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Interview with Annie Popkin

Ann Hunter Popkin

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**LOUISE PETTUS ARCHIVES AND SPECIAL COLLECTIONS
ORAL HISTORY PROJECT**

**Interview #243
POPKIN, Annie**

POPKIN, Annie

Feminist, radical activist, founding member of Bread and Roses, educator

Interviewed: August 15, 1993

Interviewer: Ron Chepesiuk

Index by: Alyssa Jones

Length: 1 hour, 39 minutes, 31 seconds

Abstract: In her August 1993 interview with Ron Chepesiuk, Annie Popkin detailed her activist life, especially in the Radical Sixties. Popkin, who at the time was a Women's Studies professor, discussed such topics as Women's Liberation, the Religious Right, the New and Old Left, homophobia, homosexuality, Marxism, the Civil Rights movement, Beatniks, and sexism. She also covered feminism, Gloria Steinem, McCarthyism, the Southern Organizing Committee, male chauvinism, and Betty Friedan. This interview was conducted for inclusion into the Louise Pettus Archives and Special Collections Oral History Program.

Keywords: Feminism, Bread and Roses, Women's Studies, Women's Liberation, homophobia, homosexuality, Marxism, Gloria Steinem, Rush Limbaugh, Religious Right, New Left, Freedom Summer (Mississippi Summer), March on Washington, Black Power, Civil Rights movement, McCarthyism, Beatnik, Southern Organizing Committee (SOC), male chauvinism, Betty Friedan

Interview Session I (August 15, 1993): Digital File

Time Keywords

00:01:10 *Start of Interview*/Interviewer's Introduction

00:01:26 *Question:* Can you give us some general background? When you were born, where, and a little about your childhood? *Answer:* AP was born September 21, 1945 in Manhattan, New York. Her father was about to go to the Navy in Louisville. Popkin was the oldest of four children. Had a brother, two years her junior, and had two sisters, eight and ten years younger than her.

00:02:30 *Question:* How would you describe your childhood? *Answer:* A pretty normal childhood, but early on she was interested in class and race differences. She noticed that some neighborhoods had sidewalks and nicely mowed lawns, while others did not have sidewalks and had trash in the yards. She wanted to understand why those

- nice neighborhoods were White neighborhoods and the other neighborhoods were Black neighborhoods.
- 00:03:12 *Question:* Where did that come from? *Answer:* AP did not know where her curiosity came from. Her parents were very progressive and went to her first picket line with her mother as a young child. It was in Long Island, New York for fair housing in Freeport.
- 00:04:29 *Question:* How did your friends take this? Were they politically conscious like you or were they indifferent? *Answer:* It was in the age of McCarthyism. She made friends with like-minded people, and her family and family friends were accepting.
- 00:05:41 *Question:* Did you read Alan Ginsberg and other Beatnik writers? *Answer:* Not really. AP was less about reading about the culture and more about acting.
- 00:06:02 *Question:* You've given seminars on unlearning racism and sexism. Do you really believe that people can unlearn these behaviors; it's not something they are born with? *Answer:* Yes, there are no genes for racism and sexism. We are socialized to be oppressive or oppressed. AP went on to tell a story about when she was living in Cora, New York.
- 00:07:22 *Question:* When was that? *Answer:* AP was in 9th and 10th grade. AP worked for the American Friends Service Committee in Spanish Harlem in 10th and 11th grade. She worked on the weekends. An older woman that she worked with told her that if she went back to the comfort of her parents' home that she would never make social change.
- 00:09:01 *Question:* And it bothered you? What did you do? What happened? *Answer:* AP felt guilt for being middle class. She didn't tell people where she went to college or where she came from.
- 00:09:33 *Question:* You went to the March on Washington in '63, how did that happen? What impact did it have on you? *Answer:* AP said it was very moving. There were thousands of people who wanted things to be different, and believed that they could be different.
- 00:11:09 *Question:* You went there and...? *Answer:* There were people of all walks of life, different, ages, genders, and races.
- 00:11:41 *Question:* Did you know that it was making history? *Answer:* AP did not know that it was history in the making. She was too young and didn't know what the media picked up or how history was made.

- 00:12:16 *Question:* Did you have a sense of yourself as a woman? *Answer:* No.
- 00:12:25 *Question:* It didn't matter who you were? *Answer:* AP didn't have a sense of gender as a category. She had plans to change the world. It wasn't until three years that she realized gender was a category.
- 00:13:51 **[no question]** AP realized that in fighting for what she believed in, people may not always think that she was nice.
- 00:14:14 *Question:* We were talking about people not always agreeing with you. *Answer:* She was socialized to be agreeable and a nice person, but she had her non-conformist side that she couldn't ignore. She didn't realize that the "nice" went along with being a girl until much later.
- 00:15:31 *Question:* You went to the Freedom Summer. What impact did that have on you as a woman? *Answer:* AP agreed with Jane Adams in thinking that going south and getting involved in the Civil Rights movement re-energized women's rights. It also showed them organizing skills that they did not have before. She also experienced firsthand Black Power hate towards White people.
- 00:17:41 *Question:* What did you do? *Answer:* AP walked away from the situation.
- 00:17:45 *Question:* It must have been embarrassing. *Answer:* It was very embarrassing and painful. AP didn't understand what was going on.
- 00:19:21 *Question:* What was your experience at the Mississippi Summer? It was a dangerous time, especially for White women. *Answer:* People were very cynical about the involvement of White women. Black people often questioned their motives.
- 00:22:45 *Question:* You came back from Mississippi and had the experience, how did you get involved? How was it related to the New Left? *Answer:* AP was a member of the Socialists Club, the Democrats Club, and the Civil Rights Coordinating Committee during her freshman year. AP described her experience at the Mississippi Summer.
- 00:26:47 *Question:* People don't understand how scary it was. *Answer:* AP agreed. There were murders every day. It wasn't in the news. AP was stationed in Vicksburg, what she called the Red Carpet of the South. It was not as dangerous as other cities and they were appreciated by the Black people. They even stayed with Black families. Non-progressive missionaries and others were sent as representatives or to fulfill their duties.
- 00:30:01 *Question:* It must make you proud that White people did contribute? *Answer:* Yes. AP was proud of herself for not being stopped by fear.

- 00:31:56 *Question:* How did that experience relate to what you were doing with the SDS and other movement organizations? *Answer:* With the coming of Black Power, the movement was less integrated, so she left the civil rights organizations and focused on the SDS.
- 00:32:52 *Question:* How did men in the New Left view you? Did they respect your views? Did they see you as a comrade? *Answer:* There was definitely sexism, the spokespeople were mostly men. The men mostly looked to each other for answers and opinions. AP admitted to not speaking much at meetings, but she did not make them coffee or do other domestic things for the men.
- 00:33:46 *Question:* You didn't give much input? *Answer:* Except for behind the scenes in a very womanly way.
- 00:33:53 *Question:* They didn't look upon the sexism issue as a legitimate issue at that time, right? *Answer:* Right. The women of SDS and other New Left organizations thought it was just their personalities at first, but then realized it was something called "male chauvinism". It was the attitudes of the men. When they spoke to the men about it, the men were upset about it because they thought it was ridiculous. The men started to ignore the women because they assumed the women were only going to speak about women's rights. By 1967/68, the women knew for sure that it was a major issue that needed separate meetings. It was a spontaneous movement, all over the country.
- 00:36:38 *Question:* There was no organization yet? *Answer:* There was not a national organization. There never really was a national organization. It was a decentralized movement.
- 00:36:53 *Question:* Was that the cause of the rise of the modern women's movement? *Answer:* AP said they were mostly concerned with sexism in the country and sexism in the New Left. The sexism in the New Left was the most upsetting because the women expected more out of New Left men.
- 00:38:30 *Question:* Did Betty Friedan's book have an impact on this? Was there a manifesto? *Answer:* They all read the book. They didn't want to turn into their mothers and take the traditional woman's role. The founding mothers were mostly women who had graduated college and experienced sexism in the working world.
- 00:39:44 *Question:* Some historians say that the Black Power movement made it harder for women to cross the gender lines? *Answer:* Yes. The Black Power movement was a mostly male movement. The men separated the women (the Blacks from the Whites).

- 00:41:40 *Question:* Were you a part of the counterculture? *Answer:* No. AP bought a pair of bellbottoms and told people they belonged to the woman upstairs. She was more a part of the political culture. AP said she straddled the cultures.
- 00:44:10 *Question:* What was the impact of the counterculture lifestyle on the women's movement? *Answer:* They critiqued the counterculture because the women had a very domestic role in counterculture. Counterculture and the movement culture made it easier to let women be the way they wanted to be. SDS didn't think that the Hippies were serious.
- 00:46:06 *Question:* How would you assess the birth control pill during the movement? *Answer:* It had positive effects. It also made it harder for women to say no.
- 00:46:40 **[no question]** AP was speaking about internalized depression. Oppressive societies breed internalized depression.
- 00:50:23 *Question:* Did you have any female role models when you were young? *Answer:* AP didn't remember having a female teacher as a role model, but she did remember looking up to her mother. Her mother was smart, non-traditional female, and an athlete. However, her mother was a stay-at-home mother.
- 00:51:45 *End of Session I*

Interview Session II (undated): Digital File

- 00:52:16 **[no question]** If you didn't want to have sex with your boyfriend, then you were an uptight chick.
- 00:52:36 *Question:* How did your parents view you and feminist culture? *Answer:* They were very supportive.
- 00:52:47 *Question:* Was this general? Was there conflict? *Answer:* Some of AP's parents' friends were confused and a bit disturbed by her actions. People also told her that there were bigger issues in the country. The hierarchy of oppression.
- 00:54:12 *Question:* What galvanized the process of these emerging women's groups? *Answer:* AP said that the consciousness raising part of the movement was the most important part of the growth of the groups and their involvement in politics.
- 00:56:44 *Question:* What impact did it have on you? Did you have a boyfriend? *Answer:* Yes, AP and her boyfriend had a rocky time. He felt threatened by her friends. Their relationship did not survive, which happened to many relationships at the time. The

- ones that did survive were transformed. The women's movement valued the relationships between women.
- 00:38:31 *Question:* Jim Fouratt said that a great contribution of the women's movement was that personal is political and political is personal. Do you think that was a great contribution of the movement, not just for women, but for men as well? The realization that your personal life is political? *Answer:* The women's and gay movements, especially, took that idea to heart. The Old Left said that the political life and the personal life were completely separate. The New Left believed that the two were interconnected.
- 01:00:38 *Question:* Dave Dellinger ended his interview with that philosophy. He did not consciously recognize the origin of the philosophy, but Jim Fouratt did. Tell me about the Bread and Roses organization. Why did it start? *Answer:* AP and others had been meeting and talking about women's issues. This large group split into the Women's Liberation movement, who wanted to create a formal group, and the other group that was very anti-leadership.
- 01:02:53 *Question:* Where did the anti-leadership come from? Because it was going so well the way it was? *Answer:* People's experiences in other organizations had been so excluded and sexist that they turned anti-leadership.
- 01:03:20 *Question:* When did the term "feminist" come about? *Answer:* AP wanted to finish answering the first question before moving onto the origin of the term.
- 01:04:10 *Question:* What happened to the other part of the organization? *Answer:* Most people stayed, but some left for the Female Liberation organization.
- 01:04:40 *Question:* What kind of relationship did you have? Did you have a working relationship? *Answer:* AP and the leader of the Female Liberation movement did have a working relationship. Some people saw Bread and Roses as opposition while others saw it as an ally group. Bread and Roses was about reclaiming the notion of feminism as an effort for bettering conditions for all women.
- 01:06:00 *Question:* Marxists didn't talk about women. You had to figure out the issues yourself. *Answer:* There was a little in the idea of women being the "second sex". Marxists also talked about the family and there was some talk of the emancipation of women. There was a lot of theory and writings that came out of that period.
- 01:06:50 *Question:* What was your role in the founding and development of Bread and Roses? *Answer:* AP was one of the founding mothers/members. There wasn't much history chronicled because no one saw it coming. There were collectives within the group.

- 01:08:03 *Question:* So there were practical results? *Answer:* Yes. There were 3 basic structures of Bread and Roses. There was the mass meeting on Friday nights, the collective smaller groups, and the work group.
- 01:09:02 *Question:* The public did not like the movement and stereotyped you and the others as man-hating feminists? Was that justified? *Answer:* No, that was a media creation. There were no bras burned. The media tried to make it seem like the movement was made up of man-hating lesbians that were only White. They tried to trivialize the movement by calling it Women's "Lib".
- 01:11:10 *Question:* Lesbianism had a role to play in the movement. Can you talk about that? *Answer:* It absolutely did. The movement was supposed to reclaim all women and keep the homophobia of society from separating women. There was homophobia and racism in the movement as well. The lesbian and straight split was a painful split for the movement.
- 01:13:36 *Question:* That was a critical factor? *Answer:* It was one of many factors. Most of the organizations were crumbling and the FBI infiltration in the organizations also helped the disintegration.
- 01:13:49 *Question:* Let's talk about that and its impact on the organizations. They infiltrated the organizations? *Answer:* It wasn't documented by the Women's movement, but the rumors were dangerous enough to cause splits.
- 01:15:00 *Question:* Eventually it disintegrated like the other organizations. *Answer:* Yes. The point wasn't to keep the organizations going; it was to create lasting legacies.
- 01:15:17 *Question:* Let's talk about legacy. *Answer:* AP said she was lucky that she taught Women's Studies because she was watching young people actively learn about women's studies. She believed that people wanted good information. AP had seen people become socially aware.
- 01:17:56 *Question:* Do you think women in academia are respected? *Answer:* No, not completely. AP thought that her position as a Women's Studies professor allowed her more freedom and respect. Most academics looked at women's and racial studies as useless topics.
- 01:18:55 *Question:* That makes it difficult to implement this new program, right? *Answer:* Yes, much more difficult.
- 01:19:08 *Question:* You still categorize yourself as a radical? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:19:10 *Question:* Has that had any effect on your ability to find a job? *Answer:* It had an

impact on the choices AP made in life. It made a difference on where and how she was hired.

- 01:20:36 *Question:* What kind of reception did you receive? *Answer:* AP said she often felt isolated as a radical in university. Her position at the time made her feel more comfortable, especially as a full-time professor, which was new.
- 01:21:08 *Question:* This is a tenure track position? *Answer:* Yes.
- 01:21:51 *Question:* When did the term “feminism” start? *Answer:* They reclaimed the term and expanded the definition of the term in the early 1970s.
- 01:23:11 *Question:* How far have you come along with that? *Answer:* AP said she talked to her students about how women could only wear skirts and they mostly didn’t work. Many other problems that are now social problems were just ignored before the liberation of women.
- 01:24:02 *Question:* Radical feminism has declined, hasn’t it? *Answer:* AP didn’t agree completely. The media was more interested in it in the 1970s.
- 01:24:42 *Question:* There’s not just one type of feminist. Could you elaborate on the current strains of feminism? How do you view yourself? *Answer:* AP said she was a feminist focused on the ending of oppression for everyone, everywhere.
- 01:26:14 *Question:* What is your impression of Camille Paglia? Do you think she has a role to play or do you think she is just a media creation? *Answer:* AP was familiar with the name, but didn’t actually know anything about her.
- 01:26:51 *Question:* Paglia was a good soundbite, but she was very critical of the leadership. *Answer:* AP said she only paid attention to people she thought had something to say.
- 01:27:22 *Question:* Who is that? *Answer:* No one mainstream or famous. They usually came from the network of people she created of people like her. She mostly read novels by women.
- 01:29:10 *Question:* Do you think it’s better for women today? *Answer:* AP thought that it was better, but there was uneven development. Two steps forward, three steps back.
- 01:30:51 *Question:* The Religious Right is much more unified than the women’s movement. Is that disturbing? *Answer:* They were more unified, more organized, and better funded. It was disturbing in terms of long term welfare of the people.
- 01:31:39 *Question:* What about the men’s movement? Is that a positive development?

- Answer:* AP said that there were parts of the men's movement that were positive and progressive, but there were other parts that were degrading, sexist, and woman-hating.
- 01:32:14 *Question:* Could you give an example? *Answer:* Not really. AP said she'd heard things about Robert Bly.
- 01:34:00 *Question:* Have men changed that much? Are they more sensitive to women's issues? *Answer:* There were some men who had internalized the critique from the women's movement, but there were others who had not and had become anti-feminist.
- 01:34:57 *Question:* Rush Limbaugh calls feminists feminazis. He's powerful in the Religious Right. *Answer:* AP found Limbaugh distressing and went on to say how the Right gained so much power by blaming the movements.
- 01:35:42 *Question:* Like the myths about the nuclear family. The disintegration was happening before the 1960s. Do you ever get nostalgic for the period? *Answer:* AP said she never lost her commitment, so she never felt nostalgia. She said she occasionally felt nostalgic about the people getting together, but she could do that if she tried. AP thought that every woman should have a group like that.
- 01:36:08 *Question:* Many feel nostalgia for the sense of community of the movements? *Answer:* AP said she felt very lucky to have her vast network, even though it was only through phone conversations.
- 01:38:12 *Question:* Are you part of other organizations? *Answer:* She's formally part of one because she receives her health insurance through it.
- 01:38:25 *Question:* How do you see yourself in the future? *Answer:* AP was glad to have the job she had, but didn't know if she would be there for the rest of her life. She found spirituality later in life, so she imagined a quieter life in the future.
- 01:39:31 *End of interview*