LEXINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS, INC.

Interview
Bonnie Jones
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Interview conducted by Norma McGavern-Norland
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BJ: I'm Bonnie Jones, and I've lived in Lexington since 1963, moved here when my first-born daughter was a couple of months old. Right about the time that John Kennedy was shot. I've lived in Lexington ever since. I had all three children here.

INT: Why did you move to Lexington?

BJ: I think we chose our house because it was a sort of countryish town and offered a lot of the amenities we were looking for—a good school system, some space, and so forth, and looked like a nice town to live in. We didn't know anybody here at the time. We met people fairly quickly after we moved in. I joined the Civil Rights Committee, the Fair Housing committee, fairly soon after I moved to Lexington and was pretty active with that whole movement during the 1960's and into the 1970's.

INT: Was Lexington like other communities surrounding it at that time in having an active civil rights organization?

BJ: It was similar to some of the suburban communities around Boston. It had the reputation of being more liberal than some of the neighboring towns. My own theory about this is Lexington has a lot of university connections to Cambridge and Harvard and MIT, and professional people who are perhaps a little more on the liberal side of things than maybe some of the other communities. And like-minded folks tend to move into the same communities, I think.

INT: What did you think about the atmosphere of the town in political terms?

BJ: Around 1963 the racial issue in housing was a pretty hot one. And the Fair Housing Committee was a committee that organized a lot of the

suburban communities around Boston to open up the housing market. The Fair Housing legislation had been passed for home ownership, single-family home ownership. There was a lot of testing of the law. Lexington was relatively open, but still we did run across some resistance. I remember the first meeting I went to—I signed up to track cheap houses in town that could be available for black families that might want to move to the suburbs. I went through the listing and found all the houses for less than $20,000 and listed them. Then we would talk to people who were interested in having help finding housing. We would take them around and show them houses and some were sold.

INT: Were these issues threatening do you think at the time in the town?

BJ: To some people I think they were.

INT: Were you aware of any opposition?

BJ: Yes, there was some, certainly. Later in the sixties we got into more of it. It wasn't so much that the racial issues as the economic one, the low-income housing issue. So that income became the barrier, the more obvious barrier than race. But the same issues were happening on both of those.

INT: Could you characterize the people who were the other activists in this area that you worked with?

BJ: We talk about certain sections of town that seemed to be more resistant. I think there was more resistance among people who felt more threatened in terms of their neighborhoods. And I think that's universal. People with less money tend to be more threatened by new people coming into their turf. The that the racial issue was clouded over and not openly talked about. It was more, those people from the city are going to come and ruin our town, and their habits are going to be less desirable. And they are going to throw trash and do all of those things that inner-city types were

thought to do. In terms of numbers of people who felt like that, I don't know. But there was certainly some resistance.

INT: How would this connect with the Vietnam War?

BJ: I remember being very struck when Martin Luther King decided to come out against the war, which I believe was in 1965 or 1966, somewhere in there. I was aware of the war, I didn't think about it a whole lot, because I was very involved with more domestic issues, social justice and so forth and I never really connected the two. When he came out against the war, I was initially thinking, oh dear, what's going to happen to the [civil rights] movement, because the whole country is going to be opposed to him. He is sidetracking the movement, and all this kind of thing, and I was kind of disappointed. I remember the Civil Rights Committee discussing it, and there was difference of opinion within the group. But then gradually over the next couple of years it became pretty apparent to me and to others that the two issues were very connected. My thought before that was—I just didn't want to complicate things. Things were hard enough to try to get these things accomplished, and to have another issue thrown in, that seemed to just muddy the waters. I initially didn't like the idea, but clearly there was no way to not deal with it. As it became more and more obvious, I was one of many that decided to join that movement, too.

INT: What had been going on?

BJ: I remember the first actual demonstration that I went to was in New York in 1967—I had been in some little kinds of stuff around, but I hadn't done anything that major. My husband and I went to New York. It was actually the first time we had been away from our two young kids at the time. It was before my third one was born, and it was a weekend away, so we were kind of excited about that. I remember just being absolutely amazed at the number of people at this demonstration. I thought, if this many people show up, the war can't go on. It was something like three

hundred thousand people in Central Park getting geared up to go on this march down, I guess it was Fifth Avenue. I thought, my God, there's just so many people here, they will have to listen. But what I didn't realize is in a city the size of New York you can have a demonstration like that and two blocks over nobody notices. But it was a very exciting time and we marched from Central Park down to the U.N. It was quite a thrill to realize that there were that many people who really were willing to hit the streets; at that time hitting the streets, for me anyway, was a big deal. I had never done anything like that before.

INT: Do you remember anything, any of those activities happening in the year that this event happened in Lexington in 1971?

BJ: I went to Washington again, I think it was in 1969, and again, massive amounts of people. At that time there were busloads from the Boston area, and Lexington had a bus or two that we filled and went down. It actually arrived when the march was over. So we missed the essential part of the march but we got there in time to hear Pete Seeger singing, and it was a pretty exciting thing. Then there were small marches here in town. Every Friday some people would march around the flagpole on Lexington Green. There was a crew of at times maybe twenty-five, thirty people that would march around in a circle. I remember there was a time that we got some complaints we were wearing a hole in the grass from going around in a circle, but this was the same Lexington Green, of course, that we all got arrested on in 1971. That was going on for a number of years, that every Friday we would for an hour march around the flagpole.

INT: Did you know most of the people who held the same views that you did and who went to other marches with you? Was it a kind of a friendly group of people that knew one another? Were you all strangers? Did you do it as individuals? What was the feeling like?

BJ: There were networks of people. The people I knew in town were active in similar political organizations—Civil Rights, Fair Housing—and they were sort of interlocked. I certainly didn't know all the people in town that were involved, but there were people from different kinds of groups. The Political Action Committee of the time I was peripherally involved in, other people were involved more. The Democratic Town Committee I believe had a lot of people active in it. So there were these various groups, and they overlapped. Some would join groups that they were attracted to for one reason or another, and some people were attracted to party politics. Some people were attracted more to special interests—what we now call special interest groups—specific interest groups around either civil rights or other social justice issues. And the anti-war movement really bridged all of those in the suburbs. Of course the student movements were more in town, but I think in the community, in Lexington and the other suburban communities we knew each other in the different communities, too. All the Fair Housing people knew each other, and the Democratic Town Committee people knew each other across community lines. The League of Women Voters had some people in it that were active with anti-war things, and then some who were not. It was a range of folks.

INT: Would you describe it as a network of people who shared an interest in the opposition to Vietnam?

BJ: Yes, and [there were] varying reasons for it. I had one friend who I thought was really radical compared to most people in Lexington. She had always been from day one against the war, and had always been out on the cutting edge of progressive issues and I always thought of myself as being a little more moderate than that, but compared to other people, I was radical fringe. So you get this range of folks, and I think there was a good feeling, a lot of friendships, that cut across these lines, and it was a good bunch of folks.

INT: How would you describe your typical so-called, as you put it, radical activist at the time, or maybe a couple of typical radical activists? What kind of people were they? What kinds of interests did they have?

BJ: This particular person was an artist. But as these ideas filtered into my consciousness—it always takes me time to process things. Being a sort of skeptical person I would take my time to decide—okay, is this a good idea or not? And there was also the whole thing about my government behaving so badly, and it took some time to have it really penetrate. Having been raised in the fifties, basically a child of the Cold War when Communism was in all my little weekly readers—Communism, those were the bad guys—and in my bones was this belief that the United States really is a good place, and our values are right, and desperados and dictators and Communists all were in this other camp. Until I went to college and met my first Democrat I was a pretty conservative person. I didn't know that, but I was, and then things gradually opened up for me. In the late fifties I really began to see things differently, but still I had this trust in the government being basically good—screw up sometimes and all that, but basically good. I think the Vietnam War was quite an incredibly discouraging realization that this is really bad stuff, evil stuff, and that was kind of a profound thing to recognize. I forget what the question was that started all of that.

INT: I asked you if you could characterize some of the other people who were active with you.

BJ: Some of the people that were active with me had come to these conclusions much sooner in their lives than I had, earlier in their lives, and had been on the edge, on the outer fringe of the political spectrum and did not believe in the mainstream.

INT: What is the "outer fringe?"

BJ: In terms of party politics. I had always believed in voting and being part of the political process and not outside of it. Some people—I wouldn't say many, some people, and I would say quite a small group in this range—were not part of that process, did not really believe in participating in party politics because it was all worthless. Most of the people, however, in the Lexington community really did believe in being part of the process, the so-called mainstream, and participating in it and trying to change it from within. In the sixties though, and certainly in the late sixties when the Black Power movement came along and some of the groups that really shook up the mainstream, some people joined that view—that you have to be outside of it. You can't participate. Everybody has their way of doing things, and I think at this point I look back and I think—it's all necessary. Everybody just picks their place to work.

INT: Were these pretty much family people? In other words, people with families who were active?

BJ: Yes, and I think that's just a reflection of the town, that's what the town had to offer. At that time not too many single people lived in Lexington. Lexington was a family town and I think it still is, but certainly a lot more people are single.

INT: Men and women pretty much equally as far as you can recall?

BJ: Yes, I think so. The women at the time had more time on their hands, and the Women's Movement really hadn't gotten started yet, although it was around this time the first women's group that I was in got started. It was in 1971, and it was no accident that the Women's Movement came out of that same period. We started a consciousness-raising group and that had a big impact on my life, and the other people's, too. But in the sixties and when this thing was happening, the women in town who were active were, by and large, not working. They were home with their kids, putting a lot of energy into political activity. Probably because it interested

them, and probably because they had the time available. They were basically volunteering their time, and the men, by and large, were working for a living and didn't have as much time, but did participate. I think women did most of the work. That's my perception. Perhaps it is a little bit biased, but I think that the real energy and enthusiasm for a lot of this stuff did come from the women. If we could look back and see who took leadership roles it might be kind of interesting, because I think the women did some of that, but I think men took more leadership roles perhaps than they deserved or earned—and things have changed since then.

INT: What happened that you could recall that led up to these events on Memorial Day 1971? Were you involved in pre-Memorial Day events, whatever they were?

BJ: I wasn't. I certainly didn't have a leadership role in that whole thing, but I remember being involved. I went to some meetings. I think I went to the first meeting the Selectmen had when the vets asked permission to use the Green, and I was certainly aware of the struggle that was going on. I do remember the morning of the day of the arrest, going back and forth to my house and my kids, sharing babysitting off and on with my husband. My memory is that in the morning we were down at the town hall.

INT: Saturday morning?

BJ: Saturday morning, at the time when the Selectmen were making up their minds whether or not to pursue the injunction, I guess it was. I remember Allan Kenney, one of the Selectmen, coming out of the trailer where the Selectmen were meeting. (It was a temporary building while they were building a new office.) He came out to announce that the Selectmen had decided to pursue the restriction of the vets not being…not allowing them to stay on the Green, and I remember feeling very disappointed, thinking, oh dear, why are they are being so, you know, about

it. I remember that meeting and then later going to Fiske Hill, which is now part of the National Park System on the edge of Lexington where the vets were having their lunch, and I remember that meeting. I don't remember specifics about what people said, or who spoke, but I just remember the feeling I had, this ominous feeling that something is going to happen here, and it began to really sink in to me that a confrontation was very likely. It wasn't that I was afraid so much as I was really feeling oh—conflict, and oh this is going to be very unpleasant, and people are going to be coming up against each other. I don't think I was worried about anybody being hurt so much as that I was really disappointed the town was taking this position, and I started to feel uneasy about what was going to happen.

INT: Were you surprised?

BJ: I don't know if I was surprised. That's really hard to say.

INT: Why do you think the Selectmen took such a hard line?

BJ: What I thought then and what I think now, it's hard to separate. I do believe what many others have said, that they just didn't have a long view. They saw their job as keeping order in the town and what was happening was going to possibly cause disorder and they would be responsible and they should not let this happen. How much of their choice to go with this injunction had to do with their position on the war… I suspect that it was congruent with their position on the war to oppose these guys staying in the town, but their "stage" reason was that it would upset the community. It would damage the grass, and it might get out of hand. I think that might have been a reason, and it might have been a legitimate reason to say no. I don't know what I would have done if I was a Selectman. I hope if I was in that position, I would have [taken] the long view—to say, yes.

INT: What do you think they were afraid of?

BJ: I think they were afraid of disorder. There was a lot of stuff on TV about heads being beaten in, and people being disorderly and so forth at various demonstrations in Washington and around. In 1968 in Chicago Mayor Daley is punching people, and that was a pretty ugly scene. So if those were the images they had about what might happen, I could see them being real resistant to allowing it. However, of course, one could say the police caused most of that problem.

INT: The police in Lexington?

BJ: No, I am saying that in the other demonstrations people did not handle them well when there was violence. A lot has been learned about managing crowds since then, but I do think they didn't want to disrupt the town, or have anybody disrupt the town. As a result *they* disrupted the town a lot more than it would have been otherwise, but they didn't have the foresight to see that. It was unfortunate in a sense, although in retrospect maybe it was all okay. I mean, maybe it was a good thing. It was a good thing actually; but, at the time I was… I remember feeling later in the evening when we were down on the Green—we had had the spaghetti dinner and we were sitting around singing and kind of waiting, waiting to be arrested—I remember feeling this sense of, "I don't know what's going to happen here." It could be awful, and then I would say, "Oh, no, no. It can't possibly. Not in Lexington. Lexington cops are going to behave themselves, and that's not going to happen," but then there was this little part of me saying, well, one never knows, and I was a little uneasy.

INT: What did people around you think?

BJ: There was generally a pretty casual feeling of camaraderie and enjoyment. I don't even think I mentioned to anybody that I was nervous about it. That was probably something I hid very well, thinking, I am not going to acknowledge that to anybody, but I think I really did feel like

[that]. I wasn't afraid of being hurt or anything. I just thought this could get nasty.

INT: Who are the people that you remember being with through the day or the evening? Were they the people that you had worked with in housing and before?

BJ: It's really amazing how little I remember about the details in that regard. I was with my husband and talking with various friends. I don't remember it real well in terms of whom we were hanging out with specifically.

INT: Where were your children?

BJ: They were with babysitters.

INT: Had you known it was going to be a long night?

BJ: We did figure it would probably be a long night, and we certainly didn't want to miss it. When I got onto the buses and went to the Public Works Department where they arraigned us—I guess that's the right word—we paid a fine and went home. I think the reason I didn't stay was because between my husband and I, we couldn't decide who could stay because we both wanted to. So we both went home. [Laughter.]

INT: Was that common, do you think?

BJ: I think so. I have friends who one got to stay and the other one felt bad, or felt disappointed.

INT: Do you see scenes of the Women's Movement in this?

BJ: For me part of the reason the day is sort of a blur is this whole thing about… I was probably constantly worried about who is with the kids and how long can I be away. I remember other situations where we would sort of compete for who could get away and have a good time and who had to stay with the kids. We generally worked it out, but it was a little tension around that.

INT: When it was all over and you think back on what happened the day before, was it shocking to you that this could have happened at this local level?

BJ: No, I don't think it was shocking. It just sort of developed and there it was, and it all made sense as it happened and the various players who were involved in it played out their parts in it. I do remember a lot of jockeying around. Some of us were trying to get in touch with… There was one Selectwomani who was down on Nantucket Island vacationing over the holiday. We figured that she would be one of the people who would possibly vote in favor of allowing the vets to bivouac on the Green. I recall trying to reach her by phone so she could put in her vote in the process of their discussion, and I don't remember whether I reached her or not. There was a lot of concern about how can we change this whole thing? How can we get them to change their minds, or get them to do it our way? And there was a lot of excitement in that, a lot of people trying to make things happen, and the whole thing was a pretty exciting time, even though I was nervous.

INT: Exciting you think in a way that it might not be…you think things might be different if that occurred now?

BJ: Yes. I think that kind of demonstration was still a new thing. It had only been a few years that people in great numbers hit the streets to make a difference in this country. I know there's historical stuff with the union movement or World War I veterans going to Washington, this kind of stuff. But not in the numbers. I don't think that happened with ordinary people the way it did in the sixties and into the seventies. Now it happens a lot for various kinds of things on all sides of the political spectrum, which I think is interesting. The whole thing about demonstrating and speaking your mind about an issue has become part of the American political process

[i] This refers to Natalie Riffin.

which when I was growing up was unheard of. People just didn't do that. I remember when I started thinking that, gee, I am really far out here to be doing this. In my family, my family of origin, it would have been unheard of and still is, but they know that it happens now and it's people—you know, gay people and black people, and minority groups—and all sorts of social justice things, plus all the other kinds of special interest groups on all sides of the political spectrum. They do it now and it's okay.

INT: Why was this so important at the time? Did it seem to you like a really important event?

BJ: As part of a whole series of events it really was, and it seemed to have a meaning because it was local, because it was in my own hometown where you are not anonymous. You are not one of a half million people walking in Washington where nobody knows you. Your name is in the local paper and your neighbors are going to know and your kids are going to know that their friends are going to say, "Your mother got arrested," which may or may not be something they would want to know [laughter]. So it's a much more a public statement to get arrested in your own hometown with people that you know, and I had a certain amount of pride in doing it. I thought it was an important thing to do.

INT: Do you think it had importance historically, in a larger sense?

BJ: Because it was a very respectable group of people, middle class, and older than most of the demonstrators in other parts of the country. It was a different kind of demonstration because it was in a hometown, and so in that sense it was—I don't know about unique, but it certainly was not a common occurrence—and it was important for the people who did it as a part of their consciousness-raising around political action.

INT: What kind of effect do you think it had on the town? Was it a painful event, looking back?

BJ: It probably was for some. It certainly was an upheaval politically. I mean, it changed the political structure. No, not structure—it changed the political tone of the town. Some of the town leadership really changed in the next election. Some of the people on the Board of Selectmen were replaced, and this event probably contributed heavily to that. Certainly some of the people who worked very hard to put other people in office came out of that experience feeling that they wanted different leadership in the town. Whether it had long lasting impact, as part of a whole range of things it probably did, a number of things that might have happened during that period.

INT: Do you think it had any effect beyond, even beyond the history of the town, but didn't have an effect to any degree on the Vietnam War and what happened there?

BJ: Again, as part of a lot of activity all over the country, I think it did. There were demonstrations all over the country and this was one of them, and I think an important one. I don't know how it played in San Francisco or Peoria or wherever, I really don't have any information about that. It would be interesting to know whether it hit the national news. I think it did hit the national news, but I don't know what, how much.

INT: Looking back on this, do you think that there is an inevitability to how large, broad issues like opposition to war clash with what you could call local values? Is there an inevitability about those little clashes, do you think? Was there in this case or something bound to happen?

BJ: I think so. I was thinking about the town. There were already some things going on within the town—the generational struggles around long hair and hippie dress and that kind of stuff. I don't know about drugs, but certainly smoking grass, and I remember hearing stories about it. My kids were young, were not teenagers at the time, but I had friends whose kids were teenagers, and kids would be hassled in the center of town.

There was a movement going on, a youth movement which happened in the sixties and was independent of the Vietnam War. It came together with the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement and the youth rebellion and the sexual revolution. All of those things happened, and the town was a microcosm of that, and there were struggles within the town about that. So that was happening already, and part of the Selectmen's concern had to do with that history of kids being unruly and not behaving the way kids are supposed to behave before the 1960's. So there was already that tension, and the war was also happening, and a lot of that youth movement picked up on the war and went with it. Although I think the youth movement was broader than just anti-war. It was a lot of other stuff going on, social revolution certainly, and the generational thing, and the war was part of what was happening. My generation was right in between—my adolescence was in the fifties. I was having children during the time these young people were revolting and doing all this stuff. My generation was caught up, and some of us were thinking, gee, we missed out when we were kids. We went through that whole time of our lives in the fifties which was so unbelievably deadly boring, so there was a big appeal to have all this stuff happening. These younger people were doing all these wild things, and it was pretty seductive stuff for us.

INT: Do you think it may account for some people's interest in being there and being involved in that particular day?

BJ: Yes, I think so. My involvement, the mature part of me—and I think I had some maturity at the time—I was there out of conviction and strong opposition to the war. Another part of me—that missed my adolescence—enjoyed the hell out of being there because it was exciting, and the energy was a very seductive thing. It was both, and my whole generation was pretty vulnerable to that kind of an appeal.

INT: It sounds like heavy stuff, being involved in all kinds of exciting, interesting causes, idealistic causes, having an event like this that brought all those people who had those feelings together. Is that something that you could say you miss now, that you don't see? Is that connected with a stage of one's life, or a time in history, or all those things?

BJ: Well, I don't know. In terms of the social justice movement, to me that whole period was very formative, and it's still there. I still have that sense of involvement, and I think it is more difficult now to find places to put that energy and to do it with care, to select where to put it. Things are much more complicated now in some ways as to where to put your interest in social justice. There's a lot going on, but I find I have to be really careful about where to put my energy, what's effective and what isn't, and there are some choices to be made there. In that period it was like everybody would jump on the bandwagon and there was so much to do. Everybody was sort of all together and we will do this, and so forth. Now, it's trickier to make the choices—political choices and social movement choices that are going to work, that are going to be effective—and maybe it was true then, too, but we didn't know it. We just sort of jumped on the bandwagon and this has got to be good because it's good people doing this and so it is right. What I have found lately is, it's harder to know. The Gulf War was a good example. I was opposed to that, and I marched in Washington and stuff, and a lot of the same people were involved with that. But a lot of the people who were very much against the Vietnam War were very much in favor of the Gulf War. So things are not so clear-cut anymore somehow.

END OF INTERVIEW