

MC.0356

Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project

Ida B. Gordon – Class of 1939

(interviewed by Jean Choi)

January 13, 2011

Ida B. Gordon
Class of 1939
1/13/2011

[Looking through MIT yearbook together]

Choi: Did you hang out in the Margaret Cheney Room?

Gordon: Yes, well, that was the only place to hang out.

Choi: Can I see your page?

Gordon: Yes, I'm looking for it. There I am.

Choi: Wow! You are so beautiful! You are from Fitchburg, Massachusetts?

Gordon: (Laughs) Yes, do you know the place?

Choi: Yes, I do. I haven't been there, but I have friends from there.

Gordon: Time magazine once said that it was the second worst place (laughs) to live in the whole country.

Choi: Why?

Gordon: We had a very bad depression because it was a mill town.

Choi: So your given name was Ida Rovnoff? You were born April 2, 1918, prepared at Fitchburg High.

Gordon: Actually I got out of high school a year earlier, but I went a year to Teacher's College there. I didn't have any money at all, and I wanted to learn how to type and things like that. I got out of high school in 1930 or was it 1933?

Choi: Can you tell me about your childhood?

Gordon: Well we were very poor. It was a poor town. It was a poor time. It was the depths of the Depression, not recession, depression! I was born in New York, but we moved to Massachusetts when I was about ten years old. It was sad to me, but I didn't have a yearbook initially because I couldn't afford to buy one. People in the department there, Judy, do you know Judy? Anyhow, someone sent me an old yearbook. Upon looking at it I found out I was on the Dean's list as many times as Richard Feynman. He was in my class too.

Choi: It says, "Dean's List, six!"

Gordon: Six times, and so was Richard Feynman. I took classes with him too. We were in a few classes the senior year. He used to joke around a lot. I never knew he was going to be a Nobel Bell Prize winner.

Choi: So, when you were growing up, you were very poor. You were born in New York. Did you have siblings in your family?

Gordon: Yes, I had two brothers and a sister. A lot of people were poor then, but we were really poor. My mother was a very good cook and a very good manager. She could make wonderful food out of nothing. She was very good.

Choi: That is amazing. Did they encourage your studies?

Gordon: No, they encouraged the studies of my brothers, but they didn't think a girl was that important. So I went to MIT without a penny in my pocket, just a coat. I didn't have clothes or anything. I had to work all the time.

Choi: Oh my gosh!

Gordon: Well, one of my brothers went to Worcester Tech. I tried to go there, but they wouldn't take me because I was a girl. My brother lived at home, and I couldn't live at home. We lived in Fitchburg. I had to commute. So I didn't want to commute the long commute.

Choi: How did you do it?

Gordon: I really, if anybody knows my story, it's really amazing. I got a job, and as you can see I still was on the Dean's List.

Choi: That's seems so difficult if you were poor and not encouraged as much.

Gordon: No, they didn't give me a penny. They didn't have much, so I worked. Most of the time I worked as a reporter. I was what they called a "Stringer," the one that gets, sends in reports about certain things. Anyhow, I worked for the Boston Post.

Choi: You did?

Gordon: I worked for them for three years. But I didn't make much money because you got paid a dollar for one inch of type that they took, and if you had a picture, you got two dollars. I used to turn in stories, and I used to try to get pictures, but in the Margaret Cheney room there was a very nice lady who used to not just take care of us, but she was there. She used to have dinners, not for us, but for various things. She would make lunch for us. It was 25 cents, and I couldn't afford that.

Choi: So what did you do?

Gordon: So I used to go across the street. MIT looks very different now, but there was a drug store with a lunch place. For 15 cents I could get a thick milkshake.

Choi: That was all?

Gordon: Well, I didn't need much.

Choi: That's so sad! For lunch?

Gordon: I lived off of four dollars a week. One place I lived—we didn't have a dormitory back then, but I couldn't have afforded it

anyways—I had to wait for everyone to fall asleep so I could sleep on the couch.

Choi: Where was this?

Gordon: At MIT.

Choi: Was this a dormitory?

Gordon: No, it was somebody's apartment. But I had to wait until everybody fell asleep. I don't think anybody went through the things I did.

Choi: I have interviewed many alumnae, and this is the first time I've heard of such a story. Was your family very surprised when you were admitted into MIT?

Gordon: No, they weren't surprised. I was admitted. I couldn't get into Worcester Tech, so I went that year after high school to Teacher's College. That was really—it was so easy. Anyhow, I got a ride, I forget where it was, it was towards the end of my—I got a ride with the butcher, into Boston. I went into MIT, and I applied.

Choi: That's how you applied back then?

Gordon: Right, well that's how I applied, and I never had to go back. They gave me a scholarship and admitted me right away.

Choi: What was the application process?

Gordon: That's all, I don't remember. I didn't have any exams or anything. I was the valedictorian of my high school class.

Choi: So you were the smartest.

Gordon: Well, I was smart enough. MIT was easy for me.

Choi: Okay, you are a genius!

Gordon: (Laughs) One summer we were supposed to do summer school at MIT. It was a year with summer school included, but I had gotten a job that summer as a playground instructor in Fitchburg. People had warned me that some of the children were so bad that no one knew what to do with them. So when I met the "bad" ones I gave them jobs policing the playground, making sure that everyone was behaving, and it worked! All the kids behaved very well and gave me no problems. I was getting 15 dollars a week, so I saved it, but I couldn't afford to stay in Boston. They had a school policy at MIT at that time, that if you had a good enough record you could take a course in the summertime on your own. I didn't have time to study because I was working. So I picked Economics as something I could just read a book and get by, but the funny thing was that I never read the book. The night before the exam, I decided to start reading, and there was a terrible hurricane. All the lights went out! So, I sat up all night with candles reading the Economics book! (Laughs) I think that makes for a nice story.

Choi: It's like a movie!

Gordon: That was way I got through.

Choi: There were not many women at MIT at the time?

Gordon: Only six graduates in my class, except I think some more in the Architectural School.

Choi: Was it difficult for you coming in as one of six women?

Gordon: Not really. Somehow I worked for the Tech, and I became the Senior Editor. I was really the only one who should have been the editor because I wrote all the editorials. A friend of mine who was in one of the Tech meetings said they didn't want a girl to be the senior editor.

Choi: How did you feel?

Gordon: Well I didn't know about that at the time. All I knew was that they appointed somebody else, but later my friend told me they didn't want a girl. It was awful. But the way I got the job at the newspaper was that one of the men who worked on the Tech was graduating. He had been doing this job, and he recommended me for the job. They didn't want me at first because I was a girl, but then one of the guys there had somehow noticed me. He called me up; I don't know how he got my phone number. He was newly married. I was really kind of surprised. He called me up and he said, "You know the Hindenburg has exploded. Get one of your professors and write an article about that." So there was a professor who was a specialist on aircrafts. I went to him, and I wrote an article about him and what he said about it. I submitted it, and they hired me. They paid me five dollars for the article. They never ran the article, but they liked the way I wrote it. I worked for them for three years. The last year I was so busy doing my thesis. My thesis was published in Chemistry, and I was working very hard doing that. I tried to retire from the paper, and they said, "No, no!" I told them I didn't have time to do much, but they said, "Whatever you do, we don't want anybody else." They really liked me there.

Choi: Can I ask you, going back a little bit, it seems that obviously you were very good at Chemistry and the sciences, and you were good at writing. Where did you learn how to write?

Gordon: I was good at everything! I was really good at writing. In fact, I didn't really think about it, but I wrote a very small thing for our high school paper. It was called, "On going to school in the morning." It was about four lines, but I won a state prize for that. I was always a good writer.

Choi: Did someone teach you?

Gordon: No.

Choi: Wow, that's really amazing. What did you parents do?

Gordon: My father was a tailor, and my mother had never gone to school. She went to night school here to learn English. She won the prize of a picture of George Washington for being a good student. The painting hung in her living room wall!
(Laughs)

Choi: Where was she from?

Gordon: She was from Russia, and my father was from Russia. They met in this country.

Choi: So they both immigrated and met here.

Gordon: They both immigrated. My mother came in 1911. My father came shortly afterwards.

Choi: Did they come through Ellis Island?

Gordon: I guess so. I never went down, but I want to go down and see it. I understand their names are probably there.

Choi: So they met here, and they settled in New York. How did they end up moving to Massachusetts?

Gordon: Well, you know things were very bad during the Depression. My father had been a foreman in a factory that made women's clothes, I think. The man who ran the factory retired, and he wanted my father to run the factory, but my father said he isn't a businessman and wouldn't do good at it. So, he tried to do piecework, but he hadn't been doing any sewing for awhile because he was a foreman. He couldn't do enough because you got paid by the piece and there was a great speed required. He wasn't fast enough. Someone he knew had heard about this job in Massachusetts.

Choi: What kind of job?

Gordon: As a man's tailor. He took us all to Massachusetts for one summer to see if we'd like it. We rented a little house there. Then we liked it because the place was great. They had an amusement park there and everything! And a lake! So, we moved to Massachusetts. He cashed a \$1000 insurance policy and bought a little store in Worcester. The people loved him so much for he was an honorable man who did a good job. My mother couldn't sew, but she could help by pulling out basting stitches. My mother was a wonderful cook though. Together they saved \$45,000.

Choi: How old were you when you moved to Massachusetts?

Gordon: I was ten, but I was already in the eighth grade. Well, New York used to skip you all the time if you were good.

Choi: Do you remember what school you were going to here? Where did you live in New York?

Gordon: We lived in the Bronx. I don't remember what P.S. number it was. When I got to Massachusetts I already had taken the eighth grade work, but they said I was too young to advance to high school. So I had to go through the eighth grade again. New York schools were wonderful then, not like they are now.

Choi: I hear they aren't that great now. Could you speak Russian and English?

Gordon: No, they only spoke Russian when they didn't want us to know what they were saying (laughs)! No, but I never learned Russian.

Choi: When you went to MIT, I'm sure your family was very proud.

Gordon: I don't think it meant much to them. They came to the graduation which was surprising to me.

Choi: Did you realize at the time how difficult it was to go to MIT?

Gordon: I didn't find it difficult!

Choi: So you had no idea that for the normal person MIT was considered a difficult school?

Gordon: We were so good in math and science in my family that I didn't have any problems. But I really neglected a lot because I had to work, writing (laughs). Sometimes I was so tired I'd go to lecture, and my eyes were closed. When I went to study, I couldn't read what I had written! But I did very well.

Choi: Yes! You were on the Dean's List six times, and you were very busy. From the very beginning you lived on someone's couch?

Gordon: No. I lived in all kinds of places. Because whatever I could find that was cheap to live in I did. I lived on the couch because at time I couldn't find anywhere to live. One time, there was another girl in my class who never graduated. Her mother ran some kind of rooming apartment. I didn't like living there. I didn't know what was going on there. I got a room there, and I paid for it. It wasn't much. Then she rented the room to somebody else, and I shared the room with the girl, and I was going to MIT! (Laughs) There was no dormitory for MIT women at the time.

Choi: So you were responsible for finding your own living space.

Gordon: In fact, I used to write editorials because there were no sports facilities for women. They used to charge us if you wanted to play tennis; you had to pay! So I wrote editorials about that. It wasn't fair! Because of my editorials they eliminated the charges. I also wrote editorials about Chemistry. I took Biology and Chemistry. In Biology you got everything for nothing. You got to use microscope, you got big petri dishes, you got animals to dissect, and everything else. In Chemistry you had to pay for everything! You had to pay rental for the glassware, and if you broke it, you had to pay for that! I wrote editorials about that.

Choi: Did they change the rules?

Gordon: I think they did, and the head of the Chemistry department said he was going to write an editorial about Ida!

Choi: You made a lot of change happen.

Gordon: Yes, they didn't charge us for playing tennis anymore. I liked playing tennis.

Choi: Please tell me what you did for fun. You played tennis...

Gordon: I didn't have much time for fun (laughs). One night when I was coming back from the newspaper after submitting a story, I had to wait on Mass Avenue, but the subway car didn't run after a certain hour. It was late, and I had to take the streetcar to the Mass Avenue station and change over, and there was a man at the station. He was waiting, and there was another man there. This man was waiting for his streetcar to come in. His streetcar came, but he stayed there; he didn't get on it. He came over to me, and said, "There are other men here, and I have a daughter your age. That man, I didn't like the way he was looking at you." So he stayed to wait until I got on my car. He had to wait an hour for his own car! He was really nice. He waited until I had gotten on. I had a lot of adventures that my parents didn't know about (laughs). They didn't call me or anything because they didn't have a phone at home.

Choi: How often did you see them?

Gordon: Only around Christmas time. I didn't go home much. I used to spend summers there because I had a job as a playground instructor. I made 15 dollars a week (laughs). That was a lot for me! I don't think too many people had to do what I did to get through school.

Choi: It sounds like you were incredibly busy outside of the academic realm.

Gordon: I often didn't turn in things. One physical chemistry professor said I wasn't turning in assignments. He said, "You know God gave you the brains, you should use it." I did whatever I had to, but nothing extra. In math, in the last year I remember we were taking differential equations. I never went to class at all. I came in only to take the exams. It was an open book exam, and the professor had never seen me there! But with an open notebook exam, you just had to know how to turn the pages. He was surprised to see me walk in.

Choi: You took the exams?

Gordon: I was really smart.

Choi: Yes, it sounds like—I for sure could never have done that. It sounds incredibly difficult.

Gordon: I really ought to write an autobiography of what I did there (laughs).

Choi: You should!

Gordon: I think it's interesting compared to most people's experiences.

Choi: Many other alumnae I met were lucky because often their parents paid for everything.

Gordon: (Laughs).

Choi: They were for example, sailing on the Charles. They had time to socialize...

Gordon: Well I used to like to dance. I loved to dance.

Choi: What were the dances like?

Gordon: They were wonderful! One of them, I don't know how I had the time but...

Choi: (Looking at the yearbook under Mrs. Gordon's name) Oh, the "Sophomore Dance Committee." What does that mean?

Gordon: I helped to organize the dances. I have always loved dancing, so this was wonderful for me. It was on campus. They were nice dances. They had an orchestra; it was really nice. The girls would come from the girls' schools around there.

Choi: Like Wellesley?

Gordon: Yes. They were the girlfriends of the boys. It was really nice.

Choi: Did you have a boyfriend when you were at MIT?

Gordon: Well, I got married (laughs). Not to this man, but I got married to one of the students.

Choi: How did you meet him?

Gordon: He moved into the place where I was living. It was in my junior year, I think. I was living in a very nice boarding house. The nicest place I had been in, and this woman, she used to make a dinner for us on Sunday, and the only time I ate really all week was then (laughs)! She was really very nice. There was this girl—I don't know which course she was taking, but she was living in this place that was across the bridge somewhere. I don't remember the names of the streets.

Choi: There's Newbury Street, across the bridge away from the street, there's Commonwealth, there is...

Gordon: It starts with a "B." It's the next street if you move across. There was a place there with debutantes living. My first husband was really very, very, very handsome...

Choi: You were very, very pretty too! So he was very handsome?

Gordon: She had a crush on him, and so she had him move into the place where I was living. She was going to come live there too, but he liked me (laughs)!

Choi: Was she angry?

Gordon: I don't know. I never talked to her!

Choi: Okay good (laughs) that's better.

Gordon: (Laughs) Well, I didn't know about her at all, and I didn't try to be with him. I got married, and he was very handsome, but I just didn't, there was just something about him that was scary to me.

Choi: Oh no. Did he have a temper?

Gordon: No, but I used to have bad dreams about him. But I got married.

Choi: Why? Was it thought of as proper to date at MIT?

Gordon: I got married secretly to him because at that time if students got married, the newspapers would have stories about it. It wasn't that they would throw you out, but somehow it was considered story-material. You know, Boston papers ran everything.

Choi: Oh, so you mean in the Boston newspapers?

Gordon: Yes. There was one woman that year, I don't think she was in my class. She was a white Russian. She had left Russia during the Revolution and lived on the top of a place called, Harbin. She got married there, and so she and her husband drove us down to Plymouth, MA where there were no newspapers interested in us. So we got married there.

Choi: Did you parents know?

Gordon: No, I didn't tell them either.

Choi: Really? Why were you so secretive? Would they have disapproved?

Gordon: People didn't have sex then without getting married (laughs).

Choi: Were your parents upset that you got married without them?

Gordon: No, they weren't upset about it. It's funny because my father was educated. He left Russia because he didn't want to be in the army. You know a lot of them used to do that. My mother came over, first. She worked in a sweatshop, and she took over her family. She paid for all of them coming over. When she got here, before that, she had worked as a maid and had paid for some of them to come ahead of her, even. She was a remarkable woman, my mother.

Choi: You probably got your work ethic from her.

Gordon: My father never stopped working. My father would not take a penny from anybody. He wouldn't take any kind of welfare or anything like that.

Choi: They both worked very hard.

Gordon: My parents had eight grandchildren, and five became doctors!

Choi: You must have been so proud!

Gordon: Well, they still are around, all the doctors, because they were grandchildren. My brother went to Worcester Tech, and he had four sons. Three of them became doctors.

Choi: So many doctors in the family.

Gordon: One in New York and three in Florida.

Choi: That's so wonderful. So you got married in Plymouth, and then afterwards...

Gordon: Afterwards I moved to New York.

Choi: Did you graduate?

Gordon: Well of course I graduated! You see I graduated (pointing at yearbook).

Choi: You graduated after you got married.

Gordon: Yes, but nobody knew about it.

Choi: That's so funny! Your friends didn't know?

Gordon: I don't remember, but I know the school did not know about it. I don't know how at the time my friend got away with it, but she and her husband were the ones who drove us to Plymouth.

Choi: After you finished at MIT, what did you do?

Gordon: Well then I looked for a job, and it was not easy at the time. It was the middle of the Depression. It was hard for girls to get jobs. Especially Jewish girls.

Choi: Oh, I see, because you are Jewish.

Gordon: MIT is not in any way anti-Semitic. They were wonderful. That's why I give a lot of money to MIT.

Choi: Because they didn't discriminate against you.

Gordon: Because they didn't discriminate against anybody.

Choi: Were your professors kind to you?

Gordon: As I say, I didn't see some of them (laughs) because I never went to class. If I did happen to try going to class I remember I was so tired by the time I got to class. I would have been bringing my story to the paper and then it would be late, so by the time I made it through lecture and went home, I couldn't sometimes read what I had written in class!

Choi: Did you have a support system?

Gordon: No one supported me.

Choi: Oh my goodness.

Gordon: It's not the fault of MIT. I never went to the Dean and said, "You know I have no money. I'd like to borrow money," or "Do you have any funds for helping me?" I wouldn't have wanted to borrow money. I never asked for help. It was not in our family to ask for help.

Choi: I see. So mostly everything you did on your own.

Gordon: Everything. I never got a penny from my parents.

Choi: That's amazing. So you must be very proud of your achievements then.

Gordon: No, I'm not necessarily proud (laughs). I got divorced from my first husband.

Choi: When you were in New York?

Gordon: When we were in New York.

Choi: Did you have any children together?

Gordon: Yes, I have a son. He just retired.

Choi: That's great!

Gordon: Then I have a daughter here. My daughter is a lawyer. She graduated from Yale—senior editor of the Law Review. She is very smart.

Choi: You went to New York with your husband at the time. Did you find a job?

Gordon: I got a job with this firm, which made all kinds of tonics and this and that. It wasn't much of a job. I worked six days a week for 12 dollars a week. It was hard to find jobs then. This was the Depression still. See, I had done a lot of writing, so finally, someone suggested that I write to the editor of an agency that employed writers. I got a job, working for a firm called, "Burndy," that made what they called, "Connectors." These were the things they use in wiring and things like that. I was writing there, writing for them. Then I started to take a course in advertising. At Columbia, halfway through, the professor liked my work so much he got me a job in an advertising agency. I never finished the program because I was just so good at it. I had various careers in advertising.

Choi: So you went away from biology and chemistry then.

Gordon: Yes. I remember I went to Rockefeller Institute, and I wanted to do research. They said they could hire me for nothing. They had no money to hire me! Anyhow, I think someone, when I graduated from MIT, there was a firm that wanted me to do safety engineering. I hadn't done anything like that, but I guess I could have learned. But I would have had to travel around a lot, and I was married by then, so I couldn't take that.

Choi: Did you miss biology and chemistry when you were doing advertising?

Gordon: Well, I missed having that as a career because I really wanted to go to medical school. I didn't have any money to do that. I didn't have any money at all. I was already married even then, but I always wanted to go to medical school.

Choi: You could have done it too. It would have been easy for you!

Gordon: (Laughs) Probably! I was good at all those things.

Choi: At that point you were living in New York City. You got divorced then.

Gordon: I got divorced, yes, after my son was born. He was two years old.

Choi: You were a single mother working?

Gordon: I was a single mother until I married my current husband.

Choi: That must have been very difficult.

Gordon: The difficulty is that you have to have help, and help is not always there. Sometimes they get sick and things like that.

Choi: How did you manage?

Gordon: Not easily. But I did manage, but it was not easy. I met my husband when I was working for Young and Rubicam—that was the best advertising agency in the world. Somebody there gave me a tip on a stock, but he himself didn't have the nerve to buy anything. He wouldn't buy anything. I don't know, at one time I had bought a hundred shares of stock that he had told me about, and I couldn't sleep at night because I was worried about the stock market (laughs)! But the stock he told me about was very good, and it tripled. I had followed its progress, and I said, "Gee!" Then somebody who was working at Young and Rubicam at a different department but who was a friend of mine had told me there was this other young man. I went to visit my friend at Fire Island and was told that the one that paid for this particular house was this young man who came here with nothing and became a millionaire. So I said, "He must be pretty good!" So, I went to see my to-be husband. He wasn't quite a millionaire, but he was very good.

When I went to visit him, he took a fancy to me and we started dating, and we got married.

Choi: That's so nice!

Gordon: With him, I had a daughter, Roberta—want to see a picture?

Choi: Sure, yes please!

Gordon: This was my picture when we got married (pointing to a photo).

Choi: You're so beautiful!

Gordon: You're too nice.

Choi: I'm serious, you look like a movie star! And this is your husband?

Gordon: He's eight years younger than I am. Come here I'll show you these other ones.

Choi: So you were saying something about your husband.

Gordon: This is my husband when he was in college. He was a baton twirler. He won national championships in baton twirling, in the saxophone, and the oboe and clarinet.

Choi: He's handsome.

Gordon: Yes, he was really, but I didn't know him at the time.

Choi: And he's very athletic.

Gordon: He's very intelligent. This is my daughter a few years ago. She still looks like that (pointing to a photo). Her boys are going to college now. One is in college.

Choi: She's beautiful!

Gordon: She is a beautiful girl.

Choi: She looks like you. Are these your grandsons?

Gordon: Yes, but they're grown up now, and they're beautiful, so handsome. This is Fire Island, I think. As I was saying, my son is retired now. This was us at a later time. This is my husband.

Choi: I recognize him, and that's you!

Gordon: We've been married 54 years yesterday.

Choi: Congratulations! Are you going to celebrate?

Gordon: Well, I didn't even remember it. My daughter called us, and she said, "What should we give you for your anniversary?" This is a nice apartment.

Choi: It's very beautiful and spacious.

Gordon: This is my bedroom, the master bedroom.

Choi: It's so big wow! How long have you lived here?

Gordon: We moved in 1994. That's 16 or 17 years.

Choi: If we sit back down, I'd like to ask you about moving to New York and what you did in the advertising company. What was your job exactly?

Gordon: I was a writer, what they called a copywriter.

Choi: What does a copywriter do?

Gordon: They write the ads, and I wrote television commercials and things like that.

Choi: Where did you learn how to do that?

Gordon: I just took to it naturally. I worked also, at one time, for what they called, "Direct Advertising." It's not in newspapers or television or anything. It's through the mail, what you would call, "Junk mail." I did that, and I was working in New York, and they wanted to move the business to Boston. I didn't want to do that because I wanted to stay in New York. I had an apartment here. I had friends and everything. So I was between jobs, and a friend of mine was working for Macy's. She got me a job there. I was in the fashion department.

Choi: Really?

Gordon: I started writing fashion ads. I went through the fashion magazines, and I got the nomenclature. That's how I did it. When I was working in Boston, working for Sports, that's what I did!

Choi: How did you know what to write?

Gordon: As I said, I looked through fashion magazines, and I had never been interested in fashion, but I learned the nomenclature and everything. This woman came up from what they called, "The Little Shop" at Macy's, which has high fashion. She said, "You're the only one we've ever had here, who understands the Little Shop." I did it by looking at the high fashion magazines.

Choi: What did you write?

Gordon: I was so good at it that, and two of us were doing fashion ads. She left, and I did her job as well as mine. When I told them I was leaving—I got a job at a small firm that was in the Plaza Hotel on the top floor—when I said I was leaving, my boss said, "You know, you have a brilliant future here, you should stay!" But it was difficult because I had to work on alternate Saturdays. When you wrote an ad there, it went through steps, and it appeared two weeks later. You had to be at work

on alternate Saturdays. It was difficult for me to have an extra babysitter for Saturdays. But I loved retail advertising.

Choi: How did you do it? You looked at the clothes and came up with the phrase?

Gordon: Well, for the Little Shop, I came up with phrases that are like—one time they were selling these dresses, and I called it, “The Plum Line.” I made up the name for the type of fashion it was. That’s why my workplace said to me, “You’re the only one we’ve ever had here that understands the Little Shop.” If I wanted to learn something I would read about it. That’s the way I learned about it. Everything I did.

Choi: Did you just look at the clothes and come up with...

Gordon: I never even saw the clothes. I just saw pictures of them. I knew what they were trying to do because high fashion has a lot connected with design not with if it looks good on women or anything (laughs). So I got the idea of what high fashion was by seeing the high fashion. If you see pictures of what they’re wearing, you think, “Oh God almighty, why would anyone want to where that?” But that’s what high fashion is. I liked doing it, but having to come alternate Saturdays was too difficult. When I got to Y & R with one step in between, at first I started doing radio ads. Then I had to do television ads. I wrote television ads. I wrote radio ads, and I wrote print ads.

Choi: You were very creative. You had to come up with everything.

Gordon: I don’t know. As an MIT professor said to me, “God gave you the brains, you got to use it!”

Choi: At the time were a lot of your colleagues women or men?

Gordon: Well I know a lot of people watch a program called, “Mad Men.” It shows that women had difficulty getting writing jobs. (Laughs) Half the women in my agency were women writers!

So I don't understand all this to do about not having women writers. Half the writers were women!

Choi: I didn't know that! I was thinking of Mad Men while you were telling me about all your ad experience.

Gordon: I didn't understand how this seemed to be going on in Mad Men.

Choi: What did you think?

Gordon: Well, the show is totally unrealistic except for the drinking and the affairs with the secretaries. That always went on.

Choi: I see.

Gordon: But a lot of the men got divorced and married their secretaries and things like that. We had one guy there who used to be having affairs in the office. He'd close the door, having these women. But you know what happened to him? He was a married man with three children. He went to visit one of her mistresses on a rooftop, and the chimney fell down on him and killed him!

Choi: That's horrible! That's so scary!

Gordon: As far as the drinking was concerned, Mad Men was okay. As far as the affairs were concerned, it too was okay. But as far as not having women writers, that was absolutely ridiculous.

Choi: It was half women, wow. Was it nice for you to have a work atmosphere with a lot of women?

Gordon: I shared an office with a man that I really admired a lot. He was a really nice guy. They usually made you share an office.

Choi: Did he treat you as an equal?

Gordon: Of course.

Choi: That's good. I heard from a lot of other alumnae that when they were going to MIT, a lot of the male students were not happy that they were there.

Gordon: Yes! They called us, "Murgatroyds!"

Choi: Yes, that's the word I heard! What are Murgatroyds?

Gordon: I don't know? I'm going to write an article and call it, "An Education of a Murgatroyd."

Choi: The alumnae I interviewed recently in New York; they both live on 5th Ave. They graduated in 1949 and 1950. They both said the boys would call them Murgatroyds.

Gordon: I didn't know what it meant. I'd like to meet them. If you give me their names maybe I'd call them and have lunch.

Choi: One lives right across the street from the Met and another woman lives on 77th.

Gordon: Are they married?

Choi: Yes, but their husbands have passed away.

Gordon: Really.

Choi: It sounds like you were so busy all the time, even in comparison to the other alumnae I interviewed.

Gordon: I was busy to earn enough to keep myself alive.

Choi: When you were working at the advertising agency, and you were married to your current husband...

Gordon: Well we are married 54 years, but I was working at that time at Y & R, yes.

Choi: How long did you stay there?

Gordon: I stayed there until we went to live in Long Island for awhile.

Choi: Oh, why did you decide that?

Gordon: He wanted it. I had a lot of my alumnae friends living there. We used to go visit them, one of them especially. A woman, you can't interview her anymore because she died in an automobile accident last year. Margaret Dean, did you ever hear about her? She was my dearest friend there. They went to live in Las Vegas, but Bob and I went out a number of weekends, and it was the time they were talking about the Atom Bomb and everything. They said, "You really must move out here." We even built a bomb shelter in our house in Long Island! It's not filled with liquor, but we have jugs of water down there. Nothing to eat, but jugs of water! So, it would be a wonderful wine cellar, but we don't keep much wine there. We used to go out there every weekend to play tennis. I got my husband interested in tennis. He was hurt during the war on his shoulder.

Choi: How?

Gordon: That's really an interesting story. He was in a foxhole.

Choi: So he went away to the war?

Gordon: He was still here in the States, but he was in a foxhole; they were training, and they were in foxholes.

Choi: So he was in the military.

Gordon: Yes, a man next to him had a live grenade and froze holding the grenade. Bob grabbed the grenade and threw it so hard far away that his shoulder came out (laughs)!

Choi: (Laughs) I was so afraid you were going to say the grenade went off, but he was throwing it and hurt his shoulder.

Gordon: He threw it as far as he could, and the grenade didn't hit him, but the shoulder went out. He still has trouble with it. But he hadn't been playing tennis, and I loved playing tennis, so I introduced him back to tennis. One day his shoulder came out, and we were playing with my uncle who was a doctor. He put the shoulder back in (laughs), yes!

Choi: He didn't actually go to the War?

Gordon: Well, he was in the War—I don't mean to be boastful, but he was picked as the most intelligent person in his group. They needed someone to train people in the office, and they picked him to work in the office in the Pentagon because he had the highest marks. Actually, they were going to send him to the Battle of the Bulge (laughs). He was lucky that he got off.

Choi: Prior to working in the Pentagon, what was he doing?

Gordon: He was in training, and he was supposed to go overseas just at the time that they had the Battle of the Bulge.

Choi: Were you afraid?

Gordon: I didn't know him then. I never knew him then.

Choi: I see. When did you meet him?

Gordon: I met him in 1955.

Choi: After the War, I see.

[Break in recording to move to another room]

Gordon: My husband had lung cancer.

Choi: He did? And he recovered?

Gordon: Well, we didn't even know it! He had a swollen leg. The doctor sent him for an x-ray. They did different things. They did cat scans and things like that. They found he had something in his lung. He had no symptoms at all. They discovered that it was lung cancer, but a small one.

Choi: Did they remove it?

Gordon: He wanted radiation because he had had prostate cancer and went through radiation, and it was very successful. It's not successful for everybody, but it was for him. So he thought he'd rather go through radiation rather than surgery.

Choi: And he recovered well?

Gordon: For instance, on the 8th of February, they take cat scans again to see that things are going alright.

Choi: Oh okay, he looks great right now.

Gordon: He has other problems too, but anyhow, he's very dependent on me. I can't really do much.

Choi: It seems that you help him a lot.

Gordon: Yes (laughs).

Choi: Can I ask you, so you moved to Long Island...

Gordon: So we bought a house in Long Island. We still have it. We bought a house on the water with six acres for 45,000 dollars at that time!

Choi: That sounds wonderful!

Gordon: We played tennis there. We're the oldest ones in our club! We were kind of the icons, but since his last fall, my husband is using a cane now. I could play, but...

Choi: You are in very good shape. You look very healthy and young!

Gordon: We take a lot of vitamins (laughs). I have all kinds of vitamins every day (laughs). I am in touch at MIT with the Brain Institute, the people there, and I went up once even to visit them. Have you seen that facility?

Choi: No, I have not.

Gordon: They have a beautiful building, and they do a lot of interesting work. I've tried to make contributions to them to help in that category.

Choi: Did you continue working after you moved to Long Island?

Gordon: I couldn't do much because when my daughter started school we had to be back in Manhattan or Long Island. It was one place or the other, and meanwhile my husband's parents had decided to stay the summer in our Manhattan apartment. During the year they lived in Florida, and they stayed for the summer in New York. Then we used to come to the Manhattan apartment for the winter because my daughter was going to school here. I never was there, but before we moved to Long Island, I got a call from a company I had never even visited. Somebody had recommended me to one of the biggest agencies. They said they had been waiting for a year to contact me; they really liked me. I could have carried out my career. I was really quite good at it.

Choi: But you decided not to?

Gordon: I worked with my husband; I'll show you. I have an article. The stock market is a very interesting place.

Choi: It's a difficult place too.

Gordon: My husband is a genius at it. He really is. Let's see I have a picture. We had our picture in the New York Times.

Choi: You did?

Gordon: Yes. Let's see where—I have it here some place. One of the women that was out on the Island with my dear friend, she died, and I have her (showing a letter)—her granddaughter wrote to me. Let's see, where is it? Oh, here is the newspaper article.

Choi: Oh my!

Gordon: I should do something with it.

Choi: You should frame it.

Gordon: Yes.

Choi: May I open it?

Gordon: Sure. It was a big, two-page article.

Choi: Oh, you really should frame this because it's ripping right there. Oh my goodness! (Reading article out loud)

“Couple find marriage a good investment. In 1955 when Ida Blackman was a copywriter at Young & Rubicam, she decided to make her first investment in the stock market. Her broker, as it turned out, was Robert S. Gordon. ‘I was afraid of the market before I met Bob,’ she recalled the other day. ‘I told him I had a squirrel personality, that I had worked hard to save my money.’ In 1957 Ida married Bob, and she was discovering what makes the market tick. ‘After watching Bob operate,’ she said, ‘I learned the value of taking calculated risks in stocks.’ Over the years the Gordons have formed a most unusual husband and wife team in the investment world by combining their respective talents. This teamwork was formalized last spring when Mr. Gordon became Research Director at Satorius & Co., a brokerage firm based at 10 East 53rd Street, and Mrs. Gordon signed unofficially as a

member of the Research Department. Today, Mr. Gordon, a man with a proven track record in Wall Street is a big fan of Mrs. Gordon. He expresses it this way. "The secret to making money in the stock market is to harness your strengths. Ida has a very high order of intelligence and a very strong sense of marketing competence from her work in advertising. She understands what motivates people. It was her understanding of products and marketing, for example, that originally led us to Procter & Gamble and away from General Foods." Mr. Gordon was associated for many years with Ralph E. Samuel & Co. as a partner and Research Director. At 47 he is a man with total involvement in the market. During an interview he glanced repeatedly at an electronic screen carrying stock prices. When he talks..."

Oh no, I think this page ended. You should frame this because—oh look it's you!

Gordon: This is me!

Choi: You look so nice.

Gordon: You're so sweet (laughs).

Choi: No, I'm not, you're very beautiful. You should frame this whenever you get a chance, so that the paper doesn't fold.

Gordon: You know, people sometimes tell me I'm beautiful, and I don't know what they're talking about!

Choi: Why? You don't think so?

Gordon: No, I never really thought so. I didn't have much vanity, I guess. Now my husband thinks I'm beautiful, but if he didn't...

Choi: (Laughs)

Gordon: He's a genius in the stock market. He's done very well. That's why we can afford to live here.

Choi: I see. Afterwards what did you end up doing?

Gordon: After, in the summers, well, my daughter loved riding. She loved horses, and she would go to this horse farm, and she really liked it so she would stay with us. But when she became 15, she didn't want to come out anymore. She had so many friends here in the city, she was going to school here, and she went to Dalton.

Choi: She did? One of the alumnae that I spoke with, she went to Dalton.

Gordon: Really? You must give me her name! Anyhow, Roberta, she wouldn't let us sell the place out there. Now we hardly ever use it because my husband can't play tennis. He doesn't like to; his back hurts. I said, "Why doesn't he go to have to have it treated?" He doesn't like to treat anything. He's unable to play tennis now. All of our friends have either died or moved away. He had a lot of clients from our tennis club because one would tell the other how smart he was, so he got a lot of clients out there. Anyhow, we have a beautiful place, a beautiful view of the water. It's worth a lot of money, but I can't sell it because Roberta says she wants to retire there. Fine! Alright, we don't need it. Whenever I leave the house there I say, "Goodbye house," like the house is lonely and wants us to stay (laughs)!

Choi: After that period where you were working with your husband, did you continue working?

Gordon: Somehow I never was bored. I always had a lot to do. But I've always meant to write about my life at MIT. I never heard anybody else talk about Murgatroyds, and I thought, maybe I was mistaken.

Choi: No, I just heard it the other day from another alumna. You should write about it, don't you think?

Gordon: I have a lot to write because what's very interesting is that my last year at MIT, in about, it was about March or something, Harvard Medical School said they wanted me to go work for them. They wanted me to work for them starting May 1st, or something like that. They were excusing me from taking final exams at MIT because my record was good enough.

Choi: What did they want you to work as?

Gordon: They were doing research. It was in research because I had done some work with Harvard when I was working in my junior year in Chemistry. I had to collect horse urine. The horse was fed in a certain way, and I had to take the urine and get a certain compound out of it. My junior year had that interesting experience! I was carrying pails of horse urine (laughs). It's really so interesting because they were hiring me to work for them in May, and I had already been excused from taking any final exams. I was working for the newspaper, and at that time there was a thing going on. Kids in college were eating goldfish. Did you ever hear of that?

Choi: Yes, I thought this was a myth! Why were they eating goldfish!

Gordon: No, it wasn't a myth. I don't know. So I wanted to get a picture of somebody eating goldfish so I could put it in the paper and get paid for the picture. The Boston Herald sent the photographer, and I asked if I could get the picture. They said, "We'll give you a picture if you feed the goldfish to somebody." So I said, "Okay."

Choi: It's a living goldfish, right?

Gordon: Yes, I guess so, I don't know. Anyhow, next thing I knew was that Harvard said that they couldn't wait for me any longer so I went up and I said, "Why can't you wait for me?" So one of the professors said, "You know I shouldn't tell you this," because he was Indian, and Harvard was very prejudiced at

that time. He said, "They saw your picture in the paper." But the paper wasn't supposed to publish that picture. They were only supposed to give me the picture. He said, "Harvard thought you were a notoriety seeker." So they didn't want me to work there!

Choi: So you almost worked there but then they saw your photo.

Gordon: I would have had to come back to New York anyhow, and I was married to this New Yorker at the time.

Choi: But that's still such a silly reason!

Gordon: It is silly. It was silly for me to do that, but I needed money so badly.

Choi: Did you actually see people eating goldfish?

Gordon: Well, I fed somebody a goldfish (laughs)!

Choi: You really did? You saw the person eat it?

Gordon: I guess so, I don't remember it.

Choi: Why did they do that?

Gordon: I don't know because kids are crazy! Why do they do a lot of the things they do? Why do they really expose themselves to all kinds of dangers? We used to throw paper bags with water at MIT. The girls' room is over the main thing, and people used to throw bags full of water out the windows.

Choi: Why?

Gordon: For fun! They'd go "Plop!" College kids are all like that. I don't know if MIT kids are like that still.

Choi: They do a lot of weird things, but I never did anything like eat a goldfish.

Gordon: Where did you go?

Choi: I went to MIT.

Gordon: When did you get out?

Choi: I graduated in 2007, but there was a dorm where people made explosives and weird things. I never ate live fish, or...

Gordon: You never participated. I didn't participate in that thing, but I used to see them throw bags.

Choi: After you settled back into the city, you kept busy doing...

Gordon: When we went to live in Long Island for the summers, I couldn't really keep a job. My husband never really liked going to analyst meetings, and I liked it. I became an analyst, really. Not a paid analyst, but I used to go to all the meetings that he didn't want to go to.

Choi: He was lucky!

Gordon: I think he thinks he is lucky anyhow, knowing me. You learn an awful lot about industries that you never could imagine if you just live in this ordinary environment. What do you know about the sugar industry? What do you know about the coal industry? You just don't really know much, but if you go to analyst meetings you learn so much about them. I went to a sugar meeting, and I said, "Is your industry suffering because of all the artificial substitutes for sugar." Someone said, "No, you know there's sugar in those things, and they use a lot of that stuff. We like that!"

Choi: Interesting, I never knew that.

Gordon: I never knew it either. When I'd go to these meetings, there were all kinds of things I didn't know.

Choi: So you enjoyed those meetings, and you continued attending those meetings?

Gordon: I always kept busy, and I'm interested in a lot of different things.

Choi: What do you still keep doing in your spare time?

Gordon: Right now, I don't do very much because my husband likes me to sit and watch television with him (laughs), but I'm trying to wean him off that! I'm 92. I'm going to be 93. Well, I got out of MIT in 1939.

Choi: You look fantastic! Good for you! Can you find a different tennis buddy?

Gordon: I would love that.

Choi: Would your husband be upset?

Gordon: I don't know.

Choi: You should continue exercising.

Gordon: I was going to the gym. I'm going to start that again.

Choi: That's good.

Gordon: I went to the gym because my knees were bad, and going to the gym helped my knees a lot. I'm going to take an hour off in the mornings to go to the gym. I wanted him to go, but he didn't want to go.

Choi: Maybe he can go and just walk on the treadmill, something simple.

Gordon: He could, in fact I'm thinking of putting one in the house here.

Choi: That would be good.

Gordon: Because he needs the exercise.

Choi: He can watch T.V. while he does it!

Gordon: Well, if I can get a T.V. in there (laughs), see we have an area (points to an area in the house). He really needs it. For example, he wanted to go out with me this morning.

Choi: It's awful outside, the weather.

Gordon: It's awful! I had to go because I had to mail my estimated tax that's due on the 18th. So I had to go, and he said, "I'll go with you." The sidewalks aren't even, well, the sidewalks are okay, but the crosswalks are dangerous.

Choi: Did you go alone?

Gordon: Yes.

Choi: You should be careful, when the weather is like this, I even feel like I will slip on the street.

Gordon: Anyhow, what do you do besides doing this interviewing?

Choi: I want to go to medical school. So when I heard you say that, I felt like I wish you could go too!

Gordon: Are you going to go to medical school?

Choi: I hope so. Right now I am taking courses because there are courses I didn't take at MIT. I was a humanities major.

Gordon: We didn't have much humanities when I was there, only a few courses in humanities.

Choi: Do you remember which ones you had?

Gordon: No, but I think people took courses in writing, if that's humanities.

Choi: Did you take writing at MIT?

Gordon: No, I never took writing in my life!

Choi: It was all just natural for you.

Gordon: Does your family live in Boston too?

Choi: Yes.

Gordon: So you are living with your family?

Choi: I live in my parents' apartment, but actually they work in Boston, but they commute one hour. They live just outside of Salem, NH.

Gordon: We went to Salem once, when I was there at MIT, after I went for an alumnae occasion.

Choi: Why did you go to Salem?

Gordon: There's the cemetery where these women were hanged.

Choi: I didn't know this!

Gordon: The ones that were hanged as witches.

Choi: Really? Oh, you're thinking of Salem, MA.

Gordon: Oh yes.

Choi: My parents live in Salem, NH.

Gordon: What do your parents do?

Choi: My mother is a pharmacist, and my father is an engineer.

Gordon: Are they MIT people too?

Choi: My father went very briefly for a Master's, but he had to pick up a job. He decided on a career because my sister and I were young, and he needed to make money for the family. So he quit, and he really wanted me to go to MIT. My sister is a doctor now.

Gordon: She went to MIT too?

Choi: She did not. She went to Wellesley.

Gordon: Wellesley is a part of Harvard, isn't it?

Choi: No, but they have a connection with MIT. So a lot of Wellesley students come to MIT to take courses.

Gordon: Oh really?

Choi: And MIT students can go to Wellesley also to take classes.

Gordon: Now you have almost half women or more than half even at MIT.

Choi: Can you imagine?

Gordon: It's hard to!

Choi: Can you imagine, because I can't imagine being the only woman in my classes. It wasn't difficult for you at all?

Gordon: I never thought of it as difficult. I didn't think of flirting when I was in the classes.

Choi: That's good for concentrating then.

Gordon: A lot of classes I never went to, as I told you (laughs).

Choi: Or you were half asleep.

Gordon: (Laughs) As I said in Biology, I couldn't read my notes at all! Fortunately, there was one girl there. There was some kind of health degree that you could get. She was in that degree. I don't know if that department's still there. She had some notes (laughs) that I tried to read because I couldn't read my own.

Choi: That was nice of her. You didn't really utilize your Biology or Chemistry much afterwards. Do you regret that at all?

Gordon: I've never had the leisure to regret because I've always been doing something else. At first I would think about that feeding of the goldfish and how it really ended my career as a scientist because I couldn't get a job here in New York and then subsequently went into writing. I used to feel so frustrated about it because I wanted to do research. I read "Arrowsmith," that book, did you ever read it? It's a novel about a research person, and that's the thing that inspired me. I used to feel so frustrated about it. I don't think about that anymore though.

Choi: But you have been very successful ever since!

Gordon: My nephews who are doctors; I have one who is a very well-known plastic surgeon. In Florida I have three doctors, my nephews. It seems like my sister is not going to survive (speaking about a current situation). She had already had a bad stroke and had gone for rehab, and she was doing okay. I guess she may have—they don't know if she just fell or whether she had another stroke. She is right now unconscious. I don't know whether to wish for her to live...

Choi: Because it would be hard afterwards.

Gordon: My sister had an interesting career. She worked for the State Department, and she went all over the world, doing things. My sister is a very good writer. She used to write wonderful

letters, but she's not functioning anymore. My daughter takes care of her because she lives close by.

Choi: That's really nice of your daughter.

Gordon: My daughter is a lovely, beautiful girl (laughs).

Choi: That's really great! Do you have any words of wisdom that you'd like to share?

Gordon: With whom?

Choi: With everyone who will be reading your life story.

Gordon: I think if you keep healthy and keep interested in what's going on around you and in the world, that you can have a wonderful life! That's my word of wisdom. I just wish that there were not so many bad people in the world and so much that you have to worry about people coming and shooting at you! There are too many guns. There are too many people that are just not interested in anything but making illegal money and even legal money! I find life extremely fascinating. The only thing I dread is not being able to keep my brain as flexible as it is now.

Choi: You don't have that problem now so you shouldn't worry!

Gordon: Though it's harder to think of words as you get older.

Choi: Really?

Gordon: Yes. My explanation is that you have a rolodex in your brain, and you keep feeding things into that rolodex. When you want to get something, it may be way down low in the rolodex. For instance, I was trying to think of Ava Gardner's name. It took me two weeks before I got it! Now it's in the front, so I get it immediately. This is the thing, that you have all these things that are in yourself and your memory cells and in your brain. They aren't immediately available. So as

you get older it's harder to pull them out. I'm looking for exercises to help me (laughs)!

Choi: Do you think you'd be interested in visiting MIT again?

Gordon: I go up there—I was there at the Brain Institute, what is the name of that? Somebody gave them 35 millions dollars. (Her husband calls her over) So my advice to anybody is just keep your brain working. Don't let it deteriorate. Read, for instance, if you're interested in making money, to learn about it. Don't just do nothing. It's easy to relax, but I don't like to do that. I don't like to sleep late. I try to watch T.V. programs that are interesting, though I don't like to watch much T.V. The stock market is my favorite channel. I really haven't had a lot of hobbies these days, but I try to take care of my husband. Today I woke him up, made him breakfast, and watched the stock market channel. I like to go out, and I like to go to the museum. They have an exhibit now that I'd like to go see. When they have exhibits I like to go. Sometimes I take my husband, but I'll leave him in one place and tell him to wait for me there while I explore (laughs)!

Choi: Your house is decorated so nicely it reminds me of a museum too. Did you have an interior designer help you or did you do this yourself?

Gordon: I did this all myself. In fact, I have a friend who is an interior designer and she said I did a great job with my home. I can show you some of these things if you'd like.

Choi: Please!

Gordon: I got these from 8th street, they used to sell art around there.

Choi: These are gorgeous! Are those a Miró?

Gordon: Yes, well they are copies. See the number in the corner? It says which version it is. And this wooden piece my daughter brought me from Africa.

Choi: I love these all!

Gordon: But this (turning to point to her windows that face Central Park) is what I believe is the best art!