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Fulton, Ruth oral history interview

Mike Richard

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Interview with Ruth Fulton by Mike Richard

Summary Sheet and Transcript

Interviewee

Fulton, Ruth

Interviewer

Richard, Mike

Date

August 17, 1999

Place

Nashua, New Hampshire

ID Number

MOH 142

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Biographical Note

Ruth (Coan) Fulton was born on June 19, 1915 in Manchester, New Hampshire to Fred Coan and Pearl Knowles Coan. Her father was a foreman at the Elliot Manufacturing Company in Manchester, New Hampshire. Her parents were Republicans. Ruth went to Bates College with Ed Muskie where she majored in English. While there, she was treasurer of the Women's Student Government. She was also involved in dramatics, the glee club, college choir, and music. After college, she became a teacher and lived in Portland, Maine. She married Robert William Fulton, who was an electrical engineer.

Scope and Content Note

Interview includes discussions of: family background; political beliefs; childhood community; education and community involvement; Bates College; teaching; and characteristics and description of Ed Muskie.

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Transcript

Mike Richard: The date is August 17th, 1999, we're here in Nashua, New Hampshire with Ruth Fulton, and interviewing is Mike Richard. The time is about 11:00 A.M. And Mrs. Fulton, could you please state your full name and spell it?

Ruth Fulton: Ruth Alberta Coan, C-O-A-N, Fulton, F-U-L-T-O-N.

MR: And what is your date of birth?

RF: June 19th, 1915.

MR: And where were you born?

RF: Manchester, New Hampshire, Elliott Hospital.

MR: And for how long did you live in Manchester?

RF: I was, supposedly had that for my home address until I was married in 1940.

MR: And what was your husband's name?

RF: Robert William Fulton, F-U-L-T-O-N.

MR: And was he ever interested in politics or involved in politics at all?

RF: No, just the one time when I put placards all over the house. He wasn't too happy to see Muskie's name there, when he was running for governor. He or anybody else in the neighborhood. But I became a Democrat that day.

MR: Actually, do you want to talk about that now, the time that you put up the Muskie posters, I guess that was when you were living. . . .?

RF: Well, I just put them up and neighborhood was all Republican and I was not popular. And they even asked in the newspaper if I would be willing to tell them how my husband voted. And

I took, I think it was the Australian oath and said that before we were married we had decided that there were some things that would be personal, and this was one so I could not say what my husband did. But of course by not saying everybody knew.

MR: And this was in Portland that this happened?

RF: Yeah, Portland.

MR: And for the, for the governor's race?

RF: Yes, 1954 I think it was.

MR: And so what was your husband's occupation actually, or occupations?

RF: He was an engin-, an electrical engineer.

MR: Well let's talk a little bit about your family background first of all. What were your parents' names?

RF: Well, I had a father that was old enough to be my grandfather. His first wife died and when his daughter, who was then sixteen when she died, when she became twenty, she was the same age as my mother. So, I never had any sister except this step sister who was more like my aunt. My father's name was Fred and, Coan, C-O-A-N again. And he was born in Maine in Exeter. And he had no education at all. He didn't graduate from what we'll call elementary school. He just, as he said when I asked him once if he ever graduated from anyplace, he says, "Graduated? No, nobody ever graduated. We just went and quit." That was his education. My mother, on the other hand, was born in New Hampshire and she went to school at the Hallsville I think was the name of it in Manchester, New Hampshire. But they were a very poor family, her father was a minister. And she did take part in a prize speaking contest in Manchester representing the grammar school that she graduated from, and she went a half a year to high school. That was her education. But they were determined that I would have more. So, my father at one time I overheard talking to my mother in the kitchen and he, my mother was cross because she couldn't get me to help in the kitchen, I was not interested in that. And my father said at the time, while I was reading a book in the next room, "Don't worry about it. There's only one thing she's any good at, books. Let her read them." Then they tried to see that I did read them and I did get to college. That's what I had for a family.

MR: And what was your mother's name?

RF: Pearl Knowles before she was married, K-N-O-W-L-E-S.

MR: Okay. And you mentioned that your family was rather poor growing up, or that, oh that was your parents' families.

RF: No, that was my parents. No, my father was an overseer, a foreman, in the Elliott Manufacturing Company in Manchester; he had a good job for the times. He never made much,

but he owned a house and the house next door. And he owned land in the country and, where he had a big garden which he liked to keep and raise vegetables and that kind of thing. And I would say we were average. We did get a car, which a lot of people never did. And we did have an Edison phonograph at the time, and that was real classy, and I'd say that we were just average people. But they did say from the time I was born "I swear," to put me into college. So, I didn't have to worry too much. In my day, they did worry, other people, and wondered where the money was coming from. I never worried, but I did work at the college. But I never did get a paycheck. They just put it right into the fund for me or whatever, I don't know, but I never saw any paycheck. And I did work as a proctor and that money went into this fund, and my education cost me about nine-hundred dollars a year. You should have gone then.

MR: Yeah, I missed out I guess. And, so growing up, especially during the Depression, in the teenage years. . . .?

RF: That's right. My father never lost a paycheck. But I had a fr-, one of my best friends from home, also went to Bates at the time. Her father lost his job, never got it again. And the banker who went by our house, he was president of the bank and we children were taught to respect him because he was somebody important. And we were horrified, we were just kids, he put a bullet through his head because his bank failed. And there was somebody that I knew, that was my first contact with suicide of course. And we just couldn't get over that. That I remember as being a terrible thing. But I also remember the fact that my friend's father never got a job again. Not anything like he had. He may have had small things. He was like so many others, it was a terrible time.

MR: What were your parents' political beliefs?

RF: Oh, they were solid Republicans, except my father did say to me, "Yes, I am a Republican, but I always vote for the best man, whatever he is. So he was broad-minded. My mother was straight Republican.

MR: Would you say that they had a quote, unquote, traditional conservative Republican outlook, or were they, what were their actual political attitudes?

RF: Well, I couldn't tell you because I just don't know what they really thought. My mother was very religious, my father did not belong to the church. So I had two types of living when I grew up. And my mother was conservative on everything, she didn't drink tea or coffee or milk or any of those things; she just had water, but I was brought up on milk. My father drank both coffee and tea. So they were different in their philosophies, but it was good for me because I got both sides of all of that.

MR: And what church did your mother belong to?

RF: The First Baptist Church, and so did I, in Manchester at that time. What it is today, I don't know.

MR: And a little bit about your neighborhood, what were some of the. . . .?

RF: Oh, it was a wonderful neighborhood, people my age to play with, grow up with, and a Jewish family across the street, they were my best friends, and other people. There was a girl that I was very friendly with whose mother was a Smith graduate, a little bit different from my background. And she was very kind to me and she would come to my mother and say, “Well, now, may I take Ruth to see the puppets?” Or, “May I take Ruth to see this or that?” And I’d take my money in my hand, but she saw to it that I got to see and do things that my parents would not have known to get me to do is what I’m trying to say. But she really, she taught at Brown, that’s where she wanted me to go, Pembroke, but the high school principal was from Bates so you know where I ended up. So, the neighborhood was a great place to grow up, we all had our own homes and there was a nice hill that you could slide down. It was, it was a good place for children.

MR: And do you remember any incidents of ethnic or racial tension or prejudice in the area?

RF: No, never. My parents were very broad-minded on that, and of course we had a Jewish family, two of them in fact, right across the street. Down on the corner we had a French family. So we were mixed up with other people that, many people in those days my age were not. I mean, you aren’t going to live in a neighborhood probably where there’s somebody French, somebody Jewish, and then the rest of us may be Yankee. But we had a sulky driver on the corner, horses, that kind of thing. It was a mixture of different philosophies of life. I never did know what the sulky driver was, but we used to watch him ride down the street every Saturday to go to the races, with his great plume on his hat. He’d let us go up and look at his horses; he had a barn on the corner. So I was in a mixture and I think maybe that influenced my life.

MR: Okay, let’s talk a little bit about your educational background, and. . . .?

RF: Well, I went to, my mother was determined that I would go to kindergarten, and there was no kindergarten in my district; the same thing today, I understand, in many places. So she got permission from the superintendent of schools that I should go to a school outside my district as long as it was not overcrowded. So I went to the Chandler School for two years, and for the first grade, and then it was crowded. So I was supposed to go to the Lincoln School. But some child somewhere had told me that the teacher that I was going to have was just awful, scared the life out of me. So my mother went to the superintendent and said, “Could she go to the school on the other side of her district?” Chandler’s here, and Lincoln is here, and Wilson is here, so I graduated from Wilson grammar school. Same stipulation: if it ever gets crowded, she goes to where she’s supposed to. But I got through there and I loved the Wilson school. That, and then Manchester High School Central, and then Bates College. And then I went to Columbia for a year in the summer expecting to get my masters, but I fell in love and I got married instead. So I never got a masters until I was sixty years old. I should have stayed home but I didn’t. Anyway, that’s my education.

MR: And what were some of your interests through elementary and high school? Maybe some of the academic interests or clubs you were involved in?

RF: Oh, dramatics and girl reserves, those are two that I, girl reserves today, I don’t know as

they even have it, it's like (*unintelligible word*) Girl Scouts, but it was girl reserves at the time, and I belonged to that. And the church, I was very active in the Christian Endeavor Society and I taught Sunday school and I was I suppose you would say a religious person. But my mother was, (*unintelligible phrase*) was, my grandfather was a minister anyway. So, that's my religion I guess. Today I don't go anywhere I'm ashamed to say, but up until today it's been Baptist and Congregational, depending where I lived.

MR: And speaking of the churches that you've attended, what were some of the other groups or organizations in the community, when you were growing up, that were important to you or to your family?

RF: Well, it was mostly, my father was very active in the Odd Fellows and the Masons; that was his church. And my mother went to the institute, what is it, Institute of Arts or something down there, I've forgotten it; and she was very clever making things and crafts and that kind of thing. She made all my clothes; she was an expert on the sewing machine and all. And it was the church that was her life. She taught Sunday school class for adults, and she was in a class herself and she worked on all the suppers and that kind of thing, that was her life.

MR: Let's talk about how you first decided to go to Bates College?

RF: Yeah, Mr. Morrison, the principal of Manchester High School decided that I was going to go to Bates. I had a hard time with Mr. Morrison, he, I. In those days, I don't know what you had to take to get yourself into Bates, but at that time, it was only two and a half years of math that we had to take to get into Bates. But most of the, three and half years, I don't know, anyhow, it ended in a half, I think it was three and half. And he made me take four years, and I balked because he didn't make other people take four years. And, oh, I tried to get my father of all people to go down there and talk to him. Of course my father didn't understand a lot of things that most fathers did, but he did say, "Well, what's the idea? You don't want to take that, this math you talk about, and you had a pretty good report card, didn't you?" And I says, "That's not it. I can do it, it's just that I don't like it and it takes longer and I want to take history and he's let everybody else take history and I don't see why he won't let me." And my father said, "Did you go and talk to the man?" And I said, "Yes I did." "What did he say?" "He didn't say anything. He just looked at me and said, 'Ruth, I think it would be a good idea if you took that extra math.' Period." That's it. And he said, "Oh, and you want to take the other because it's easier, huh?" And I said, "Well it is easy, and I suppose that's right." So he said, "Well, I'll tell you Ruth, I've been in Manchester for quite a few years and I've had various offices and I've been in charge of things, but do you know nobody ever asked me to be principal of Manchester High School. And until they do I think we better let Mr. Morrison do his job." I took the darn math. That's what I know about why I went to Bates, because Mr. Morrison was pushing me up there. But I will give him credit, poor man. He did do the right thing because he knew from talking to my mother and this Mrs. Bennett who was the Smith lady, that it wasn't really firm on Bates. If the Smith lady had had her way, I would have gone to Brown (*unintelligible word*). And then, I would have needed that extra math. The others were pretty solid on Bates, but it took me a lifetime to ever figure out why he held. And that's why he did, because I could have decided something else. And he did the right thing, but I never would have thought so when I was your age or younger. I'll tell you, I never forgave him for that.

MR: Well, I can understand that. Okay, so when you got to Bates, what were some of the groups that you were particularly interested in that really, you were most excited about?

RF: Well, I joined the glee club and then I sang and I was in that I guess for four years. I was in the college choir for four years, music. I was never a great singer or anything but I had sung in the church choir and I was in a choir in high school, some kind of thing, and I liked that. But my main interest was in the stage and dramatics, and I worked behind stage and I worked on stage. That was the thing that I went to Bates for because they did have Professor Robb [Professor Grosvenor May Robinson] is, was the leader then, the coach and all these things at the time. That was my main interest. I was not a sports person at all. I did, I was a proctor, I did that. I was student government to the hilt and I was treasurer I think it was my senior year. And so, that was that.

MR: And you were an English major, and also involved in (*unintelligible phrase*)?

RF: Yes, I was a Latin major. But that was the time when Latin was being taken out of the schools and they called the Latin majors in and they said, "Look, the jobs are getting more and more scarce in teaching Latin. Pretty soon they're not going to teach Latin in high school. You people better think twice." So I thought three times and said, "I got to have a job when I graduate for heaven sakes." And so I changed to English. But I did teach some Latin because in those days, and probably today, I don't know, I taught Latin, I taught French, I didn't know any French but I taught it anyway, and I taught English. But in the end of course it was English. And it was true, the Latin majors had a tough time and eventually. I don't know if they major in Latin any more or not, but my grandchildren never had Latin.

MR: Okay, well, I guess, actually what did you, so you became a teacher for a few years after college?

RF: I taught in, oh, I taught in Penbrook Academy and I taught in Edward Little High School. And then I got married. And then after I was married I taught at Edward Little, I taught there sometime along the line, I don't remember, before or after I was married. And then I eventually ended up at Andover Business College in Portland and I taught business English. And eventually after I got my masters in my old age, I was dean at the college for a while.

MR: And so after Bates you lived in Portland, in the Portland area for many years?

RF: Yeah, after I got through teaching.

MR: Oh, okay.

RF: Yes. We moved first though to Buffalo, we lived there for a short time, and then I was in Syracuse, New York for four or five years, and this was because my husband was transferred. He worked for the same company for forty-one years; it was an insurance company. Today it's Industrial Risk Insured, it was something else back then, but he always was with that company so we got shifted a little bit. Then I came to Portland and we were there forty-five years in the

same house.

MR: And, actually speaking of Portland, how would you say, well first of all, what was the neighborhood like when you moved there?

RF: It was a, this was during the war, WWII, and it was a place where all the houses were very similar. Some actually the same. We moved into, well, a house that was used for demonstrations so it was a little bit, had a few more things than most of the houses on the street. But our street was all young couples more or less like us with children our age, of our children, and a place to play ball and a place to skate, and it was a good place for a family to grow up. And the people stayed there, they didn't move, move, move, so that was a big plus too.

MR: And how would you say the neighborhood changed over the forty-five years or so that you lived there?

RF: Not much, but it changed with death; that's what finally changed it. We lived there, you see, for a lifetime you might as well say. So at the end we were among the few who had come at the time that this development was starting. And many of our friends, we've kept, I've kept track of them, even now, and, well, there's two or three left besides me and that's about it. Of course they're getting up to ninety some of them. That's kind of old even in these days, so.

MR: And how would you say the economic situation of the area of Portland, in your neighborhood has changed?

RF: We were all pretty much the same, I mean middle class people. Worked at the newspaper in town for instance, and they worked on the railroad, and my husband was still working in engineering for this company that was in industry, traveling a lot. And then other people, I don't remember the jobs they had, but they were, we'd say a good job. Not a marvelous job, There was nobody there that was wealthy, wealthy, wealthy, but we were, we had enough, you know.

MR: Okay, and let's talk some more about Bates and your time there.

RF: Well, I don't know much more that I can say about Bates at that time, but I was always happy there, after I got used to the stage that is. And made a lot of friends there that, well, some of them I've kept in touch with all my life. You know, we're not close but we knew where each other was and what we were doing and, I don't know. I just liked the place, did what I had to do, studied what I had to study and managed to get out of there.

MR: And you mentioned Professor Robb who was working with the theater?

RF: He was the coach of the dramatic club, that kind of thing. And he was an elderly man then, in my eyes. I don't know how old the man was, but he, I assume is no longer. But he was there all the time I was there. And Quimby was the debating coach, I never was a debater but I had friends who did debate, of course Muskie. He wasn't, I wouldn't say a friend, but I knew who he was, he was on the other side of, courses he was taking courses in what we would call today political science. They didn't have any fancy name like that, but he was interested in that kind of

thing. And I on the other hand was language oriented, so I can't remember, tell you the truth, that I ever was in a course with him. Freshman year would ordinarily have been the time, but they had all the boys in English, for instance, which they all, everybody was required to take, and the boys were all in a boys class and the girls were all in a girls class, and there was to me a definite segregation, which I wasn't used to. In high school we never were segregated like that, but that's the way we started.

And eventually I got to be assistant in the English department under Professor Berkelman and I'd get down and do this and he was wonderful, a wonderful English teacher and it was really a thrill for me to be able to work under him. And the reason I remember those boys classes is because I had to correct the freshman English papers and it was all boys. And then I didn't, I, he had the boys and some lady, Mrs. Mabee for instance, had the girls when I was there, the first year or so. I don't know how long she taught but that I remember as different. And I did enjoy correcting the papers and it was good experience of course. And if he was sick or he went away, he'd let me take the class and that scared the life out of me because I had people who were a year ahead of me sometimes I was trying to teach. Oh, I didn't like that very well, but I didn't have to do it too often, he had good help, isn't that nice? So that's about it.

I did do those things outside, and of course we went to the games and we supported Bates a hundred percent. I can remember going to Colby when it was down by the railroad tracks and thanking God and all the angels that I didn't go there. And of course there was, and still is I suppose, a real rivalry between Bates and Colby, more so than between Bates and Bowdoin. I still respect Bowdoin, of course it's higher on the list academically, top twenty-five out of the schools, liberal arts colleges, and Bates, Colby and Bowdoin are all in that top twenty-five, but it's Bowdoin, still, even though it's coeducation. I think that's a sin that they ever did that but everything seems to go that way today. Well that's all I know.

MR: Okay, well, on your position on the student government, I guess you were treasurer for a while, did you come into contact with Ed Muskie, was he involved in the student government much, at that time?

RF: No. This was women, see? Women, men. . . .

MR: Oh, it was separate government.

RF: women, men, that's the way it was. He was probably in the men's whatever it was, student, I don't think they called it student government but something else. But, see, it was just girls where I was.

MR: And, did you get to know him outside of (*unintelligible phrase*)?

RF: No, well, yes and no. I had a very good friend that dated Ed Muskie occasionally. Everything else is silence, I will not talk. Ed was a great, a great guy and my friend was a very outstanding girl. He dated her, I suppose, I can't remember, I happen to know her because she and I were very close.

MR: And, actually, would you, could you give us her name or would you be. . . .?

RF: No, she's still living.

MR: Okay, okay I won't, I won't push it then. Okay. And what were, what were some of the impressions that maybe other students or teachers had of Ed that you could, that you noticed, or was that anything that you (*unintelligible phrase*)?

RF: Well, he was always well respected by everybody. I never heard anybody say anything against Ed Muskie. Maybe it's because I traveled in a group that were a hundred percent for him, but he was the president of the class and he was always a leader and always well liked. He was quiet, soft spoken, excellent debater, super, and anything that he was interested in always went very well. He could organize and, and he is a good leader, I mean sometimes people may be great leaders but people hate them, but that was never true with him. He got along well with everybody.

MR: And do you have any maybe little anecdotes about the time with Ed. You mentioned to Andrea something about dipping in Portland, was that a story that you had concerning Ed or something that you did?

RF: Something that, what was that?

MR: It was dipping in Portland? Andrea said that you mentioned that phrase?

RF: Dipping? Oh, I don't remember that. I don't know at you're talking about.

MR: Okay, but you don't have any other anecdotes or stories about Ed?

RF: No, the only thing in that clipping, I did make a comment on Ed Muskie when I was asked to. I would say the same thing today, not having had any close relationship with him except at our reunions and of course he was a (*unintelligible word*), but that's all. I did, I don't think this is anything great to say but one of the things I think that lady said maybe I should know, describe something or other about him, how would I describe him. Well I can describe him the same here, like you, it says in the paper, "Would she care to say something about memories for the press? She would, and she did." All right, here's what I said: "I think he's got it. I'm a dyed in the wool Republican, but I'm one of those who'll split his ticket. I don't know anything about politics but I know Ed Muskie and I'd vote for him any time." You can see, I was a strong favor-, he was a favorite of mine. And it isn't that I knew him that well but I saw, I was on some committees and all with him, I can't even remember what they were, but he was good to work with, always did what he said and you could count on him.

MR: And so during the, we were talking about before, the posters that you were putting up for Muskie in the face of local Republican opposition, that was during the '54 campaign?

RF: Yeah.

MR: And were you also involved in any way in his later campaigns, in supporting him or just putting up posters?

RF: No, I never took part in anything, but he got my vote. He'd have gotten my vote no matter what.

MR: Were there some other democrats that he was involved with that you voted for at the state or local level?

RF: I would have split the ticket. Every time his name was on it, you could count it, I'd vote. I wouldn't say he was the only one maybe, but I don't remember back then who ran or anything. I might have, as my father taught me, vote for the best man. He was Republican. And I did try to do that. If there was somebody in Portland, for instance, that was running that was a Democrat and I thought, as I said in my comment that he had it, I would vote for that person. But generally speaking, like for the presidency and all, but when Ed got up into that category he would have had me solid, too. And, no, I didn't, there's nobody else that I remember that, I might have, but I don't remember.

MR: What would your assessment be of some of the other later Democratic governors? For example, Ken Curtis? Did you. . . .?

RF: I always liked him. I don't think I voted for him. See, it was Ed, but now and then you get somebody that is something like Ed and I might have known that person, but today, too many years ago, I've forgotten.

MR: Okay, well, is there anything else that you'd like to talk about that we haven't covered yet maybe?

RF: I don't think so. You covered it all.

MR: Okay, great. Well thanks a lot for your time.

RF: Oh, you're very welcome, I'm sure.

End of Interview