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Interview with Carolyn "Boo" Poole

Carolyn Poole
SC Mother of the Year Committee

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Winthrop University
South Carolina Mother of the Year Award Oral History Archives
Interview Transcript
Mrs. Carolyn "Boo" Poole
Member of the SC Mother of the Year Award Selection Committee
June 24, 2015

Dr. Disney: Good morning. I'm Dr. Jennifer Leigh Disney and I am honored to be here interviewing Mrs. Carolyn Poole for the Mother of the Year archives project. How are you doing Carolyn?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I'm doing great today, thank you.

Dr. Disney: Thank you for being here with us. We've had the opportunity to talk to Carolyn before in a different context but we're going to put her in the hot seat today and ask her some of those same questions she's heard and participated in in other interviews. So Carolyn, tell us when and where you were born and raised and a little bit about your early childhood experiences.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Well I think I have a childhood of magic. I was born in Walterboro, South Carolina in the low country and I was the fourth child with three older brothers and I have to tell you that most people don't know me as Carolyn, they know me as "Boo" because my family, I was always told, felt so elated and overjoyed when I was born. My mother lived on a farm with my father who was a farmer, he was educated at Clemson to be a father, and her father-in-law lived with her and he was a retired attorney and they ran the farm with tenant farmers and a large operation of cattle and timber. She was really a fine matriarch and a wonderful homemaker but I think she was lonely for a feminine part of her life because she lived there with my father and three boys and my oldest brother was ten years old when they found out they were expecting a fourth child. She was a very active person in her home as well as community and she belonged to a little book club called the "T in Topics" in Walterboro, South Carolina. They read books that were popular back in the day and one book that was read that year was called *Time for Miss Boo* and it was a book portraying a family that was totally changed by the birth of a little girl, an older couple who thought they would never have children. It's a beautifully illustrated little novel about a little girl named "Miss Boo" so all of her friends and all over her community loved her, especially my father and my brothers said, "It's time for Miss Boo here." They called 'Miss Boo' when I was a child and then it was shortened to 'Boo' and even when I went to college, if I would introduce myself as Carolyn, it always became 'Boo' because somebody knew I was Boo Howell and not Carolyn Howell. I was named for my mother, Carolyn.

Dr. Disney: Wow, that's a beautiful story. "Time for Miss Boo," I love that. So you went to college, tell us about your education and your young adult life.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Well I'm going to go back to my childhood because I grew up on this farm with so many things going on, as they do on a farm. My brothers were very active helping my father and my grandfather was not in my life but he had been very much in my brothers' lives. I grew up in a home with many stories of ancestors or people before us. There were many jurists in my family, my great-grandfather was Chief Justice of the South Carolina Supreme Court and my great uncle was on the Supreme Court and his law partner was my grandfather who was the Chairman of the Democratic party in Carlton County. So there was much lively discussion of public affairs, as well as farming. I was born in this household where there was always things going on in the farm but there were many things going on, many conversations

about the public life at that time. Then, many conversations of who my family was and the contributions they had made and the inspirational stories I was just telling you a minute ago, of strong women in my life like my grandmother, who was not in my life, but I was told so many stories of her benevolence and her care for others. My great great grandmother did have slaves but we have learned that she taught the slaves along with her own children, she broke the law at that time and taught the children in her home around her kitchen table to read. There are descendants now of those children who have come back to our family and said, "Your great great grandmother made this possible, to be where we are." So I'm very proud of my ancestors, I come from a family of story tellers so I enjoyed that and I think it influenced my life greatly. I took a turn when I was a child that nobody had really thought about much in my family. I had cut my hand seriously when I was three years old and so, as it healed, they began talking about what they could do to make my hand stronger and they said, "Maybe piano lessons." They had gotten me a little toy piano and they had noticed I was playing "Three Blind Mice" on the piano and it sounded like "Three Blind Mice." So, when I was seven years old, they bought a piano and they told me if I like taking piano lessons, they would keep it. But if I didn't like it after a year, it would go back to the people at the piano company. So, they gave piano lessons and I loved music and I played the piano by ear, as well as taking piano lessons, and I ended up going to college and majoring in music education and I enjoyed that very much. So I always derived great joy from playing the piano for others and making others happy with my music. I found that very...it was just a great feeling, to be able to change someone's mood with my playing, I think I enjoyed that.

Dr. Disney: What a great breadth of knowledge, I'm thinking about your childhood. I mean you've got farming experience and knowledge, you've got the judicial experience and knowledge, political experience and knowledge, and then you bring the music, I mean, just talk about how you've been blessed with eclectic mix of talent from your family, that's amazing.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I feel that it's totally eclectic and my mother always told me, she never worked outside the home, but she was such a busy, busy person in the home and busy in the community and the time I came along, being born in 1949, the war was over and it was a happy time for people. They were getting back to their lives and many women were going to work to make more money for the family in our town. I had friends whose mothers worked and their mothers would not have time to go on a field trip with them or maybe be a brownie leader. My mother was the leader of the Girl Scouts and things that came up, she taught my friends and I how to play bridge because she thought it would be important for us to know how to do things. She taught my friends and I how to play tennis and we had a tennis court on the farm because my parents loved to play tennis and they felt like playing was as important as working. It was a clay court, we built it by hand and it was fun and we had friends out to play tennis and friends to go with us fishing to the home fish pond and picnics at the pond and it was just a happy life. My mother was the kind of person that was an artist in her home, now that I think about it. She loved to sew and she sewed for herself and she created beautiful garments because money was not real, there was not a lot of money to do extra things with and she enjoyed making beautiful clothes. She would go in a shop in Charleston and examine a beautiful garment and then she would come home and make her pattern and she would make it beautifully. She enjoyed cooking and she enjoyed making recipes and she did have help in the kitchen because we had tenant farmers who helped and she would teach them her recipes and she taught many of them to cook that went on to work later in the food industry. She was, I always remember fresh flowers in the house and she loved to garden. She would make arrangements and there would always be something nice to

look at on the mantelpiece or in the center of the table. I feel like I did have an eclectic childhood with a forest fire maybe going on in one part of the woods that we would have to go out and my brothers were racing around trying to help Dad and maybe the cows were in the garden in another area of the farm and we had to go. I was never in that but my brothers would run along and help my father with that, with all the animals and all the property, things that had to be done on a working farm. My brothers said that my childhood was very different from theirs because I played the piano and I stayed with mom but in later years, I did follow my father everywhere I could and enjoy his company and I would learn to paddle the boats so he could catch bass and I wouldn't make a sound with my paddle. It was a great childhood.

Dr. Disney: And you mentioned music education, where did you go to college?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I went to Columbia College, the same college that Janet went to and I too loved it so much.

Dr. Disney: That's what I thought. What were your dreams, goals, and aspirations at that time in your life?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I had thought about that and I think at that time, I was thinking that I wanted to do something in music to help others because I had always enjoyed the difference my playing seemed to make to groups that I would play for. I was playing for church by the time that I was twelve years old and I would go in the men's elderly Bible class and they would sing rather brisk and after we got through singing and playing, they would open up and be happy. So, at Columbia College, I was just hoping I could learn how to teach music so I could share my love of music with others and make people happy.

Dr. Disney: That's beautiful. Tell us about how you met your husband.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: As with Janet, at Columbia College, we had the blind dating system so I met him through a blind date. I remember being a music major, I would stay on campus many times when our fellow students would go home, but we had to practice piano or practice the organ, so the music majors kind of hung out together. I was in my dormitory room one Saturday when I got the word, somebody came in the room and said, "I've got a really nice boy from Denmark, South Carolina, don't you have relatives in Denmark?" "Well yes I do." "Well, they would probably know you and he's looking for a date to go to the Duke/USC football game." And I said, "Oh, I would love to go to a college football game" so that was our first date, a Duke University/South Carolina football game. He was a student there and he was in his first year of law school and so I enjoyed very much his company and it just grew into a great love.

Dr. Disney: That's wonderful. Tell us about the early years of your marriage and the birth of your children.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Well, the early years of my marriage were very interesting, I feel, because we married as soon as I finished college and he finished law school and he was offered a position in a law firm in the small town of Barnwell. It was a very well known law firm and the senior partner of the law firm was Representative Solomon Blatt who was the longest serving state Speaker of the House in South Carolina, he was Speaker Emeritus. He had been in service for a long time when we joined the law firm, he was in his later years. This small town, although it was small, there was a lot of political activity in that town because the Senator Pro-Tem, Senator Brown was also from Barnwell, South Carolina. The two of them, they said, ran the state from the small town of Barnwell, it was in the time before industrial Greenville became so prevalent and things were more rural at that time. So, I was twenty-one years old and we joined this law firm and I became, I appreciated so much my mother's teaching and example in entertaining because I was expected to be able to entertain and interact with people of all ages

and go to functions with people of all ages and be myself and be comfortable and make others feel comfortable and that's the way I had been reared. I enjoyed very much the activity in Barnwell with the many friends that I met who were leaders and interested in South Carolina's history and South Carolina's future. So, it was interesting.

Dr. Disney: Talk a little bit more about the activities that you got involved in before and after your children.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Okay, well one thing I did, I taught piano lessons for many years until my children reached the age where they were needing me in the afternoons to take me to their lessons, I taught piano lessons to children and I enjoyed that very much. I became very active in my church, in the music of my church. I was choir director for twenty-nine years in two different churches and I was also an organist in two different churches. I enjoyed that immensely and that was my little break from being a mother, when I would have choir practice once a week, I would get involved in the music and I loved the people, working with people in music. I feel very grateful that I have the talent to pull all of that together and also be a mother who was available to my children when they needed me.

Dr. Disney: So tell us about your children.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I have a son who is a dentist and a daughter who is an attorney and they were active little children who I always enjoyed playing with them as well as working with them. They were raised in the country, as I was. We moved out of town and so they spent time running through the fields, jumping haystacks and wading through the streams and fishing in the fish ponds and going to the ocean and going to the river. I feel that they had happy childhoods, playing a lot and also learning to serve others, as so many times we took care of families who needed help. In small towns when people needed food or they need just somebody to be there during sickness or bereavement, it was a great tradition that you were there for people when they needed you and they saw a lot of that. In fact, sometimes when I'd be baking a cake, they'd come in and say, "Momma, is somebody sick?" And I'd say, "Nope, you can have some!"

Dr. Disney: It sounds like your mother was such a good role model growing up that you carried on a lot of her practices in your home and your community.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: She was exactly that. Cared for others and she always taught me others first. I just appreciate so much her words of wisdom that come back to me daily.

Dr. Disney: This segues beautifully into my next question, what does motherhood mean to you?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Motherhood, to me, is one of the most important roles that a woman plays and it's a privilege to play that role. It's a role of setting an example because children, what they see is so much more important and meaningful than what you tell them, so I hope that I set the example for them of participating but mainly for thinking of others before themselves and to be a part of a team to work for good in anything that they're involved in.

Dr. Disney: Putting others first, an interesting sacrifice, right? Sacrificing one's self for others in the community. How did you become a member of the South Carolina Mother of the Year Association and selection committee?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Well, it's sort of funny. I had distant cousins on the committee that I really didn't know very well and they were looking for someone from my area because they wanted to have the state well represented. Being a rural area there, I guess you know, it was, they had to try to think of who they really knew from that area. So one of the members said, "I have a distant cousin from that area. She lives in Barnwell. I've met her, but I don't know her well." And then another member said, "Well, I have a cousin from that area, too. I know her mother and

father very well, but I have not been in her company very often.” And it was me. I was related to two different people on the committee.

Dr. Disney: How did your experience with members on the committee impact you and your family and your community?

Carolyn “Boo” Poole: I feel like it’s been one of the greatest blessings in my life because I’ve had the chance to observe the lifestyle of these very purposeful, successful human beings, successful in so many areas of their lives, even besides the motherhood. It’s impacted my life and given me so much more depth in understanding what’s real and true.

Dr. Disney: How many years have you served on the committee and what offices and positions have you held?

Carolyn “Boo” Poole: I think I’ve served about sixteen years. My offices and positions have been, I was Chairman, Vice Chairman for forty years. Then, I was Chairman for two years. I had the honor of being Chairman on the committee when the South Carolina Mother that we selected became the National Mother of the Year. So I enjoyed so much of that situation.

Dr. Disney: Was that 2008?

Carolyn “Boo” Poole: I believe it was. It was Betty Jean McGregor. Of course, I loved Betty Jean immediately and working with her on her portfolio was a huge job after she was elected Mother of the Year. Each mother had to fill out a portfolio that was a huge document of things and essays and interesting questions that they had to address about their philosophy of parenting and their theory on living and their background. So, part of the job to be Chairman was to be sure that this mother that you had selected as South Carolina Mother of the Year was well informed on how to fill out these applications and documentations and have all that packed in by a certain time so it could be reviewed by a national committee. The National Committee would then meet these Mothers when they came to a convention of all the states and they would use the portfolio that had been turned in earlier to select the National Mother of the Year, along with their interviews. So, it was quite exciting when Betty’s husband, Sam, called me and said, “Boo, we’re still out here in Oregon at the convention. We had to stay an extra day. Betty Jean won the whole thing!” I said, “My goodness! How exciting!” So after that, the year went on with celebrations and I stayed with Betty Jean McGregor as being National Mother of the Year. I thoroughly enjoyed my time as Chairman, it was especially meaningful during those years when I was able to work closely with Betty Jean McGregor and Annette Sutfield.

Dr. Disney: Last question I’m going to add, or if there was anything else you’d like to say. I’m just curious what it was like to be able to work with these women who were State Mothers, National Mothers, and taking them through that year of being honored. Tell us a little bit about anything you want to share about them or about that experience working with them.

Carolyn “Boo” Poole: Well, one thing that struck me about each woman who was selected as Mother of the Year was their humility, they all felt like they were undeserving and their activities. They were the busiest people I had ever known, as many, many interests they had and many organizations and contributions they had made in their community and continued to make. So when they were selected as Mother of the Year, they had basically finished rearing their children. But they were very busy women, still, in all of the many tentacles they had and the major parts they had played in their communities and churches. So that struck me about the mothers and that they all felt so humble about being selected, that they were underserving, but when you asked them about their roles as a mother, they knew exactly what they were and how they had been totally involved with their children, as well as their communities, when the

children were growing up. It just struck me that they were such well-rounded, energetic, smart women.

Dr. Disney: That's beautiful. Such a testament.

Dr. Disney: So Boo, we want to ask you what do you think are the most important issues facing women today?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I think important issues them are things they don't even understand because they have this feeling, this nurturing maternal feeling inside and sometimes, it's so hard to balance that with what is expected of women now to be everything. I think that probably can be a conflict for some women to figure out where they fit in being a provider and a nurturer and a role model.

Dr. Disney: Do you think women's work or women's roles as mothers are adequately recognized by society today?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I really don't. Personally, I don't think they are and that's one of the reasons I love being a part of this committee because I feel like it elevates motherhood to recognize someone who has done a great job and there's so many mothers who deserve recognition. I wish we could recognize one hundred mothers a year because the applications we received were just incredible people who had changed their communities and their state and had been so involved in the lives of their children.

Dr. Disney: You talked a little bit about how difficult it is for women who are expected to do it all. They have to balance their work inside the home, their work outside the home, they're maybe working for pay, working with their church, volunteering. So just talk a little bit about those struggles or those balances: how you were able to do it, how you maybe met some of these Mothers of the Year, how they were able to do it, some of the awe you had with how they were able to do it, and then women today raising kids, if you think things have changed over time.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I think the way that I was able to do a lot of community work and church work and work with my children because I was a Brownie leader and I was the driver that took the class places and I was a class mother and things like that. My husband was so supportive and he wanted me to be involved and he encouraged me to be a part of things and he supported me in doing little things to make the wheel work together. When I had choir practice at night, he would always step up and help out with supper, which was always out of his realm, because back then, the roles were defined more, there was a big gap between what the mother did and what the father did. He was not real comfortable cooking supper and serving supper, but he would do the best he could because he liked for me to have another part of my life and he liked for me to contribute. I think having the right helpmate is a big part of that and someone to boost your confidence too, that you can do a lot of things.

Dr. Disney: That's so important, having the right partner. And having men and women who are willing to maybe challenge those gender roles stereotypes of what's considered women's work and what's considered men's work, right?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Right. And I do see really I will call an improvement in that because my son does everything that I did for my children and does it very graciously and very well. He can just handle anything that comes up at home and he's always been in charge of the bath time when he comes in from work and he just takes over from there and he's Dad until they go to bed, he's fully their's. I'm so proud about that because the roles aren't as defined and I think things have gotten, it's really a better situation.

Dr. Disney: You must have raised a good son? That's really great.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Well, I'm really proud of him. He's a good dad.

Dr. Disney: I think, maybe, you raised a feminist son. So that's my next question, what does feminism mean to you?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Well, feminism, I thought about my grandmother and my great-grandmother and I felt like they were women of their time that did what they needed to do to make things better for others. That's what I think feminism is, is not being afraid to use your talents and your ability to have the woman's gracious way of making change or helping others. So, I think that's a very feminine thing to do and to be active with it is feminism to me.

Dr. Disney: That's a beautiful definition. Do you consider yourself a feminist, based on that definition?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: I don't know, you'd have to ask somebody else I guess. But I am one who, I am for justice and I am respectful of all and I have a heart for right so, maybe I am a feminist, I don't mind speaking up if I feel that something is gone awry.

Dr. Disney: That's beautiful. I think you are, I might say. Based on those two beautiful answers, I think you are. Let me just ask a question, you talked about your son coming home from work and being Dad until bedtime. Does your son's wife work, is she a stay-at-home mom or does she work outside the home?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: She is a stay-at-home mom.

Dr. Disney: A stay-at-home mom. Okay, so that's how they work. She's at home, nine to five, and he kicks in five to nine.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: That's the way they work together. I'm so pleased with that and we can see he's totally committed to them and it's different from earlier times. He doesn't play golf or go fishing, he might like to, but he doesn't do that too often on Saturdays, it's mostly all about the children, and I think that's really a good thing. His dad was very much like that and I was always thankful that nothing preempted family during those important years when the children were young.

Dr. Disney: How many kids do they have? How many grandchildren do you have?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: They have two boys. They are eight and almost eleven.

Dr. Disney: That's wonderful. That's a great model to me. He's a good representation of the kind of mother you must have been. So, I just wanted to say that. I want to thank you for your time. Any questions you want to ask us? Anything else you want to add about your experience with South Carolina Mother of the Year Association, the selection committee, the mothers you've worked with, anything else you want to share?

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Well, just the members of the committee have been important friends in my life and the common bond we have and recognizing goodness and graciousness and the activity in these women that we were able to recognize. It was just pure privilege to get to be a part of that. It's been a great relationship with other women on the committee, as well as some others that we've worked with, and I feel like it's been a great blessing in my life. I feel like somebody winked at me, maybe God winked and said, "You can do this. Have a good time." Because I really have enjoyed it.

Dr. Disney: That's beautiful, thank you. It's been a blessing for me to be asked to be included by Martha and Shirley and I've learned so much from all of you, so I really appreciate it.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: We appreciate your interest and I think it can be just a big learning tool for young women who are searching for themselves to see. As I grew up learning about my ancestors, to see how other women handle adversity and handled good things and handled busy lives and that core heart value that they seem to keep in the midst of anything going on. It's just

so important. I know that others have gone through this and I can too and I can handle it with grace. That's something I think women can do, they can handle things with a lot of grace.

Dr. Disney: That's beautiful, so well said. I agree with you, I think this archival project is really going to help younger generations of women to look back and learn from previous generations of women. For example, what you said about how to balance all the things women are trying to balance and be successful. Thank you, Boo.

Carolyn "Boo" Poole: Thank you very much.