LEXINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS, INC.

Interview
Nancy Earsy
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Interview conducted by Richard Robbat
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NE: I am Nancy Earsy. I live here in Lexington on Parker Street which is just two blocks from Lexington Green, and I have lived here for about twenty-one years now. I was living here in 1971, and was involved in the events of Memorial Day when four hundred and fifty-eight people were arrested. I was one of those people who were arrested.

INT: How long had you lived in Lexington prior to 1971?

NE: We moved in 1960, soon after we were married. We wanted to come to Lexington because it was pretty. It was green. It had a good school system and even though we didn't have any children yet that was important to us. Also, my husband was working at that time in Bedford, so it was a convenient place to live in terms of his commuting.

NT: Were you originally from this part of the country?

NE: Well, I was born in Ayer, Massachusetts, but I grew up in Ohio, and when I graduated from Oberlin College, I moved back to Massachusetts. It was where I had always visited my grandparents. My grandfather Franklin lived in Winchester and so New England was the place I wanted to be and Boston seemed like a really exciting city at that time. It still does.

INT: Were you involved in the town, any town organizations prior to 1971?

NE: Yes, I have been very active in the League of Women Voters and I had worked some with the Civil Rights group in terms of housing, and my husband and I had been somewhat involved in an effort to facilitate development of low and moderate income housing here in Lexington. We were concerned that Lexington was becoming a place where people like us

might not be able to live anymore. This was even back 1970 before the real estate prices of the late eighties had skyrocketed. That's still rather incomprehensible to me.

INT: How many children did you have at that time?

NE: I had two little boys. They were about six or seven at that time, and they went to Hancock School which is right here in the neighborhood. It has been made into condominiums now.

INT: Were you at all involved in the preliminary plans for this march [on the Green] by the [Vietnam] Veterans Against the War?

NE: I think the proper way to think about that is, I was part of a support effort. In fact, about ten days or so before the march. When the veterans came on Memorial Day, I had been at a meeting at Norma's [McGavern-Norland's] house. She was chairman of the Citizens for Participation Politics then, and they had received a request to help provide food for the veterans. That was kind of the first I heard of it, maybe the first anybody had heard of it, and we were going to prepare spaghetti for the Saturday night supper. The people in Concord fed them the previous night because their plans were to camp at the National Park there. So, as far as I was concerned, my role was going to be cooking spaghetti sometime on Saturday. That was where it started out. That isn't the way it turned out, though. Along the way the veterans had asked the Selectmen for permission to march through the town to distribute literature, to camp.

On a Monday, the Selectmen granted them permission to march through the town, but turned them down with no alternative on their request for camping. That was kind of a concern because they were definitely planning to do this and they already had anchored themselves at Concord with permission from the National Park. The Selectmen reconsidered on Thursday. I think I was at that meeting then, and they voted three to two to not change their vote—I guess they voted against reconsideration, but they voted not to offer an alternative site, not to offer the Green, which was one

of the places that had been requested. I was becoming concerned because this was a group that had a plan and they were going to do what they needed to do to dramatize their views against the war anyway. It seemed to me that the situation was heading for a confrontation. I was very concerned because it seemed like Lexington should be as open-minded as Concord was, and we weren't offering hospitality to the veterans. I was concerned about that. There were phone calls on Friday, and it seemed to me that sometime Friday I began being concerned because we were hearing rumors that people might be arrested, or that something might happen. I thought that we were going to need some legal help. So I began to call around. I made two kinds of calls. I tried to call politicians who might intervene and get the Selectmen to reconsider and to think about what they were doing, whether they might be more hospitable. The other kind of call I made was calling some people who were lawyers here in town to see if they would be available in case their services were needed. I think it was probably Saturday morning when I got Julian Soshnik, and Julian said he was going to be around and would stand by and help us if we needed it. So Julian became our lawyer for some of the ensuing events.

INT: What was the nature of your concern? You talked about being concerned; what does that word mean to you?

NE: It was a little unfocused at that time. I suppose some of it relates back to an experience that I had the year previous which shaped my views on what it was like, what anti-war protests could lead to. You remember, the year before was Kent State. The students were killed at Kent State. Four students were killed by the National Guard. A group of people was protesting and four students were killed. I have a picture of it. [Holds up a collage and points at a photograph of a grieving student at Kent State bending over a student who was killed.] That's a famous picture now. She is upset. Her friend is dead there in front of her, and here is the headline. I was in Washington when Kent State happened. I was at a League of

Women Voters Conference. I was there for a week. It was the first time I had been away from my husband for a week since I had children and was in the hospital, had babies, and I went there for the League of Women Voters Convention. What happened was, in the middle of the week the students were killed at Kent State. You remember that universities and colleges closed down and the students were ready to march on Washington, and our League of Women Voters passed some sort of mild expression of sympathy with the students. Having had this death, and having had the violence out of Kent State, the atmosphere in Washington was just electric, and students were pouring in. I was really concerned that there would be more deaths and more violence, and as a mother and as an older person I thought I needed to do something.

It wasn't really clear what I could do but, anyway, I was helping the students, and I decided I would stay down for the demonstration. I would extend my stay beyond what I should. I called my husband to tell him what I was doing and he said he would come down. So he drove down with the kids in our station wagon. I still feel it, because he just did it. He picked up hitchhikers, which is very unlike my husband. Some of them were coming down to the demonstration, and so the kids and Bob and the hitchhikers all drove down for the demonstration. We left Paul and David, our children, with Bob's sister in Silver Spring. At that time I felt that we were at risk ourselves because I didn't know what would happen in Washington, and I wasn't sure how much Bob knew that. That wasn't something we talked about but I felt that if anything did happen to us, at least they were with their guardian. I was not sure…I felt torn between my responsibilities to my children and my responsibilities to standing up for expression, more than anything else, and the students—the fear that I had that they might be killed. I remember looking for my longest dress. We were wearing our skirts very short at that time, and [I wanted to wear] my most respectable looking outfit so that if I looked very middle class and

very respectable and as old as I could, maybe the students wouldn't get shot. That's very magical thinking, but there was a notion that if the politicians could see that mainstream people like myself and my husband were in support of the students' right of expression that maybe they wouldn't shoot, and maybe nothing would happen, and really nothing did happen. Bob and I were named "New Mobe" [mobilization] marshals and I saved this [pointing at the collage where "New Mobe" ribbon is displayed] because it meant a lot to me. Marshals were to sort of keep the peace and help handle scuffles. I don't know what we would really have done if there was a scuffle—we did smell tear gas at one time—but there were really no scuffles and that was the second time that I had seen so many military people in a place that otherwise has always been a tourist spot for me. Washington DC is a nice tourist spot, but with all those police and soldiers around it had a very different kind of feeling to it than it does when you are down to look at the museums. It was scary.

INT: Are you saying that the concern then was a fear that there could be violence in Lexington?

NE: I don't know how conscious it was. There was knowledge that there could be violence in Lexington. Did I really think that our police force and our Selectmen would do that? I don't know. I really am not sure. I knew that theoretically it could happen, and I certainly knew that people did get arrested for demonstrating, and so my practical [view] was, we will need legal help. I don't think I had taken it to that step, but I had gone to Washington, I had been in Washington and had participated in this. When something came in my own backyard that I saw as the same issue again, I had to be involved. It didn't start out that way, as I said. It started out cooking spaghetti, but it turned out differently.

INT: Before we get into that…was the Lexington League of Women Voters involved in any preparation or awareness in terms of the march?

NE: No, no. I mentioned the League as an activity that I had been very involved in. I was local president at one time. I was not at this particular time. I mentioned that because it is part of my activist approach to things. The League approach is more study, consensus, and the League was not really taking a clear position on the war itself. The League had worked with students in terms of the democratic process, had encouraged voter registration, particularly after Kent State. I was involved at the state level with some of those efforts, to help the students learn the process, give them tips on things like that, things that the League was good at, but the League was not taking a direct position on the war at that time, which in some ways disappointed me because I did have a position and I was not in support of the war. I thought that we needed to stop it. The earrings [in the form of peace signs] that I have on I dug out because I had them at that time, and they expressed what I felt. I wasn't wearing them at the time that we got arrested but they were something I wore in those days.

INT: You took us through Saturday morning and contacting the lawyers and getting increasingly concerned as it didn't appear as though the situation was going to be resolved. What happened Saturday?

NE: A lot. Saturday was a busy day and kind of a blur for me part of the time. I did make a lot of phone calls in the morning. I think I also did something with the children. They were still pretty young and needed some parental attention; I probably gave them lunch, and in the afternoon I went down to Follen Church to cook spaghetti. That was what I signed up for. I remember I wanted to make really good spaghetti with meat and celery and, you know, good stuff in it, like we do at home, and we had to take some shortcuts. There wasn't as much really good stuff in that spaghetti. I wanted to give the veterans kind of a nice meal. I figured they would be hungry, but that kind of took a back seat. I remember being in Follen Church, in the kitchen there, the great, big pots that we had, and the big black stove, and full of spaghetti sauce like that, and I sort of kept plugging

at this spaghetti sauce, and other people came in and out, and it seemed like there was a lot of excitement. Other people had lunch with the veterans and I didn't. I was doing more mundane things like cooking spaghetti. So I finished cooking spaghetti sometime and went home, and I think I gave my children some supper, but maybe their father did. I really can't remember.

Then there was a meeting that evening down in the Town Hall. I still haven't figured out whether it was a special Selectmen's meeting, or just kind of a general meeting. The Selectmen were there and were kind of presiding over it. There were also some Lexington clergy there, and there were a whole of townspeople. There were a few veterans, but I believe most of them were on the Green conducting their own discussions and relaxing, eating spaghetti, and things, just there. But there were a lot of people in Town Hall, and they were speaking to the Selectmen about whether or not the veterans ought to be permitted to camp there, and opinion was divided on that issue. It was clear… but the meeting ran something like seven or seven thirty through to—I don't know, nine or nine-thirty, with a lot of views and a lot of rather heated comments, and then the Selectmen agreed or decided that they were going to meet with the veterans, a few leaders of the veterans, and there would be some clergy people present. I guess they were observers. Anyway, they went off to do that. They did that at Saint Brigid's, I believe; I don't know where in Saint Brigid's. Pretty much the meeting emptied out, and a lot of people went down to the Green. Probably some people went home at that point, but there were a lot of people on the Green. I went down on the Green, too, and then when the Selectmen and the veterans came out of the meeting I remember hearing them say something. I think I saw John Kerry at that point because he was one of the leaders of the veterans. The Selectmen announced that they were going to continue to enforce the curfew, and the veterans announced that they were planning to camp. I think they invited anyone from the town who wanted to join them to do so. It was kind of

hospitality. They would welcome company if anybody wanted to stay, and I saw some of my friends down there. Some of them had sleeping bags, so a good number of townspeople had decided that they would stay with the veterans if that was the way it turned out, and it was.

INT: Let's try to separate two distinct periods, and maybe they are not that distinct, but the two periods anyway on the Green that evening, the post-Town Meeting atmosphere as you remember it and then the post announcement by the Selectmen that the curfew would remain in effect after the meeting with the veterans. Prior to announcement later that evening, what was your recollection about what was going on at the Green at the time?

NE: At first it seemed to me that a lot of people were excited by the general atmosphere, what was going on, actually before and after. I didn't feel that way. I felt kind of disappointed and depressed after the announcement was made. It was like, oh, no, this is not what I want to have happen. I was also very, very tired at that point. I was exhausted because I had been going and I had been on my feet pretty much all afternoon. So I went home to get some rest. I wanted to go back to the Green if and when people got arrested. I basically went home to take a nap, and I didn't want to risk really going to bed because I was afraid I would sleep through everything. So I brought my sleeping bag, laid down here on this floor [points at the living from floor], and I lay down and I took a little nap on this floor in my sleeping bag. It was pretty warm that night. In fact, it was a lovely evening, and you could smell the lilacs in the air. It was really, really pretty and, of course, I can walk two blocks easily so I'd walked back and forth.

Then I woke up. I woke up to hear the bells, the church bells in First Parish. They were ringing. First Parish, it's just two blocks from my house. In the winter I can stand on my porch and look through bare trees and see the steeple there. Anyway, I heard the bell, and I knew it was time

to go. So I got up. This was around three in the morning, I believe. I got up and went down to the Green to get arrested, and that's what I did. I got on the bus and went to the Town Barn. That was the "jail" that was being used for us. The Town Barn was where the Department of Public Works keeps the trucks. It's a fairly large, modern building, with grease on the floor, I might add—not too much. It's a fairly clean property as town barns go, but there was some grease on the floor. It's a vast, huge structure and that was where we were temporarily housed until a little bit later Sunday morning when we were all bused over to Concord Court. There was some booking and there were different things that happened at the Barn, but we were bused over to Concord Court, and we were taken alphabetically, and since my name was Earsy with an E I was sort of high up in the alphabet, and I remember being in the same bus with the Davies. I think I was in the same bus with Nancy [Engels], and we were taken over to court.

Our lawyer, Julian Soshnik, had done some advising. I believe he was in the Town Barn with us, advising us, and he had explained to everyone what *nolo contendre* means. As one of the options, he had explained, what we were being charged with was being on the Green after ten o'clock at night and basically violating a town park ordinance. There was also the injunction which we would be in violation of; but in order to prove that in court you have to prove that people knew it, that they heard it and they knew it, so if somebody says, "I didn't hear it," you haven't got a real good case on that. The third charge that was potentially there and that was originally planned was disorderly conduct, and Julian got that thrown out. None of us were disorderly. We marched very neatly into the buses and some of people who didn't get on the bus but who wanted to be arrested were quite disappointed. So we were hardly disorderly; and, as a matter of fact, the police were very courteous. It was Lexington police, but there were some police from other towns, I believe. They were very courteous in terms of their arrest of us, as it were. They had a bunch of willing people

marching into the buses. So disorderly conduct wasn't anything that could stick either. Those charges were dismissed. Basically what we were pleading to, *nolo contendre* or "no contest," was violating a town ordinance. Yes, we were on the Green after ten o'clock at night and that's not allowed in Lexington—or it wasn't then—and the fine for that was five or ten dollars. So we paid our fine and we were free to leave. I remember that I went through that process and then went out and [husband] Bob, and [sons] Paul and David were waiting for me. I drove home and I think probably took some other people with us, but I really don't remember. I was pretty exhausted by the whole thing at that point.

INT: Was there any type of agreement between you and your husband who was to stay home, or were you both in agreement to a degree about a statement or the issues involved with the veterans; or how did—since he stayed—did he stay home while you were out, or what type of dialogue ensued between the two of you regarding your role in this?

NE: I participated and Bob stayed here. Someone had to stay with the children. I don't think that Bob at that time saw it quite the same way as I did. I connected it very clearly to Washington and saw it as the same thing, and I think at that particular time he didn't. He was seeing it more like a local issue—more like dog leash law, or some of the things we debate at Town Meeting—and so he didn't quite see the context in the same way that I did at that time. Since then we have talked about it and I think he understands where I was coming from more clearly now than he did at that time. I don't think he would have chosen to be arrested. I don't think he would have seen that as a particularly useful thing to do, and I saw it as a necessary thing to do to be in solidarity with the veterans so that it wasn't just outside people who were participating in this, so that it was clear that other people supported these views against the war, and supported that there should be an expression [of those views].

INT: Which do you think in your mind took priority, the expression of the views, or an anti-war statement?

NE: For me it was the expression of the views. I thought a lot about that because I needed to clarify my own thoughts on this. It was clear for me both in Washington and here in Lexington that it really was the right to express one's self that was primary. I certainly thought the war was bad. I had written countless letters, some of which are in this family album, and maybe we can get a couple of shots of this album later in terms of some of the pictures that are in it, but I had written a lot of letters to politicians. That was how you expressed yourself. That was what I had learned in the League of Women Voters. That's how you get change. So I certainly was pretty clear about what my own views were on the war, which was that we ought to be out. But the primary issue was people's right to speak out under the First Amendment, their right to petition their government about the issues when they disagreed with the course that the government was taking. If that isn't there, there isn't anything else. I did feel that, in retrospect, thinking more about it, it's very clear. In both the Washington situation and in this Lexington situation my perception was that I was helping the rights of others more than my own right to speak out. That's not entirely logical because if somebody else doesn't have the right to speak out, maybe you won't either next time, but because I was in the Washington setting older than the students whose rights had been trampled, and, because in Lexington I was someone who lived here rather than someone from outside town, I felt that it was my responsibility to be the host and be a guardian, as it were, for other people's right to state their views.

INT: Tell us something about what happened after the arrests were over, the subsequent week.

NE: Well, people were upset. There were certainly a lot of letters in the *Minuteman* that next week. After I came back from Concord Court, I probably took a nap some time that afternoon because I was so tired, but

then I woke up and I was angry about what had happened because it seemed to me that it was such a needless confrontation. It was so avoidable, that the Selectmen could have offered an alternative site back earlier in the week and things could have worked out in a way. I was angry at our local government decision-making. I thought it was the wrong decision and I wrote…one of the letters in the *Minuteman* was mine, and I expressed this feeling and invited people who felt similarly to call me. I also had done some calling, and some people did call me. Various people who had been arrested and been concerned about this decided that we needed to meet to figure out what to do next. We had a meeting on I think it was June 6th, but it was the day before the Selectmen's meeting. More than a hundred people came to that meeting. I remember making nearly a hundred phone calls on Sunday, and I believe the meeting was a Sunday night. We met and we talked about what we needed to do right then in preparation for the special Selectmen's meeting that was coming up the next night, to see if there was any consensus on a statement that we could make for that meeting. We also talked about what else we might do and there were several subcommittees. One of them was to work on town politics and leaning towards the idea of running candidates in opposition to the current Selectmen who had made the decision with which we disagreed.

Another group was a pardon subcommittee. This was one of the ideas that our lawyer Julian Soshnik had, because when people do something that is not in itself wrong, this is one way that you could get that point across. It wasn't that having an arrest record because one violated a Green ordinance was necessarily going to harm anyone. Although I remember being advised by a lawyer other than Julian Soshnik hearing [that] because I had applied to law school, that I might be concerned because I might not want to be arrested because lawyers had to have good moral character and that might be a blemish on my moral character. My reaction to that was that had to be nonsense; and at any rate having an arrest for violating a

town ordinance is probably not going to keep one from being a lawyer or much of anything else, but it was a way to focus attention on this. The idea was in part to use it as an organizing tool, and to get a lot of signatures from people in town that would make it very clear that lots of people—not just those who were arrested—didn't agree with the Selectmen's decision, and use the pardon petition as a vehicle to do this. That group worked through the summer. We wrote away to people, the veterans who didn't live in town, inviting them if they wished to participate with us, to sign this and get it back, and Julian would file the pardon petition on behalf of all who signed. That happened sometime in the summer, and then we did the pardon petition drive in the winter, in December. It was all organized and this is some of the follow up. This was getting organized and so was a campaign to run someone in opposition to the Chairman of the [Board of] Selectmen.

These were follow-on activities to get a change in the system and to make it very clear that this kind of policy wasn't okay in Lexington. I remember it stretched out over several months. In March the vote did go in favor of the opposition candidate whose name was Sanborn Brown. He was a professor at MIT, and he had supported the idea of the right of people to speak out in a freer atmosphere. That was part of what he presented as his views in running, and he won, and the then Chairman of the Board of Selectmen was retired in that vote. Looking at this I consider that the event itself was a catalyzing event. It was very dramatic for some people, for lots of people, those who were arrested and those who weren't. It caused a great deal of controversy within the town. Reading the letters in the *Minuteman*, both pro and con—they are pretty fervent on both sides. A lot of the discussion focuses on whether it was right or wrong to camp on the Green, whether it was right or wrong to use this tool to speak out. It is interesting, the issue of whether the war is right or wrong is not as strongly in there. It

had become a local issue, in my perspective, about our Green, and about free speech.

That's how I remember it, and about correcting that process through the political process. That's the ongoing maintenance that we all have to do, is to keep at that political process. Once in a while in our lifetime we participate in something really big like what I did in Washington, like this Green arrest, but the rest of the time we have to make sure that the people who understand the process are in power and that they will protect that process that keeps the options open for people who disagree and people who agree with the way things are going now and the way they will go in the future. That is the League of Women Voters part of it for me. That is what I learned in the League. That's what I continue to think is important, and it's hard sometimes. It gets boring. You see the same old issues. It's never finished. People who weren't there at the time…all the people who are ten years old today don't have any knowledge of that. Even some of the people who are twenty years old today don't have any knowledge of that, or very minimal knowledge because they were infants at the time.

INT: Do you think that it is important that this event be brought to the forefront in terms of the history of the town?

NE: I am very glad that this project—getting people to tape what they thought happened, their perspective—is going forward, and I hope that we can get all viewpoints on it. I think that it is very important. For me it was personally important, but the issue is important because when a town like Lexington—that is ordinarily so rational and debates things at great lengths with great care in its Town Meeting—can arrest four hundred and fifty-eight people, that's an important issue for people, not just in Lexington, but everywhere.

INT: Well said. Let me ask you one other question. You sort of summarized, in your perspective, the short-term impact on the town. What do you think, was there a long-range impact on the town?

NE: Certainly people remember this, and I hope that we will be able to interview some of the people who were supportive of the Selectmen's view and get their perspective on it. My understanding was that they were very angry, that they felt that it was outsiders and newcomers who were creating waves, essentially. That was my perception of how people felt who were not in agreement with me, and I don't know whether they still feel that way, or whether time has mellowed their viewpoints as well, but nothing is ever finished. I don't know that there are strong residual feelings. It was twenty years ago now, but was it important for the town? Could it happen again? I would hope that through this project we would show what did happen and convey that the right of free speech is a really important thing. There are ways to talk to each other that we don't need to get to that kind of confrontation, and a lot of the letters—maybe some of them will be shown as part of this series—get at that point, that we do need to talk to each other. I do remember that even the Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, with whom I mostly disagreed, made that point in at least one of the follow-up meetings, that it was important to talk and listen, and that it was important to allow people to speak on both sides of the issue. That was the way that that initial meeting after the arrest was conducted, and that was one of the themes in letters in the *Minuteman* and in some of the subsequent discussions, so I think, at least in the short term, there was an awareness that that was an important value. I hope that this series will reinforce that.

END OF INTERVIEW