

The Historic New Orleans Collection

Oral History interview with Marian Mayer Berkett

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MARK CAVE: So, what is your name?

MARIAN MAYER BERKETT: My name is Marian Mayer was my maiden name, M-A-Y-E-R, M-A-R-I-A-N, and my marriage name is Marian Mayer Berkett, B-E-R-K-E-T-T.

CAVE: When were you born?

BERKETT: When?

CAVE: Uh-huh.

BERKETT: March 29, 1913.

CAVE: Nineteen-thirteen.

BERKETT: I'm 103 years old.

CAVE: And I'm Mark Cave with the Historic New Orleans Collection. It's Wednesday, April 27, 2016, and we're here at your home on St. Charles Avenue in New Orleans, and we're talking about your life. Talk about your father.

BERKETT: My father?

CAVE: Uh-huh.

BERKETT: Well, my father was a country boy, and he was crazy about horses. He had a place out in the outskirts of Baton Rouge. It's now pretty much part of that but out there he

had -- he raised pigs, he had a farm where he made things. Somebody else handled the farm but he did -- I think one thing was important was it was a place he could ride to on his horse every night -- every day because he was attached to his horse. In fact, most men, as you know, carry around pictures of their children and grandchildren to show off but not my father. He carried pictures of his horse, and he had one painting that he put in the back of his car so he could take it out anytime. It had been done by some artist so-called from Italy. Eventually, he was the owner of the world's champion Tennessee Walking horse, and that's the most sensational member of the family. One of the members of our family still has the trophy, but that's my father.

CAVE: What was his name?

BERKETT: And his name was Maurice, but we called him Morris, M-A-U-R-I-C-E, M-A-Y-E-R.

CAVE: What was your mom like?

BERKETT: My mother? Now, that was an interesting woman and a very accomplished woman. She was born in New Orleans, and the family home is still over there on Camp Street. She was in a -- her family came over in the 1830s and she was in the third generation and graduated from Newcomb College in '06, 1906. Then she got married, went to live in Baton

Rouge, and she was a very accomplished woman. She was very helpful in all kinds of educational projects. Once when -- well, in the -- I think it was 1917 when the flood came she was in charge of the refugees that came to Baton Rouge to escape the waters. Red Cross asked her to organize that, [00:05:00] and they were all up in that area which is known as the Pentagon where they put up the refugees at the time. She did things like there was a student at LSU who was a blind girl, and she wanted to learn French but there were no French textbooks in Braille, and for reasons I don't know, the Red Cross came to my mother who could speak French and asked her if she would learn Braille so she could make a book for this girl and she did. She learned enough Braille with her knowledge of French to make a textbook for this girl. The Red Cross recognized this as quite an achievement, and I think it was. Well, she was a pretty remarkable gal.

CAVE: What was her name?

BERKETT: Her name was Beulah, B-E-U-L-A-H.

CAVE: And her maiden name?

BERKETT: And her maiden was Loeb, L-O-E-B. I mean I could go on but she was a very accomplished woman.

CAVE: Do you remember the 1927 flood?

BERKETT: I do, yeah.

CAVE: What do you --

BERKETT: Well, I had to. I mean my mother was up there. I mean I don't remember the whole flood, I just remember that it was a flood, that all these poor people came to Baton Rouge, and that my mother wasn't very available for some weeks.

CAVE: Did you see the refugees? Did you go to where the camp --

BERKETT: I saw but only briefly, you know. I would go up and see they were in that area in Baton Rouge called the Pentagon. It was across from where the capitol is now on the river, and it was a famous old place where -- it goes back to the Civil War.

CAVE: Was your mom involved in politics?

BERKETT: Not really, I don't think. I never knew any political thing, no.

CAVE: Did you have brothers and sisters?

BERKETT: She had -- you know, we were friendly with people who were in politics, but I don't think she played a part in the political movement. My father thought he was in politics but, you know, it's just supporting his friends who were somehow involved from time to time. But as things went on and when Huey came in then everybody was involved

in politics come hell or high water, and I was up to my eyes in it.

CAVE: Talk about that. Was your family pro-Long or anti-Long?

BERKETT: No, indeed. No, indeed. As a matter of fact, I can remember distinctly that on the night that Huey got shot by his bodyguards, not by Weiss, Weiss didn't shoot him, the word came on the radio, and I was in New Orleans with my sister and at that time my boyfriend who was driving, and we stopped for gas and we heard that Huey had been shot. With that, my sister who was younger than I went into hysterics. She cried, and she cried, and we couldn't stop her. I knew she couldn't be crying because Huey was shot. He wasn't very pleasant in our family. Finally, we calmed her down and she said, "I know my [00:10:00] daddy did it, I know my daddy did it." And there have been other stories that are very similar that I've heard since then. So, that was it.

CAVE: Were you in college then?

BERKETT: As a matter of fact, I was in New Orleans because I was transferring to my second year in law school to escape Huey Long and all of that stuff going on in Baton Rouge where we had martial law, you know, only two people could meet on the street. There were actually some shots fired

as if there was going to be a rebellion and so forth and so on.

CAVE: So you started out at LSU?

BERKETT: My college career, I graduated from high school around -- well, I went to journalism in my freshman year at LSU and graduated in journalism in 1930. But I got a scholarship to go that summer to Geneva, Switzerland to a school there run by the League of Nations and so I took advantage of that scholarship and went to Geneva that summer. I had a chance to remain there and go on from there but I decided to come back to New Orl-- I mean to Baton Rouge. I thought I was going to go to Radcliffe because I had met Manley Hudson who was teaching at Harvard and was considered the man, and he was called the chief of international lawyers, and he taught international law at Harvard. By that time I decided that's the direction I wanted to go in. I spoke to him and I couldn't go to Harvard because they didn't allow women but I could go to Radcliffe and walk across and audit his courses. He offered me the opportunity but it turned out when I got back to the States that Radcliffe would take me in but only if I could read German. Now, this is 1930. I'd seen what was happening with Hitler. He had just come into power. I'm Jewish and I didn't know a word of German. Now, my

mother did. My mother could speak both English -- I mean French and German but I didn't inherit that.

CAVE: Yeah, uh-huh.

BERKETT: I've never been good. So, I absolutely felt it was a -- I couldn't understand how I could learn German. It wasn't worth it. It would have been emotionally absurd, and so I did not go to Radcliffe. Instead I went back to LSU and this time I took a Master's. In the course of the Master's I decided to -- well, I managed -- I was going to write about how they administered Workman's Compensation laws, and to do that I thought I had to read all the cases. In that particular time they were all administered in the courts, and what I was writing about was that it shouldn't be that way. It should be administered by some sort of board [00:15:00] or something. But, I read every case in the books on Workman's Compensation and so I wrote a whole thesis on how it was administered by the courts, and all the cases, and everything else. I was in the midst of deciding to go to law school besides. A strange thing happened, a lawyer somehow got a hold of that thesis, and nobody writes -- reads a thesis, but he read this one. He decided it had to be published. He persuaded the LSU press to publish it, and so when I transferred from -- I went first year of my law school to LSU but I couldn't stomach

Huey, and I couldn't stomach what was going on in Louis-- at LSU with that political background and in Baton Rouge, too. So, I had planned to go over to my second year of law school, after I had gotten my master's degree, to Tulane and I was in the midst of doing that when Huey was demised. So I did go then to Tulane for two years.

CAVE: What was it like in Baton Rouge during that period?
Kind of describe why it was so uncomfortable.

BERKETT: You mean before I --

CAVE: Before you left, yeah.

BERKETT: Well, there was somebody, I can't prove it, but there was somebody in front of my home constant -- towards the end, constantly watching. There was -- on the streets there was martial law. Only two people could stop to talk to one another, a third couldn't. It was oppressive, and I've told this story before so I guess I can tell it again. I spent my first year of law at LSU, and one day the dean of the law school called me in. Now, I didn't know what this was about. Dean Flory, F-L-O-R-Y, and when I got there to my astonishment he said, "I asked you in because you're the only person around here I can talk to. I want to tell you, I'm considering murdering that son of bitch." This is dean of the law school, and he said, "There's nobody around I can talk to. You're the only one that

refuses to support him." Now, I'm not telling you a new story, I've said this -- I've told this before. Maybe it's not fair to Dean Flory but this is what it was, and that really convinced me that I had to go to Tulane.

CAVE: Talk about your time at Tulane.

BERKETT: Well, it was the best move I'd made in a long, long time. I had a particularly wonderful class. The people in the class were bright, interesting for the most part. I enjoyed it. I liked the class better than the teachers, let me say that.

CAVE: Were there other women in the class?

BERKETT: One other woman in my class. Now, there were other women in the law school and had been. [00:20:00] They just like the women -- well, some of the women were really interested in practicing law, and some of them were interested in getting husbands. Just like in the medical schools. They have women taking medicine, it's a good place.

CAVE: What were your ambitions?

BERKETT: What were my ambitions? It was to be a good a lawyer.

CAVE: Did you do that after graduating?

BERKETT: Well, I did well because number one, I was top in my class at Tulane, and my book made me an authority on one phase of the law before I ever graduated from law school.

It may have convinced Eberhard Deutsch of Deutsch Kerrigan to employ me as the first woman employed by a law firm in the state or I think in the United States, I'm not sure.

CAVE: Where was the law firm located?

BERKETT: Well, pretty much where it is now. Well, no that's not true, wait a minute, wait a minute. It was located then in the Hibernia Building on the fourteenth floor, I think it's the fourteenth but I'm not -- I may be wrong about the floor number because as the years went up so did the firm's size went up and I remember we ended -- I ended up in the very tip top in that tower up there. The highest point where only one office was up there. It was wonderful. Then we transferred to -- names are bad. Well, anyway the big bank building that..

CAVE: When you were in law school what did you do for fun?

BERKETT: For what?

CAVE: For fun, for entertainment.

CAVE: Oh, I had a lot of entertainment. I went dancing.

You could dance in the Quarter then, right in the Quarter there were places where you could dance and they weren't, you know, the shows of your butt and all that kind of stuff. No, you went down there, the kids from school went there, and then I had a friend, a boyfriend who was a good dancer, and we used to go on Saturday nights to the New

Orleans Country Club to dance. There were parties where we drank beer and, you know, it was fun.

CAVE: Did you have an apartment in Uptown?

BERKETT: When I first came, I was virtually penniless. I think I had \$500 but an aunt of mine who was a wonderful gal and very generous took me in for a year. I stayed with her. The second year I did have an apartment so to speak. It was a room in a home but I spent a lot of time outside of that room with friends and so forth. Well, I guess it was my senior year or maybe it was the year afterwards I had an apartment.

CAVE: Talk about going to work downtown in the CBD, what was that like in the '40s?

BERKETT: Well, I don't know. It was -- I remember Morrison's Cafeteria. That was downtown then. Our offices, as I told you to begin with, were in the Hibernia, and we later moved over, sometime later, but in the beginning. As time -- not originally, [00:25:00] but as time went on there were three of us who were the staff, you might say, of the firm. The young ones who were not -- there was Deutsch, Kerrigan and then us, and we were very close. These were two wonderful guys. I was crazy about them. We had a lot of fun. We not only spent a lot of time together at the office but

also otherwise. I mean it was a good friendship that lasted our entire lives. I treasured it, really.

CAVE: What kind of work were you doing?

BERKETT: Everything, but a lot of Workman's Compensation nevertheless because of my supposed expertise. I wanted to get out of it and get into other stuff, and I did very quickly. I mean I continued to do it but I got into other things, and I remember the first day that I went to the office. I thought to myself what does a woman do in this office, and I soon found out I was very useful because that very day a woman came in the office, and she wanted to make a will. She didn't feel well, and she spent most of her time in the ladies room so I went in the ladies room and conducted the sale, so to speak, and got all the facts, and what she wanted, and everything. And I thought to myself, you know, they couldn't have done this. They need me, I'm convinced. But I really -- it's amazing how little trouble I had. I think I immediately indicated that if they wanted to have a fight with me because I was a woman, that I'm ready.

CAVE: Talk about Morrison's Cafeteria in more detail. Can you describe --

BERKETT: Well, I can't remember what we had to eat or anything like that. I just remember that it was inexpensive enough

for us to be there. Now, for instance, there was a fellow, a lawyer, who used to come in every day and the boys marveled at him. That guy makes ten thousand dollars a year, ten thousand. Give you an idea of what it was? There's no way I can make comparisons.

CAVE: Talk about the second World War and your thoughts during that once you found out what was going on in Europe.

BERKETT: Well, I got a taste of it when I went on the scholarship, and it wasn't nice then. I had more contact with the Italian side. There were students from Germany that happened to be two women, and I didn't have much to do with them. They kept off to the side. Somebody told them they should stay away from American men, and so if there was a man close by. But, there were some fellows from Italy and one of them thought he wanted to be my friend. He didn't think my French was very good, and it wasn't. He translated the French things that were said at the school into Italian for himself and then he re-translated from Italian [00:30:00] to English to help me. It didn't do me a bit of good, I can tell you. Nobody had to have an examination, really. If you wanted to learn, if you weren't going to learn it, that's cool. What you were going to learn was the sessions of the League of Nations, and what you learned at night when you went down to the

lake and had your liquor at all these young buds that later became ministers, some of them prime ministers, that started off just where we were and drank the same stuff and talked the same way. It was an exhilarating performance there, but not at the school.

CAVE: Talk about your memories of the war here in New Orleans.

BERKETT: Here, in New Orleans? I mean, well, it was mostly -- well, I did not have a relative -- well, I did have two brothers who were in -- called in the war but neither one was really a soldier out there shooting, administrative positions. One was a geologist and an oil expert so he started off actually in Africa and came on up through Italy and France, and the other found himself comfortably in Great Britain in some administrative position. Neither one of them were -- well, the one was in the line of fire, so to speak but not shooting. At least he didn't tell me about that.

CAVE: Were you hearing stories of the Holocaust during this time?

BERKETT: Well, I was beginning to hear the minute I hit Europe in 1930, I was beginning to hear about some of the atrocities that were going on, and Hitler had just that year come into power and they were already going on.

Before I got to Europe I was traveling with this friend of mine, and she was going to Heidelberg where she had a boyfriend, whatever she could, whatever the occasion was, and I was to go with her but I called it off, I wouldn't go. That's the first time I'd ever been in Europe. Heidelberg had all kinds of resonance for me having done a lot of reading and so forth but not enough to get me. I saw Hitler right then and there the minute I almost set my foot in Europe as a real problem. Not to the extent that it developed. I mean you couldn't imagine anything to that score but I knew that he was up to no good.

CAVE: Did you stay at the same law firm for a long time?

BERKETT: Never went anywhere else.

CAVE: How did you --

BERKETT: I'm still there.

CAVE: You are, OK.

BERKETT: I don't practice but they carry me on their letterhead, and I have got an office there, and I do have a secretary there.

CAVE: What kinds of things have you done throughout your career?

BERKETT: You mean what kind of law?

CAVE: Uh-huh.

BERKETT: I've had a wild array of different kinds. I tried to get out of personal injury stuff as fast as I could but I had a lot of that. I represented airlines. I represented [00:35:00] -- well, in the beginning Chicago and Southern but then that developed to Delta, and I was intimately involved in the first time that they flew from here to Central America, the first flight that was inaugurated. I was in on that one. I went up, wrote the brief. I represented Delta for quite some time. They did -- in the beginning they didn't have too many, well, house lawyers, and so they'd -- I'd get questions like what do you do about flying over a state where liquor is not allowed. Can we serve it and so and so forth, you know, that kind of stuff. And then this big thing that involved the who was going to get the right to fly, to make this flight. Waterman Steamship Company wanted it and it was Delta's -- well, anyway, that was that.

CAVE: OK. So there were legal issues from flying from New Orleans to Latin America? Was it the --

BERKETT: Well, they'd never had one flying before and that was the first flight and who was going to get it. It involved some congressional problem. The Congress had made out the way it was to be handled but the president figured another, that he had the right to name and to govern the situation.

The case involved who had the right, and we said that this belonged in the international sphere and it should be the president, and so the Supreme Court in a divided opinion held that we were right, that the president was the one who had the final say in who would get it. They said that the provision and the books were -- you know, that the Congress had passed was to be thrown out, illegally.

CAVE: Did your mom, did she live to see you become an attorney?

BERKETT: Huh?

CAVE: Did your mom live to see you become a lawyer?

BERKETT: Yes, she did but just barely.

CAVE: What were her thoughts on that? It seemed such an unusual choice for a young woman at that time.

BERKETT: Well, I think she was proud of me. She didn't live very long afterward but we did -- shortly after I graduated from law school, this very close friend of mine and I decided that we were going to go to Mexico on vacation. This friend of mine's mother and my mother were intimate friends and actually related, and had spent their childhood together. They owned -- there was one block there on Magazine Street where both the houses were -- both the families were and they were intimately related going back a couple of generations. We're all descended out of the

same, you know, the same pot. The two of us decided we were going to Mexico, and then our mothers decided to go too, and this was something unusual, [00:40:00] and we were thrilled. Before I knew it my brother -- one of my brothers, I never expected him, but he wanted to go, and one of our cousins. So, we had a wonderful trip to Mexico. Those two old ladies giggled all day and night.

CAVE: What part of town did you live in in New Orleans?

BERKETT: Well, it was usually right off the Avenue, and I spent a good deal of time -- and during the war I was living at Dunleith Court which is two blocks about off the Avenue, and I was over there at the request of the woman who traveled with my mother to Mexico that time. It was during the war and her sons were off because of the war, and she was alone with her daughter. If I came over and lived there, which I virtually did anyway, that would make it fine. She could go out and not leave her daughter alone or we could go out together and, you know, all those kinds of stuff. So, it was a very, very wonderful arrangement. By that time my mother had died. It was a good arrangement.

CAVE: What synagogue did you go to?

BERKETT: Well, I'm not a very faithful goer but I belonged to Sinai, and my grandfather whom I never knew, my grandfather Loeb who he was one of the founders of that synagogue.

CAVE: Was your mother religious?

BERKETT: I think so. She was at one time the president of the Sisterhoods of Louisiana, Louisiana president, and we had -- well, she was -- when I was six years old, Rabbi and Mrs. -- well, they were newlyweds. Reinhart, Harold Reinhart and Flora Reinhart came to New Orleans for his first bout as a rabbi, and they formed a very close relationship with my mother and they treated me as if I was their child even though I had a sister, but I was their child. They never had children and he subsequently, of course, left Baton Rouge and had a rather amazing career. He went to London and he was the chief rabbi at the biggest Reformed congregation in London. That was before and after the war, and then he left there and formed another congregation, another Reformed congregation, and he is responsible -- I don't know if you about the scrolls -- are you Jewish?

CAVE: No.

BERKETT: Well, to make it short, the Nazis had taken all of the Torahs, you know, the scrolls that had been in the churches of Czechoslovakia and threw them in a pile with the idea that maybe someday they would have a [00:45:00] showing what had gone on. Well, anyway, Harold Reinhart had a friend who was also my friend, a very wealthy man in London who was informed by one of his sources about the

fact that there were these Torahs piled up in a little place. He secretly devised a scheme to get those, the whole bundle, and have them transported to London to the synagogue where Harold was the rabbi. This synagogue was in a mansion that had once belonged to Queen Elizabeth, what do you call it, I for-- one of her children. It was an enormous place. Anyway, it was big enough to take care of all this rubbish as it was. I saw it when it came in. They set about reconstructing all the Torahs. They had a little luck because you had to be trained, know how to do it, and one of the refugees who came knocking on the door of that synagogue happened to be one of those, and he -- when he found out that he could not only get fed, he could get a job, and they needed him, and he knew where to find others to help him. So, over the years they reconstructed these, and then they had a trust for them. They offered to lend each of these Torahs to any Jewish congregation, any religious congregation, as a matter of fact, and any school provided it was a loan. It still belonged wherever it came from. Nobody's ever claimed it again. But, anyway, and so it's a fantastic story, the whole story of those scrolls. He and Ralph Yablon who was the man who got the material, bought the material so to speak, and whom I knew well, arranged all this. Of course, both are dead now but

they're still there, been around the world and it's generally known. Sometimes now in the little villages where they come from they recognized where it comes from and, you know, they make claims, to lend back, I guess, I don't know. I asked for one for Sinai, be loaned to Sinai. Julian Feibelman was a close friend of mine and of my husbands, and he wanted a very light, small one. We got one, one of the few they never found out where it came from except it is obviously from a little country.

CAVE: You mentioned dancing at Shushan Airport when it was newly constructed. Talk about that.

BERKETT: Well, you know, I haven't thought about that in years and years, and today I was invited by friends to lunch, and we started out where are we going to lunch. I was talking about crawfish and all kinds of things, so we decided to go out to the Lakefront, [00:50:00] now, I haven't been out there in a long time. We ended up at the Shushan Airport, that's what it was, you know, the Shushan Airport. I remember dancing there when it originally went up, and today it was -- I had a wonderful day. I mean, I had a good meal there, and there's a woman there that is reconstructing as fast as she can, and refurbishing it. All the artwork she's bringing up, you know, and the stuff like that. A lot of artwork there. All I can just

remember dancing there when it was original there. I don't know if you know the story of that. Well, somehow Shushan had a hand in creating it somehow or another. He was a big Long guy, you know, every brick, I am told, that every brick that was used in that building had his name on it, Shushan. Many, many years later they went to the trouble of obliterating every Shushan name. That's what I'm told but it was all over, and it was called the Shushan Airport. No longer called that but it was a great day for me. I enjoyed it, and the woman there is -- she's an art historian so to speak, and she's fantastic with the place. I mean, it's fun to go out and listen to her talk, and you see some pretty good sights there. Oh, there's some beautiful things there. Go out sometime.

CAVE: I'll check it out. What are your memories of Mardi Gras?

BERKETT: Mardi Gras? I've always -- particularly in New Orleans. We used to go to the Quarter almost every time when in the beginning, and I have still have the same costume. I wear it every year.

CAVE: What is it?

BERKETT: Don't get me started on Mardi Gras; it could be all night, but it was great. I go as a lamp.

CAVE: A lamp?

BERKETT: Well, in our travels, I think it was, I forgot, but in the fields, they wear this thing that looks like a lampshade.

CAVE: Yeah, in Vietnam, like, yeah.

BERKETT: In Vietnam, yeah. I had brought one back. I looked at it and I thought, hum, I've got a costume. So I put this on and I string around my -- the top of my head on some -- well, strings -- hefty sort, two light bulbs, and I'd tie them on real good when I had more hair and all that. Then I'm a lamp, and we used to go down to the Quarter, and I had my picture taken sixty million times but I'd get all kinds of things like, "What does it take to turn you on, kid," that kind of stuff. Then after the storm I came here, and I still had the costume. I still wear it every carnival. I go outside and people come up and say, "Can we take your picture? Oh, it's so cute," you know. I thought to myself -- whom. The whole attitude of reception is so -- it was invalidated.

CAVE: Have you ever been in any Mardi Gras groups or are you just a...

BERKETT: No, I haven't. No, I've never been there. I've had friends who've been in there but I've never.

CAVE: [00:55:00] Do you have memories of Hurricane Betsy?

BERKETT: Well, what about it?

CAVE: Did you --

BERKETT: Well, I wasn't here. When I heard the storm was coming, my husband had already died and I was alone, so I jumped into a taxi and took the last plane out, and got to New York where I have a niece and nephew who I'm very close to who live not in the city but outside the city. When I got there, I read and it was true, the storm went over, it was all over, finished in 24 hours. The storm had gone by. Then I began to get in all the news that the place was swamped, and it wasn't from the hurricane. It was from the US [Army Corps of] Engineers, and I was livid. I didn't know at the time that my home was one of the victims. I was livid, just the idea because we had been warned of this before, and I sat down on the week after the storm, and I wrote my infuriated letter to the *New York Times* and explained that it was the fault of the engineers. Now, this is only a week after the storm, and that they had said they couldn't do any better because they didn't have any money. The money was going to Vietnam. That's all in the newspaper. I mean not just my letter, I mean before that. But my letter was published in the *New York Times*, and it was an interesting experience because it got people did not get back to me directly, they couldn't unless they knew me personally and knew where I was, which was again, they

didn't know where in the world I was. The *New York Times* handled it so well. They asked me -- well, first of all they asked me if I had anything else I wanted to put in the letter and so forth, they were very nice about it. Then when people asked the *New York Times* to tell them where I was and so forth and so on, they refused to do so but they said they would inform me that they had asked, and I could get in touch with them if I wanted to. They told me that I could. That was the way it was handled. I thought it was handled very well.

CAVE: Where was your home in New Orleans at that time?

BERKETT: I was in Jefferson Parish, and I was right by -- it was Country Club Gardens. We had a home there right across from Country Day on Iona Street.

CAVE: Do you remember the sniper incident in the '70s in the CBD?

BERKETT: What?

CAVE: The Howard Johnson sniper incident? It was in the early '70s.

BERKETT: Howard Johnson.

CAVE: Sniper. There was a man shooting people from the roof of the Howard Johnson Hotel.

BERKETT: Oh, I saw that. I was in my office overlooking the shots were going down below me.

CAVE: Oh, my gosh.

BERKETT: I was on the fourteenth floor of the, you know, the bank building there.

CAVE: Did you all just stay in the office?

BERKETT: Well, I decided I would leave [01:00:00] finally but there was a danger in leaving. I didn't know where the shots were going. It was a wonderful perch besides experiencing that. I watched them put the top to the -- what is it now, the Mercedes (inaudible).

CAVE: Oh, the Superdome.

BERKETT: The Superdome. Up until that time you couldn't tell what the Superdome was going to look like, and the whole key to this dome is that one little thing up at the top. There's a little round thing up there that had to be placed there. Nothing else, just a pole and that thing. The only way they could do it was by helicopter. I saw the whole experience from my office. It was fascinating. Boy, was that scary stuff. Somebody had to accept one guy, had to accept this hovering -- hung on a string. And that held up the whole building.

CAVE: Are you a sports fan?

BERKETT: Well, I love tennis, and I used to play. I used to go to football games but I don't go now. I don't really like football now. I think it's a brutal game.

CAVE: It is.

BERKETT: I used to watch a lot of basketball; don't watch that much anymore but I do like tennis, and I keep it up. As I say, I used to play. I, unfortunately, when I got married I was a pretty good tennis player in my youth. Up there on the very top you can see a little cup about an inch or two high. Well, I was the champion of Baton Rouge. When I got married George wanted to play golf, and I yielded, and I don't like golf much but I had two holes in one which proves that it's all chance. I was not a good golfer but I had two holes in one. Finally, after 30 years about of marriage he decided he wanted to learn tennis. I could have killed him. He kept me off the courts for 30 years, I would have been a champion, you know, and he didn't -- [Ringing phone]. I'm sure that's nothing but trouble, let me see. Tennis and while I was no longer young but I used to play with -- there were tournaments for ladies, or super-aged, and I would go play in those. It was fun.

CAVE: So what have you been doing in your retirement? When did you sort of pseudo-retire? I guess you're not totally retired but.

BERKETT: Well, no, I am -- I don't practice law anymore. I wouldn't do that under any circumstances, and I quietly withdrew because my hearing was not as good as I needed.

If I'm going to do any trial work, I have to hear and hear well. But I have lived a pretty good life, and I've traveled a great deal, and had a lot of wonderful -- and for the last two months I've been feted all over the place, and I feel like I'm a -- it's wonderful.

CAVE: Did you do any more publishing, writing, after your early public... --

BERKETT: I wish I had. I've always wanted to do the thing on Huey but I never really got around to it. I couldn't. I wouldn't be able to do it anymore, [01:05:00] I can't spell right anymore, I can't, you know, it's gone.

CAVE: I don't have any more questions. Is there any big part of your life that we --

BERKETT: What?

CAVE: I don't have any more questions but is there any important part of your life that --

BERKETT: Well, I think that I do have some things. I served on the civil service, State Civil Service Commission for eight years. I was the governor-appointed major server on the commission that wrote the charter for Jefferson Parish. Up until that time they lived like a police jury. Justine [McCoffey?] and I were the two women which was exception who were invited, and we served -- as a matter of fact, the first day afterwards the men called a meeting but they

didn't bother to tell us about it. We found out and appeared, and they were sort of embarrassed. I said, well, I'm going up to Chicago next week, do you mind if I talk to this fellow -- I forgot his name now. He's big in the Municipal League and knows all the ramifications of these charters. Of course, they said, sure, you can talk to them. Well, I brought him back and he stayed here, and he helped us with the charter. It's a long story about the charter. [Door bell] Hold on. It was an interesting experience because, you see, Jefferson is on two sides of the river, and a great deal of time was taken up deciding what side the next meeting was going to be held on. But we finally got a charter, and it was voted in, and since then the Jefferson Parish Commission has managed to bungle up and destroyed it and everything else, but anyway it was a pretty good instrument in getting.

CAVE: Well, that's good. I don't have any more questions but is there something you wanted to add?

BERKETT: Well, let's see. You got the Civil Service Commission. The People's League you've probably heard about that.

CAVE: No, what was that?

BERKETT: Bobbie, can you wait? That's the -- when my class graduated from Tulane Law School it was the depth of the

Depression, and we didn't like what was going on politically. Nobody was doing anything about it so we formed what was known as the People's League. It's been written up time and time again. What we did was to -- we decided the district attorney was not doing anything about the corruption. I won't go through the whole deal but we managed to get him out of office, just a bunch of us. As a result of all that, Hale Boggs was elected as the youngest guy that ever went to the House of Representatives because he was part of our league.

CAVE: Did you know Hale Boggs?

BERKETT: He was in my class. Of course I did.

CAVE: What was he like?

BERKETT: And his wife.

CAVE: What was he like when he was a student?

BERKETT: He was a salesman. Hale represented, I guess it was, Beechnut, something like that and he kept his locker full of it, and he passed it out to all the people in the class and everywhere. He was buying popularity back then. Interesting guy, and his wife, of course, particularly interesting gal. What else [01:10:00] can I give you?

CAVE: I think we did a good job.

BERKETT: You are sent here by Mary Lou [Christovich]?

CAVE: Yeah.

BERKETT: Well, Mary Lou and I were friendly for a long time.
We used to play tennis together. She and her husband, my
husband and I, and then afterwards we'd sit down for lunch,
and they were on one side of the political scene and we
were on the other, and we'd battle it out.

CAVE: Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

BERKETT: You're very welcome.

CAVE: Can I take your picture.

BERKETT: I don't know, Bobbie, can I --

Bobbie: Did you go to the beauty parlor?

BERKETT: No.

Bobbie: Did you get fair warning.

BERKETT: I did not.

Bobbie: Uh-oh. That's not polite, you know.

BERKETT: I went out to the Shushan Airport for lunch.

Bobbie: Did you?

BERKETT: I've had a big day. I've had a big day.

Bobbie: Well, you usually do Miss B.

BERKETT: I've had a big two, three weeks.

Bobbie: I know you have. You have a busier social schedule
than I do.

BERKETT: Tell my friends at the Collection hello. I don't know
if they remember me but...

CAVE: Yeah, and if you're ever down, let us know that you're coming down to the research center and I'll show you around.

BERKETT: I'm going to come down to see the Shakespearian stuff.

CAVE: Oh, you are? Oh, good. We have an exhibit called "Voices of Progress," too, which is about 20 women in New Orleans history in there, contributions.

Bobbie: Oh, how nice.

BERKETT: Where is that?

CAVE: That's in the Royal Street spot, and the Shakespeare thing is there too.

BERKETT: That's the 20 women available to see now?

CAVE: Yeah, uh-huh.

Bobbie: Is Miss B one of them?

CAVE: No.

Bobbie: Why not?

CAVE: I don't know. I apologize for that.

Bobbie: We should inquire about Mr. [Munroe's?] paintings too.

END OF AUDIO FILE