

Ruth Anderson Wilson

Ruth: There have been so many episodes over the years that have been just so ... the moment of crisis. From then on things change and you just look back and see it.

Judith: We want to capture those today. So I will start. I'm Judith Auth and I'm interviewing Ruth Anderson Wilson. This is Tuesday, November 22nd, 2011, and also with us in this lovely garden is Cherstin Lyon. We have a series of set questions, but we ask you to use them as a spark to share with us your experience as a woman involved with the environmental movement in this region during the last several decades. We want to start with biographical questions.

Please share any early childhood and family experiences that may have shaped your environmental involvement.

Ruth: That's an interesting question. My grandmother and grandfather came from Czechoslovakia, and lived in Lorain, Ohio. They had a lot beside their house ... full lot ... of a garden. And my early memories are being with my grandparents in those gardens, helping my grandmother put her dishwater on the plants to get rid of the bugs, and things like that. So I saw that ... she also was saving the water at the same time that she was helping the garden. So that's one of the very earliest memories I have, and that was l-o-n-g ago.

Judith: Is there anything in your family history or family traditions that shaped your involvement?

Ruth: Well, not really. My mother was a very frugal woman and learned to collect and re-do and, you know, make all things happen. Re-doing a dress out of another piece of cloth or using burlap sacks and things like that was not unusual. In those days back in Ohio burlap sacks actually had flowers on them, and I wore some of those with flowers made into school clothes.

Judith: Do you see a relationship between your political views and your views on the environment?

Ruth: Well I hadn't really thought of it that way. No, the environment is self-reproducing. Political views I see as destructive (laughing) ... self-destructing. So no, I don't see much connection.

Judith: Do you see a relationship between your spiritual values and your views on the environment?

Ruth: Oh, a whole lot! My little boy said, "Where do babies come from Momma?" and I said, "You know when you plant a zinnia seed you get a zinnia. And when you plant a baby seed you get a baby." And he said he was so disappointed that he got a little sister instead of a puppy. (Laughing)

Judith: (Laughing) Do you have any favorite stories or works of literature that you think shaped your views on the environment?

Ruth: Oh, yes, I think perhaps. My father disapproved of women reading and going to school. He thought education ruined women for doing what women should do. That is stay home and keep the house and take care of the babies. I was reading a book under the blanket with a flashlight and he took it away from me. It was Girl of the Limberlost and he knew that that was a bad influence. I said, "It isn't really. It's about a girl, you know, and she's going to get better."

He opened it up and what had been recommended to the girl was she should put on some pink powder. She was a sickly little girl. Didn't have much sunlight and so she was pretty pale. So the pink powder made her look so much better in the mirror that she went on of course from then on to do great things. But my father's anger with me, and his bringing that very point to be a bad thing when I realized it was a good thing, was probably a turning point in my earlier life. Maybe I was twelve, thirteen.

Judith: That was a book my mother shared with me that I remember reading as a child.

Ruth: But my father considered that a bad influence because it was teaching me to wear make-up and cosmetics, and not be my natural self. And I did say to him, "Well, if you look at a garden that God takes care by himself, it doesn't look that good."

Judith: We're sitting in your beautiful garden. Do you have any other favorite hobbies or leisure activities you'd like to talk about?

Ruth: Oh, I can't get past a computer to get out to the garden. What are you talking about? (Laughing) Oh, I love the garden and of course here in the citrus community, with the University. I'm a Master Gardener, I received that certification in 1982. So it's been a long time. But a lot of my trees and plants here are either from citrus experiments, early ones, before they hit the market or else trading with friends who have gardens with similar things and ideas. So friendships and gardens and the environment all go together.

Judith: What influences ... personal, cultural or social, have shaped your environmental outlook?

Ruth: Probably my father's attitude about women.

Judith: (Laughing)

Ruth: I won't continue much of that, but I can tell you that that had a lot to do with it because I decided very early on that he didn't know everything! And I probably was in my early mid-teens when I decided that I would make up my mind by myself and I would do it with getting information, not with just hearsay.

Judith: Who were your role models?

Ruth: All of the wonderful women in Riverside! (Laughing) I know we have a batch of fabulous women here in this city. I work with so many and I admire what they do *so* much. And it works because everyone works together. You don't have to work alone. You have to work with help. Other people's ideas spark yours. Yours spark theirs. If somebody knows a friend who knows a friend ... it's fabulous.

Judith: How did you get involved with these women?

Ruth: Well, my husband said, "You know we're new in Riverside ... " This was in 1954 and he knew that when I'm home alone he has an awfully big "to-do" list. A honey-do list. He said, "The list gets

longer the more I take off it.” So he said, “You know I understand the League of Women Voters is starting up in Riverside. Maybe you'd like to go to that meeting.”

He was a physicist at Naval Ordnance Lab and he had friends there who had wives in the group.

Judith: And when was this? The '50s? '60s?

Ruth: September 1954. '54.

Judith: '54.

Ruth: The League was provisional at that time. Provisional status hadn't been accepted as a regular League, and the political people in town were going to the City Council asking that they not be allowed to start.

Judith: My goodness!

Ruth: Right here in Riverside, yeah. Then the result of that is I did go and join and did meet women who were part of the Washington D.C. scene. You know they moved a lot of their scientists out here to the West Coast, probably by the Department of Agriculture. Anyway, they came out here with their wives, people who were either in the parade, or knew women who were active in the Suffragette Organization.

Judith: Oh, my!

Ruth: And they carried that enthusiasm with them to the point where one just said OHHHHH, is that really what happened? We really talked to them. You know, it was really very contagious. As a matter of fact our present Mayor Loveridge said to me years later, he said, “You know the League is like a religion with you women.” (Laughing) And that's about what it was because it started with Suffragette enthusiasm.

Judith: What was the biggest obstacle that you encountered in your community activities with other women?

Ruth: Oh, this problem of not really being able ... women are not loyal to each other, or were not. I think that's changing, and hope it is. But I really encountered a self-containment in women that doesn't lead to cooperation. When everyone can understand that the project is more important than any of us. Then we can make it happen. But if we have a time of saying, “Well, we have to keep her happy; we have to keep him happy.” All we knew is we had to keep fellows happy. You know, be sure that they didn't think we were too bright. You know, mom taught me never win a tennis game 'cause your boyfriend won't like you. (Laughing) That was many years ago. I learned a long time ago if they couldn't stand me winning a tennis game ... too bad. (Laughing) I'll play with a friend.

But anyway ... so I had a very independent attitude about men, and I had to move it towards some women who were very self-contained. They felt they were the most important part of their world. And that is not what you do when you're in an environmental project. It's the project that has to

be everybody's goal. Those of us started learning that early, Martha McLean was one of them that started so early. I think that's one of the biggest obstacles. Women have to look after themselves. They have to look after their family. They look after their children first. And people on the PTA Board would end up fussing with the teacher over their kids and say, "Well, I'm a member of the Board here. I have, you know, special privilege." You can't do that.

Judith: Describe some of your triumphant moments.

Ruth: (Laughing) There was a wonderful one that Martha and I have been working on saving the river for about four years where people were saying ...

Judith: The Santa Ana River that you're talking about?

Ruth: The Santa Ana River, yes. We've been working on it since 1966. She called me a couple of days after I had finished a term as League of Women Voters President and said, "You've loafed long enough! How about saving a river?" So that's when it started. And little did I realize how it was going to influence the rest of my entire life.

But we've been working on it four years and we were the first environmental group in the whole county. When they had their first Earth Day we were the environmental people for Save the Santa Ana River; that was the Tri-County Conservation League. That was saving the River from concrete. But we'll get into that in another story.

But what we just really were finding was we had to organize the public opinion that is what our role was. But it was going very slowly and we found that the biggest enemy was the government. I'm not kidding. We ran into the State, the Feds, and local ... and the government was our enemy. It was a hard thing to realize when the League of Women Voters is, you know, supporting the government ideals.

But anyway, we went to see Robert Anderson who was County Executive Officer at the time. Martha and I were there and there were a couple of fellas, and I think there were about five of us in the room and Mr. Robert Anderson ... we were talking about everything. "Oh! This is what we can do! and this is what we have to do!" and you know, that kind of thing. And he said, "I believe you women are serious about this." It surprised him.

We said, "Oh, yes we are."

And so he became a member of help. Paul Anderson who was a Supervisor at the time became our champion in Orange County. He was very well liked and known down there, and opened those doors for us, introducing us to different people that would help, and that sort of thing. And so we really, from then on, after those first four years showing little progress, starting up what seemed to be one of the first environmental movements with the River, began to move. But our role really was organizing public opinion.

And then of course I was appointed to the Park Commission and then ...

Judith: This was the Riverside County Park Commission?

Ruth: County Park. I was a charter member of the Park Commission. The Grand Jury found out that the County had no Parks Department. Parks were handled by the Road Department. So by a Minute Order the Supervisors created the County Parks Department. And the instructions were that since they have five Supervisors with five districts in the County, everybody was to appoint two people to the County Park Committee. So Mr. Paul Anderson assured me that he'd pick two of the most difficult vocal people and they were all given the same instruction ... two of the most difficult people to handle. Put them on the Park Committee. (Laughing) And I said, "Gee, thanks!" (Laughing) I was one of the two.

So I talked to the fella who became the head of the County Parks Department, and he became Secretary of our Park Commission, only they called it a Committee at the time. He said to me, "Do you realize that I have ten of the most difficult people in Riverside County as my Commissioners?" And that's when I went to Mr. Paul Anderson and said, "I heard this."

And he said, "Well, yeah. That was what our instructions were."

And I said, "Thanks a lot."

And he said, "Well I expected something to happen."

What had happened was he'd tell me these things like: "We have a complaint from you people and we do a study because you people are crying at the microphone and want to have it done, so we order a study. You go away. We get the study, put it on the shelf, forget it and everybody's happy."

And I said, "What happens to the study?"

He said, "Oh, it just gets dusty."

I said, "I don't think so." I was a Parks Committee member then.

Judith: What were some of your disappointments? Your down times?

Ruth: Oh, we had an election coming up ... Election Day ... just raising a few thousand dollars ... actually \$225,000.00 for our very first time to help with the River. And there was a fire in the river bottom the day before the election. The election failed.

Judith: Oh, my!

Ruth: That was *so* disappointing.

Judith: This was '68?

Ruth: Uh, well, probably it would be in the early '70s. But on the other hand then, we had a public law passed ... I'm not quite sure ... 912 or ... anyway it doesn't matter. That public law passed that we had to have public involvement in any environmental issues that we were going to work as a government project. And we were all very poor. The City was poor. The County was poor. As a

matter of fact the County is, you know, considered if anybody's ever poor it's Riverside County. If you're in anywhere at all (laughing) they cry poor all the time. But that's typical of them. But it was even more typical then.

But the City was willing to give us their pig farm for the land it was on. They put their garbage in the river. I'm not quite sure who owned that, but whatever happened is ... I guess it was the City had the pig farm ... and then they gave it to the County, and the County was able to take that for a value of public involvement somehow. They were also able to turn in secretary-time and just paper stuff that they bought. You know, paper supplies. All considered contributions in order to make this project work. And this is how I came home. It was in 1971 ... And I said, "You know what? We just have been given the pig farm!" It was a big step forward to save the River.

And my husband goes, "AGHHHH!" You know ... (laughing) He said, "I wish we got as much attention around here as that River!"

But just the same it was our first big break!

Judith: And where was that located?

Ruth: Down in the river near the City/County line. Now they have covered the City dump over and it's waiting for all the methane to work out of there, waiting to be included in the river park system.

But, anyway, that was our first big break and also an issue. The County and City were not really talking to each other very well. As a matter of fact they're pretty hostile to each other. And they'd dig at each other every chance they got. This is the first cooperation that we had at that time, and that was in 1971. And that was again another positive movement, you know, step by step. "I believe you ladies are really serious about this." (Laughing)

Judith: What was the bravest thing you ever did?

Ruth: Well, it was in a different subject. I was an appointee of the County for about twenty years. The Watershed Council consisted of ten counties each with four representatives concerned with Wild Land Fire Fighting. There was a time we needed to speak at an Assembly-Senate Conference Committee meeting concerning the appointment of a new head of the State Forestry Division, part of the State Conservation Department.

The question was should the head of the Division be an appointment based mostly on political pressure or should it be a member from the professional fire fighting units of the State. As all the firemen work in a semi-military form of organization they progress up through the ranks as they gain seniority and experience. They work for promotions in their ranks. If the top man is chosen by political favoritism the heart of incentive is dead.

Well they were at odds between the Assembly and the Senate so they called a Senate-Assembly Conference Committee meeting ... you know how that does ... they work out their differences. I was the speaker at that to tell them that they should not put in a political person but to take someone from the ranks. So we were talking about that and I was saying: "I don't believe you understand what this does to the morale of the men, and I just can't tell you how much destruction you do to these men who

are working so hard at keeping California green.”

And he said to me, the Chairman ... “Let yourself go. Let me hear it.”

And I said, “Well then I'm telling you! You should (laughing) not take a political person and put him at the head of the whole fire system. The one who should be at the top should be a fireman who has come up through the ranks and knows what it takes to get there. Getting ahead motivates him.”

It was accepted. They did ...

Judith: It did prevail.

Ruth: Not that I had any influence. But that was my bravest moment. (Laughing) I took on ... there's an Assemblyman on one side and the Senators on another, and he says, “Let yourself go!” And I said, “Right.” (Laughing) It's wonderful to be able to be in a position like that.

Judith: You talked about organizing public opinion. Can you describe other strategies and tactics that have worked and some that may not have worked?

Ruth: (Laughing) Yeah. A lot of them didn't work. What we did for saving the River, Martha and I. She said, “Let's get that started.”

She has a son and daughter and husband and they went down and took pictures of the Santa Ana River, and they took pictures of the flora and fauna that they could get from resources. They put together about a twenty, twenty-five minute slide show. And we took that slide show and she and I wrote the script for it, and I had more time to take it around than she did. Sometimes I'd give that show three times in a day. But we went to anybody who would listen to us.

Oh, and the last two pictures were of a river ... the Los Angeles River in concrete. So the end of our slide show was ... this is what happens to a river when nobody cares. It really worked. We went to Scout meetings and church meetings and sewing circle meetings (laughing) and you know, everybody that would have us for a little bit. And I didn't have any trouble. And we had all kinds of people that you would never believe even cared ... wanted to know about it then because we'd let people call us and let us know, and so on.

And we also said we have this organization we've started and we're after troops, not treasure, so membership in our organization is for a dollar! So everybody (laughing) everybody joined us, and we really put together quite a large group ... including Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts and all ... you know ... So this was one of the ways that we got the word out.

And then one of the other things that was *very* helpful was Martha McLean was a newspaper reporter and Tim Hays, long gone, we miss him ... he was very supportive. It turned out that his father was very helpful in saving Yosemite Park, and so Tim was very helpful with helping our organization. We only had 38 members in our organization when we started, and (laughing) we had an article in the paper about it. You know, this is because of these lovely things that ... Martha was very good with words ... all filled with opportunities. And so that kind of thing happened over and over. We had one

thing after another happen that you just sort of wondered HOW DID THAT HAPPEN?

Well we learned to put luncheons together where the Planning and Park people would meet together from all three counties, and they'd say to each other, "Oh, you're the one I've been talking to on the phone" or that sort of thing. We found that to be very helpful, mostly for information exchange.

Judith: This was San Bernardino, Riverside and Orange County?

Ruth: Yes. And they all were very, very cooperative in learning. But that's how they got things together.

Judith: What didn't work?

Ruth: Oh, my. Going after money. So we just did fine with very little money. But our money we didn't need. It's just the money that just anytime you talk money then everybody closes the doors. And so what we needed, and what we never really did have, was the good old boys club that men have. "Hey, Joe" you know. And we really didn't have that. So what we had to have was a banding together of all of the rest of us. The 99% now.

But that's about what it turned out to be. The teachers, kids, women, and then the environmentalists started to join us. And once we started having clout then that made a difference. And of course being appointed on things. But the things that really worked... we could have done a lot more faster. But I think we had to learn not to use emotional things like take your little kid with chocolate on his face and ask, "Save my river for my child." ... you don't do that.

As a matter of fact we went to many things and we learned to use data. We learned to use facts. We learned to use day use and we used to do the cost, and the water preservation and multiple uses of water. Preservation, conservation and all that sort of thing.

Judith: What do you see as the pressing issues right now in our community?

Ruth: Well, the Santa Ana River is always under threat. This is the part that's really disturbing. And now of course I'm on a Water District ... I'm a member. I'm on my fourth term on the Rubidoux Community Service District. I'm a member of that and what our problem is, is people are conserving water and one of the problems of conserving water is that the water- conserving people don't buy enough water to handle the fixed expenses of producing the water. The water is free. We all get free water, but it has to be handled in pipes. It has to be cleaned up. It has to be ... all kinds of things have to happen to it in order that we can use it. And the biggest danger is that we cannot afford what's happening. We're seeing everybody raising rates because they have to raise rates because they're selling less water. A funny kind of thing, but it's happening and it's happening in all kinds of ways. Not only in the water but in gas also. And you try reaching a balance that we don't waste water but yet we do use water too, so my garden here will cost me more money to support with water than if I had a family of five. It has to be because people are more important than plants, but you can't ... They're not unimportant. You have to have a garden. You have to have vegetables and fruit and you have to raise those things. The farmers are using a great deal of the water and they have to use less. So if you save it you save a tomato plant or an almond tree. It gets to be an issue like that. And that issue happens down in the California Water Aqueduct area or anywhere. We're facing that problem.

So I really don't know. The problems are huge and I think the ignorance of what's going on is probably one of the biggest ones. I don't think people really know. They hear vague threats and what they do in the media, but I don't think they know the real effects.

Judith: What major changes have you seen in recent years?

Ruth: In what particularly?

Judith: With regard to attitudes towards water. Towards the environment.

Ruth: Well, people are very much more conserving. And that's of course what we're seeing. In the last three years on the District our expenses have been way higher than the water income. The only reason we've been managing is because there are other things that are supporting it that aren't as high, because people are really being careful and good about that. It's interesting too that it costs more money to recycle all of our wastes and all that we do. It costs money to recycle it. It's not free. You get green waste. It has to be made so that it can be chopped up. You have sewer water. It has to be cleaned up. There are metals in it that have to be coming out. All that takes money. And unfortunately that comes from the same taxpayer who has to pay for whatever else they're charged for. So, no, the problem is keeping a balance so we end up with a world that we can leave to our kids.

Judith: I imagine that the public is not aware of these issues.

Ruth: I don't think they're aware of the seriousness of it. Everybody knows we have low-flow toilets and we have different kinds of things they're trying, and they do have some of this. But these are the kind of ordinary, I hate to say 'glamorous' (laughing) part of it, but that's what it amounts to. Because the serious parts are all of our pipes are many years old and are full of holes and having to be replaced. In the City of Riverside they've got pipes that are as old as the City, and they're having to replace them.

And that's not only for water. That's for gas. And that's not only here but it's all over the country. Boston has pipes. Up there they're still made of wood in some parts of the city. It's just incredible. We haven't really been spending enough money on maintenance to take care of where we are now. You know you have to fix up things. You can't just live off the top and let everything go bad. You've got to wash things. You've got to clean them. You've got to replace them. And this is true for this city too. It's just like your own home. And I think that the people are not really facing that. And certainly the politicals are not.

Judith: Do you see any involvement with young women in current issues?

Ruth: Uhhh, unfortunately they're slow to join us. The AAUW. .. American Association of University Women ... I've been on their Board for several years, and we do not see the younger women coming along, but they're doing better than their mothers. The Boomer Generation was not really one to be joiners. And to help understand these things, to get the information out, women need to be out. The younger women are a little better but I think their interests are more personal at the moment. They're young and they want to look after their future and make sure they have the right boy and all these things that are important. So maybe they'll come along.

Judith: What do you think still needs to be done?

Ruth: Oh, people have to be taught that facts are the ones that are important. Not just rumors. Not just media coverage. Or it doesn't even make it to the fourth or fifth page in their newspaper unless it's on the TV. And you know that's where most people get their news, and the news on the TV is the least reliable. The newspaper is next. The monthly magazines are better, you know. (Laughing) And it's disturbing. And I know that I'm considered a real pain in the backside to some of my relatives about some of this sort of thing, because they come in all hysterical about something, and it's, you know, keeping everybody distracted from the real serious things that need to be done. This is where we're at. I think the government needs to have a better approach. But these issues are just pushed aside every different direction by politicians that want to be reelected.

Judith: What should we be focusing on?

Ruth: Hmm, in the environment are you speaking of? Well, the basics which were there fifty years ago are still there. We still have to have bridges that are falling apart. And we still have to have all of the basic infrastructure of cities. And it's not only saving our grounds and things, maybe we all have to give a little. You know, the amount of land we have is finite. The amount of people we have is infinite.

Judith: What keeps you involved?

Ruth: Just waking up in the morning. I have a choice you know. I can decide to smile or have my mouth down or up. It's my choice. Life is really wonderful. I've had such a good time.

Judith: You've received many awards and achievements for your activities.

Ruth: Yeah.

Judith: Can you tell us about some that are particularly meaningful to you?

Ruth: Oh, I've put them all in a drawer. I've got a couple here. My favorite one is the shape of the watershed, but (laughing) I think the Gold Key Award from the Soroptomists was really a nice one because here is a club that didn't know me from anybody and ...

Judith: And this was in the '70s?

Ruth: No, it was in the '90s.

Judith: '90s.

Ruth: And one of the things they wanted was someone with 20 years of being a volunteer. I guess I had so many. Anyway, they gave that award in 1994 and I've since gone on to the Woman of Achievement in the year 2000, which made a big change in my life about things that happened. They had a celebration for me ... the Soroptomists did, at the Victoria Club, and there was a gentleman sitting there and I said, "I understand you're a Pastor."

And he said, "Yes, I am."

And I said, "What church are you with?"

And he said, "Yours." (Laughing)

Judith: (Laughing)

Ruth: I am a backslider. (Laughing) Because I'm usually Sunday morning doing something else (laughing) But anyway that's probably my church.

Judith: Do you feel that your activities have made a difference in this community?

Ruth: I know a few that have. (Laughing) I know a few that have.

Judith: The Santa Ana River is not concrete The Santa Ana River has not been concreted in.

Ruth: No, it sure hasn't. And that's a big success. I must admit it's a special favorite. But you know, another thing that is a special success is the Born Free House. The YWCA supports the Born Free Girls. So these are women who are pregnant and drug addicted and the YW wanted an opportunity for those girls to have the pregnancy without drugs. They have saved over 200 babies since 1990. They were in a house that the YW was paying rent for and just absolutely using up all of the funds of the YW. So we set out ... again a team effort. Everything you do that really amounts to anything is a team. We thought we'd get them a house that they would own. If the YW could own it they wouldn't have to put all that money out, and they'd still have something of their own. And buying that house was practical at the time so we said, "Well, why don't we go to the Habitat and see if they'd build it for us."

And we went to them and they said, "No, we only do families and you don't have families."

And my dear friend Barbra Purvis whom I'm sure you'll be running into ... said, "I was giving money to these little girls who had AIDS over there in Africa, and that was the house that Habitat built."

So we went back armed again now with facts, right?

Judith: Uh-hmm.

Ruth: And went to Habitat and said, "How about helping us build a house for Born Free. In the District where I am there happens to be a lot that is a double lot too big for one house, but not enough for two houses, but anyway."

So they said, "Do you want to know how the YWCA could do it? (Laughing) Can the YWCA be the owner of this lot?"

And so, "Yes, we would do that". It was donated.

Judith: How wonderful.

Ruth: And so we put in two addresses and now they are already built. Built by Habitat. Built by donations. Even the architect and everything. . . all parts of it. The foundations. The framing. All that. All donated. So they now have two houses there. One is for the girls and the babies, and the other is for the Living Free, because when a girl has a baby sometimes she goes back into the same environment and so in order to help her stay away from that and learn to live without it, and learn to live a life where her life is more positive, away from drugs, and away from the influences of drugs. So they have now six girls in each house and there's a mortgage on it which is interest free, paid to Habitat who is carrying it for them. And we're really proud of it. And those babies. . . they put a little baby in my lap, about that size, and AHHHHHH, (laughing) It's wonderful to have that happen.

Judith: Do you have any other lovely stories to share with us? I'd like you to tell the story about ... dishes in the sink.

Ruth: All right. Yes. We were at the Planning Commission and we were...

Judith: Do you have the date? Was this the '50s? '60s?

Ruth: Oh, let's see. Yeah, it was about 1967 ... around there. We wanted them to not allow development of some trailer parks or something in there, in the River, by the Prado Dam, and we were really urging them to not let people go in there, telling them that we just had the data from a woman who was there during the flood, that had a problem with getting out of there safely just with animals. And we were asking them, "Please don't do that. Don't put these people in here."

And so then the Chairman of the Planning Commission said to me, "Where are your children?"

I had just been telling them why you mustn't do that, and he interrupted all that and said to me, "Where are your children? I'll bet you have dishes in the sink at home."

And I said to him, "The children are in school and the dishes have been washed, and we are here to discuss the River, Sir."

Judith: Focusing on the issue.

Ruth: And that was just, you know, that's just the sort of thing, that attitude towards women. What a backside problem you guys are! You're a pain in the you know. Burrs under the saddle . You do everything that you can that could insult us. "Just what are you doing? A woman making the decisions worth millions of dollars when you are just a housewife!"

Believe me, after that no one ever said that to me again! I made sure that anything that was done I knew about, and as a matter of fact when I was on the Regional Water Quality Control Board ... that was in the government ... and that was in the middle '70s, when that question was made about how I could **dare** to make decisions that interfered with people's corporate works that they were going to build or make, or not do. How dare I!

And so this one said to me that they wanted to have a meeting with us and we had to be nice to protect me... or them ... I'm not sure who.

And I said, “Why me?”

He said, “Because if we can answer your questions, we can answer any of the Board members.”

This is the way it came. That's the way you handled these people that griped at you because you were female. I don't think plumbing should make the difference. I mean it. I've never felt so. There's article in *The Press* in my clipping file. I don't have many clippings but I saved one 'cause it said: The question was: Did you ever find being a female was a problem? And I said, “Never. You just did it. You just did it. Made it. But also you noticed that you made it **stick!**” (Laughing) I think women's influence is so necessary on every Board. Every political board, you know, every commission, everything because women look at things differently and you hear women bringing about something. There are no water fountains in the hospital. There's nothing in the halls where any visitor can ever go get a drink of water because there's no water fountains or water availability in the Riverside Community Hospital. We're having a new building built. It's in the plans now for the Community District. You can be sure that there's water availability, and access to local bathrooms. If somebody's coming in, they're coming in angry. They need to have access to where they have facilities for the person coming in, not just for the staff. Not just for everybody else, but for the people who come in to speak at the microphone. That's what I mean about women thinking about things men don't.

Judith: Well I remember that your daughter was proud of the work that you did and she wrote a very fine tribute to you at one point.

Ruth: She put an article in the *L.A. Parade*. (laughing) What happened was downtown there's a parking strip in front of the property I have downtown in Riverside. And it's incorrectly done. It's not within the 15 feet from the street. It's past 15 feet and it's next to a driveway. It's absolutely wrong... and I haven't been able to get them to change it. So I just got a pot of paint and painted it myself. Over-painted the red. (Laughing) A couple of years later they came back and put it back, you know, but my daughter thought that was pretty funny. Parking space is very valuable downtown and it meant that a valuable space couldn't be used because of that. I can justify ...

Judith: So you knew what you'd done. You did it yourself.

Ruth: I sure did. I got a color chip and matched it. You know somebody said, “You could write a book.” And I said, “It'll never stay on the shelf!” (Laughing) I really think the things just simply cannot go on and be unfair. There's a lot of things we have to sort of wink at and say, “Well, okay. That's what you want.” But those of us who are in charge of our own lives, the least I can do is have everything be treated as equally as possible.

My sister said to me years ago ... she's long gone now ... “I always made sure you distributed the pie or the cake or dessert.”

And I said, “Why did you do that?”

And she said, “Cause you always give the other people the biggest piece.” And that's just sort of big sister, I guess.

I've gone back to college and both of my degrees are after I was 50. And I say to my kids now, "Why don't you get your next degree?"

And they say, "Well, I'm not 50 yet!" (Laughing) So it comes back to haunt you sometimes. Oh, there's so many wonderful things and so many ... life is rich and full, and it's what you make it. And you know now I'm active with the AARP and we have tours and I travel a lot and I really am glad to be able to do things now that I couldn't do years ago because ... as a matter of fact maybe I can tell you this. It's wonderful to be old. It's marvelous to be old! You know, I'll be 89 in January and I just have had the greatest time in these last years and the most fun of all! The kids are off on their own, doing their thing. If they need me they write me an email. Sometimes I can work them in my schedule, but not always. And it really is just a fun, fun time. So I'm just having a good time.

Judith: Well, it's really been a pleasure talking with you Ruth, and I'm going to now ask Chertstin if she has any questions. Is there anything you'd like to ...

Ruth: Well, I'd like to show you that ... oh, you've seen it. The things that people give you. You know you have the shell for Women of Achievement. You saw that. But the one of the watershed. . . [Showing an award that included an etched map of the Santa Ana River]

They said the Santa Ana was the last wild river in Southern California and it's just not worth saving. And Paul Anderson told me that and everybody else told me that. I was the political arm; Martha was a kind of the journalistic part of it. Well, anyway, we went in to see Arthur Potter 'cause we'd gotten to know friends. I saw the plans for the concrete river: our Santa Ana River.

Judith: So you went in to see Arthur Potter of the Army Corps of Engineers?

Ruth: Yes. And he showed me the plans ... the blueprints ... for concreting in the Santa Ana River, and they're still there. They even look just like they had ... in the little ridge here. So he was so angry this morning. He was just fuming. I said, "Arthur, what is the matter?"

He said, "I'm so mad. I just went into Santa Barbara yesterday. My boss was with me and we were telling them how we were gonna take care of the creek over there that was giving them some trouble. And he said, "They absolutely shouted me down and wouldn't let me talk!

"And I was so embarrassed that my boss felt that I really didn't handle the meeting well." Now this head of Los Angeles, (laughing), his boss is from Washington or whatever and he said, "I'm so mad. I'm not gonna go through this anymore. We were there. We were gonna take care of things for them and they just wouldn't let us do it. They wanted their creek left alone."

He said, "I know better than they know about this creek."

And I said, "What are you going to do when you quit?"

He said, "I'm gonna go hunting and fishing!" (Laughing)

Judith: Where are you going to go hunting and fishing if everything is concrete?

Ruth: Yeah. But what he was able to get was 10% of one man for his environmental efforts when we first started. That's all he could get out of Washington. And later on he did a report that he printed in green ink and sent it to Washington, and they sent it back and said, "Do it right!" And they were very unhappy with Arthur Potter for doing this (laughing) report in environmentally green ink! But anyway ...so that's the kind of thing ... but that's sort of the way it worked.

Judith: How did you win him over?

Ruth: Just talking. Asking him to tell me all about it. Everything I wanted to know I'd say: "Arthur, I don't understand this. Can you tell me about that? It looks to me like you have a big goal here of building dams."

He said, "No, no, no! Building dams isn't our biggest thing."

And I said, "Yeah, but one of the big things on your paper here says, 'Tons of concrete poured.' Why would that be something you'd put on that you were proud of, you know, if what you'd accomplished this year is tons of concrete poured, if that weren't for dams and for concreting rivers?"

"Well," he said, "I guess it would make it a goal, wouldn't it?"

But, anyway he said, "You have that all wrong, you know."

I said, "Oh, I know."

Anyway we also learned a great deal about what they had to do about Prado Dam, in expanding the big lot of land behind the dam because their rule is you have to have land all within the elevation of what the dam is. They have to own it or control it. So he talked to us a lot about that kind of thing, which helped a lot to talk to people that understand these things. They loved to tell you what they wanted, you know. The more you ask them the more friendly they are towards you. And the more you are interested, they're more interested in you when they know you and once you say "Do you know you got this? Or they'd send articles.

And the other funny thing that happened is that material came from the City Park Department or the County Park Department in manila envelopes with no return address on 'em. He'd send me the material so then Martha and I would go up to the microphone and make this big stand and the Supervisors or the Councilmen would say: "We don't know what to do. We'll have to send it back to the Department." And so the Department would then get the material which we had just taken from their material. (Laughing)

Judith: (Laughing) That was a tactic that worked.

Ruth: Boy, did it work.

Judith: Being informed. Having the information ahead of time.

Ruth: Yeah, that's right. So then when Mr. Anderson put me on Park Commission, they were saying they didn't know what to do. And they set up a study and request for our requesting him to do

something, and that's when they did the study. They told Mr. Anderson, "Why don't we just put it on the shelf." So I was on the Park Commission by this time, only it was called the Park Committee. It wasn't big enough to be a Park Commission. So I went to Mr. Norman Davis and got that one changed. But anyway, the people said, "We don't know how our Supervisor wants us to vote."

I said, "Sir, let me make a motion. Let's put the study back in to be implemented."

I pointed out to them: "The Supervisor already knows how he's going to vote. He doesn't need you to tell him what to do. You're out there as the liaison with the people and bring back what the people think in order that he can be a good representative of his people. Well. (I said) why don't you go back and ask him."

Anyway, we got it back to the implementing the study part and the Supervisors accepted it. The Commission Chair said, "Well, what are we going to do now?"

And I said, "Well, we'll be back in a few weeks."

The Supervisors said, "Yeah, we know you will."

Judith: (Laughing)

Ruth: So then that's when it turned out that when one's on this Park Commission, the Park Director had his interests on the Colorado River and not the local river at all 'cause he considered that a loss. He knew it'd been studied and was considered to be no good. It was wild and worthless and not navigable. Called it, you know wild, it's an ephemeral river in some places, and that sort of thing. So we really had a problem with him, and he'd sit on my front porch ... he lived near me ... and on Sunday afternoon he'd say, "I really have problems with you people."

I said, "You've just got to pay attention to Santa Ana."

"No, no, no."

Well, unfortunately he had a heart attack and died, and it was really hard on him but *boy* was it a big break for the River!" (Laughing) 'Cause we didn't have a director then for the Park Department and Pete Dangermond was brought over from Redlands. He was hired. He was a Park Planner in San Bernardino and he was hired. And those were really great days because then we started implementing different things. But he was a total supporter with the Santa Ana River. And so that's probably the biggest break we ever got.

Judith: Now he went on to be in charge of the State ...

Ruth: That's right. He was State Parks Director, right. Well the early Riverside days that he came around, I rode with him and we went all around to the different parks in the County, and there were some nice ones. Very neglected, and so on. And at the end of the day I handed him all my pages of notes on what he'd talked about. I've lived long enough to see all of those brought into fruition. And that was really a thrill.

I had to leave the Park Commission however. I was at breakfast with my husband, Mr. Paul Anderson, by this time (laughing) and I told him I was going to make a presentation at the Board of Supervisors meeting and ask for his vote. And he said, "I'm not going to vote for that."

I said, "**You've GOT TO!!! I've got to get that! It just has to happen!**"

And he said, "I am not going to let the Second District people think that the Second District Supervisor's wife is running the District!"

And he did. He did not vote for it. It went 4 to 1. He knew it would pass 'cause we already had the other 4 of them. We knew they would go for us, and I turned in my resignation that afternoon. It put Martha McLean up in my place on the Park Commission.

Judith: And the park that was named after her, were you involved in that development?

Ruth: Yes. We had a lot to do with it. That's why we wanted to name it after her.

Judith: That wasn't where the pig farm was.

Ruth: No, no, it wasn't. This is a whole different one. This is owned by the City and by the County, and it's in the City limits. It's kind of one of those odd little things. No, the pig farm was down below in the river itself. I think it was over by Hidden Valley. I think in that general area is where it was. The pig farm. That was our first ... well, it's because we wanted to implement Public Law 912 or whatever it was ... the pig farm..

But you see, when they had that law passed they wanted public involvement so they wanted to do a study of raising Prado Dam, so because I was an environmentalist ... they couldn't even spell that word in the 1970's ...

Judith: (Laughing)

Ruth: I was a speaker over at UCR. It was April Fool's Day they used to do it. Now they moved later in the month. But I was the speaker that day 'cause I was the only environmentalist. I was President at that time. The only environmentalist they knew at UCR (laughing) That was the longest day.

Cherstin: What were you President of at that time?

Ruth: It's the Tri-County Conservation League. And so yes, we spoke up that day. There's a story about that one. But anyway, that's what happened. Every little step is, you know, this little one here, a little bit over, and had to be gradual, gradual ... and the acceptance by the public of changing. . .It became a cultural change and we were just with it.

Oh, we said ... I was in the Music Room at the Mission Inn and we were studying something, maybe water supply. I'm not quite sure what it was, and the speaker at the time was an Army Corps speaker. Now this was just a couple of years ago. Five years ago. And it had been said to me, "Aren't you sorry you saved the River now because the River in flood tore everything up and tore our District [Rubidoux Water District] all to pieces?"

We lost a lot of pipeline and all kinds of stuff. We had a really tough time of it. It cost about \$14 million dollars to fix it.

He said, "Aren't you sorry you saved the River because if you hadn't saved the River this wouldn't happen."

So I asked at this meeting where there were all the speakers and I said to the Army Corps person, "Was it a mistake to try to save the River?"

And he said, "On the contrary."

I mentioned that I was with the Tri-County League and he said, "We have taken your philosophy as our own. "!!!

What we were preaching was keep the River's soft bottom. Let's riprap the sides. Keep the soft bottom so we have water when it was recreation time, when it wasn't in flood, and let the kids play, horses walk and all that kind of stuff. And that was what we were preaching. We came up with it first. "Oh, you dumb women! You don't understand the economics." That's what we heard.

So anyway, when he said this, and this was back only five years ago ... it had to be 2006 ... he said, "I'm glad to be able to tell you this..." in a whole room with a hundred people there, "We have taken your philosophy for our own."

Judith: What success!!!

Ruth: Yes! That was really ...

Judith: Soft bottom for the Santa Ana River.

Ruth: Yes! That was really a crowning moment and I forgot about that. But it was really a good deal because all the watermen were in the room, and all the engineers were in the room, and all that. So there were wonderful times.

Judith: As a parent and a grandparent I want to thank you personally for all the many hours I have enjoyed in that soft bottom.

Ruth: (Laughing) Well, he said, "If you hadn't" Oh, I guess that's the rest of that. "If you hadn't started when you did it would never have been successful." That was back on April 29th, 1966. 'Cause what happened was it also meant that the River just became a big part of our lives.

But anyway there's a lot of stories that are like that that are delightful kinds of things. And the interest is still there, but Martha's gone. And Kay is gone. Kay Black was our third person and she took care of all the paperwork and the mailing, and all of those things and just kept us in line when we were supposed to be somewhere. She was wonderful. All three of us were League members. But this was not a League of Women Voters project.

The interesting way the Tri-County Conservation League got its name is ... Isn't that an ambitious name? Tri-County for two women (laughing) who were thinking they were gonna save a river? Boy, talk about nerve!!

Chertstin: Did you start that organization?

Ruth: Yes.

Cherstin: Can you talk to us about how you started it, and when?

Ruth: Do you want to do that now? I think it's a very interesting thing because Martha and I were working on saving the River, and we had a League meeting about it. It wasn't a League-sponsored meeting, but it was about all League members that were invited to come to it. What should we do about saving the River, and what really was the issue, and also to talk about the entire watershed coming from the mountains to the rivers to the ocean. And I was sitting in the back ... we had a speaker from the Water District ... just somebody who was talking to us about it. A typical League meeting. And a man came and sat beside me and said, "My name is David Butler and I'd like to talk to you about saving the River."

And I said, "Well, where'd you come from?"

And he said, "From Norco."

He was over at Norco and wanting to keep the ...

Judith: The bluffs? The horse trails?

Ruth: No. He was worried about digging the rock out ... the quarry. He wanted to prevent the quarries from chopping up the River over there in Norco. He had held a meeting and had all the City/County people who were involved that he was able to get together there. And he had an address list and they all signed in who were there that day. So they decided they'd work together to do that there and he wanted to know if we would want to work with them. And I said, "I wasn't sure how much we could help them because that was over there, and we were over here" and so on.

Well, it turned out that we could help a whole lot. They could help us a whole lot. But they had come up with the Tri-County Conservation League's name. So we didn't come up with that 'cause we'd be Save Our River, or some crummy thing like that. They did. So we took that one ... their's ... and so we worked with them and combined forces. And we went from that list of addresses that he had and then we started doing the same kind of thing. We're after troops, not treasure. And so let us have your name and that sort of thing. So that's how it started. And we took over from there. David just sort of let go of the whole thing and gave it to us. And so what we learned about that ... about the names that he had on his list, 'cause he had County and City officials on there. Not political ones but the staff people. And when they found out that we were interested, they were the ones that offered to send us the material in the clean envelopes, and that kind of thing.

But the other story that goes along with that is when Jane Block wanted to do Save the Mountains. Did she tell you how that got started?

Judith: About her Box Springs Mountain?

Ruth: Did she tell you how they got that?

Judith: No.

Ruth: She had a group and wanted to talk about starting it. A lot of people were sympathetic up there in the area. I was there with her and she had called me and asked me about how do you do these things? And I said, "Well, you get 'em started and have everybody else do 'em. That's about the way it works."

So she's used that ever since, bless her heart. But anyway, I had the Tri-County League Minutes ... I mean the Well, I guess our statement about who we were as the Tri-County Conservation League. We had the membership form stuff with us. She was saying about the Box Springs Mountain, so I said, "Well, would you care if we just take our paper that I already have to do for the State or somebody ... or an organization maybe. Organization people. Why don't we just strike out Tri-County Conservation League and put in Save the Box Springs Mountain?" So that's what we did. She passed around the attendance sheet and asked everybody for a buck, so she had a treasury, she had a membership, and a name, and an organization chart (laughing) that night. So that's how that got started.

Cherstin: What year was that?

Ruth: Uhmhhh.

Cherstin: Approximately.

Ruth: It had to be '80s, '90s maybe. (Laughing) Anyway that sure saved a lot because everybody said "Oh, yeah" and they chipped in. It was really wonderful to have everybody pitch in like that. And then you had mailing addresses and you know, could do a newsletter and all of that stuff. It's that being in the right place at the right time.

Judith: Does the Tri-County Conservation League continue?

Ruth: Oh, yes! It's still continues today, as a matter of fact ... and I don't help 'em very much ... but anyway, it's doing fine but they are watching. A lot of things need watching ... they have to sort of weaken some of the things they want to do because of the water table problem, and so on. I'm in a District that has no adjudicated water. We have all the water we can use. We have more water than we can use.

Judith: Is it the Jurupa Water District?

Ruth: No. It's not. It's the Rubidoux. Jurupa is adjudicated. We're not. We have a lot of water.

Judith: Was it your water district that was developed when Louis Rubidoux had the ranch?

Ruth: No, the Rubidoux District was formed in 1954 with water from wells. But we've got quite a bit of water here. But think again about how things happen. How things start. Maybe you've heard of the organization called Clean Air Now?

Judith: Uh-hmm.

Ruth: And it's an anti-smog group, and this is when Ben Lewis was Mayor.

Judith: So this is early 1970's?

Ruth: Yeah, something like that. I think so. Yeah, I think so. I think I was still Mrs. Bratton. I've been married three times. But anyway, what happened was ... I wrote a letter ... and it was Christmastime ... and said that people are moving out because of smog.

But anyway, I'd tell them that the people are moving out because of smog, and *The Press* said, "No. That isn't true." So I put a letter in *The Press* in Letters to the Editor and said, "If you're unhappy about the smog, or thinking of moving out, would you please send me a Christmas card and tell me so." And they printed that in *The Press*. "That's nonsense," they said.

I said, "I dare you!"

So they did. I got one hundred and eleven letters!

Judith: From one Letter to the Editor!

Ruth: From my letter about smog. And they checked out the letters oh! They were sent to me in care of *The Press*. And *The Press* even put in ... well, anyway, some of the people who wrote they found them moving, they put pictures of 'em with the moving van at their house. (Laughing) So that's how that started.

And then it was that *The Press* put in this coupon to ask for more who were unhappy about smog and got eleven hundred answers in a couple of weeks. You should really be upset about it. So I took these eleven hundred names and I had a call from a fellow in San Bernardino who was interested in working about the smog also. And so that's where the name Clean Air Now came from, and I turned all that over 'cause I was in the midst of the Park thing at the time. And my husband said to me, "You can't do 'em all! You gotta let go!" But that's how the Clean Air Now started. Don Bauer from San Bernardino was the one who came up with that name. Dr. Zweig and others picked it up. He's now gone. But that's how that name started.

But what they did ... I wasn't happy with them, but they wanted petitions because we had such a successful thing, so they got petitions signed enough end to end for two miles. They had so many they took them all to Sacramento to tell how unhappy they were about the smog thing.

I said, "They don't want to look at 'em end to end. They don't want to look at 'em now. They're not in Session."

And they took 'em up when they weren't in Session anyway.

I said, "What did you do that for?" They had these tons of petitions and this was not a political thing. It was just a petition thing. It was not a guaranteed vote. None of that. It was just the people upset about the smog.

Judith: Petitioning their government. But the government wasn't in Session.

Ruth: "Cause they weren't in Session. So I said to 'em, "If you'll just wait, you know. When they had a nice dinner for 'em up there and said, "Thank you for the petitions."

They soon backed down and they were kind of like, "Ohhh." Nobody noticed.

And I really was unhappy with them. I said, "Timing is everything, and you know that. And I know that. It's just timing. You have to do it when the time is right. You can't stop an idea when its time is right. And that's really what it amounts to. But anyway, that's how Clean Air Now got its name. (Laughing) *The Press* said to me "No. That's isn't ... nobody will pay attention to you."

I said, "Well then print my letter and see what happens." So they did. They were pleased with the results.

Judith: (Laughing) Oh, my goodness.

Ruth: Yeah.

Judith: Power of one woman!

Ruth: Well, no. Yeah, it's the idea, you know. And also I just had to because League training is so good. You don't do it unless you have the facts. You don't say, "I think" or "I know" or "I guess." So anyway, that's that.

Judith: Just the facts.

Ruth: Anyway, there's just so many stories like that.

