



The Herstory Chronicles

Newsletter of the Women's History Project of Northwest Michigan

April 2011

Focus on Helen Milliken

Born and raised in Denver, **Helen (Wallbank) Milliken** attended Smith College where she majored in American Studies. "It proved to be a very beneficial background for the life that evolved, which I never dreamt of."

She met Bill Milliken during World War II when he was a pilot. They married in 1945 and moved to Traverse City. "It was an enormous change. A different kind of climate and a different community and a whole new chapter." A son and daughter were born and Helen worked part-time at Milliken's Department Store.

"Bill was becoming involved in politics," she remembers. "He first ran for office in 1960 for the State Senate. That was a huge change in everything because he was going back and forth to Lansing." Then Bill became Governor of Michigan in 1969, a post he held until 1983.

"The Equal Right Amendment was passed in 1971 ... and a reporter called me to ask, as the governor's wife, what I thought about it? Well, all I knew was that it was something that had been passed by Congress... And
(See Focus on Helen on p. 2)

Celebrating Women's History Month

By Kari Kahler, NMC

The Women's History Project of Northwest Michigan, AAUW, and the Alpha Rho Pi Chapter of Phi Theta Kappa (the two-year college honor society) co-hosted *Strength in Numbers: Working Women and Unions in the 1900's* on Saturday, March 12, in the Fine Arts Auditorium at Northwestern Michigan College.

In addition to film clips about Rosie the Riveter and Norma Rae, a lively discussion, hosted by NMC History Instructor Mindy Morton, ensued with its timely connection to union issues facing workers in Wisconsin and across the country.

A highlight of the event was the *Live Wax Museum* presented by the Phi Theta Kappa students. Each participant researched a famous woman in history and presented a monologue depicting their life.



The students from left to right are: Erica Peplinski as Shirley Temple; Meghan Goulder as Jacqueline Kennedy; Ashley Finrock as Elizabeth Taylor; Sophie House as Princess Diana; Maddy Mesa as Lady Gaga; Shauna Quick as Rosie the Riveter; Ashley Flees as Nellie Bly; Erica Hamilton as Annie Oakley; and Emilie Larner as Emilie du Chatelet.

Speaking of books...

The book, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, by Harriet Jacobs, which we discussed in January, touched everyone who read it. It is one of the few full-length slave narratives written by a woman and one of the most graphic accounts of the sexual exploitation of women in slavery.

From the vantage point of her life in New York City after she escapes from slavery in 1842, Harriet Jacobs offers a gripping account of the experiences that fueled her determination to remain hidden in a crawl space for seven years, and tells of her struggles to assure the freedom of her children.

Join us on Friday, April 29, when we will discuss *Half Broke Horses: A True-Life Novel* by Jeannette Walls, which is a follow-
(See Books on p. 2)

Focus on Helen

continued from p. 1

I called my daughter (Elaine, a lawyer) and she said, ‘This is something that impacts all women in this country. And you could and should do something that contributes to the betterment of women’s roles.’ And I started to learn... and once the light goes on, you never stop.

“Elaine educated her father as well as me. It’s hard to change traditions and change laws. But it takes a lot longer to change perceptions... the Equal Rights Amendment has never been passed. It didn’t get the required 38 states; it just got 35. We still need to have it as part of the framework of the Constitution, so that women are treated by the same standard as men.

“I became involved in environmental issues of that time, too, and still am. I’m now involved with the Michigan Land Use Institute and on the Board there. We are looking at how to control exploding development that is eating up our countryside and the natural beauty of this land.

“Another area of concern is both family planning and reproductive freedom for women and population growth. They’re interrelated, all of them. And I think a woman’s reproductive rights are so vital to a woman’s life and health and prospect for a decent life.

“It’s the most tremendous education to become involved in the history of women. And I never knew a thing about it in my college years. It was never even mentioned.”

President’s Corner—

Women have been on the stage

by Kathi Houston, president

March has been a month of celebrations to highlight the accomplishments and contributions of women. From the Benzie Area Women’s History Project’s film presentation on March 8 to commemorate the 100th anniversary of International Women’s Day, to the activities sponsored by the Phi Theta Kappa group at NMC on March 12, to a presentation about our project including actively listening to one of the oral histories in our collection at the Traverse City Humanist group meeting and finally, to the education day on March 26 in Frankfort, women have been “on the stage.”

Your board has been out and about in many ways including supporting and participating in local events. The process of working with our oral history project is being fine-tuned by an enthusiastic group of members and friends. The quarterly book group is alive and well. The website has been updated.

Even though many of the board have been traveling this winter, they have stayed in touch and are looking forward to getting to work again at the next meeting, which will be held on April 11. Members are always welcome to attend. It may help you to see how you might be interested in getting more involved with the project.

Please feel free to contact me if you have an interest in joining the board at a meeting.

Happy Spring!

.....

Helen also has traveled to Africa and to China to learn about women’s issues. “I also try to stay informed about what’s happening to women globally. And we never need to stop expanding. I began late and I’m just catching up.”

.....

Books continued from p. 1

on of her 2005 memoir, *The Glass Castle*. It is a novelistic re-creation of the life of Walls’ maternal grandmother, Lily Casey Smith, in the first half of the 20th century, told in her grandmother’s voice. It perhaps will cast some light on why Walls family became what it did in Walls’ generation.



.....

On July 22, we’ll discuss *Keewaydinoquay: Stories from My Youth*, by Keewaydinoquay Peschel, Ojibway healer, and on October 28, *A Short History of Women* by Kate Walberg.

The book discussion takes place at the History Center from NOON to 1 PM. Bring your brown bag lunch and join us for these lively and enlightening discussions.

For more information about the book discussions, contact one of the co-chairs: Ann Swaney, ASWANEY@message.nmc.edu; Martha Vreeland.

Mark your calendar...

April 11

Board meeting. 2:00 PM.
History Center

October 22

Annual Meeting with lunch
and a speaker. *History Center*

Oral History Update

A small team is working on the WHP Oral Histories with a goal of making them more readily available to the public. This includes providing a complete listing on the WHP website, creating a user's manual, and conducting ongoing interviews.

If you know a woman in our region whose history would be a valuable addition to the WHP collection (now numbering more than 60), please send her name, background and contact information, to Karen Anderson: kanderson507@att.net

Board of Directors

Karen Anderson
Nancy Bordine
Kathi Houston
Shirley Murray
Jane Purkis
Etta Rajkovich
Tina Tank
Martha Vreeland

Meghan Goulder
and
Doris McMaster,
Phi Theta Kappa Liaisons,
NMC

Oral History: Marjorie Eleanor Balk Barrett

Interviewed by Susan Abbott Schmidt, April 25, 2009

MB: My father was one of the first motorcycle policemen in Detroit, and one of the first squads of policemen. He was killed in an accident, run into by a man in a car. There was quite a bit of writing in the paper at that time because the person who ran into him, supposedly, might have been drunk. I was only five years old. I remembered it so well because they had a funeral parade going all the way out to the cemetery. And they beat on drums, and for years I couldn't stand the sound of a drum; it made me ill.

SS: *Who were your inspirations when you were young?*

MB: I think from a very young age I was impressed by flying. That was still in the beginning of aviation. Everybody was interested in flying at that time. The barn-stormers happened before World War II. Everybody paid a lot of attention to it. It was a new thing. Actually the first flight that I was able to take was with one of the barn-stormers who came into the area to a small park right on the shores of Lake Huron, only three miles or so from the farm that my maternal grandparents had. My mother used to send me there in the summertime, when school was out.



SS: *Did you like high school?*

MB: High school I liked very much. Uh huh. That's when I first began to be a journalist. I got on the school paper and was editor on the yearbook.

SS: *How did you spend your time when you were a teenager?*

MB: After I was fourteen or fifteen, I took some summer classes. I remember one year it was a dramatic class and I had been in the senior play or junior play. I was smitten with drama just about that time. And then I was preparing to go to college. Mother was very much in favor of it. And fortunately there were three other girls in the high school who were also going to Albion College. So we were a little tribe. We stuck pretty close together that year. I went to Albion for one year, and then I went to the University of Michigan, which I discovered was cheaper than going to Albion. Albion was a private college. I remember I was pretty shocked to find out that there were some girls who were going to college and seemed to have all the money they needed, and then some. The Depression had been on for four years and I didn't

(See Marjorie Barrett on p. 4)

WHPNM Mission
To preserve and recognize the contributions of women to their families and communities in northwest lower Michigan.

Marjorie Barrett continued from p. 3
think anybody had any money left.

SS: *How did the Depression affect you and your mother?*

MB: Number one, I remember particularly, Mother was working for the city government. I don't know just when it started, but they cut the wages of people working for the city government, and they paid in script, not in regular dollars. Script meant you got paid, I suppose something like coupons, where you could only go to certain stores that would accept the city script. And that meant that I could only shop for certain things, at certain places. Mother had kept the house that we had by hook or crook. She wanted to keep that house.

SS: *What advantages or disadvantages in your career did you have because you were a woman?*

MB: I would say there were disadvantages, especially in journalism, because if you wanted to work for a newspaper as a woman, the chances of you working at anything interesting were pretty slim. They wanted you to work at Women's Page, Cooking and Housekeeping, or the Society Page, which didn't interest me either.

SS: *How did you meet your husband?*

MB: The reason I met him, and the reason I married him, was that I was bold enough to sign up for weekend flying lessons. After college I was working for a little advertising agency in the Free Press building. While I was working there, I heard about this Civilians Pilot Training. And of course, I heard about it because I knew a lot of people who were involved in publicity. They wanted girls. There were five of us girls who started it, but I was the only one who finished. I had been raised by a very smart

woman, my mother, who always said, "Whatever you start, be sure you finish it." And in doing so I met my husband. He loved flying. Flying was his reason to be. He was devoted to it. I happened to meet him because I had my picture in the Detroit Free Press for soloing (see photo).

SS: *What important life lessons have you learned?*

MB: That women need to have the pride that gets them through any difficulties they have, knowing they can do so much more than women used to be able to do to make their lives better. And in making their own lives better, they're making their children's lives better.

Join WHPNW

Women of Wisdom: \$10

Students: \$10

The Rest of Us: \$15

Business/Organization: \$25

Dues payable to WHPNM;
send to address below.

Thank you for your support!



Women's History Project of Northwest Michigan
322 Sixth Street
Traverse City, MI 49684