualifying for campus military training programs such as the Navy's V-12 program and the Army's Specialized Training Program.¹⁵ As a two-year college with a focus on Accountancy, Finance, and Secretarial Studies, Bryant did not qualify for programs of this type. Consequently, Dottie was correct when she stated that the women really did keep the college going during World War II.

Prior to World War II, there were approximately 600 students enrolled at Bryant. By 1944 and 1945 enrollment had dropped to 300 students. There were only eleven men in Bryant's 1944 graduating class of 155 and thirteen men out of a class of 154 graduated in 1945. Across the nation, the enrollment of civilian men declined by 68.7 percent between the class of 1940 and 1944, but at Bryant the enrollment of civilian men declined by 92 percent.¹⁶

Mary Walsh began classes at Bryant College in 1940.¹⁷ She was a student at Bryant when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred on December 7, 1941 and remembers the shock and outrage of her classmates. According to V.R. Cardozier, "On college campuses the mood was somber, students were confused, gloomy, and disbelieving".¹⁸ Many college Presidents discouraged students from volunteering for military service prematurely, and assured students that this war would be "technology based and would need well-trained leaders" dedicated to academia in order to guarantee victory. Yet, campus enrollment declined drastically as men left the classroom to enlist in the military or earn money in high-paying defense jobs.¹⁹

Quickly, colleges across the country began to implement new training programs and accelerated degree programs. Many schools increased class hours, students took classes six days a week, and degree programs were reevaluated to include summer sessions. Students were able to receive baccalaureate degrees in less than three years.²⁰ Bryant College initiated a twenty-four week Army Navy Office Training Course for its female students and accelerated its two-year Accountancy and Finance degree

programs to one and a half years.²¹ While many women opted to take advantage of these wartime programs, others decided to remain in more traditional degree programs.

As a teacher training student, Mary was an active member of Beta Chi Tau where she participated in networking functions which helped to develop connections between Bryant alumni, who were established in the teaching profession, and current students.²² Beta Chi Tau provided a support group for the teacher training students to discuss and share their fears and excitement as new teachers. Mary recalls these students as being her closest friends and those that she relied on for encouragement while completing her classes and student teaching.²³ She was a member of the Glee Club, an organization that took on new importance after the college orchestra was disbanded as many of its members were drafted or volunteered for military service.²⁴

One organization that Mary was actively involved in was the Bryant Service Club. With the onset of World War II, many colleges developed means to keep in contact with students and alumni fighting in “far flung fronts”.²⁵ As stated in the 1943 *Ledger*, the Bryant Service Club, founded on March 29, 1942, developed as, “an organization OF Bryant men and women FOR Bryant alumni in the Service”. The club was founded “to send cigarettes, candy, cookies, [hand] knitted articles, and letters to Bryant alumni in the Service”.²⁶ The Bryant Service Club dedicated much of its time to collecting and verifying addresses, writing V-mail letters, mimeographing form letters, packaging hundreds of pounds of candy, ordering thousands of cigarettes, knitting socks and sweaters, selling war stamps and war bonds, and planning fundraising means to support their efforts.²⁷ Students believed that “Never in the history of our College has there been such genuine, enthusiastic interest given [to] any movement at Bryant College as that given to the Bryant Service Club.”²⁸ In a recent interview, Mary recalled:

The Bryant Service Club was just a wonderful organization! All the members of the student body were part of the Bryant Service Club. We were all asked to write letters to

alumni and current students who were in the war and in turn many of those alumni and present students would write letters of appreciation which we would keep at Bryant. Now at that time, I was working for Miss Clara Blaney who was the Placement Director. I worked part time for her and she was so excited and she had such a passion for writing letters to the service men she just wanted them to feel a part of home. She appointed me as the co-chairman of the letter writing committee. I remember every time I went into her office telling her that I had collected a certain amount of letters she would be so excited, that excitement was contagious. Therefore I would go out and try to get more of the students to write more letters!²⁹

Indeed, all Bryant students were eager to support the war effort and understood the morale-boosting significance of a letters sent from home to loved ones in the military.

As co-chairman of the letter writing committee, Mary was responsible for collecting letters from members of the Bryant campus and for motivating students and faculty to write letters to those in the military who were once part of the Bryant community.³⁰ As stated in the 1944 *Ledger*, when the Bryant Service Club formed, there were as few as “eighty Bryant men and women known to be in the Service. Since then the list has grown to over six hundred”.³¹ Over the course of the war, the Bryant Service Club sent thousands of letters and packages to Bryant students and alumni serving in the military. Recipients included alumni as far back as the class of 1927. In return, the Bryant Service Club received more than 1,400 letters and greetings from Bryant students serving in the military.³² These letters were effusive with praise for the work of the Service Club and included comments like the one contained in a “Quickie Note” from Sgt. L.J. Palana, class of 1934. He wrote:

Hello Gang! Received your letter yesterday and your swell gift package arrived today in good form. Thanks a million – You know, the longer I’m in the Service the more

thankful I become that I attended Bryant. You haven't let us down yet when it comes to kind thoughts and remembrances, and honest gang, that's what spells Morale.

Of course, letters like the one written by Sgt. Palana had an equally significant impact on the morale of Mary Walsh and the other members of the Bryant Service Club.

Both Dottie and Mary wrote at least one letter each day to family members, friends, Bryant students, or faculty members in the military during World War II.³³ With their help and the efforts of the Bryant Service Club, “Thousands of letters, packages of cigarettes and candy, and dozens of sweaters, helmets, socks and scarves have gone to all corners of the world – and from battle zones and camps all over the world have come thousands of grateful letters”.³⁴ Many students who did not attend Bryant became envious of the gracious labors of the Bryant Service Club.³⁵ Mary recalls stories from returning veterans about how jealous their friends were that they received frequent letters and packages from the Bryant Service Club.³⁶

Miss Clara Blaney, Bryant's Publicity and Placement Director, spearheaded and supported the Bryant Service Club. Mary fondly remembers Miss Blaney's enthusiasm and dedication to the service club and the letter writing efforts of the Bryant College campus.³⁷ Mary was fortunate enough to work as Miss Blaney's part-time secretary in the Placement Office. Once Mary completed her teacher training, she had hoped to remain as her full-time secretary.³⁸ But, Miss Blaney convinced her otherwise, and wrote a farewell greeting in Mary's 1944 *Ledger*: “To Mary: My little Secretary! How I will miss you! There may be finer girls and better Secretaries, but I've never known one! My sincere and lasting affection, Clara Blaney.”³⁹ Mary admired Miss Blaney and believed that her “enthusiasm and kindness rubbed off on everyone who knew her.”⁴⁰

Both Dottie and Mary remembered the scarcity of men, especially at campus functions like dances, during the wartime years. As Mary states in her interview, “We just switched partners and made

the best of it. You know, us women, we always manage to get by!”⁴¹ The scarcity of men was not the only difference on the Bryant campus as a result of World War II. For members of the Bryant community like Dottie and Mary, there were always constant reminders that a war was raging in full force. Mary remembers blackouts on the Bryant College campus and credits these blackouts as the greatest realization that a war was waging.⁴²

Not only were blackouts common, but many products and foods were rationed. Mary, for example, waited for over two years to obtain a refrigerator once she graduated from Bryant in 1944.⁴³ As Susan Hartmann has noted, there were shortages of “toasters, vacuum cleaners, percolators, irons, and electric refrigerators. The percentage of families owning washing machines, vacuum cleaners and refrigerators actually decreased during the war” as priority was given to military production.⁴⁴ College students were given ration books if they were not living with their families, and those living in small boarding and sorority houses pooled their ration books.⁴⁵ “Meal preparation was complicated by rationing and the difficulty of obtaining such customary foods as sugar, meat, and butter.”⁴⁶ If students ate in the campus commons or cafeterias, their ration books were clipped and food services allocated the rationed food.⁴⁷ Sacrificing certain goods and products satisfied the need for families and students to feel as though they were doing their part to support the war effort.⁴⁸

Many college students also supported war stamp and war bond drives. Mary bought war stamps whenever she had enough money to afford one.⁴⁹ Typically, college students could not pay the full price of a war bond, \$18.75. Therefore, many students purchased war stamps, which could be bought for as little as ten cents and were combined in exchange for a war bond.⁵⁰ Colleges across the country competed to sell the most war bonds. If 90 percent of the campus participated, colleges were authorized to fly the Treasury flag on their main building or student union. In order to encourage more participation in war bond drives, sororities and fraternities sponsored dances, auctions, and contests.⁵¹

Mary attended a weekly dance canteen at the Rhode Island School of Design every Friday night that soldiers who were home on leave or stationed in the area often attended. At events like these, students were often asked to donate money, scrap metal, and rubber instead of the cost of admission. Even with all of these extra wartime activities, Mary mentioned that she never considered any of them to be too much of a distraction from her daily studies and academic goals.⁵²

After World War II ended, many returning veterans took advantage of the G.I. Bill. During the postwar decade, approximately 2,232,000 veterans attended college as a result of the G.I. Bill.⁵³ This bill not only provided support for education but, “contained several provisions, including vocational and educational counseling, loans to buy a business, loans for operating a business or a farm, home loans or other assistance, but it became widely known for its provisions supporting education.”⁵⁴ The educational provision allotted up to five hundred dollars per school year and monthly subsistence allowances of fifty dollars for single veterans and seventy-five dollars for married veterans.⁵⁵ This covered almost all of the educational expenses for veterans, and they flocked to colleges and universities across the country.

Bryant College saw a substantial influx in enrollment after 1945 as many veterans taking advantage of the G.I. Bill were attracted to the two year degree programs that were offered. Enrollment increased to 2,100 students in 1946. By 1949, enrollment had peaked at 3,000 students in facilities that typically held only 1,000 students.⁵⁶ Therefore, a “warm seat system” was developed where one group of students would take classes in the early morning, and the second group of students would begin classes while the first was at lunch.⁵⁷ This system allowed Bryant to accept the maximum amount of students in all of their programs. In her interview, Dottie recalled:

After World War II, some of the returning veterans were in my shorthand class, and they were model students and beautiful shorthand writers. And many of them went into the dictation classes at high speeds, 160 to 180 words per minute, they were model students.

And, it was a change after they started returning and we would go out in the corridors and for two or three years we had all girls, and now there were all these men. That, I think, floored me more than anything. Suddenly, men!⁵⁸

In 1944, Mary received a Bachelor of Arts in Commercial Education and was immediately hired to teach remedial English to returning veterans at Bryant.⁵⁹ Bryant developed a “refresher program” to provide “an intensive review of Arithmetic, English and Bookkeeping” for returning veterans who were unprepared for collegiate-level classes.⁶⁰ Veterans who had not graduated from high school enrolled in the remedial English classes that Mary taught. This would help to prepare them for high school diploma examinations, as they had not considered going to college prior to their military service.⁶¹ Mary adapted her style of teaching to engage the veterans in her classes. This was especially challenging as the veterans had varying ages, education levels, and wartime experiences.⁶² But, these differences allowed the veterans to add a new dimension of maturity and practical experience to the classroom and the campus community.⁶³ In her interview, Mary recollected the following story about her first day of teaching:

My first years of teaching were with the veterans who were returning from World War II, and there were many of them who were taking advantage of the G.I. Bill. And Dean Mercier asked me to cover the refresher English courses for veterans. I will never forget my first day of teaching. All these veterans were there who had just returned from the battle field, and here I was assigned to teach them English grammar. And I thought, how can I interest them? So, I said, ‘How about we start with action verbs?’ And they said, ‘Oh yes, action!’ So, I said, ‘How about the verb love?’ Oh, they cheered for that one! I put on the chalkboard the various tenses of the verb love. I love, you love, we love, I loved, I shall love, and the secondary tenses. The chalk board was filled with love! Well,

in comes Dean Mercer, the man who hired me and my face went scarlet. And he said ‘Oh, with all this love on the board I’ve got to take a seat in the front row. I’ve got a lot to learn about love!’ And he stayed until the red in my face diminished. And that was one of the things I remembered about my first day of teaching at Bryant.⁶⁴

Although Dottie Hines did not normally teach returning veterans, as shorthand and typing were subjects typically reserved for female students in the Secretarial program, one Bryant College veteran, Edward O’Connell, would take on enormous significance in her life. Dottie and Edward were introduced through one of Dottie’s close friends. They began to date after Edward asked her to attend an on-campus dance. As teachers were strictly forbidden to fraternize with students, they kept their relationship a secret and were rarely seen together on campus. Dottie never mentioned her relationship with Edward to anyone at Bryant, but many faculty members knew of their involvement. After Edward graduated, they eventually married in 1954.⁶⁵ Dottie, along with her sister, Alice, who began teaching at Bryant in 1948, remained on the faculty at Bryant until 1983 when they both retired.⁶⁶ Each of the Hines’ sisters dedicated nearly forty years of their life to teaching and mentoring students.

Mary Walsh also met her husband while teaching at Bryant. In 1946, she married Conrad Fournier, a World War II veteran who was a student at nearby Providence College. Mary continued to teach at Bryant until 1948 when she left to start a family. Upon leaving, the veterans in her remedial English class threw her a farewell party and left her a note which Mary still remembers today. It states, “Your one dream has partially come true we ain’t fell in love with English but we sure done learn us a lot.” Mary developed a bond with her Bryant College veterans that she has cherished for over sixty years.⁶⁷

Many aspects of Mary Walsh Fournier and Dottie Hines O’Connell’s lives were altered by World War II. As Bryant College President, Harry Jacobs stated in the Forward of the 1944 *Ledger*,

“Some day when the madmen of Germany and Japan are brought to judgment, when peace again comes to our beloved country, you will look back upon your ... days at Bryant and remember happily that you carried on courageously amid all the chaos.” For Dottie Hines O’Connell and Mary Walsh Fournier, Bryant College during World War II remained a constant fixture, a fond memory, and a force for change in both of their lives. As Mary stated in her interview, “After the war, I never forgot those years and I think if you can tell, I still haven’t forgotten them! They were the best four years of my school life. At Bryant, I learned to appreciate education, appreciate people who were kind like Miss Blaney. I think it left me for a sense of appreciation which I carried all these years for Bryant College.”⁶⁸

Notes

¹ Valerie Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years* (Smithfield: Rhode Island: Merid Printing, 1988), 12.

² Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years*, 29.

³ Nicholas C. Coracci, eds. *Bryant University 1942 Ledger* (Providence, Rhode Island, Oxford Press, 1942), 14.

⁴ Dottie Hines O'Connell, interview by the author, East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 2 February 2009.

⁵ E. Bucolo and E. Burnham, eds. *Bryant University 1944 Ledger* (Providence, Rhode Island Oxford Press, 1944), 44.

⁶ Dottie Hines O'Connell, interview by the author, East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 2 February 2009.

⁷ Nicholas C. Coracci, ed. *Bryant University 1942 Ledger*, 44.

⁸ Nicholas C. Coracci, ed. *Bryant University 1942 Ledger*, 50.

⁹ Nicholas C. Coracci, ed. *Bryant University 1942 Ledger*, 44.

¹⁰ Dottie Hines O'Connell, interview by the author, East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 2 February 2009.

¹¹ Nicholas C. Coracci, ed. *Bryant University 1942 Ledger*, 14.

¹² Dottie Hines O'Connell, interview by the author, East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 2 February 2009.

¹³ Dottie Hines O'Connell, interview by the author, East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 2 February 2009.

¹⁴ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, (Westport: CT: Praeger, 1993), 116.

¹⁵ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 114.

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- ¹⁶ Cardozier, *Colleges and Universities in World War II*, 116.
- ¹⁷ Bucolo and Burnham, eds. *Bryant University 1944 Ledger*, 40.
- ¹⁸ Cardozier, *Colleges and Universities in World War II*, 3.
- ¹⁹ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 112.
- ²⁰ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 110.
- ²¹ Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years*, 43.
- ²² Bucolo and Burnham, eds. *Bryant University 1944 Ledger*, 70.
- ²³ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ²⁴ Claire Gilfix and Julia Scott, eds. *Bryant University 1943 Ledger*. (Providence: Rhode Island, Oxford Press, 1943), 72.
- ²⁵ Judy Barrett Litoff, “Bryant College Goes to War: A Preliminary Look”, paper presentation (Bryant University. 11 December 2008), 2.
- ²⁶ Gilfix and Scott, eds. *Bryant University 1943 Ledger*, 70.
- ²⁷ Gilfix and Scott, eds. *Bryant University 1943 Ledger*, 70.
- ²⁸ Bucolo and Burnham, eds. *Bryant University 1944 Ledger*, 68.
- ²⁹ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ³⁰ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ³¹ Bucolo and Burnham, eds. *Bryant University 1944 Ledger*, 78.
- ³² Litoff, “Bryant College Goes to War: a Preliminary Look”, 4.
- ³³ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ³⁴ Bucolo and Burnham, eds. *Bryant University 1944 Ledger*, 68.
- ³⁵ Litoff, “Bryant College Goes to War: a Preliminary Look”, 6.
- ³⁶ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ³⁷ Litoff, “Bryant College Goes to War: a Preliminary Look”, 3.
- ³⁸ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.

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- ³⁹ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁴⁰ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁴¹ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁴² Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁴³ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁴⁴ Susan M. Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s* (Boston: Twayne, 1982), 83.
- ⁴⁵ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 133.
- ⁴⁶ Hartmann, *The Home Front and Beyond: American Women in the 1940s*, 83.
- ⁴⁷ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 133.
- ⁴⁸ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 134.
- ⁴⁹ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁵⁰ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 125.
- ⁵¹ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 125.
- ⁵² Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁵³ Keith Olson, *The G.I. Bill, The Veterans, and The Colleges* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1974), 6.
- ⁵⁴ Cardozier, *College and Universities in World War II*, 223.
- ⁵⁵ Olson, *The G.I. Bill, The Veterans, and The Colleges*, 17.
- ⁵⁶ Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years*, 43.
- ⁵⁷ Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years*, 44.
- ⁵⁸ Dottie Hines O'Connell, interview by the author, East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 2 February 2009.
- ⁵⁹ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.
- ⁶⁰ Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years*, 43.

⁶¹ Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years*, 43.

⁶² Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.

⁶³ Quinney, *Bryant College: the First 125 Years*, 44.

⁶⁴ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.

⁶⁵ Dottie Hines O'Connell, interview by the author, East Greenwich, Rhode Island, 2 February 2009.

⁶⁶ Kelly Campbell, ed. *Bryant University 1983 Ledger* (Providence: Rhode Island, Oxford Press, 1983), 13.

⁶⁷ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.

⁶⁸ Mary Walsh Fournier, interview by the author, Woonsocket, Rhode Island, 13 February 2009.

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