

**Nancy Mayer-Whittington Oral History**  
**Interview Session I**  
**June 24, 2009**

Ms. Woodbury:

This interview with Nancy Mayer-Whittington, the Clerk of the Court for both the United States District Court for the District of Columbia and the United States Bankruptcy Court for the District of Columbia, is being taken as part of the Oral History Project for the Historical Society of the District of Columbia Circuit. This interview is being conducted in Nancy's office in the E. Barrett Prettyman U.S. Courthouse on Constitution Avenue in Washington, D.C. My name is Ellen Woodbury. I am a lawyer with the law firm of Chadbourne & Parke. Nancy, thank you for agreeing to participate in the Historical Society's oral history program. I would like to start today with your family background and your childhood growing up here in Washington. First, would you just state your full name and tell us when and where you were born?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington:

I am Nancy Mayer-Whittington. I was born in Washington, D.C. on February 2, 1953.

Ms. Woodbury:

Would you tell us a little bit about your parents and their families?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington:

My father, Francis C. Mayer was born in Wichita, Kansas on February 18, 1919. His mother was Mae Spellman Mayer and his father was Hans Englebert Mayer. His mother, whose parents were both born in Ireland, was born in the United States and his father was born in Hamburg, Germany. Hans was sent to the United States when he was 15 or so to avoid having to join the German army. He went to live with his uncle, Leo Mayer, who lived in St. Louis. My father had an older brother, Russell and an older sister, Celeste.

My mother's parents were Anna McHugh Herron and Patrick Francis Herron. My mother, Mary Rose Herron, was born in Hazelton, Pennsylvania on April 29, 1920. Her mother Anna, whose parents were both born in Ireland, was born in the United States and her father Patrick was the sixth of 13 children and the first one born in the United States. His older siblings were born in Ireland. My mother was one of ten children. She was second oldest and the oldest daughter.

Ms. Woodbury: Do you know how your father's family came to settle in Kansas?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: My father's mother was born in Kansas and my father's father was a traveling insurance salesman. His territory included parts of Kansas and that is how he met my grandmother.

Ms. Woodbury: Did you know your paternal grandparents?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: No. My grandfather died before I was born. My grandmother was not in good health in her later years and did not travel. She died in 1960 when I was 7 years old. My dad told us that although his father, Hans, had come to this country when he was in his teens, and later became a citizen, he never quite got rid of his German accent. He learned the English language and spoke it flawlessly. But, he also retained his fluency in his native German language. When Hans and Mae married, she forbid him to speak any German in the house. Tensions against Germany and the German people were still running high in the United States after the end of World War I. My dad remembered that when he was about seven years old, their next door neighbor ran up to my Dad's front door and told their family to stay inside and turn off the lights. A mob of people were coming to the house because they thought they had heard Hans speaking in his

native German language and they didn't believe he was an American citizen. A few minutes later, a big group of men arrived yelling and carrying torches. My dad said he had never been so scared in his whole life. Fortunately, the neighbor confronted the group and told them that Hans was an American citizen and that he was loyal to this country and the neighbor reminded them that most of them knew Hans and that he was a good neighbor and friend. Finally, the crowd left and my dad and his family could turn the lights back on. My dad said he never forgot that night or the bravery of the neighbor who came to their aid.

Ms. Woodbury:

Did your father or your aunt Celeste on your father's side talk about how the family was impacted by the Great Depression?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington:

My aunt Celeste talked about all the changes that happened to their family as a result of the Depression. The insurance business was very slow so the family had to cut back on their living expenses because of the lost income. My aunt Celeste told us that they used to have a cook, and a housekeeper before the Depression. They had to let them go and do the chores themselves because they could no longer afford to live that way. My aunt Celeste was 12 years older than my dad and his brother Russ was 14 years older. Since my dad was so much younger, he did not recall a time when they had a lot of money. He remembers living in a very modest home and doing a lot of part time jobs in order to have any spending money. In fact, he told of the time when he was at his high school graduation and when he got his diploma and opened up the outer casing, instead of finding his diploma there was a note that said he owed the school \$5 and he would not receive his actual diploma until he paid the outstanding

debt! Five dollars was a lot of money back then but his sister, Celeste, who had a steady income from her job, paid the fee and they never told my grandmother anything about it. My dad after high school went away to college.

Ms. Woodbury: Did your aunt Celeste also attend college?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes. She was quite a character! She had a part-time job when she was 16 and in high school. With her very first paycheck, she took the money and went out to the regional airport. She paid for a 30 minute ride in an open cockpit two-seater plane laughing as they circled Wichita and enjoying every minute. She never told her parents what she did, but she enjoyed telling her nieces and nephews all about her first trip in an airplane.

Ms. Woodbury: Do you remember or do you know which college she attended?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: She attended Marymount College then transferred to Wichita State University. Her first husband, Buck Weaver, whom she married in 1948 died in 1958. She then married James C. Dolan in 1961 and he died in 1991. Aunt Celeste died in 2002.

Ms. Woodbury: Where did your father go to college?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: My father attended Regis College in Denver.

Ms. Woodbury: Do you know how he selected that college?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: I think he got a scholarship. He was an outstanding student who excelled in a lot of subjects but he was especially good in public speaking, debating and engaging anyone in conversation.

Ms. Woodbury: What year was your father born?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: 1919.

Ms. Woodbury: On your mother's side, did you know either of your grandparents?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes. I knew my grandfather, Patrick Francis Herron. We called him Pat. He was a wonderful first generation Irish American. In Hazelton, he owned and operated a general store. The store was on the first floor and the family lived in the two stories above it. When the Depression came, they lost the store primarily because they had extended so much credit to their customers — and his customers couldn't pay my grandfather what they owed him. He in turn couldn't pay for more merchandise without cash because they were not extending him any credit either. At this time, the two oldest sons, John and Joe, had finished high school and went to Washington, D.C. to look for work. Both of them found jobs and the family decided to relocate to D.C. and start fresh. Things were changing but the family wanted to stay together.

Ms. Woodbury: Were there job opportunities available in Washington at that time?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes, my uncle Joe found a job working as a car mechanic and my uncle John found a job working in a grocery store. My uncle Terry enlisted in the Navy when he finished high school in 1942. The family moved to D.C. in 1941. My grandfather was 64 years old and he found a job working the produce department in a Safeway store. But he was allergic to the pesticides they used on the produce and developed a rash on his hands that made it difficult for him and very uncomfortable. He didn't want to lose the job because at his age it was hard to find work. Shortly after his son Terry enlisted in the Navy, his plane was shot down in the Pacific. Everyone got out

but Terry. He was the belly gunner and wasn't able to get out. They never found his body and his death was a huge blow to the family. A few months after this, a stranger came up to my grandfather while he was working at Safeway and told him about a job that was opening for a night watchman at the public water plant. My grandfather applied and was hired. He always told us that he thought the stranger was an angel sent by his son Terry to ease his sorrow and get him out of the produce business.

Ms. Woodbury: This would be your uncle?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: My one uncle was a mechanic.

Ms. Woodbury: You said your father after he graduated from college applied to Catholic University? Did he tell you why he decided to go to law school or how he chose Catholic?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: I think he chose Catholic, again, because he got a scholarship. He didn't have a lot of money so getting a lot of financial help was what he needed, But he also choose Catholic because of his and his family's interest in having a Catholic education. To this point, my father had gone to Catholic schools all his life, so Catholic University for law school was a natural choice. He also loved their theater program with their connection to Arena Stage. My dad loved appearing in theatrical productions.

Ms. Woodbury: All of your siblings are girls right?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes.

Ms. Woodbury: Did you ever wish you had a brother?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: No, not really. But I don't know whether it was because not ever having

had a brother I didn't really know what, if anything, I was missing.

Ms. Woodbury: I was going to ask how you and your sisters got along and were you close while you were growing up?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes and we had our normal ups and downs...

Ms. Woodbury: Sibling's rivalries?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Somewhat but we were all so close in age to one another — my parents had 10 daughters in 12 years - that being a part of a big family was normal for us. We were and still are very close to one another. Our parents did a wonderful job of raising us and letting us know that getting along, helping each other and taking care of each other was the most important thing we could do for the family. I was the second oldest of the family and at an early age I learned that I should be a role model for my younger sisters. My parents gave me an opportunity at a young age to develop some leadership skills. They had expectations for all of us depending on our age and skill sets and I think that prevented the sibling rivalries and developed in all of us a strong sense of family love and pride.

Ms. Woodbury: When you were born your parents would have been in their thirties right? And they lived in Washington?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes.

Ms. Woodbury: And at some point they moved to Kensington?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes, when my sister Kathleen was born we were living in a two bedroom apartment in the Brookland section of D.C.. So, we moved to a three bedroom home in Kensington. They didn't want to go too far out because our dad was commuting downtown to the Federal Trade Commission every day for work.

Ms. Woodbury: You would have been still very young at that point?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes. I was 2 at the time.

Ms. Woodbury: Do you remember anything about Washington at all from that time?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: No, I don't. I have seen pictures of the Brookland area but I don't have any real memories of living there. When my parents got married, my mom moved from the family home on Quincy Street in NE to the apartment. When we moved to Kensington, the only family members still living in the family home were my grandfather, and one aunt and uncle who had not married. So, they moved to a house across the street from us in Kensington. That was great because we got to see them every day.

Ms. Woodbury: What did you and your sisters do for fun?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: We were a typical family. We played outdoors a lot riding our bikes, roller skating, playing kickball and baseball and hopscotch and four square. We had dolls and doll carriages and lots of doll clothes. One time when we cleaned up our basement and put all of our dolls on the wooden shelves my grandfather had made for us, we had 72 dolls all in a row and all in their Sunday best. I still remember how they looked all cleaned up and sitting side by side. I had a wonderful childhood. It was great growing up in a family with ten daughters.

Ms. Woodbury: What was that neighborhood like?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Our Kensington neighborhood was wonderful.

There were kids in most of the houses around us. We lived on a court for much of the time before they cut down the trees and added more houses to our street. Living on the court was great for kickball games, bike riding and hide



Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Holy Redeemer is located at the corner of Saul and Summit Avenue a couple of blocks off Connecticut Avenue in Kensington. It is not too far from the beltway and Rock Creek Park.

Ms. Woodbury: Were you there through age 10 when you moved to Rockville?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes.

Ms. Woodbury: Were you sorry to leave the old school, you had been there for five years?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes, it was hard because I had a lot of friends there and I was very happy there. When we moved to Rockville, St. Jude's school had a waiting list for some grades so that my sister Kathleen, who is one year younger than me, and I had to go to the local public school.

Ms. Woodbury: Were all of your sisters in that same situation that they had gone to the public schools?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: No, just Kathleen and I. We both went to Aspen Hill Elementary School. Kathleen went there for fourth grade and I went there for fifth and sixth grades.

Ms. Woodbury: When you went to high school where did you go?  
Academy of the Holy Cross in Garrett Park?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes. That was a great experience for me. I was rather shy in grade school but I started to come out of my shell at Holy Cross. I loved the fact that it was an all girl's high school so I didn't have to worry about impressing or making mistakes and getting teased by boys. I learned how to write at Holy Cross, how to take responsibility for myself and how to manage people and projects.

Ms. Woodbury: Were there classes or teachers that you particularly liked?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: There was Sister Thomas Aquinas who gave me my love of creative non-fiction and poetry, Ms. Homorsky who taught world religions and opened my eyes to all the other faiths that exist all around us and Sister Rose Michael who encouraged me to run for president of the drama club — not because I wanted to be on the stage — because I had a knack for managing things.

Ms. Woodbury: Were there particular teachers that influenced you?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Absolutely, there was Sister Margaret Ann who taught me that I always have a choice in any situation. There may not always be a lot of good choices, but there are always choices. She would say, "If you give up your right to make a choice, you become a victim. God gave you free will. Use it."

Sister Grace who epitomized her name but always impressed on us the need to be an advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves. But, she would say, "Do it with dignity and grace."

Ms. Woodbury: What kind of literature class did Sister Thomas Aquinas teach?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: She taught English Lit and the Classics. But she encouraged all of us to find our voice through writing. I won a poetry contest once because she inspired me to try my hand at writing poems?

Ms. Woodbury: You mentioned the drama club.

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes. I was the stage manager for all the plays and I found that I had a knack for telling people what to do. Not really telling them what to do but helping them stay on track and get to the right locations on stage in the right costumes at the right time. Those early beginnings have helped me develop

management skills that I use today. But, as I said earlier, at Holy Cross I developed a real love of the written word. I love to write and at one time I had hoped to be a sportswriter.

Ms. Woodbury: Why didn't you pursue that?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: There were very few women sports writers at that time and I guess I lacked the confidence to give it a try.

Ms. Woodbury: Did your family travel?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Not really but we always made a point of taking a family vacation. Our dad loved going to the bay or the ocean, so each year we would rent a cottage on Broomes Island, Maryland or Fenwick Island, Delaware and then eventually Ocean City, Maryland.

Ms. Woodbury: In your family, were there any female role models for you to emulate?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: My aunt Anne was because she got up every morning and put on high heels and pearls and went to work for the Department of the Navy.

Ms. Woodbury: Did your aunt give you any advice?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Her favorite expression was "It's a man's world!" But then she would tell us that we were going to be better off because of our education. My aunt Anne never went to college.

Ms. Woodbury: Did your mother talk to you about the problems of having a career and family?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Not directly. My mother was more subtle. She would grab little opportunities - like when she was helping us out by babysitting one of our children — to remind us to keep things in perspective. Nothing was so bad that it

wouldn't look better in the morning. And, she was right. But she was clearly my role model for what a mother should be.

Ms. Woodbury: Were either you or any of your sisters interested in politics or public policy?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes. I was a little bit interested in politics because of the Watergate trials and all the intrigue surrounding the supposed burglary of the Democratic National Committee. I knew something about the Executive Branch of government because of My dad's position as head of Discriminatory Practices for the FTC. But I had no idea about the investigative side of the Legislative Branch.

Ms. Woodbury: You were aware that the nation's capital was right next door?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: Yes. In the sense that I knew that my dad worked downtown and commuted there every day when we were growing up and that the FTC was on Pennsylvania Avenue with the Capitol at one end and the White House at the other.

Ms. Woodbury: How old were you when President Kennedy was assassinated?

Ms. Mayer-Whittington: I was ten years old and we had just moved to our new house in Rockville a few months earlier in August of 1963. Like everyone else, we watched the TV non-stop and it was interesting to me that all my mom's living brothers and sisters came to our house. They were so upset and so sad that the first Irish Catholic President was assassinated. They loved President Kennedy and were in a state of shock. Our aunt Anne took some of my sisters and I down to D.C. to watch the funeral procession and I clearly remember how quiet it was and the only sounds



my new found perspective but I appreciated that he listened to what I had to say.