

MARY McCONNELL BORAH

Interviewed by:
Maureen Bassett
From an interview made in Hillsboro, Oregon

Oral History Project
Latah County Museum Society

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MARY McCONNELL BORAH

Moscow; b. 1870

wife of Idaho Senator Willam Borah; daughter of Governor McConnell

.5 hours.

minute page

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| 07 | 3 | Her exciting life. Meeting William Borah. He was the only young man who could answer the questions of her father, the governor. Borah's marriage proposal. Her fascination with the people on the streets of Washington. Witnessing the first automobile ever driven in Washington. |
| 12 | 4 | Mother told her not to worry about clothes in Washington because they probably wouldn't get dinner invitations as a new senator. The black maid brought in the invitation from President Roosevelt, thinking only of the man who had delivered it. (continued) |

(15 minutes)

Side B

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| 00 | 5 | Buying a beautiful gown for her first White House dinner. The transformation of the saleswoman when she realized her customer's identity. Her fear that husband would disown her for buying such an expensive gown. Her beauty in the gown. |
| 07 | 6 | Her reaction to being seated at the president's right hand. She told him about how she had named William Allen White's <u>Strategems and Spoils</u> , a book which the President loved. Subsequently she was close to the President. |
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with Maureen Bussett*
October 15, 1971

*Interview was made for a Hillsboro, Oregon, radio station.

II. Transcript

MARY McCONNELL BORAH

MAUREEN BASSETT: Mrs. William Borah, who is our guest today. She's going to have her hundred and first birthday on October 17, 1971 which will be on Sunday. And our show today will be a couple of days preceeding Mrs. Borah's birthday. She's the widow of Senator William Borah who was a senator from Idaho and she is now a resident of Maryville Nursing Home in Beaverton, which is run by the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon. As we talk with Mrs. Borah today, Sister Christina is going to help us in following her life from when she was a very tiny young lady up until what she is doing at the present time. Good afternoon Mrs. Borah.

MARY BORAH: Good afternoon.

MB: You were born in Eureka, California?

MMB: Yes. I don't remember exactly the day but I can almost remember the second day of my life.

MB: Very good.

MMB: I was taken by my grandmother, who thought that I was a most beautiful baby that had ever been born, but I was slightly disfigured. By some red spots, which seemed to be in the blood under the skin. And grandmother should have been a doctor. If she'd been a man. But at once she knew what she was going to do. She was going to take this baby to a famous doctor that she had read about and see that those red spots were obliterated at once. So mother wasn't well because my brother was only a few months older than I. And mother was a very delicate woman anyway. So she consented to let grandmother take me to this famous man who wasn't far away. So grandmother bundled me up and took me on this little train that ran to Portland and she first had written a note to the doctor describing my symptoms and he had written back to her, "Bring the child to me." And he had made the date when she was to take the baby to... So when she arrived in Portland, she was too early

to go to the doctor. But she had been wise enough to make an engagement at the little hotel in the village. And so we might have to be there *for* a few days while he treated me. So after she got me bundled off to the hotel and cuddled in bed. I was a good baby, but on the train going down to Portland there had been a strange woman who never took her eyes off me. Grandmother told the story afterwards. She said the woman fascinated her. She wasn't afraid of her but this woman never took her eyes off of the child. And so when we arrived in Portland, grandmother made the reservation and she turned and saw that woman *was* in the very spot again. So she heard the clerk say to the woman, "Madam, what kind of a room do you want?" And the woman said, "I'll not take a room now because I expect a friend to meet me here. And she'll probably have her plans." So that was, grandmother remembered that. So she was assigned her room and she cuddled me down in the bed and off she went to the bathroom, which was quite a few steps then, in those days. They didn't have bathrooms to each room. Well, when she came back, opened the door, there was no little Mary. The bed had been robbed. I was gone. Grandmother ran screaming down the hall "My grandchild has been kidnapped!" Well, there was some sort of a conference going on and the lobby was filled with men. And they were all so excited. A porter came up from the bathroom. He said "Why, I saw a woman a half an hour ago with a big bundle in her arms, going through the lower part of the hotel and out the back door." Well the men all started out. They forgot that they were being delegates to some sort of convention. They went out to hunt me. They were, I think, ^{perhaps} three quarters of an hour, they located this woman with little Mary. Probably I was screaming at the top of my voice. Anyway, they had an awful time getting me away from this very strong woman. But they finally got me and here I am today.

MB: I'm so glad that they found you.

MMB: I've had a whole life full of adventure. After that. That was my

first venture in life. And it seems to me ^{that} it just kept on through the years. I was either in the newspapers with some kind of disease that nobody else had ever had in the world, or something to keep me in the limelight. I was not beautiful, not facinating, but I just kept up the pace. And so when I met my husband to be, he had just made a speech for my father, and ...

MB: And your father was William J. McConnell who was one of the first state senators from Idaho and also a govenor of that state?

MMB: Yes. Well anyway, I think Mr. Borah was then just out of college and he was with a group of young students, trying to fight it out, something about the world ^{that} he was soon to tumble into. Well, ...

MB: When you met your husband he was working for your father?

MMB: Yes.

MB: And he also worked in your father's campaign?

MMB: Well not exactly. I wouldn't say that he worked in the campaign. But he was very interested in my father. And my father asked these young college men questions and Mr. Borah was young, and he was the only one who seemed able to answer any kind of question that father propounded to him. Well anyway, then life went on. And by and by I was a big girl and I met this Mr. Borah and recall some of things that ^{had} happened. Well we became friends and one day he came in great haste. To tell me something that I must answer immediately. "Will you marry me? I'd been appointed by the govenor to take care of a big case in Washington." Well I had two days to get ready to go to Washington. Well, there might be some interesting bits in between time. I did marry Mr. Borah. He was Mr. Borah then. And with the govenor of Idaho, we proceeded to Washington. And of course, Washington wasn't entirely new to me, but I had forgotten much about it, because I was only a child when my father went into the senate. And ,well, I had a very interesting few days in Washington. And my greatest

interest wasn't in politics as it should have been. It was watching the people on the street. That was all new to me. For the first day in any city in the world a new automobile was being tried out. And I had my eyes glued from the hotel window. People had gone crazy and men driving horses, the horses were up in the air and I thought eventually they were coming through the second window. We were on the second floor. And of course, I couldn't imagine what was happening. It turned out later that the first automobile that was ever seen in the world was taking place. And the governor and my husband popped into the room just as excited as I was. I had started a letter to my mother to tell her all the things I had seen. Well that was my first trip to Washington.

MB: In 1907 Mr. Borah was appointed to the senate and you were invited to a dinner at the White House with President Theodore Roosevelt, and your husband told you it was not an invitation, it was a command performance?

MMB: Yes.

MB: Can you recall anything about that first time you were in the White House?

MMB: ^{yes} I can remember that ^{very} perfectly. We had been in Washington only a very short time. And my mother, before we went to Washington, advised me about my clothes, "Now don't think that you need a lot of new clothes. Because a new senator has to make his place in Washington. It may be months before you're invited out to any formal dinner at all. Or any formal meeting." So I had plenty of clothes, such as they were, for a girl. I was young. But one day at our door came a colored messenger bearing an invitation to a dinner at the White House. And I had a colored servant, she was with us for forty years. And she came in with that invitation in her hand, not interested that it was an invitation at all to go to the White House, but telling me about

this wonderfully beautiful man who had brought it. He was a colored man, but oh, the garments he wore. So of course, in the meantime, I was opening this invitation and I...

(End of side A)

MMB: ...the next morning bright and early, I started forth to the finest shop in the city where in I had never poked my nose. And to buy myself a dress for that first dinner at the White House. The madam of the shop looked at this young person coming in without much interest. She said, "What ^{color} would you prefer." I said, well I hadn't thought of a special color. I said, perhaps blue or pink. And she was very indifferent. She brought out a few things that were really very lovely, but she was so blasé. A young thing didn't interest her very much. And finally she said to me, "Is the dinner you're going to a formal dinner?" I said, I presume so. It's at the White House. The woman then nearly fell over! And she became vitally interested in the clothing and she said, "May I ask you what is your name?" And I said, Mrs. Borah. "Oh girls!" she called. "This is the young wife of that famous Idaho senator!" Well I was a different person. Oh, how they loved me!

And in the end one of the girls said, "I must show Mrs. Borah the gown that came in today from Paris." She said, "The loveliest thing." Came the vision of the most beautiful gown I had ever put my eyes upon. But I said, ^{back} I couldn't think of buying anything as expensive as that. "You'd be surprised how cheap this gown would be." Well of course, in the end, I bought the gown, thinking that my husband would be thrown into jail when he refused to pay the bill. But I thought the price was worth it. And they tried the gown on. And the help in the place was so enthusiastic. The gown was just a fluff of white. The most beautiful thing that was ever made in Paris. And so she said, "And Mrs. Borah, I'm going to get slippers for you just to match it.. . ."

And stockings."So...

MB: That's what you wore to your first White House dinner?

MMB: That was the first time. But when I got home ^I tried the dress on it needed a few little pinnings. ^{And} I was to come back. So that night, when my husband came home, I said, Billy, I bought a dress today for the White House dinner. But I think you're going to leave me before we go. I said, it was very expensive. He said, "Honey, I'm so glad you bought it. I intended to tell you to get the very nicest thing you could find." So that was a kind of a husband I had. I wore the gown. But first I must tell you about the woman who owned the little shop. She said, the last time I saw her, she said, "Mrs. Borah, would you care if I had a painting of you in that gown for my own self to keep in my room to look at?" Of course, I was very young and had golden hair. I never was pretty. But that helped to make me a little bit pretty because the night we went into the White House for dinner ^{down} this long hall where we were to take off our wraps I didn't need any wrap. That beautiful gown kept me nice and warm. But the colored maid in the dressing room said to me, "May I ask you your name, madam?" I said my name is Mrs. Borah. She said, "You're the loveliest thing I've ever seen." I I stooped over and kissed the old colored woman on the forehead. I was happy. I knew I looked alright, ^{and} that my husband wouldn't be ashamed of me. So as we went down the hall, we were stopped by they young aide at a desk to find out if we were really invited and he recognized senator immediately from his pictures in the papers so many times. So he said, "And Mrs. Borah, you're to be seated at the right of the president." I said, oh. He laughed out loud and so did my husband. Think of me being seated and a great, great crowd like that. All the diplomatic people. Here I was to sit next to the president. Do you wonder ~~that~~ I did that? That young officer, I saw him several times afterward.

And the way he always greeted me was ...

MB: By putting his hand over his mouth like, oh!

MMB: Anyway, it was a wonderful, wonderful dinner. Mr. White, before we came to Washington, I said, Mr. President, we had an old friend of yours visiting us for a few days. He had just written a book and while he was there, he read us some extracts from the book and he said, "Senator, this book has never been published, but it's one of the finest books *that's* ever written." He said, "Nobody knows that I've written it. It hasn't gone to the publisher's yet. It has no name." He said, "I haven't been very well and I have never told anybody that I was writing this book."

MB: Who was this man?

MMB:

William Allen White, the famous author. So he said, "Let me read a little bit to you." So ^{he} went in and brought out this book which was not in form, it was the rough, and read a few chapters and senator was perfectly entranced and ...

MB: You told President Roosevelt about this?

MMB: Yes, I was telling him at the dinner and the president of course, was so excited over that book. And he said, "I received a copy of the book yesterday. I immediately took it to the French ambassador. I said, 'Read this book. It is the finest political story ^{that was} ever written'".

MB: Do you remember the name of the book?

MMB: I said, Mr. President, I think I can brag a little bit now. I named the book. He said, after senator was gone. He was making a speech that day, he couldn't see it through. So Mr. White was reading to me and he ^{read} me down a list of names that he might call the book. I shook my head when I came to Strategems and Spoils. I said, there's the name for your book. He said, "Alright Mary. My book is Strategems and Spoils. Well the president of course, was terribly excited to think

that I had named that marvelous book. I said, Mr. President, he nodded. I think he might have given it that name anyway. I said, I just like to brag a little bit. And the president laughed and laughed. Senator was sitting, of course it would be like, here's the bed and the president and Mrs. Roosevelt were sitting ^{WAY} across. Mrs. Roosevelt said, "Mr. President, what do you think your wife had so interested my husband in?" She said, "I never saw him pay any attention to a guest. He was always thinking about something else."

MB: You captured the heart of the president. The first night you met him.

MMB: Yes. He was always so kind to me after that. He, I had so many wonderful photographs of him, great things. And I said to my niece ^{JUST} yesterday, Mary, why didn't you pack my photographs. I had the most wonderful pictures in the world.

MB: What did you do after your husband passed away? You were in Washington D.C. and worked in the hospital?

MMB: Life of course did stop for me. We came from Washington out to Idaho for the funeral. Then back to Washington and I thought I can never be here without Billy. I thought that my mind would go. So I made up my mind to rent my apartment and go back to Idaho but Idaho was changed. Everyplace in the world was changed. But of course, my friends had all gone and the babies, when I went out there, were grandmothers ^{now}. And there wasn't anything for me to do.

MB: So you went back to Washington and worked in a hospital?

MMB: Then during the war I went back and there was always a lot to do. I never was idle. And so when my niece came she said, "Aunt Mamie, I'm going to be married and mother will be alone. And there's nobody but you." So I sold my earthly possessions. Things I'd cherished and I came to Idaho. And with my sister.

MB: Now she's with you at Maryville Nursing Home?

MMB: Yes.