

7-3-2001

Jean Powell interview for a Wright State University History Course

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Jean Powell

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Repository Citation

Spangler, C., & Powell, J. (2001). Jean Powell interview for a Wright State University History Course. .
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Jean Powell

C.S. Where did you go to high school?

J.P. I went to Stivers High School.

C. S. What year did you graduate?

J.P. I graduated with the class of 1948.

C.S. If we're talking about the period when you were in high school and in your early twenties, what did you do for fun back then?

J. P. Most of the time I think of those times as concerned with music, dance because I had studied dance when I was a youngster and of course Big Band was the thing. And I had started going with my husband when I was fifteen years old and then I married him and so we followed dance bands around this area, the general area. There was a place in Springfield, Ohio where the Big Bands always came and we followed them and there was a Dixie Land jazz band that we followed in the general vicinity. So, I always think of those times as filled with music and dancing, jitterbugging. Jitterbugging was the thing of course.

C.S. What kind of things did you do on a date?

J.P. Oh well, our dates, I can remember going to the band shell over at Island Park and a whole bunch of us would just get together and go over and sit and listen to music. Of course, in my high school years everything was geared around kind of a social thing. In those days there were lots of sororities, quote, unquote, and groups so we had hayrides, wiener roasts, dances and of course going to the show. We often went out to eat. And I was not a meat eater so; I was always the odd man out. In those days I would always order lobster, which was one of the cheap things on the menu. And to this day when we go out for a really fancy meal I still order lobster tails. But now I'm the most expensive person to entertain.

C.S. Where did you go to see movies?

J.P. We went to, there were some absolutely beautiful fantastic movie houses in Dayton. The Victory was one of them, which has been restored to the Victoria. But it wasn't one of the big beautiful ones. Probably the most gorgeous one was right across the street from the Victory, called the Loew's Theater. It was opulent, it was just beautiful. There was also another one called Keith Theater and there was another one called the Colonial Theater. Most of our dates would be centered around going to the show and it was very inexpensive. When I was very young my cousin and I, I was raised with him like a brother almost, and he and I went to the show every week, every Saturday. We'd laugh, boy that was a great way to get rid of us on a Saturday because it cost a dime. The carfare was three cents each way. And so, it was a wonderful time, I think, because we had a lot of information like children will sit in front of the TV now, but we had more wide reaching experiences because we had to get on the street car or the bus and go downtown by ourselves and we never thought anything about it. We just

did it, because everybody did it. And then went to see the movies, and of course the movies were just fantasy kind of things too. So movies were important.

C.S. Who were some of your favorite actors or actresses?

J.P. Oh, well, there is Katherine Hepburn, has always been my all time favorite and of course, Gone with the Wind to this day is still one of my very favorites. I have tape of that now. I think I must have gravitated toward strong competent women even then. I think I liked those movies about the women who were not just a 40's or 50's housefrau.

C.S. Where did you like to shop?

J.P. Oh Rike's, no question. Rike's was the place, Rike's Kumler Company, actually was what it was called. And Elder and Johnson which was on the corner of Fourth and Main and it was not quite as well known as Rike's. But those two places and Billy Lewis, later on, I liked a lot. And as a youngster there was a shop close to Billy Lewis's called the Children's Shop where my mother knew the buyer and she often would take me in there and order something and when the buyer went to New York she would look for things for me. And my mother was a very accomplished knitter so I remember as a youngster having most of my clothing; my coats and hats were knitted because my mother was such a wonderful knitter. My grandmother was a wonderful seamstress, so I remember most of the time it was shopping for clothing. I didn't do much in terms of household goods except my grandmother had started me when I was in high school collecting my sterling silver, which was important in those days. Now the kids today don't really care about it. Shopping was Rike's and Elder and Johnson's.

C.S. What fashions were popular then?

J.P. Oh, in high school I can remember we had pleated skirts that came to about our knees and then we always had a sweater that came very low so you only had several inches of pleated skirt showing. And we had long strands of pearl, and also we had, I had knitted sets of collars and cuffs that my mother had made me out of white angora that went onto my cashmere sweater sets. And cashmere sweater sets were a must, you had to have those. A short sleeved sweater underneath and a long sleeved button down front sweater. And of course a must way that you had to have Spalding saddles and you never polished them, you just washed them and then they took on this beautiful patina. And that was in high school. And later on, when I was in my twenties, I suspect, because my grandmother was a very accomplished sewer, I had learned to sew. And so, I made most of my own clothes. And when I would really want to have something really beautiful, I would go downtown to Rike's and go into the Moraine Room which I really couldn't afford the clothing there. But I would go into the Moraine Room and look at something, see how it was constructed, see the design of it and then I would go home and I would kind of sketch a picture of it and make a pattern out of newspaper. And then I would buy a fabric that was comparable to the one I had seen. Between my grandmother and I, I would

make them. But we had suits that were very close fitted, very straight skirts, and I know my perfect length was just below the kneecap and that's where I wore my dresses for years and years and years. And, but the skirts were very straight, and the jackets were very fitted and often times they would have what we called a peplum out from that. And I know often times I would pick a very plain fabric, but I was very interested in designer buttons, and even still have some of the buttons off some of those suits I had. Blouses were important because you wore a nice, nice blouse under a good-looking suit. Swimming suits, two-piece, most of them were one piece, but one year I decided I wanted a two-piece. So I bought the wool and made a two-piece bathing suit. That was little boy shorts and I made one half black and the other half gray and on the top I made the other half gray, other black. You always had to have something different. And high heels and sometimes, ankle straps. And I know when I got married, my going away outfit was a three piece mauvey lavender color and I had, this sounds really wild today, purple snake skin small platform, ankle strap shoes that completed the outfit (laughs).

C.S. I guess, my next question was what kind of music did you listen to, but you talked about the Big Bands...

J.P. Big Bands, everything was Big Bands, and the ballads, you know, Frank Sinatra and Perry Como and little bit later was Rosemary Clooney. But the mellow ballads I think were probably, and then of course the silly songs, like Mares Eat Oats and Does Eat Oats and Little Lambs eat Ivy, but that was earlier. And Spike Jones and his funny band. So there was humorous music and ballads kind of music and Big Bands and jitterbug. So it was a fun, fun time.

C.S. What did you do for entertainment at home?

J.P. Well, I remember we played a lot of Scrabble, and we, Canasta, not Scrabble, that was later. And in my home, which was an extended kind of family because my, this was when I was in high school, my mother and I lived with my grandmother and grandfather. And there was a large extended family and every Saturday night all the brothers, my mother's brother and cousins would come over and they'd have this big Pinochle tournament, practically every Saturday night. So I can remember that. As a young person, we played Monopoly all the time. As a matter of fact a few months ago I ran into a man who had been one of our neighborhood buddies and he said he could remember, he said when ever I think of your house, I remember sitting on the porch playing Monopoly. Because when ever it was rainy or too hot we were always on the front porch playing Monopoly. In the early day there were, polio was a big, big factor, and so if you didn't go swimming, which we oftentimes we would ride our bikes over to Old River. I had a friend whose father was a foreman and every year, and I don't think it was quite kosher, but he would get me a swimming pass because his daughter was an only child and she was my best friend, so she and I could go swimming all the time. And then with my cousin Ted, we would ride our bicycles over to a park or we would ride our bicycles to Oak Day swimming pool and if we could get someone to take us over to Old River. We loved swimming in the

summer. We played a lot of records. We played records all the time. So, books, we had lots of books so reading was important. Just kind of hung out, with no TV.

C.S. I was going to ask, when did you get the first TV?

J.P. We got our first TV probably in the early 50's. And it was a teeny tiny little bitty thing. Of course, there wasn't much on except cowboys or wrestling and most of the time it was snow...

C.S. You kind of mentioned this one already, I was going to ask you on summer breaks or vacations what was the thing...?

J.P. Oh yeah, swimming. Swimming, we baked ourselves at the swimming pools, we lived at the swimming pools. When I was younger I spent my summers going from Girl Scout camps, because I was an avid Girl Scout, so my mother always made sure I went to Girl Scout camp. And there were times when I would get home from one camp on Sunday night, my mother would try to get all my clothing ready because on the next Monday or Tuesday I would leave for church camp. Or there would be a day camp or there'd be some kind of camp. So I oftentimes spent summers at camps. And there were a whole group of us that did this. I didn't go alone, a group of neighborhood kids, Girl Scouts. I have a group of friend that we started in kindergarten together and there were three or four of us that started in kindergarten and then we added little friends as they came in like in the third grade. One of my best friends that is now married to my cousin, makes her kind of related to me, but we are still are really good friends, and we still get together. In fact two weeks ago we had a big party. So those early elementary and high school days those friends are still some of my best friends.

C.S. Who were your role models?

J.P. Probably my grandmother and my mother. That sounds so trite, but that's probably, my grandmother was a very, she was a large woman, very tall for that day. She was probably 5'8" and she was very into going to church and she belonged to the Easter Star and she belonged to the Good Will arm of collecting things. So I had an early sense of contributing something to my community. I think I got that from my grandmother. My mother was working all the time, which was also unusual. Because I was from a ... and my high school and elementary grades, my mother was a single parent at that time, which was also unusual. There weren't many kids who I knew who had divorced parents. So my mother was working all the time, my mother was very attractive and one of the things that I always remember was that my mother bleached her hair blonde. And it was really kind of risqué in those days, but we were all under the influence of what we saw in the movies. And there was Carol Lombard and all those blondes and my mother was a bleached blonde lady. And to this day I've never done anything to my hair, and I think it's a kick back to, you know, and often times, I can remember sometimes children were not so kind about that, that I was the child of a divorced family and my mother had bleached hair. But I really, really

always thought she was very wonderful, beautiful. And I said my grandmother was one of those super women who did everything. She was kind of a matriarch of our whole family. She had five children, three sons, and two daughters. I saw how she just ruled everything in our family. She was probably my role model.

C.S. What neighborhood did you grow up in?

J.P. I was a Belmont girl. It was a very middle class community in those days. Some people from Wright Patterson Air Force Base were neighbors, people who owned Mohler's Belmont Dairy were neighbors, so I was a Belmont girl. And in fact, you know our Riverscape, when they started having the bricks for sale. I'm signed up for one of the bricks for this group of girls. We called ourselves the, we first started in the sixth or seventh grade, we thought we had to have a name for this group of girls, so we called ourselves Delta Cateria because my grandmother said Cateria was an organizational name. Well then when we got older we found out that that wasn't quite Greek enough. So we changed our names to Delta Chi and eventually became just the D.C. girls. So there is a brick at Riverscape that says D.C. girls Belmont Elementary, Stivers High School. But I was a Belmont girl.