

**MC.0356**

**Interviews of the Margaret MacVicar Memorial AMITA Oral History Project**

**Marjorie Pierce** – Class of 1922

(interviewed by Stephanie Ragucci and Carissa Climaco)

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[Clarissa G.]

**Climaco:** I am here with Miss Marjorie Pierce in Weston, Massachusetts, doing an oral history interview for the Oral History of MIT Women Project of the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program at MIT. So, would you like to introduce yourself?

**Pierce:** I guess so, I think what you're probably interested in is what it was like at MIT in that period of time. I graduated from high school in the spring of 1918, and then I came to MIT that fall. I passed half of the entrance exams that you took; at that time there were college exams, and then the other half in the fall. One of the cute things that happened was that I flunked English, and they never caught up with that until I graduated. So, the war was going on, I had been working very hard to get together the money. I knew I had to work my way through college. My family wanted me to go to Wellesley, but I felt that if I went to Wellesley the only job I could get would probably be waiting on tables or something like that, and when I got through, I probably wouldn't be prepared for anything except teaching, and I wasn't interested in that. So at that time, MIT had just moved across the river, and there was a great furor of the moving, you know, it was a big to-do about it, and in that all the publicity connected with that, I heard that women went to MIT, and I thought it has always had a wonderful reputation, and I thought if I can get a degree from there, I can always get a job. So I got the catalog and looked through to see what I thought I would be interested to study, and I had an uncle who was a chemist, and I thought maybe chemistry was the career, and I had another uncle who was in designing ships, and I thought maybe that was the thing, but what really struck me was architecture, and I thought that I'd always enjoyed



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upside-down on their arm, and they would put these pies in there. While we were catching one kid, they'd be putting a couple of more into their hat to get plates of apple pie or whatever it was. Well anyway, that job, I also found a few other things to do and those three months went by fast, but in , wasn't it in November, the war ended, so they began to dismantle all this thing, so I had to find something else, and I got a job at the Co-op. That was just for the beginning of the next term. It was a fill-in, and then I started making fudge. I'd go home after work, after school, and make eight or ten pounds of fudge and sell it in the lab, and I often think how, how nice the professors were that they let me get away with this business. And then I found that one of the things that I had done before I came to MIT was to make some things to sell , and my mother did some very nice handkerchiefs and collared cuffs which were fashionable at that time, and I had sold them. So when the matrons or the dames would have a tea up at the Emma Rogers room, I would put up a table and sell this stuff. So one way and another, in other words I got through the first, with the job in the cafeteria I got through the first term, then the next term I was beginning to run short, and I still didn't have quite the hundred dollars. Tuition at that time was three-hundred dollars a year, so it was three terms, a hundred dollars each term, so I didn't have enough for the next term. I came home, and there was a note in my mailbox, and one of the professors wives had given me a check to help me out, and it just got me through that one. So, one way or another I got through the three terms, and then I got a job I went back to. I had had a job the summer before I went to MIT. I had a job in a department store on Tremont Street, and what my department was selling was petticoats, and at that time they were made of taffeta, and every day you had to

take them all off the shelf and shake them out so that they wouldn't, because taffeta will form creases and will get destroyed. So I got through that summer, you know, working downtown, and I got enough together. Then there was a girl ahead of me, and I can't remember her name, but she had a job at the Exeter Street Theater ushering. So when she graduated, she was through with that job so she recommended me, and I went to work there. And I worked there for the next four years. And I ushered five nights a week from five to nine-thirty, Saturdays from two to ten-thirty and, Sundays from seven to ten-thirty, and I got seven dollars a week, and that was exactly what my tuition was, and it was incredible, and when they say you have to have, kids have to have a hot lunch, that's for the birds because I have a fantastic history of good health, and I ate two cold lunches a day for four years working at the Exeter Street Theater. Well, that got me through the financial part of it, and then I still had the summers to work, and one summer I worked for a firm, it was J .D. Leland and Company. It would later become Leland and Larson, but it was a good idea I that got, I was just a sort of glorified office boy, but you get the feeling of what, how an architectural office worked, and Mr. Larson, who was one of the partners, there were five partners, Mr. Larson was one of the partners, and he was a very good head draftsman because he had a very high standard, he had worked in a very good office before he went into this partnership, so I had wonderful training in that office, and you'd think, you know I stayed there for many, many years because I had integrated in it. In other words, they took me on just to do chores, and then the next summer, I had enough architectural training that I could do a little tracing or something, getting gradually into it. Later, another one of the partners had been a

builder, and I was still into taking my lunch with me instead of going out to lunch, and he, because the engineers had always done that, he went to lunch at twelve o'clock, and we didn't go 'til twelve-thirty. So he would be back from his lunch, and I had my lunch there, and I'd talk to him, and he gave me a great deal of practical insight of how it works in the field, and that was another. So many of these things were almost handed to me on a silver platter, but just at the same time, I worked darn hard for it. Well, anyway, at that point in time it seemed to me that I heard all around me that we gave our daughters a good education, and then they wasted it, they got married. Well they don't feel that way today but that's the way they did in 1918 or 20. So, I felt that I had to be sure that I was in the right. I didn't want somebody to say that, though I didn't want, I was offered after the first year, most colleges, they don't give a scholarship the first year they want to be sure that you are going to be there, but I was offered a scholarship, but I decided that I had gotten through that first year which had been so difficult financially, so I started into, I kept on with my job at the theater, and finally, by the time I got to be graduating, I was sure I was in the right field. I loved it and I, well we had half of our classes at Rogers and a few of them over across the river, and I think of how much walking we did, I don't understand how they, how we ever sustained that pace, but of course now they jog up and down the river, but we had to get back and forth and there were no, almost no dormitories. I've forgotten when the first dormitories were, and one of my classmates, she came from a well-to-do family in Long Island, and her parents were quite upset about her going to MIT anyway, because it was really a man's school. So they didn't want her living in some boarding house or around so they put her up in the Hemingway

Hotel and gave her an automobile. Well I want you to know she was the most popular person around. She had this little car, and we'd all pile into that to get at, so I got to know Martha. Martha is still alive, she's the only, no there were two other, there's one other classmate of mine still alive, but Martha lives in Florida, and she came back for her fiftieth and her sixtieth reunion, and I saw her and she just sent word to the Alumni office that she has published her ninth book, and so she must be the same age. I'll be eighty-nine my next birthday; I was born in 1900. Martha had been married, divorced. She had several children. She married a second time, but it was not a long marriage because it was a friend she'd known many years, and he died before she did, but she's a great gal and a very smart woman. Anyhow, yours truly, to get back on the track. So I, when I got through the four years, and I was always what I call behind, like a carver's tail, but there was this system in MIT that you were presented with a problem to solve of a building, and you worked on it, and you got criticism from your professor, and then you presented, and that presentation had to be on very, you've seen the drawings they have down there, it had to be nicely presented. Well if you were running short on time the classmates from the next class or the class under you could what they called nigger. They could come and help you present that, do that, put on some of the washers, and they were, you had to grind the ink, it was a different world entirely, but that presentation was important, and so because I was always behind, timewise, the boys would get around the table, and they would help me to present the drawing so I always had this, I was very lucky that I always had somebody that was encouraging me. And, I think of it now in a different way, but the thing that surprises me is where did I get that much energy to work at

school all day from nine to five, go over there, and I did, I could do my, it was the days when there was, the movies were silent, so the organ played to this day I can still hear the particular things that were played on the organ for two women arguing about something or a horse race or something, ta-dat-da-da, ta-dat-da-da, ta-dat-da-da-da-da-da-da. That was a certain thing that the organist, was a very good organist as it happened. Anyway, that's a very interesting old building. It's been remodeled now, but that was originally built in the late nineteenth century. There was a very big movement toward spiritualism, and that was a spiritualist temple, and of course as the thing sort of petered-out, Mr. Ayers, owner's husband, he had been into spiritualism very deeply, so down in the cellar where we kept our coats and hats, the people who worked in the theater, there were all these robes hanging that they used to put on. It was spooky; it was spooky. And Mr. Ayers would creep around, and on a hot summer night, they'd open the doors onto the fire escapes, and I was out there one night, and Mr. Ayers came out, and he was kind of a spooky guy anyway, and we were looking up in the stars, and he said, you know, I've been there, you know, and he went on with this. True. This has nothing to do with MIT, but it's kind of fun. Anyhow, so when I got to be ready to graduate, I knew that I was in the right field, and so I decided to take a scholarship and stay for graduate work. Now the reason that I wanted to stay for graduate work is that in the profession of architecture at that time, I don't know whether it still is or not, it's very hard to get on your own. You either, we used to say, you either had to marry money or have money to get that first job, that first house, that first building, whatever. So to get that first something you had to have it. The only people that I knew that didn't have that kind of a background



that would be supportive in commissions was a woman who was a member of a firm of women architects in Boston and she had worked up a job. It was, do you have the name there?

**Climaco:** I think so. Howe, Manning?

**Pierce:** Howe, Almay, Manning... it was Miss Manning, and she had got herself some jobs teaching a course in, sort of house planning in two very good, what they called finishing schools at that time, women's school's that girls went, wealthy families that went, after they had gotten through college. It was sort of frosting on the cake or whatever, and then she taught that at, I think Garland was one. I can't remember what the other one was. So I went to see her, to see if she thought, and she said well, she really felt there wasn't anything else. She had skimmed the cream, there wasn't anything else. So I had this thing, but I felt if I could get a Master's, and you know that, I don't know whether it still is so, but you can't get a Ph.d in architecture. The next step is something else which I'll tell you about later. But I thought that if I could get that kind of accreditation, that possibly I might be able to get something so that someday I could get on my own and cross that bridge into actually having work to show, that you've done. Not just working for always as a draftsman in somebody else's office, and I didn't see much chance of being taken in at a firm, because there were so few women in, qualified. There was a little school up in Harvard Square that a man had started, and he had, it was a school for women, architecture, and it was very successful, and some of the people in that school have done very well. The only one that I remember was duPont, and she

worked at another office where I worked, and she went to that school, and she and her husband, Holmsey, who was an MIT man, they have a very successful business, but she was a duPont, and you know, the family gathered around, and she and Holmsey have made a good practice there in Delaware. Anyway, to get off on these sidetracks. So I took my, I went for my Master's, and I still had the job, and I, by that time they were glad to have me as a junior draftsman at Leland's. So I was the only American female in the Graduate School of Architecture. The graduates that were going for a Master's degree were all men, except for one girl, and she was there taking special courses, and she was from Norway, and she had worked for a while in New York, and then she wanted new experiences. She went back, married a Swedish man, and practiced architecture in Sweden. But about springtime, I'd say, maybe this time of year, the word was passed up that the Dean wanted to see me in his office, and I was out on the fire escape, and that was verboten, so I thought I was in trouble, and I went down to the Dean's office, and there was a Mrs., well, it doesn't matter what her name was, I think it was Hewitt, but anyway there was a woman there, and Dean Emerson was a chivalier of the Legion of Honor in France, and I have to digress a little bit to give you the background of it. You can dilute any of this you don't want anyway. But Ann Morgan at the end of the war in 1918, they had started a core of women, young women, who went over to France and lived in a hostel and helped the French peasants to come back to their farms and get their homes rebuilt and whatever. It was devastated. France was just leveled, you can't imagine. The fields were completely churned up, and every week there was somebody reported, that a farmer had been plowing and exploded a shell and was killed. It was just

devastation. All the orchards, all the trees, all the woods, everything was flattened. It was just like no man's land, which that's what they called it. So this group, this is Mrs. Morgan, had organized, and it so happens that a neighbor of mine's sisters was one of those girls. That doesn't matter; that's beside this question. Anyway, there had been so many rallies for war bonds, and everybody was sick and tired of trying to raise money. Somebody came up with this idea that they would go to different cities in the country, and they would ask somebody to head up a committee to nominate a, the committee would go to different companies and ask them to nominate a girl to run in a campaign. I don't know how to explain it very well. Mrs. Lovett was a manager for the Boston Campaign, and she had asked Dean Emerson as one of the people that she knew to nominate a girl, and the idea was a three weeks campaign in which you sold votes at ten cents a vote. And for every six thousand dollars that was raised, there was a trip to Europe free as a reward. So it was a sort of a popularity contest, and the Herald ran the publicity, and Dean Emerson wanted to know, since I was the only woman in the graduate school, he didn't have to make any choices or anything, if I would try, and he said that we'd never get very far because we're not a big organization. For instance, the Bank of Boston had a nominee. The Girl Scouts had nominated one. Houghton-Mifflin had a girl that was running. So there were something like twelve or thirteen women in Boston that were trying to get this free trip.

**Climaco:** Why did it have to be a woman?

**Pierce:** Well, this was the gimmick. The gimmick was a popularity contest, and they wanted to get as much money as they could. But out of the six thousand dollars, which was the sixty thousand votes, they would be able to spend a thousand dollars of it to give this trip, and that was the come on. So we started out very simply, you got the architectural students together, and they took a picture. They each gave a dollar, that was ten votes, you know, and then Mrs. Ayers allowed me to come out between the afternoon show and the evening show on the stage and sell this thing. So MIT heard about it and they sent out a notice to their, well, we got some wealthy girl to come down and collect votes in the hallway at MIT, and anyway the thing began to escalate, and the publicity for it. There was a Gold Star mother, you don't know what that is, it's a woman, that was an organization that had sons in the...

(Telephone rings.)

So one way and another, I, the Gold Star mother they publish every day in the paper how many votes and so forth, so all of a sudden somebody, some reporter said, you know, who's this gal, she's up at second or third in line. They knew who the others were, but they couldn't seem to place me. So, all of a sudden I got all this publicity that I was a woman going through MIT, which was unusual at that time, and I was studying to be an architect, and that was unusual, and that I was working my way through and worked at the theater. You know, it was a good story there, so people who didn't know me would send me a dollar. That was ten votes. Well, I never raised the sixty thousand votes, but I did raise over five thousand, and the votes were pooled, and so I

was one of the people that got the trip. Now, the Boston contingency was supposed to go in April, and they went to the Riviera, and then they went to devastated France, and then they came home. It was a week crossing, you can imagine, on a boat. A week in the south, I think there were three weeks, and then they went back, so it was five or six weeks, I can't tell you exactly, but they went to the Riviera which was, you know, it was fun, and then they went to devastated France. But I couldn't go because I had to graduate, and the Girl Scout couldn't go because she had to graduate from Boston University, and the school teacher from Lynn couldn't go, so the three of us were postponed and went with another contingency from Brooklyn and Atlanta, Georgia, and someplace. I think it was St. Louis as a matter of fact, and we went in July, and of course we went to the Via Ritz and all through the Provence, and where wonderful architecture is. All the Roman architecture is, you know, Point de Garde and Avignon and Nice and Ariel, and it was all to my advantage. Now when we got back, we went up to the North of France, the devastated, where we stayed in the hostel, and we slept in the Citadel of Verdonne which was supposed to be a great honor, and this went on, and then we came back to Paris and were decorated by the Mayor of Paris, and I have a nice bronze for that. So Dean Emerson thought it was wonderful that I got over there, but he thought that I should have some more time, so he gave me some money, and my father had some that he could give me, and I had some left over, so I was able to stay another six weeks. And, I went back to the Loire Valley to the chateau country and then I stayed in Paris for a little while, and then I went up into Normandy, and I got a chance to see a great deal more of France, and then I went to Italy, and went down the high points of Italy, and in that, at that time

there was a school of architecture, a summer school of architecture, Fontenblau, and in Venice I ran into the boys from that school that they had finished their course, and they had some extra time. So I got in with this bunch of young people who were architects, too, and one of the young ones stayed in the same ponceon in Venice as I was in, and we finally got up the courage to speak, and found out we were both architects, and so then more of them joined us at different points. Finally, some of them came home on the same boat. We had, it really was a wonderful trip, and I ran out of money in Rome, which is another story, and, I used up what I had and sent for some more and it didn't come, and a young man from way out in, I think he was from Denver, and he was waiting for his money from, he was a Rhodes Scholar, he was not an architect, and he was waiting, so the boys kept departing, and finally there were just he and I, and we're bottomed-out of money, and anyway I went and borrowed some from the, I had an entree to the, Dean Emerson had given me, and I'd taken these young men with me to this entree, what was it called? It's in Rome. It skips my mind, but it, anyhow, one way and another, that was that was that trip, and I came back, and of course I still had the job from then on.

**Climaco:** This was before your graduation with your Master's?

**Pierce:** I got my Master's, and that was after I got my Master's, that I went. So there that brings me up to where I was starting to work for Leland and Larson. And then I wanted an automobile, and I didn't have money for it so I took a job in the, an evening job, four nights a week I guess it was, five nights a week? Teaching dancing at a service club in Park Square. The men could come on

their, any service man could come, and it was an outgrowth of a canteen on the common that some wealthy women had run during the war, and then this, this canteen was phased-out, but they kept the staff and everything, then they moved over to Park Square into a second floor. There was this lounge where they could play cards, and there were dances four nights a week, and the girls had to be passed upon before they could come in and, you know, I was so green, you can't imagine. And it was my job to see if they could have a card so they could come to the dances. And I have a funny little story which ought not to go into the record, but anyhow, they had some rules, and one of them was that they couldn't twirl which meant hanging on to your partner very hard and going round and round and round on the dance floor. So the boys'd knew this, but they'd play it on me, you know, and I was so green. Anyhow, finally one of the sailors, the sailors would come into port, and they, they kept their bottle of liquor, the only place you could do it was their bell-bottom trousers, you know, they'd lift those up, put the flask in their socks, and that's the only place they had to hold anything. Anyway, this particular night, this young kid was from Kansas, and really still green behind the ears. He wanted to bring his girlfriend, and I took one look, there was a group of women that followed the fleet around, and when the boys came into port, they would get them drunk and take all their money away from them. They were so nieve, the kids were, you know, they were join-the-navy-and-see-the- world-kind-of-thing, they really didn't know anything about life, anyways, these two females came in, and I didn't like their looks, and they wanted a card to come to the dances, and I said, they were there for that evening, and I said I was sorry, I couldn't do it. So the sailor came to see me, and he said what's the matter with Miss Vouture?

That was the name she had, and I said, well, I'm sorry I didn't think I wanted her. What's the matter with her? And, I said well if want, I said she wiggles too much. He said oh, Miss Pierce, I can make any girl wiggle. I thought that was wonderful! And there were lots of things, and finally I ended up at a court marshall case which is a long story and doesn't have to be part of this record at all, but that was, my father got furious, and he said you've got to get, give that job up. But by that time I had gotten my first Chevrolet, and that was all I was after, but I still had the job in the daytime. And then I started going back to MIT for a weekend progress program. Well then finally, that took me through about 1923, I guess, and by that time they never gave anybody more than a five dollar raise. That was considered a big raise, yes, and you wouldn't believe it. Anyhow, so there were these programs for extended education. One of the things that happened that I think is slightly interesting in that era was the, I had gotten my Master's. The next step instead of, since there was no Ph.D available, the next thing that would get you jobs or bring your name into prominence was the Rotch Travelling Fellowship. That was for two years in Europe. And it was very, and it still is very prestigious. Now I don't know whether it should go into the record although I don't think it would hurt anybody to know it, but one of the very few times in my career that I've felt discriminated against. It was a, what's the word I'm wanting? It was a contest. And you had to take an exam, create something in just twenty-four hours. You sat and developed something. And from that contest, anybody could enter that, from that, there were, I think five finalists allowed to apply for, to get the application for the Rotch. Then you were handed a program, you had three weeks to develop it, and you were on loge. You couldn't have any criticism



from any architect or professor or anything. You developed it, and it was judged by a jury outside of Boston. And they, from that there were only five I think, and from that five they chose somebody to have this scholarship. It was not only very generous, but it was very prestigious. Rotch Fellows are very, you know, Anderson was one, and Bob Dean was one, and I can't tell you. It was administered by the Boston Society of Architects. Anyway, I'd passed that first test, taking a day off and drawing or whatever, and I got into the finalists, and I think I got into it twice. The first time I was eliminated, but the second time, I got into the finals. And, you had to take, you had to take a job, you had to give up your job for two weeks, because you couldn't possibly work on this thing and present it well in less than that. So you worked in loge. You could use the library, but you couldn't, and then the judges judged, and it was announced at a dinner. So the person who won it that year is dead, so I guess you could say, Stone was the winner. And for a long time I kept having people say, you know, you won the Rotch, and it wasn't given to you because you were a woman. And I didn't like to believe that, but the evidence keeps piling up. For instance, the first thing that happened is I sat next to one of the judges, and I said did you know there was a woman competing? And he said yes. He shouldn't have known that. Second, I said did you know which one was mine, and he said, no we actually thought such and such was yours. So you see, there was hanky-panky. Now I don't blame them. If they wanted to have it for me, they shouldn't have, they shouldn't have let me give up two weeks of my pay and my life and my ambition if they didn't want me to have it, and the next year, somebody gave the money to fund a scholarship, a fellowship for a trip to Europe and it had to be a student over thirty, preferably someone who had

experience in the real world, and they would like to have that big enough, it was made big enough so that a man, it would have to be over thirty, and he would have a, he might be married and he could take his wife with him. Well, in a way it was fortunate I didn't win the Rotch, because the year I would have been gone was the year my father died. He was ill for two years, and I'm an only child, so I don't know how I would have handled that, and anyway, when I did go for this James Templeton Fellowship, James Templeton Kelly, the Kelly, that was, my mother was a widow and so she went with me and we were gone for fifteen months all together. And that's another whole story. One of the things that's slightly interesting, but I think you'd have to skim through it is on that first trip to Europe, there were two free ones and since then I've had to pay my own, but since that first one, I've lost the track again, it doesn't matter. But everyone has always said you must have had, I know what I was going to tell you. After I'd been at Lelands for quite a number of years, it's down here, I thought it would be good if I went to another office for a while. I seem to be getting kind of a routine and nothing, you know. And I thought if I tried another tack that it might interesting for me, and so I went over and got a job at Allen and Collins, and they were doing very exciting things at that time. For instance, they were doing the Hammond.

(End of Tape 1, side 1)

**Pierce:** It's a reproduction of a medieval castle. And Mr. Hammond was working on the electric organ at that time, and he wanted to have this big room that was big enough so he could get the feeling of whether he got the resonance you

should get in a cathedral, and it had an indoor swimming pool which was very unusual at that time with glass roof on it, and it had a lot of interesting things about it. Then they were doing the Riverside Drive Church which is a huge, huge church there on Riverside Drive in New York. And they had done the Cloisters up at the end of New York, and I don't know what all. Well, one of the partners was Mr. Collins, and Allen was long gone, and, well he lived here in town, maybe it will come to me. He was a Martinette from the point of view of most of the people in the office, they thought he was real tough, but for some reason he seemed to take some interest and concern for me, and he was the first one to have the courage to send me out on a job, because you will never become an architect sitting in an ivory tower. You've got to get out on the job, and I, fortunately or unfortunately, I've always looked younger than I was, and so he sent me down to Hartford. They were building some buildings for a seminary down there, Gothic buildings, and he sent me down there on the job, and that was the, that was a big breakthrough for me. In the meantime, I had picked up a couple of small jobs. I built a house for myself, Mother and Father in Lexington, and it was during the, we had just gotten the hole in the ground really when my father died, so that it was a very, my mother and I moved in the first of January and sold it the twenty-second of February, and moved out the first of April, so that was how much time. But, I made a little money, so I put it into another lot across the street and built another house, and then I struck the downgrade. But in the meantime, I had worked for Allen and Collins, and I'd gotten a few more commissions. But I think that an architect's career is never this. It's always this, because if there's a depression or a war or anything catastrophic happens, it dries up. So that having been through the, we

had a very good time, that is, architecturally speaking, the architect's had a very good time of it in the late twenties. That was when I had such good training with Leland Company. I had such good training in domestic architecture there because they did beautiful old, beautiful big houses down on the North Shore, up and down the Massachusetts North Shore. Really mansions kind of thing, and also some smaller things, and I got that training in that, you know, in interior design and exterior design and most of them were colonial detail or that type of thing, I don't know the English word for it. Anyhow, there were also, it was a very good training in detailing which they don't do today. You have to find a molding in a catalog. If you have one made, it's out of the question, but everything was made to order and it was a very basic training. Then when I went over to Allen and Collins, I got a little broader, and they were able, they sent me out on jobs, and then I began to pick up occasionally some small thing to do on my own. And I had been there about two years I think, and that was a very tough time for me in the family way because my father was so ill, and I was running his business at night, and my job in the daytime, and then, you name it. Anyhow, when I went to get a raise, and a raise in those days was five dollars. That was a big raise. And Mr. , funny that his name is right at the tip of my tongue, Willis. Mr. Willis said to me well, I'd like to give you a raise he said, but we don't think you apply yourself as well as you could. You could be a lot better, and they had the same complaint about you at Leland. I was furious! I was fit to be tied. So I called up Mr. Leland, and I said I'd like to see him, and I went over to see him, and I said, you know, you didn't get rid of me, I went on my own. It's too small a community, the architectural business in Boston. I can't have that, I want to

come back. I didn't tell him why I wanted to come back. I said, you know, I felt that I had made a mistake to go away, blah, blah, blah. I got myself out of that. And he said that he would like to have me back, and Mr. Larson, who was the one who put this story down, I thought so much of him. I would have laced his shoes, and I can't imagine that he would turn on me like that. Anyhow, he took me to lunch, and he said, you know if you come back and you don't make good, you've, it will be curtains for you. Well, you know, I was still so damn mad. And anyhow, I said that that was my problem. So I went, and they kept me until every other draftsman, we hit the depression, and I was the last one, but I wasn't kept because I was the best, it was because I was the cheapest, and to me, they had less and less of the schools and public buildings. Their business began to narrow down onto smallish jobs, because there was nothing going on except in domestic architecture, and I couldn't hardly stand it, but then I won the fellowship, and that was the last I ever saw of an architect's office. Now I don't know how much, I think MIT is interested in that part of it. The rest of it is questionable. I don't know where you want me to take off. That's sort of a history thing. Since I've been on my own, I had some fairly strong feelings about it, and I don't know, just you tell me, turn it off, and tell me what you think.

**Climaco:** Well, I guess I want to go back and kind of get some dates down, a little more year-wise. Okay, when you received the, when you didn't receive the Rotch Scholarship, you said you would have had to go the year that your father had died.

**Pierce:** Yes, that was either '27 or '28. He died in '27, I think. It was when Edward Durell Stone won it that year.

**Climaco:** So the Rotch Fellowship is something you get once you've already graduated, then there's a competition.

**Pierce:** Yes, there's a competition for it, and if they didn't want to let women enter, that was their project, but to let you take time to go through all that. It was a really hard business, and you had to give up time, and it cost you two weeks of pay if nothing more. But it wasn't just that it was the work and the hardship. Furthermore, the one who won it, I couldn't, it was a peculiar program anyway. It was to design an architect's office, and I could believe that an architect's office, that the library shouldn't be available for the designers. Ed's solution, the library was, was something that the principals used with their clients. It wasn't available to the designers. I couldn't understand it. That was a reasonable solution. But that's a difference of opinion, and, you know, you can't say that. But if it was all principals that were judging it, then of course they wouldn't see the ordinary guys' office, but I think that it should have been available in some way to the rest of it, of the organization, but anyhow, that's another matter.

**Climaco:** Well, I thought it was really interesting when you said that you and your mother went to Europe on the Kelly Fellowship.

**Pierce:** Yes, and we bought, on the way over, one of the young men in the office

came from the north of England, and he said he didn't see why we didn't buy a little baby Austin to get around. And I thought about it, and I thought that it was a good idea, so we never had to, we never stayed less than two days in a town. Most always we'd have a place for a week, but we never had to get a room ahead of time, and go through that. We didn't have to catch any trains, we didn't have to do anything, and the bad part of it, of that was that it was a continuous packing and unpacking for my mother, and I didn't realize, she was sixty-five, and I didn't realize that that was a great drain upon her. After she had died, I read her diary, and I found that over and over that Marjorie wanted to do such and such, and I'm so tired, I'm so tired, I'm so tired. I kept seeing that, you know, every two or three days or every day. To me it was so easy because we didn't have to write ahead for a room. We'd go shopping for one, and if we didn't like what was there we had a list of places we could go, never had to run for a train or a bus or anything like that, and we, it seemed to me it couldn't have been easier. Then I'd go out to a country house that my program, one of the ways you won this thing was you submitted a program of what you wanted to do with this money and this time, and I put that I wanted to study domestic architecture in England and France. That was my program. But as I said before, if I'd said I wanted to study Italian painters I would have still got it because I think they had a very bad conscience about rest, but it took me a long time to believe that, and I may be way, way off, that they may have felt that it was wasting the Rotch to give it to me. But if they, that I don't fault. What I fault is that they weren't honest about it, and tell me. You know, that kind of discrimination does exist, and it's very, very difficult, theoretically and on the surface of it there is no discrimination, but when I got on my own, I'd

keep picking up words like, well, I don't think a woman is as practical, or I don't know, so we turned it around, and you said to your clients, look, they don't know how a house works. They don't know how a kitchen works. Why should they design it? Here's a stove that men designed, and you have to reach across over the burners to reach the shut-off's, and that happens. These are the kinds of things that if your going to put this sex upon us, all right, let's give the other side a word, you know, so in a sense I never felt discriminated against and yet if I examine it in the, I don't believe in fighting for it, I don't think, I think you've just got to be one ahead of them. Hopefully smarter, but one ahead of them.

**Climaco:** Have you found, I guess discrimination in the field or is it that, like you said, you feel that you just have to be smarter.

**Pierce:** Well, I think now I've built up such a reputation. It's incredible. It's incredible. Really is. I've done, I have a little black book, and I started, it has nothing to do with MIT, and I don't know whether you're interested, but how I got through the war, because as I said, your career in architecture follows the economy, that it went down through the thirties, what I did during the thirties, and then the forties, and then it took off again in the last, since 1946 when my mother died and Margaret came to live with me. Really, up to the time she got sick it's been the best years of my life. I've made more money, I've been, had more jobs, it was the beginning of really serious, of individual work, and I started with, after I got out of Charles T. Main during the war. You want to hear about that part of it?



**Climaco:** Yes, I would.

**Pierce:** You can pick and choose what you wanted. When I got back from Europe, it was 1933, and the, we were in Paris when the bank holiday came, and Mr. Roosevelt came in. Luckily, we had put our money into the car and so I had to get back to England, sell the car, and use that money up. It wasn't a great deal, but we lived in Europe on thirty-nine dollars a week, room and board for two of us, that's what we had. Anyhow, eventually we had to come back, and we'd been gone fifteen months, with the three months I went to Italy, I used some money I had on my own, and we went to very few places, and what we had, we stayed in Florence for several weeks and we went down to Naples, and it was a good trip. And then we came back to Paris, and, no let's see, we went to Paris for the winter. The first three months, from May until July, I guess it was, we were in England. And then from July through to the fall, we were in France. And then we went up to Paris, which of course is still in France and got an apartment in Paris and were there for the winter. And, then we, in the spring we went back to England, and spent the last three months until it was spring again in England. And it was in Paris that I did my envoire, which is that you had to turn in, every month I had to send in to the committee, and I had a copy of some of those, and I don't want you to think that I'm terribly conceited because I'm not. It sounds that way, but I'm not. Life has been much too hard for me to get conceited. But anyhow, that I wrote these letters to, and they were passed around to the committee, but I had the first, the letters were destroyed as far as I know, but the envoire were three absolutely

beautiful drawings. They were the size of this tabletop. What I chose to do was a boudoire of Marie Antoinette's at Fontenblau, and I made it three trips out from Paris to Fontenblau. I measured the floor, the ceiling, the walls, and the, I took notes. I have the notes, and the colors and everything, but they were beautiful drawings. They were beautiful drawings. And they were just thrown away. I had to send them back, and Leland and Larson went out of business, see that's when you find out who your friends really are. They said they couldn't find me, they didn't know where to find me, and so they threw everything out. And I would give anything if I had those. In the meantime I did a hundred and ten sketches while I was gone, and a few years ago, I thought it ould be nice to have an exhibition, so I hired the barn up in the center, the Josiah Smith Tavern that I had remodelled, which they named the room after me, and I sent out invitations, and I put up a little sign. They were just sitting in a drawer. I have no relatives, so what would happen to them? They would just be thrown out. There's over a thousand sets of plans down in the cellar. What happens to them? Nothing, just gone. So anyhow, I put up a little sign, if you're interested in buying one of them, for the pencil drawings it was fifteen dollars and for the watercolors it was twenty-five. Unframed. And the money would be given to the barn fund, which I was interested in. And I thought well, you know, someone might be interested in them. I sold eighteen hundred dolars worth of stuff, and I felt sort of shawn, and yet, you know, if I had said to a friend, I'd like to give you this little watercolor or whatever it was, you know they weren't, they might have taken it to please me, but if they'd bought it, no matter how little they'd paid, they got it framed and it was what they wanted. So now, you know, the Hutchinson's have one and the

different ones that I know, I see them in their houses. So, it's kind of fun.

**Climaco:** Did you do a lot of drawing and painting and sketching when you were a little girl? Before You came to MIT and studied architecture?

**Pierce:** Did I what?

**Climaco:** Did you do a lot of drawing and watercoloring before MIT?

**Pierce:** Well, I think I won, I have a little medal that was, I think it says most improvement in watercolor. They used to give these medals out, you know, at MIT, and I think I gave that medal to the, to Seamans in the museum because they wanted my alum, my first diploma, because they wanted it for the signature of the president at that time. They didn't have that in the sequence. It wasn't because they wanted my, they wanted that one sent that was signed by Eliah Thomas, I think he was. Or Thompson or whatever. Whatever the president was at that time. He was only president interim, very short time. And they didn't have that in their series. Now let's see, what else was I going to tell you? Anyway, if you have the time, I guess you have a little more time, so anyway, when I got back from Europe, there was no jobs, no jobs period, and I went back to R.H. Stearns where I had worked before, and got a job there, and I went in to see the man, and I said this idea that I may go out to people's houses and suggest decorating, you know, for them or whatever, and so to sell them material, and he said, my dear young lady, well we've got all the artists we want. What we need is someone to sell yard goods off the shelf.

And I said, well, I'll tell you, if you don't think it takes more ability to sell yourself as an architect than it does to sell yard goods, you're very much mistaken, but I needed the job, and I'll take it, but that's true you know, every time you take a job you have to sell yourself. You can't just, there's nothing on the paper until you put it there. It has to be, from my point of view, it has to be trying to get out of your client what they really want, what they need, what works for them. It isn't what, you're not building monuments. That's why domestic architecture is so fascinating. By the time I get through doing a job for a client I know that family. I know how much money they have, I know who's the boss, I know what kind of lifestyle they have, you know, I know an awful lot about them as a family, and when the job is finished, there's nothing that keeps us together. It's very rare to make long term friends. You have this acquaintanceship which is deep and very real, but it doesn't have any base, and so you don't, I couldn't possibly, I have to think hard about what did that house, who was living in that house, and who, what were they like, and you know, go back and picture that house. Any house. So let's see, let's go back. It was nothing to do, and I had to have work. So I got that job, and it was in the fall, I came back in August, and it was the fall, they put me in a, selling things that were imported from Italy, on a table right on the first floor. Because I had just been in Europe, you know, I was all gung-ho about what this was all about, these little religious things from, you know, this is a picture of Michaelangelo and so and so and so and so, you know. Anyhow, Miss Manning came through the store, and she said, what are you doing here, and I said, well, I had to have a job, that's why I'm working here. She said, well there's something been formed to hire draftsmen out of work, and

she said, I speak to them about it. So I got an application from this government agency that had formed to keep architectural draftsmen from selling apples on the street or whatever, and it was a little bit better pay than I was getting at Stearn's, so I went up there to work. Well I, it was in January that I went there. By March, I had had it. They sent out a group of men who had been out of work out to Beacon Hill to list the brick sidewalks, and then they brought that information back, and we put them on city maps to show where the brick sidewalks were. It was that kind of make-do. Now during that period, they did do some very interesting... so, I said I've got to do something different. I can't take this. It's a handout. I just can't take it. So I went looking for another job, and I got a job at the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts, and my mother and I, the house we left when we went to Europe, when we came back it was before the Depression, and the people were moving out, and we simply couldn't go back and live in it. We didn't have enough money to live in it. We had to sell it, and we had to sell it at a loss which was a great blow, but anyway everything else was down, so when I put that money into a barn down the street that I would remodel into a house at a later date, what little I got out of it, and we went and took rooms with a neighbor of ours and lived there. So I commuted to Boston on the bus, and I went in for five days a week I think, for three or four hours a day, and they threw a lot of things at me. I didn't tell you how I got the job during the war, to back up a minute. So when the war came up, when I got back from Europe, and there was, no this is before the war, that's right. I better get straightened out. So, I did all sorts of things at Leland and Larson, and I'd love to show you. Miss Pocollo at the library has taken a lot of it. They had an exhibition down there, some of the

things that she was interested in to show in that exhibition, but I can show a couple of things, and I did their advertising, and I did their designing. A company would come in with some jewelry they wanted re-designed. Then they sent me to New York to get ideas for the craft. It was an interesting idea, but it was very little pay and not particularly, nothing to do with architecture at all. But gradually I began to get a job. I got one, a neighbor of mine's niece lived up in Hanover, New Hampshire, and there was no architect up there, and she wanted to know if I would design a house for them, and she said there were two or three professors that were looking for somebody to design. So I started going up there. I left the Arts and Crafts, and I went up over the road for three years. I'd go up on Monday and come back on Friday night, and before I started doing that, my mother had had the first of a series of minor vascular accidents. We were in Paris and we were out driving in the Rue de Bologne, and she started talking strangely, and I recognized that problem, and so I got her to a doctor. Well she got home, and then we took rooms with this neighbor, and she had a very serious one, and the doctor said she wouldn't live but a few months or something like that, and I decided if I could get her into her own home and away from this very unpleasant situation, that she might perhaps live a little longer. I took such good care of her. She lived for, she lived fourteen years. Anyway, in the meantime, I built-over the barn, and nearly got into bankruptcy over that one, but when I'd go up to Hanover on Monday and come back on Friday. It's incredible how I ever stood it when I think now. So we got through that, and then from that I began to get work around the area. But Lexington was never the place for me that Weston was. I moved over here in 1950, and I realized that Margaret was commuting to

uptown Boston. It took her three hours to go from a house in Weston and Lexington to uptown Boston. She had to go in on the train, go out to the station, go on the train, get off, go to the subway, and get off and you walked and walked. It was just a change at Park Street. It was a terrible jaunt. I used to walk over the hill to the North Station, but that's not a very easy thing to do, but anyhow, so when we built this, then as I say, all of a sudden, but after the war I decided that I'd start numbering the jobs, so I started with this little black book, and I had done work before so I added it and started at a hundred, and I'm up in the seventeen hundreds now. Isn't that incredible? Now it doesn't mean that I have done seveteen hundred, but I have dealt with that number of jobs. And I'd say at least seventy-five percent of them went through. But a great deal of it were new, a great deal of it were alterations, but there are still in this town now, I'm in the process of counting it, but I think I've got thirty-nine new houses in this town. Isn't that something? And all the commercial work besides. And hardly a street, let's see, I added to that house, I did work on the house, if anybody gets anywhere near me they get to be a client, so don't look this way too long. But the job that I got during the war was quite unusual, because when the Hanover jobs were done, and I could see the things beginning to dry up, I knew I had to find a job in Boston, and I went to the United States Company, the particular people that had jobs to tell you about, can't think of how they call it, one of the agencies. And they said they had nothing for architects. They didn't know what to do with them. Well, I said, what about an engineer's office, and they said they didn't want, engineer's drafting was different from architect's drafting. Well I know that, but I thought there must be something. I came home kind of discouraged, and

there's a folder that comes that tells about new jobs. It's really key to notifying suppliers. It's put out by a company, I can't think of the name of it right now. It doesn't matter, but anyway, I noticed Charles T. Main, a big engineering firm in Boston had gotten several big Navy jobs, and it was, you know, quite enormous. So I thought, well I've nothing to lose. I walked in off the street cold, and I filled out an application. Of course, it looked very good, you know, years of drafting, two degrees from MIT, you know, a good record. The man, the personnel man said, could you wait just a minute, and he went off, and when he came back he said Mr. Moncrief would like to talk to you, and they hired me, and that day, that morning, the partners had met and decided that they would have to get a drafting room opened with some draftsmen that could do, and possibly they would have to use women, and so that's how, you know, things, it's amazing how they mesh, like the thing going to Europe the first time, it was just, and they hired me. They kept throwing jobs at me. I hadn't done a perspective in years. I never was very good at it anyway. He brought something in, he wanted a perspective drawn, and I got so nervous about the whole thing I broke out in hives. Well I got quite a few gals that were out of work that were MIT. Now they not only put us in a different room, a separate room from the drafting room, they put us on a different floor. So we were all up in this one room at the top of the building on Franklin Street, and I think I had for the first two or three years I had about five or six girls. And all that we did was trace these engineering drawings onto cloth with ink. That's a long lost art, but they had, the Navy required them to be done in ink on cloth. And the pay was not great but it was enough, and the girls all had beaux that were going to war, and they were glad to work, and



finally they got a job on how to store ammunition in quanset huts or buildings that were made that type, and over one-thousand drawings of how to store every kind of, and they had a group of men that did the perspectives, and I had finally something like twenty-seven girls, that were summer jobs, and they were from the art school, and I figured out that they could do sloping lettering better than upright. It's harder to do upright lettering. So we did them, and not one single one of those drawings were ever used. There were big ones and little ones small ones and huge ones. Incredible. Just keeping track of them was, well I think I'm exaggerating. I think there were, I did know but I've kind of forgotten. It doesn't matter. There were too many. Finally all I got out of it was not even a raise. I got a trip down to the Pentagon. I came in and I had my little card from Lexington. It said Marjorie Pierce, Forest Street, Lexington, and I passed it to her being very business-like and she said, Lexington, Kentucky? Well, I think I've worn you down to a frazzle.

**Climaco:** That was during the war?

**Pierce:** That was during the war. And then that's where I met Margaret. She came in as an engineering draftsman, and I could have stayed there the rest of my life because after the war they had other things for me to do, and they kept putting things on me, but I figured I would never get anywhere in that office as a woman, and I would never get there anywhere as an architect. So there was no sense in staying. I had to make that decision. My mother had died so I had just myself, and so I made that decision.

**Climaco:** So that year that your mother died you decided to go out on your own.

**Pierce:** She died when I was still at Charles T. Main. We had some live-in, young doctors, a doctor. First it was one, and then it was another so that I could go to Hanover and she wasn't alone. But she wasn't too sick. She recovered enough from the, but she fell in January, and I think cracked her hip, then one night she went up to go to the john, and her hip gave way. So then, we had to put her in a hospital, and they neglected her, and she got bed sores. You name it. Tough old bird.

**Climaco:** Why don't we end here for now?

(End of Tape 1, Side 2)

**Ragucci:** I am Stephanie Ragucci and the date is March 12, 1991. I am here with Marjorie Pierce in Weston, MA in her house. You were just talking about why you went to MIT.

**Pierce:** Yes. I lived in Watertown in high school years, and they pushed me ahead so I was never quite a senior; I was still, uh, pretty bad. But about that time MIT moved across the river and in the process of doing, it was a lot of publicity. And I heard that women went to MIT -- that was the first time I knew that because it was so predominantly a man's college. As I said before, I think there were about one percent women. In my class, actually, as far as I can remember, there were four or five in the Architectural Department. And then there was one girl in Engineering and she's still alive -- lives down in Fort Lauderdale -- but in general it was a man's school. You often were in a class where you were the only woman, and that brought on some problems but not a great deal. But I heard at that time, which would be 1917 -- the war was still going -- and I heard that women went to MIT. And I thought, well, if I could get through there, I would always be able to get a job because the school had such a fine reputation for placement and the rest of that.

So I applied and I got the book from them and I looked over to see what, and I didn't know what course to take. I thought that it might be Architecture, but I also thought that it might be Chemistry because I had an uncle who was a chemist. But thank heavens I didn't take Chemistry

because I hated it and flunked it and never caught up on it. But Architecture turned out to be something else again. Anyway, that summer before I entered, I passed, in the spring I think, part of the exams and then in the fall I passed enough of the rest but I still flunked English which is ridiculous, but synonyms were never a strong point. Anyway, they accepted the application and I had been saving money and it's a kind of a long story which I can give you a transcription of how I got the money together because I started selling things.

**Ragucci:** Right. We have that on the transcript that you did with Carissa. We have all of the work experience and what you did and how you got up through MIT.

**Pierce:** Good.

**Ragucci:** So that's all set on the first tape.

**Pierce:** Yeah. Good. So where do you want me to pick up?

**Ragucci:** Well what I'd like to do is when you left off with Carissa you were talking about working at Charles T. Main.

**Pierce:** Yes!

**Ragucci:** And you worked there from 1942-1946. So I was wondering if you could describe some of your experiences there and if we could start



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girls, I've kept in touch with a lot of them ever since. After the war, then, the big job was one summer the last year of the war when they got a job for the Army to make drawings -- isometric, no, not isometric, uh I can't remember the word -- but we were to make drawings of all the types of quonset hut and what kind of ammunition was stored in them. The only girls I could get were trained in Massachusetts Art and they really didn't know much about mechanical drawings. It was a hard process to do, but we did do over one thousand drawings at that particular project. Main made a nice killing on it, none of which ever floated down to my level. I was hired at a very low salary when I came in because I hardly got it out of my mouth to say that the last time I had worked on a salary I had gotten so much. I was about to say that I expect, you know, ten or fifteen dollars more than that and he said well that's what we expected and that was where it anchored in at that point.

Boy they gave me some tough ones to do, things to do. Everything that you could think of. One job that I particularly remember they sent me down to Connecticut to make a perspective of a big factory down there for McClewitt, uh, what's the menswear, McClewitt Peabody I guess it is. They wanted a drawing of their complex, and I can show you the picture of that. All it could do was to have photographs of it -- it was a huge mill on which Charles T. Main had made an addition. I stood up on the hill and made sketches of how it looked. That's all I had to go by to make this big watercolor of a drawing which was about that size. They were so thrilled with it that it ended up in the Corporate Offices in New York as far as I know. But he kept -- the one who had charge of my department, the partner -- they kept throwing these curves at me. It wasn't simple.



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**Pierce:** Yes.

**Ragucci:** What happened to the women after the war?

**Pierce:** Some of them stayed on for a number of years, some of the girls. For a long while I kept in touch with one who happens to be married to an MIT man and lives down in Beverly. But she kept in touch with somebody else. That whole group -- except Marjorie Stearn, she had a sad ending and she had Alzheimer's early on -- I lost touch with almost all except Miss Mahard who was the one engineer that was in our office. She and her niece were in our drafting room, but they weren't under [me].

One of the amusing things about it is that Margaret was the only one anywhere near my age. And so I kept asking her to do things and she always backed off -- "Would you like to go to the theater?" You know -- she had something else to do. Finally she came home and told her brother who was an engineer. I had known him and the other brother. I had known them because they had worked in other offices where I had been. And she said "That old bitch! She's hopeless." He said, "You don't know Marjorie, you know."

So finally I got a little job. I did twelve houses up in Hanover, New Hampshire before the war. I went over the road for three years doing those houses. From Lexington to Hanover and back. I'd go up on maybe Tuesday morning and stay until Friday and come home. My mother was failing, but we had somebody that lived in. Actually the prewar years and the war years were just one long hassle. So many things were wrong and



so many things went bad for me. Anyhow, Margaret said she would go and she said when we got up there and she saw me with clients, she saw a different person -- that I was an entirely different kind of person than I was in that drafting room struggling with the problems concerned with having people under me and keeping them busy. Anyway, we started going to the theater together and then in 1948 when I made the decision to leave, by that time I knew Margaret very well and my mother had died and she came to live with me. And the next forty years we lived together. And we had actually forty-four years. She died two years ago and we had a wonderful life. The best years of my life by far. By far.

So I cut the cord and went on my own. Then things began to turn around. Four years I was working. My mother and I, to survive the war years, we had split the house in Lexington which was made over from a barn that I had done. I did four houses in -- let me see, one, two, no three houses for myself in Lexington -- this fourth one which was the barn I had made over. We had had to take in some rent -- half of that. So Margaret and I only had what my mother and I had had, which was one bedroom, a big living room and a kind of a kitchenette and a bath. When I'd have clients Margaret had no place to go but to sit in the bedroom which had a double bed in it and was a pretty damn tight area. So these two ladies were going to build a house in Concord and I got fascinated with the problem of what kind of a house to build for two single women to live together and both professionals. They went out the door -- the entrance to my half of the house was through a porch and they went out the porch door -- and I said to Margaret "I'm going to build another house", and she said "What?" "Well, yes", I said "Well I haven't got what we need here and it's time to

move. And I'm not going to build another house in Lexington." Lexington never did anything for me. I don't know exactly why but I never got very far. I did do several houses, and of course three for myself, but I was working most of those years commuting to Boston. And Margaret was commuting to Boston after she came to live with me and I went on my own. She had to leave the house at 7:30 in the morning, walk to the station, take a train into the North Station which stopped at every cow and walk upstairs to the elevator, go to Park Street, change cars and go up to the Statler Building. She would get there at 9:30! That was almost two hours to commute twelve miles. It was absolutely ridiculous. So I said the next house is going to be over the other side on the main line of the railroad so you can commute to uptown Boston. She said "Where?" And I said "Well, Wellesley, Weston."

And we used to come over to Weston -- there was a very famous, two very famous ice cream stands over here and people from all around used to go to one or the other dairy stands to have ice cream. So I had, and the one for Mannises was right on the corner there of the green, and Weston had made over the Center and torn down the old Town Hall and built a new one. And that was why I new a little bit about Weston. She said "Well, I'll take tomorrow off." So we went looking and we couldn't find -- we went around the town -- we never found a single sign on a piece of land that said "For Sale". So I said let's go up to the Town Hall and get a map and see what relationship the town has to the railroad. I found that this end of town had it. We came out of the Town Hall and I looked across -- there was a Boyd's Real Estate Office -- and I said "Let's go over and see what they have." And we went over and Mr. Boyd came out, and he had been in

the business selling stocks and bonds to my boss at a previous job. He welcomed us with open heart -- "We need an architect here." Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah.

Anyhow, he took us to see two pieces of land and this was one of them. And when we turned in the gates, I punched Margaret in the ribs. This was it. I knew immediately that this was it. The Nash estate had just been broken up -- the Nash house and four lots -- that one had the barn on it and this one below was empty. The man who had bought these two lots wanted to build down at the end. I never would have built down there and thank god I knew that I wanted to be up here on the hill.

**Ragucci:** So this whole area was one person's land?

**Pierce:** It was all the Nash estate. And there were problems. They said there wasn't enough water here for the people that are here now and they've threatened to sue me. We had problems. But anyhow, I made the great mistake -- I thought I'd been twenty-five years an architect -- I thought I knew something. And I found out the hard way. I hired a young man who was eager and honest and stupid, and we paid dearly for it. It's unbelievable. From that time on -- but it was the right time in my life to have that happen -- from then on I knew I didn't know every trade's business. For instance, he said he had a good man to do mill work. The young guy didn't know anything. He was drinking heavily besides, which made a problem. I didn't know that when you build with concrete block that you put them out in the sun and they get hot. And when you start to lay them up, it draws all of the water right out of it. So downstairs you

could pick the concrete mix out of those blocks with your fingers. It never set up properly. I didn't know that when you put the deck on a house you should not back fill until you put that deck on because when you bring the land up against the foundation it has no stability until it's tied apart by the construction.

And I learned so many things, and as I say we paid dearly for it. I've been doing things over ever since I came here to live. But I love the location. I love my little house. I like what's in it, but it's given me loads of problems. It taught me a bitter lesson and it was the right time because from then on I knew I had to have a good contractor who knew his business and each man knows -- the carpenter knows carpentry, the plumber knows plumbing -- you don't tell them how to do things.

It was 1950, so now it's forty years we have lived here and as I say they were the best years. They really did need an architect in the town. It was taking off like a rocket. In the town I've done -- somebody came to interview me a few years ago and she said "How many houses have you done?" And I said, "Oh, I don't know. It's an awful lot. I've a little black book and every job has a number and I started with one hundred after the war because I'd done work before the war. So I started with a hundred and I'm up in the 1600's. Not every one of those numbers represents a house, it represents dealing with a client." Some of them didn't go ahead; some of them were just a kitchen job; some were a fifty or sixty -- which used to be a good priced house -- up to a hundred thousand dollars. Those same houses now are selling for two million or a million and a half or something like that. It's unbelievable. So I got so interested I went and

counted and I counted it twice. I think that I have done thirty-nine new houses in Weston alone.

In the meantime, how things spread! I had a little client I did an alteration for and then he built a house here in Weston. Then he moved to Montreal, and I did a job for him in Montreal. Then he moved down to Calgary and I did a job in Calgary. That kind of thing that goes on and on says something about the kind of services that I must give people. I don't think it's just because I never charged too much. It really was something that they could remember and enjoy. There's over one thousand sets of plans down in the cellar and I don't know what to do with them. I hate to see them go to the dump. But it's a big job to take those together and get them unlocked from where they are, find out what they go to, and find out who lives in that house at that time which it was maybe ten, twenty years ago. And then get in touch with them and say "Do you want these drawings? And will you leave them in the house when you leave? Because they belong to the house." And you know a set of ten or twelve drawings of everything in that house is a value to whoever does that -- it's a value in many ways, but certainly if nothing else, it belongs to the house. It's a shame to see them go to the dump. I can take you downstairs and show you what the problem is and how difficult it is.

In the meantime, here I am ninety, and still taking jobs. I've got a new house to do over in Lexington and I'm thrilled. I had no business to take it, but I can't say no. It's a young woman who went to MIT, and her husband went there too and we're enjoying ourselves.

**Ragucci:** I read somewhere that you do mostly houses and small offices. Was there a reason for that? Was there a reason you didn't build big buildings, or ...

**Pierce:** Well I've done some what I could call big buildings. I did everything on Colpitt Road, which is the center of town. I was offered the Post Office to do, but I'm realistic enough to know that those drawings had to go to Washington and if they had a woman's name on them, there would be somebody down there that would question it. When a post office is built, the Post Office department doesn't own that building, they rent it from the owner. They have specifications of what they want built. And then they farm it out. The people who have the land to put it on in different towns -- here for instance, there were two people that wanted that building built on their property. I'm realistic enough at that point in time, which is twenty-five years ago, maybe it's a little different now, I doubt it, that some goon down in Washington would say, "Oh, well she doesn't know what she's doing and we'd better take this one because it's safer." So I said to the owner who was a good friend and a good client, "I want to design that because the man who was going to do it (he's dead and gone now), he will do it, but I don't like his designing. I would like to design the exterior of that building. So the exterior of that building is mine, and besides which it was on piles and I knew nothing about that kind of construction. They did the construction work and all of the drawings, but I designed that building.

Then I did an office building across the street, and the medical building, and I said the post office, and the owner's own house, and remodeled a

bunch of little old miserable garages into a nice little Terrolean cottage kind of thing that they rented out. Then the grandfather's house up on the corner -- I did that over into office buildings. But the largest building I think that I've ever done was a big warehouse up in Chelmsford I think it is. Then I did a big -- I have some pictures of a couple of things I could show you -- medical building up in Chelmsford. The other one is over in one of the other towns in that same direction but not as far as Chelmsford. It was for a wholesale plumber's and it came to me through a builder. But they are essentially colonial buildings and the interior -- how it was divided up -- was somebody else's job, but I designed the buildings themselves. Let's see, I did an ice cream parlor for somebody, in fact twice I did those, but I'd have to look back, as I say it's a little black book.

What else should I -- I have strong feelings about how you approach clients. For instance, most of the work I have done has come by reference, either the people who sold them the land, or they heard of me through real estate people or whatever. I've done something like twelve jobs, or thirteen jobs up in the center of buildings done over.

The last one was such a huge success, and I got so much publicity out of it, you couldn't imagine. But it was an old building which had been made over and it was a mess, and the owner hired some engineers to do it. I guess it was an architectural firm over in Lexington, and he wanted to put another story on it, and they came up with a mansard roof, I don't know what you know if a mansard roof is, but it doesn't matter. Mansard was an architect in Paris, and Napoleon, when he put the \_\_\_\_\_ through -- tore down all that part of Paris -- and he wanted the cornice lines to all line up.

And the people who owned them wanted four stories, and they only had three -- let's see one, two -- I guess he wanted a third story. So they came up with the roof -- ordinarily the roof would be like this -- but they came up with a roof and they put a dormer kind of thing on here. And so the roof comes up this far and then it has this thing which looks like a dormer and a roofing but it actually is another whole story on it. Well, that's what they wanted to do with this and of course, I thought it was completely inappropriate and would be overwhelming in Weston center which is at best a very small shopping area. So I asked the owners if they would let me design the front of that building. And they were absolutely delighted, I did design it, and everybody is thrilled with it. I put a real dormer on instead of a mansard roof. And they get almost as much space, but it's something that he can be proud of, and he put his father's name on so it's now the DeVito building. It's really something very nice.

Then I also did an office building up in the center which is quite a sizable building. But I have done some commercial work, the principal part of it, actually the largest part of my practice is alterations. I bow to nobody on those. I have a flair for it. The next is domestic architecture, and along the end of it comes the commercial work, because most of the commercial work I've done bears a strong relationship to houses. It is not office buildings such as the buildings in Boston that look so horrible. I just can't believe what they -- there's a building down there that looks down on the main artery, and on this side are palladium windows. This is the latest thing. The damn things with a circular head on them. Everybody is putting them on buildings. A palladium window is a very handsome building where it belongs. But sure as hell it doesn't belong plastered five



or ten stories high window after window after window. Not only that, but when you turn the corner, the windows on this side don't have it and are an entirely different design. So here is this absolutely ridiculous building. I don't understand it. I really don't.

**Ragucci:** Okay. I'd like to get back a little bit to when you started your own practice. You said it was the right time to leave Charles T. Main. Was it difficult for you all of a sudden say "Okay, I'm going to be out on my own." How did that come about?

**Pierce:** No, I got a job. I got a job to do. And that led to another job, and it just sort of, well. Margaret and I started the first summer -- my mother died in March, and she came to live with me that March. In the summer, we thought we'd like to have -- I always wanted some kind of a small place on the water. I loved the ocean and I thought I'd like somewhere with my feet in the water. And we looked around and we couldn't find anything. We were down in, I've forgotten which comes first. Yeah, that summer we took a cottage down at Marblehead Neck and commuted. And a job came in for me -- I'm trying to think which came first the chicken or the egg -- Margaret went in on the train that summer, so I must have had some work, and I don't know where I was. Anyway we got it into our heads that we would like a cottage on the shore. We went looking everywhere, and nowhere could we find anything that we could afford. So finally, we settled on getting a boat. That fall, we looked and looked, and we found a boat. Margaret's brother found we were serious about this and he thought we'd get into trouble, so he put us on to a friend of his who had a boat. He suggested that we go to one of the really good

boat companies because we knew nothing about what a good boat was. Finally we settled on a boat we got that fall, I guess, and I'm not sure.

I took this book to get some of these things in perspective, and we might find out what happened when. Let's see. ( she starts to leaf through the book.) There, that's the page I was looking for. See if you want to copy any part of that, that shows where I was born and when and down here, you know, how I got into the architectural business. I got a job while I was working at Leland and Larson, I got a little job to do for somebody who wasn't -- it goes on over here. (she turns the page). Anyhow, that's a pen and ink drawing that I did sitting in the plaza there in front of Notre Dame in Paris. I couldn't do that today if my life depended on it. That was the peak of when I really could draw.

**Ragucci:** That's beautiful.

**Pierce:** I look on it as somebody else's work. I can't believe it was mine, you know what I mean? Well anyway, after 19\_\_, when I left Charles T. Main we stayed for another two years I guess -- maybe more, maybe it was three or four, it's in there somewhere -- in Lexington, and then as I said, I said this is ridiculous. It isn't working. I have no place to take clients to talk with them, and Margaret had to be banished to the bedroom to sit on the bed. I had to do something else about it so we went looking. Then we put our house in Lexington on the market and I couldn't build unless I sold that. I went through a lot of bad days and bad times during the Depression years. Everybody who was an architect -- there was just no work. No work at all. I worked in a department store for a while,

and somebody saw me working there, an architectural friend, and she insisted that I go up and see -- they had some make due jobs for people who were out of work. I worked there for two or three months, and I had a cruel -- people unemployed went out to Beacon Hill and counted the brick sidewalks on Beacon Hill. They brought this information back and we put them onto maps of the city. You know, make due jobs. And every time -- it was better money that I was getting at R.H. Stearns. But every time I drew a check I felt as if I were on welfare and I couldn't stand it, so I went looking for a job. I got a part-time job at the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts. I worked there for three or four years. I should have left sooner, but I was scared, you know, it was income and I didn't know whether I could step out on my own.

But finally, I got this job up in Hanover. And that led to twelve houses up there. I went over the road for four years, and that was quite an experience. We had to have somebody live in at home because my mother was all alone, and she wasn't that well to be left alone. So I would go up there on Tuesday and come home on Friday. Like any job, it's hard to get away. There's always another question. I left there after supper on a night, and this was a long drive, and I'd come down so tired coming down through Bedford to Lexington that I'd sit up and hold on to the wheel and sing to keep awake. I remember one week that I came down and it was around midnight; I guess it might have been around eleven o'clock when I came into Concord, New Hampshire. Coming down from the hills in Hanover down into that valley, the humidity was high and I was having an awful time staying awake. And I still had from Concord, NH to Lexington to do. The cars that I drove in those days were not a hundred percent.

You know you wonder how you had the guts to do this. It's if it happened to somebody else, it really is. Anyway, I stopped in the gas station to get filled, and I said to the man, "I'm just dying, I'm so tired." He said, "Well pull over there next to that car and take a nap, and I'll wake you when I close." And I think it saved my life. I went over there and I fell asleep and he woke me and I came to. But I have driven down through Bedford as I say, singing and holding on to the wheel. You can look at the road and not even see it. It's weird. It's a real weird experience.

**Ragucci:** Um-hum.

**Pierce:** Well anyhow, I survived those four years and as I say, mother was -- I got the job at Charles T. Main. I went out looking for a job as the war came on, and I told you I went over to see them and they said they had no jobs for architects and didn't know. And I came home and looked and I saw that they had work and I walked in cold. That was the day they had decided to open up another part of the office. So each thing, it does mean that you've got to have whatever it takes to seize the moment, and make some of it. You just can't be scared, and apparently -- of course ever since I was born, my folks thought I was wonderful. I was a child born thirteen years after they were married and it was always "What does Marjorie think? What does Marjorie think?" And I'm sure I'd have been a terrible spoiled brat if I hadn't had to get out in the world and work.

**Ragucci:** Oh I just had a question. You left Charles T. Main and you started getting your jobs. Did you ever think of starting your own firm?

**Pierce:** Well, it is my own firm. You mean getting a proper office and not working out of the house?

**Ragucci:** Well not only that, but hiring people to work for you, and...

**Pierce:** I don't know how many people have said that they would like their daughter or their son to come and work for me. I don't have any reason to want to do that. In the first place, it takes a lot of -- I had seven years of that learning process myself in a good architects' office. But I neither wanted nor could teach somebody, and as soon as I'd taught them, they'd leave. So I just had a succession of jobs. One would be -- I'd maybe have -- right now I have five on my book to do, but that doesn't mean that if I had somebody working for me, presumably, I could keep on doing it. But I would spend more time teaching them, and I've thought occasionally of taking one of the girls who's had a hard time starting -- she must be in her thirties or forty -- she would be a possible person to take over the business. But I decided that it wasn't fair to her. She's got to find her own way. I don't think she is interested in domestic architecture. It isn't that I -- I never had a desire to have a big office. I think that the men who were at the top of both offices that I worked for, which was Charles T. Main and Allen and Collins, the men that were at the head of it didn't have as much fun as I am getting out. Mr. Leland used to come back to the office a raving maniac. Now I understand why, to kind of cope with things on the job. He was hot tempered anyway. And I always thought that the head draftsman was my friend -- I would have polished his shoes for him I thought so much of him. I found out afterward he was knifing me in the back. Well you can let that sour you, but forget it. Go on with your life

and keep -- what is it they say in that thing that they've got -- something on the prize -- the black people are coming up with?

**Ragucci:** Eyes on the Prize?

**Pierce:** Eyes on the Prize. That's the answer. You've got to not be soured by -- I said to somebody that I never felt I was discriminated against. But now I realize how I was at points in my life. But I don't like to dwell upon that. I wanted to win the most prestigious scholarship there is, which is the one that the Boston Society -- what is it -- Rotch, Rotch Scholarship. And it has never been held by a woman. To win it, you had to do a sketch -- it was twenty-four hours work -- to develop a sketch the way we do in architecture. The five people from that group were chosen to be finalists. Well, I got through that one. That was a twelve hour job, or twenty-four hour job, I've forgotten which. Then you had a week -- they had to do a program -- and you had a week to develop, two weeks I guess it was. So you had to take two weeks off from your job which meant going without pay for two weeks. And then those were judged by out of town judges, men from other parts of the country. They reviewed those five drawings and decided which one would get this fellowship. It was for two years abroad. But it was mostly the prestige, because the Rotch scholars are -- almost all of them have gone right up. Now the reason I wanted to get it was because I was looking for some way to support my architectural business with something that was sent -- having gone through the Depression and the rest of it. No, it was before that; it was before the Depression. But I realized that I had to have something else.

There was an architectural firm in Boston that one of the partners was the principal and she had money behind her, and the other one had to earn a living. She had as a backlog, classes in two or three private schools teaching girls how to plan a house. She said she had skimmed the cream so there was no more of that. That was one way to get started as an architect. We used to say in the architectural department you either had to have money or marry money, and that's really true. It's sad, but to get that first client is very difficult. It's hard -- if you've got a niece or nephew who wants to design a house for you, it takes a lot of courage to give them that much money to spend. You wonder if they know enough to take care of it.

So I had to build for myself, and the little house that I built -- the very first house that I built -- was in Lexington and was a little Cape. I didn't know anything and the lot I bought was a bad lot because it was on top of springs, which I didn't know enough to recognize. We got this hole in the ground, and my father died, and I was left with this foundation and we had just got the house up and four feet of water came into the cellar. Four feet! You could hear it bubbling up; there were springs underneath. The woman who sold me the land knew that that was bad land and in the summertime it was dry, but in the fall when the fall rains came -- hurricane rains in September -- Belfry Hill is up here, and all of that water from Belfry Hill came down into that basin there. Not only that, but of course it was a house I couldn't afford to live in. My father had died and I had to find some way to support my mother then as well as myself. So we moved into it the 22nd of February and sold it the -- no, we moved into it the 1st of December and sold it the 22nd of February. So we lived in it

water and all. Then the next thing that happened to that house -- you know you learn the hard way, honestly. It makes me wonder how I survived.

The next thing that happened is the Diamond Match people put out a little brochure -- it wasn't little, it was a number of pages -- of houses, and they published something like five thousand of them. They took a picture of that house that I did and put it in their catalog as the kind of house that you could buy the plans for. The plans they had were not my plans.

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And so I learned a bitter lesson. You can moan and groan about it, or you can go on with your life. Fortunately, I have a big enough ego, I guess, that I went on with it. The next house we built, we struck the downgrade, you know, the Depression years, and we had to have roomers and boarders and I commuted to Boston and worked in the Arts and Crafts, and went on with it.

Then along came the -- let's see, I was trying to think, because my father had died and we got out of the apartment in Boston -- I guess the next thing that happened was there was a scholarship. I thought that if I had a scholarship like the Rotch -- I didn't tell you about that whole incident. So anyway, I took the two weeks and I submitted my plans to the committee. There is a dinner at the end of that and they invite the participants and they announce who won. I sat next to one of the judges, and I said to him, "Did you know there was a woman competing?" and he said "Yes, we did." Well he shouldn't have known that. And then I said,



"Did you know which one was mine?" He said, "As a matter of fact, we thought it was that one which was over there." And it wasn't mine at all. So I had those two things to think about. but I hated to think that that committee, which were respectable architects in Boston, would let me try for that and not say "This is not open to women." They had every right to do that. But to let me do it, and if I won it -- I don't know that I won it -- but for years I kept hearing this rumor. And finally I came to the conclusion that it was so, that I had been conned out of that.

Two, well it might have been five years later, there was a Mrs. Kelly, whose husband was an architect, and she offered a year's fellowship for a year's study abroad. The winner would be -- or the one chosen, it wasn't a winning thing, it was a chosen -- the one should be a man in his thirties who was married and needed this extra boost on their business and their architectural knowledge. And they had to submit a program of what they would like to do. I applied for it, and I said I would like to study domestic architecture in England and France. At Leland and Larson were I worked for so many years, they used to do a lot of beautiful houses down the North Shore. They had a French influence, so that's why France came into it.

Anyway I applied, and I'm telling you it was handed to me on a silver platter, and that was really the reason. They had a guilty conscience about the other. They didn't do it the first year, but they did it the second year. In the meantime, my father died, and I didn't have a husband to go with me and I took my mother with me. We had thirteen months, and it was while we were abroad that the bank holiday occurred. And on the boat going over, one of the orchestra men said what you should do is buy a little car in

Liverpool and use it as transportation. When we got to Liverpool, we looked around and we found a Baby Austin. It was so small that when I stood up in it -- it had a movable roof -- it came up to here on me. I had a picture somewhere standing in there up through the roof because it was such a small car. We drove it all over England and

(telephone rings)

so we put that much money into the Baby Austin and drove it I don't know how many miles all over England and France. We parked at a garage in Paris all that winter. In the spring, we took a -- on my own money that I had -- we went to Italy because I love Italy. We went to Florence and Rome. Then we came back to France and stayed for the spring and went over to England and finished up the year. We had the extra month over the year.

When we came back, that's when there was, you know, just nothing. The house that I had built -- the bottom of the Depression -- I would have to sell it and lose money on it. I remember going to see Mr. Silar, who was a good friend and a good businessman. He said, "Well, Marjorie, don't worry about that. If you lose money on it, that money will buy you more than it would have." In other words, a house is the best investment that anybody makes in their entire life. Any kid, or any couple, or anybody who doesn't buy themselves a home, the money you put into an apartment, or any other kind of living is money thrown down the drain. No matter how hard it is to keep up the payments, with a house you have something --

it's money in the bank. Usually, it's money that grows faster than ordinary money in the bank. End of the second lesson.

Anyhow, we did lose the house. I sold it and we lost. But I had that money and I didn't know what to do with it, so I put it into the barn that Mr. Tucker owned down the street that I'd always been looking at and thought, well that would make a good house. I got into another bottom of the barrel problem. I don't know how much of this part is interesting to anybody at MIT. But I think of all those years as from one morass to another. In 1950, when we moved to Weston, it was a different world. It was wonderful. We've done a lot of traveling, and I've done a lot of work and it's all been upbeat. But those early years were tough. When somebody asked me if I felt discriminated against, it took me a long time to realize that that was the major. I think that there were others -- there were smaller ones.

I always felt very grateful to Mr. Willis, Harold Willis, because he was the first one who had the courage to send me out on a job. You never become an architect sitting in an ivory tower. You've got to get out there. I've always looked younger than I was, and this little pint-sized coming down there, but I've found that you never try to throw your weight around. You try to make everybody, I guess I want to say, everybody is a hero. I remember standing behind Mr. Leland, who had a short temper. He was trying to get a certain texture on the plaster. Finally, he got so impatient that he grabbed the trowel out of the plasterer's hand and he said, "This is what I want!" I was the expression on that man's face -- the plasterer's face -- and I made up my mind if I stayed there all day I would

never take a man's tools out of his hands because you were demeaning him. If Mr. Leland had said, "That isn't just what I want. Maybe I can show you. I won't make it as good, but this is what I'm trying to do." If he'd explained that, but no. Once I had some painting being done, and I said to the painter, "I want that to be a grayer color. Now if you put some raw umber -- I guess it's raw, no it's the other one, not the raw but the ordinary umber -- it will gray it up a little, be a little more delicate color. So he squeezed about one drop in, and I said "No, a little bit more than that." I had all I could do not to take that thing and give it a good half a -- because that's a very neutral thing you're doing to it. But I remembered that lesson that I had learned that you don't take a man's tools out of his hands. You work through him because he is the expert. That's where I made the mistake of this house. There were no experts. And I was not either.

**Ragucci:** You've mentioned a few examples of you being a woman and with the Rotch Scholarship, but in general what are your thoughts on being a woman in a field with so many men?

**Pierce:** Well actually I've built up a lot of respect, I guess the word is, with the men that I work with - the contractors. Somebody on the job the other day it was reported to me said, "You know if Marjorie did these drawings, there would be X number of drawings and everything would be right." They had a big bundle of plans that said nothing. But the owner was impressed at all these drawings. But the men that are on the job understand that they have the information, but the fewer drawings they have to wade through the better off they are. The bottom line is that you

are serving the client. So if you can get the work done faster and better and more successfully by making fewer drawings, you don't have to give -- this damn job that I got trouble with this winter, they hired an architectural firm somewhere there in greater Boston, and they came up with a package that thick of drawings. ONE drawing was of the ceiling showing all the tiles on the ceiling. That isn't any good to anybody. You can watch "This Old House" and you can watch them put them up. They start somewhere, maybe on the edge, maybe in the center, but they start somewhere and no drawing is going to show them how to do it.

I find that in the first place, when I get a job, it is often the woman who will call me and say "We've been thinking about, let's say, putting a -- doing our kitchen over. We're thinking about it and I'd like to talk with you about it." And I said, "I'd like to set up an appointment, and I insist this first appointment that you husband be there." "Well, he's awfully busy." Well I said, "It could be a weekend, it could be on Saturday or Sunday but I insist that he be there." Now there are two reasons for that. I don't want to have him say, "I don't want some dilly messing around here." Or he can say, "Okay, go ahead and do whatever you want." And he has no intention of doing it all. Or he can say, "I'm too busy in the office and I haven't time." Now he is spending money and he should be there to see that the person who is handling that is reliable. So I have a selling job every time I get a job. But every time the man doesn't come, backs off, even though he said he'd be there; I come there and say "Where's Mr. ? " "Well, he said he couldn't get here this morning, he'll be here later." He doesn't come; he has no intention of coming, and has no intention of doing the job. I get stuck with that two or three times a year. But at least I try to

start it on the right foot. from then on, he can give his wife as much rope as he wants to. He can say to her, "I don't want you to -- you can go ahead with Ms. Pierce and that's fine -- but I don't want to spend more than so much money." OR he could say, "I want to be sure that we have somebody that's good at plans." But he must be there and meet me the first time and then it's a selling job. It's as simple as that.

I went over to see Sheri -- I've worked with her for a couple of meetings -- and I went over to see her on a sunday because her husband would be there. I didn't cater to him; I just simply did what -- I had drawings and I presented them and I told him why I changed her sketches and why I did this and why I did that and I had some in put in tit. She was here yesterday because she wants some building to look at and she said, "You know John was very impressed and I was surprised that he was very impressed with you." Well, that's very nice, but I know that he really is serious in having this done. And he will be interested enough to look at the drawings as they go along and put in whatever interest he has in it. It's something that any young woman going into architecture has got to learn -- that there are men out there and there are men who will give you a lot of support and there are those who will knife you in the back. But don't let that sour you on all the good ones. There's a lot of good.

**Ragucci:** Let's see. There is a lot of talk today about things called "women's work". Are you familiar with that? Women will have jobs that either men don't want to do or don't think they have to do. Do you think that you've been given jobs like that in your work experience?

**Pierce:** Well, I've done jobs that I didn't think used my training and abilities, that they were just a way of making money. One of them I went to get a job when I came back from my fellowship. I went into R.H. Stearns and the personnel manager was looking for somebody, and I said that I thought I would like to go into the department where they sold yard goods and drapery materials. And I said "I have an idea that maybe I could expand that service by going out to people's houses and give them some experience, and maybe there was something there that I could do that would build that department up. And he said, "My dear young lady, we don't need any more artistic input. What we need is people to sell yard goods." And I said, "Well, I can sell yard good, and I need the job and I'll take that."

It was a very short time that I worked there but I did learn something. I learned how to figure out draperies and so forth, because I got a job later for Mr. Silar doing a restaurant over in Lexington. And I made thirty-two pairs of draperies on a kitchen table for that place. He let me do it and I got paid for it. I did those in my house. But if you need money you can do a lot of things you don't care much about doing. I had learned how to do them in a way that was suitable, and I chose the materials and so forth; bought the materials wholesale and did that decorating over there.

And from that time on, I did decorating. If I do a house I'd rather see the people put money into the house which is permanent than spending a lot of money on decorating. So they'd move into a house and they'd have maybe a sofa that had been given a hard time and was in pretty bad shape. And I said, "Well now, if you get a new sofa cover, or you get a new chair

here and a new pair of draperies, that would -- until you're ready -- I'd rather have you do that and have a nice mantle than to go out and spend a lot of money on draperies." So I started doing a little bit of decorating for the houses that I did only as a service and they got the wholesale prices. It worked out very well for the clients and I was happy to do it. I finally got a house over in Milton to do, a doctor and his wife, and the house was a beautiful house. It was built in the winter time so snow got into the cellar and it was a mess downstairs. I had the supervision of it, and I walked down the cellar stairs and looked and I didn't see anything that was necessary so then I came up. After the house was done -- she knew that I did a little decorating -- I lugged samples for one year! She had everything in the house done over. I never got into anything such a mess in my life.

And every time I came I saw this crack across the living room ceiling. Couldn't feel why there was a crack there. There simply couldn't be a crack there. There was nothing above it that would make a crack there. It had to be something. I kept looking at it and I couldn't -- the next thing after they got all of the decorating done and everything finished, they turned around and sued the contractor and I. And I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe it. I had done so much work for those people. They hired the very best lawyers in Boston, Pale and Door. They sued me for the commission I got for the job, and they sued the contractor for even more. When they started, I had a very good contractor from Melrose working for me on my jobs. I recommended him and he gave them a very good price which was as I remember around forty-four thousand dollars. The doctor was playing golf with some goon, and he said "Oh, I've got somebody down in the South Shore there, Quincy, that young man, and he'd do it for



much less money than that." So they hired this young man from Quincy. And the house was really over his head. I kept working with him, helping him. One of the things on the drawings said the stairs came down like this, and then at the foot of the stairs is the living room door. Right next to the living room door was the fireplace with the hearth. When I did the basement drawings I put in two lally columns. One was out here and one was in that corner because I felt that that was a weak corner. And he didn't put that -- he thought he could save that much money. He was in trouble with the costs anyway. So he didn't put that lally column in there. When I went downstairs and the snow was there, I didn't go around -- I'm not sure I would have seen it anyway.

Then with the hearth, you always put these pieces of metal that support the hearth. He left those out. They cost maybe a couple of dollars a piece, these little things. So they sued him of most of his, and they sued me for all of my fee. But not only that, I had to get a lawyer. I kept saying to the guy at the court, "What is the problem? What is it that they're suing for?" He said, "You'll find out." So they get me up on the stand and he said, "Did you know that there was a lally that should have been there that's missing?" Of course I didn't know it; I didn't see it. It never occurred to me. I said, "It was on the plans." "That doesn't matter. You supervised. Did you know that he didn't put these things in?" "No." Now it seems that because he left it out, that is what was causing the crack. I couldn't think what it was. It never occurred to me. That whole -- the stairs coming down, the hearth coming in -- everything right there that needed that lally. And he had left it out. He thought he could put that steel beam in there and not support that spot.

And it was a bitter lesson. So the guy got his whole year's work done for nothing. I got soaked and so did the builder. First place, he said we were in cahoots; we had to get that straightened out. He said I was playing into his hands. But I found out afterwards that this doctor was what they call an ambulance chaser, that he was always taking people to court. But you can let that sour you for the rest of your life, or you can go on and say everybody isn't like that. But you learn, not very much, but you learn. I'm sure I've given you more than enough to put in your bit of whatever it is you have to do.

**Ragucci:** Oh, I think we're going along pretty well. Actually, everything is interesting. Anything you want to tell me is just going to go right into the transcript.

**Pierce:** One of the things that I'm thinking about -- I showed it to the young lady that was here yesterday, she has some friend that would type it up -- but I started an autobiography four years ago because so many unusual things have happened to me. I haven't said a word about being a Goodwill Delegate, which happened out of MIT. I've written that up, and then nobody as far as I know has ever written about the Roger's Building and what a wonderful experience that whole thing was. There'll never be anything just like it, because we were isolated over there. I wrote that story up. She thought that the Architectural Review might like to print that. If you're interested enough, I think it's here somewhere -- I've written it. These are parts of the part that I wrote. That's the beginning of it. I don't think you have time to read this stuff anyway. But that Roger's

Building -- I'm going to revise these anyway -- but that Roger's Building is the way I felt about that building, how much fun it was.

(she begins to read from her notes)

No record would be complete without something about the old Roger's Building in Boston. When MIT moved across the river to Cambridge, for lack of space, the Architectural Department -- have you got that on? (she motions to the tape recorder)

**Ragucci:** Um-hum.

**Pierce:** The Architectural Department was left behind for lack of space. The old Roger's Building on Boylston Street, which was the original design that was a copy of one of the buildings at the Paris World Fair in 1889. The first floor housed the two Dean's offices, a large gallery, and various small rooms, including an area for the women students. The second floor was mostly an auditorium, originally a lecture hall like 10-250. A half a flight below was the Architectural Library. The third floor contained the drafting rooms and the top floor was studios for classes in painting and life class.

Up through the center of the building rose a four-story stairwell of considerable size. Connecting the floors were long, long flights of unbroken stairs with handsome mahogany handrails into which some

(telephone rings)

you can read it from right down there.

**Ragucci:** Okay.

**Pierce:** Or you can wait and I can read it.

**Ragucci:** Okay.

**Pierce:** Connecting the floors were long flights of unbroken stair rails which some earlier and thoughtful faculty had inserted buttons maybe three inches in diameter and about two inches high. These were supposed to stop the students from riding the railing from floor to floor. There was a considerable amount of traffic between the upper floors and it was an irresistible challenge to ride side-saddle, jumping the knobs. By the time a student reached the Library level, he was really travelling. Of course the co-eds never tried this stunt, but one of the girls and another student did sit on a drawing board, and coast down, arriving in considerable disarray at the Library level. She was picked up, bruised but otherwise unharmed only to be suspended by the Faculty.

It was a free-wheeling group, and understandably so because we not only went to classes all day but worked at our drawing boards evenings and when a problem was due followed the Bosart tradition of "en charrette", working all night. This tradition comes from the Architectural School of Paris, where students developed their design solutions in studios located all over the Latin Quarter. And when the deadline approaches, they load the

drawings onto carts, thus the "charrette" bringing them to the school for judging. As the carts are wheeled through the Paris streets, the students are said to be still adding the finishing touches. In the Architecture Department, it was a tradition for the class to help each other with the final presentation, just learning from each other.

My own problem with the final presentation was somewhat different. Ushering at the theater from 5 to 9 every weekday, I would arrive actually refreshed but behind schedule and find a group of upperclassmen ready to surround my drawing board to help with what is called "the rendering".

Meanwhile the students, with some help from a few cans of beer, had taken "coffee breaks" sitting on the stairs harmonizing. I can hear in my memory "When I Wore a Tulip and You Wore a Red, Red Rose", "Down by the Old Mill Stream", and "I've Been Working on the Railroad". And of course, that favorite of all close harmony, "Sweet Adeline". There was another source of music singing in the halls of Rogers, the Hallelujah Chorus from the Messiah sung over and over by the Handel and Haydn Society rehearsed in the auditorium on the second floor.

Once or twice in the years at Rogers, things got a little out of hand. For instance, there was a night when the exhausted but exuberant students began a sort of frisbee game seizing pieces of cardboard, starting with a piece of heavy cardboard about four inches square. The missiles quickly grew larger and larger. A twenty-four inch square of cardboard skimmed with considerable force by an excited twenty year old is a lethal object. Some of us not engaged in the sport crawled under the drawing tables to

avoid possible decapitation. Then there was the night when I was a graduate student and there was the serious development of a grudge against the sophomores in the next room and started an egg fight. The weapon was an egg, preferably rotten, in the toe of a sock sailing through the air. That particular sophomore class, which contained a rather large number of students who later became famous architects, just sat there aghast as this childish sport made a shambles of their studio.

If this all sounds uncivilized recall that in Cambridge, the spring always brought the traditional conflict between freshmen and sophomores. Antics like the greased pole, and the spring the engineers succeeded in placing a Model T Ford on the roof of a four story dormitory. As a freshman, I remember watching from a second story window the messy business of students trying to climb the heavily greased pole. Below the room where we were seated came another group with their fire hose. After wetting down the whole scene, they disappeared as quickly as they had come and my friends and I were left to face the authorities. One winter when we had some classes in Cambridge, and that's the story I told you about crossing the -- I ought to write that over again because it was kind of the story of the Rogers Building. I think it can be added to, but it's kind of fun.

**Ragucci:** It sounds really interesting.

**Pierce:** Yeah.

**Ragucci:** Let's see, what else? Have you ever thought of retiring?

**Pierce:** Well, I had a ninetieth birthday party which got a big publicity, and I thought well that's a nice time to do it, and then something very interesting came in, and I couldn't resist it. Now this house has come in. I'm sure the deadline is in sight. Maybe the powers that be will send a signal. Maybe I'll have trouble with eyesight or have a shock or something. I mean you know, in the ninety-first year, something has to happen. Pretty soon.

**Ragucci:** Well, you never know. So what will you do when you're not working?

**Pierce:** Well, I've said that I'm not going out of this house except in a stretcher or in a box and I mean it. If I get seriously ill, I'll have to go to a nursing home, but I feel very strongly against this big deal of retirement homes. I think they are the wrong answer. In the first place you have to pay a big sum of money out which you never get back in total. Even if you get part of it back it won't be worth as much as before it went in. If it had been invested wisely, it might have brought in enough income to have help. There is help out there. There was a young nurse I ran into that started a what she called "long term care facility". She was a trained nurse herself. And she placed girls in homes to do certain chores. When Margaret was sick the two years before she died, part of that time I had one of those girls come. She came five days a week. That left it from Saturday over till Monday that I had to take care of Margaret alone. But it was a tremendous help to have that. The problem as far as I was concerned, it had built into it. For the nurses time, I was paying twenty dollars an hour, and the girl

who was working here came for maybe three hours, she was getting eight dollars. That override was what was killing it. Because you really didn't get full help and you were paying a lot for something you didn't get. But she's since gone out of business and I can understand why. If she had wanted to take that on herself -- she was a very nice person and I had a good relationship with her -- I hope this isn't being recorded, is it?

**Ragucci:** Oh, yes.

**Pierce:** Oh Lord. I tell you, you should cut that part out.

**Ragucci:** Really?

**Pierce:** Oh yes. I don't think that's anything that belongs in MIT. There are some other things that do belong to MIT. One of the funny little things that happened -- will you surely cut that bit about nursing care? Because I don't want that in there.

**Ragucci:** Okay.

**Pierce:** Now I've lost my train of thought. I guess it's gone. Well I thought I would like to show you a couple of little things, but not recorded. Let's turn this off for a minute and let me think now where we were.

**Ragucci:** Okay, great. Actually we could probably end for here right now if you'd like to do that and then you can show me a couple of your drawings and we'll take it from there if that's okay.



**Pierce:** Well, do you think you've got all you want or do you mean you'd like to come back again?

**Ragucci:** I think I'd like to come back one more time if that's okay with you.

**Pierce:** It's all right with me. There's an awful lot of stuff there. I don't know whether you want to look it over. I think it should be edited in a way.

**Ragucci:** Sure. I think what I'd like to do is look over what I have now and see what questions I still have.

**Pierce:** And try to mesh it?

**Ragucci:** Sure.

**Pierce:** It's the same thing that I have to do here (referring to her book) if I do it at all.

**Ragucci:** Great. So why don't I turn off the machine and we'll end for now.

**Pierce:** Yeah.

(End of tape one, side 2.)

**Ragucci:** Today is April 2, 1991 and I am here at Marjorie Pierce's house again for our second session. The last time I was here we talked a lot about your work and a lot of the jobs you've had and the buildings you've built. But today I think we're going to talk a lot more about MIT and things that you've done while you were there or since you've graduated and what they mean to you and how some of those came about.

**Pierce:** Good. Well I decided after I graduated in 1922 to stay another year and take graduate work. I was the only American woman in that graduate class at the Rogers Building. There was one other woman but she was from Norway and she was taking a special course to complete her academic work. So I had a call from the Dean's Office and I thought I was in trouble because I was out taking a breath of air out of the fire escape. So I went down to the first floor to the Dean's Office in fear and trembling, and Dean Emerson introduced me to a Mrs. Lovett. It seems that Mrs. Lovett, that may not be her name, I'm not sure, but this gal from Boston was interested in raising money to complete the work that Ann Morgan had done in devastated France. Miss Morgan had gotten a group of American girls to go over there and run a hospice to take care of the people coming back to their farms that had been completely devastated, that whole part of France. They'd had so many drives and war bonds and everything that it was hard to get the money to complete it. So they had started an idea of going to different cities in the country and asking different organizations to nominate young women to campaign for votes on a sort of popularity thing. The votes would be ten cents a piece which sounds so ridiculous.

**Ragucci:** Can I just stop you for one second? On the tape with Carissa, you told all about the whole contest.

**Pierce:** Oh you did?

**Ragucci:** Um-hum. So we have that on the very first tape.

**Pierce:** When she did it?

**Ragucci:** Um-hum. So if you want to skip over the contest part and then maybe talk about when you were actually in Europe. Can you do that?

**Pierce:** Yes. So I went in the summer instead of the spring, I think that was on that tape too, probably. Anyway, there were two other women from Boston. One was a schoolteacher from Lynn. The other was from the Girl Scouts and she had to finish her year at Boston University. Of course we went by boat and they met us coming out.

We went up to Paris from the boat and we took the train down to Beiritz in the south of France and had a little rest and recovery from the trip. We did some sightseeing around that area and then we set off by bus and train to that part of France which is so interesting to architects. We came back finally to Paris. I think that was the time at which the mayor gave the delegates a bronze plaque which I think I showed you. Then we went up to northern France to visit the hospice where the girls were working. They were doing this rehabilitation with the people that had been

bombed out. One of the highlights of that trip was sleeping in the citadel of Verdun. During the First World War the citadel was under siege for many, many, many days and they almost starved to death. So it was supposed to be a great honor to sleep at the citadel. One of the surviving generals took us sightseeing over the bay. We went out into the fields and we saw where there was a whole row of bayonets sticking up and where they bombed. They bombed out a whole trench full of soldiers and they left that as a memorial.

Anyhow, finally we got back to Paris at the end of that six weeks. The girls in the party went home. I was supposed to go with a couple who had a daughter and were going to travel around. Well something went wrong about that so I was left alone and I went off on my own. I went by train out to Mount San Michelle. I didn't realize in summertime it's a great tourist center. I went looking for a place to stay and the only place -- I was walking up and down the one street and this woman came out of a cafe and she said, "Mademoiselle is looking for a room?". And I said "Yes." She said, "Well if you will eat your meals here I'll find you a room." So she took me up and I had a room that was underneath the steps going up to the cathedral. It was an old lady that had this one space to rent. I was there for a week. After that when I left she gave me a hat pin which is about that long as a memento. We tried to communicate, she in her patois French and I in my lousy american French. Anyhow, we managed to get through that. I loved Mount San Michelle. It's a very wonderful place. I went off on my own to see the chateau country and stayed, and then I went to Chatre and stayed there for a while.

Finally I got back to Paris and I took a train to Italy to see some of Italy. I don't think any of that really connects exactly with MIT, but I did run into a bunch of young boys who had been at an American school in the outskirts of Paris. They were all studying architecture or painting or something. We formed a group and we did everything in Florence and Rome. Finally, one of the boys was waiting for his scholarship money to come and I was waiting for some money from my folks -- I needed some more money. We got down to just what I had in my pocketbook. Finally we made it, but it was nip and tuck not to get stranded there. I came home and some of those people were on the boat that were from the Fontenbleau School. We had a wonderful trip. My folks had to meet me in New York and pass money through the gate to get me off.

So then I came back, and since I had worked in the summertime for an architectural firm, Leland and Larson, I got a job with them. Those years, let's see, I stayed there for a number of years and I tried for the most prestigious scholarship in Boston, the Rotch Fellowship. The only time I ever felt discriminated against was that and I think I told you about that.

**Ragucci:** Right, we got that in the last session.

**Pierce:** Let's see, to go back to MIT, I kept in touch. I felt very strongly, I have for years and years, how much MIT has meant to me and how much it's meant in my career. Every time there has been something connected with the women I've gotten involved. I didn't get into the Boston MIT Club until very recently, but for years I went to all the things that AMITA did. I was president of AMITA for two years I think it was.

After the years with Leland and Larson I decided it was time I made it to some other place. So I went over to Allen and Collins and worked there. At that time, they were doing the Versailles Drive Church in New York and some work in a school down in Hartford that was semi-religious. I can't remember what the name of it was. That was the first time that anyone had had the courage to send me out on a job. I think I talked about that before too.

The thing that I remember about MIT after graduation was that it was coming up to Ellen Swallow Richards hundredth anniversary -- she was the first woman to graduate from MIT. The then president of AMITA thought that we should do something about it. MIT took kind of a dim view of this. They thought because we were still a very minority group in the school.

**Ragucci:** This was in 1972 or 73?

**Pierce:** Seventy-two, yes. But the gal, she has been president of the Boston MIT Club and very active for years, choreographed it. It was a huge success. MIT was very nervous about the whole thing. They thought it would not be a suitable affair. I'm trying to think of her name. Anyway, she's still very active -- I can look her name up for you later -- in the Boston Club and finally was president, I think, last year.

I'm trying to think of some of the things that happened at that big party for Ellen Swallow Richards birthday in 1972 I think it was. It really made MIT kind of sit up and take notice. They were quite surprised that we

could do anything as good. That gal whose name I can't remember -- she got me on the committee and wanted to know what I could do and I thought "Well maybe I can run the luncheon". I wasn't up on some of the other things so I had charge of the luncheon. That was an interesting experience because some of the other members of the AMITA group felt that the food they put on at MIT was pretty terrible. I sat down with the man who ran the catering and really worked it out with him. It's a small thing -- just for your information.

I think I must have been on the board for AMITA for a couple of years, but after that affair the same gal felt that AMITA had served its purpose -- there were more girls all the time coming -- so she thought that AMITA should be phased out and we ought to do one Alumni Association with both men and women. Well I felt strongly about that because I think that it was the only voice that the women had down there that meant anything. So I worked hard at trying to kill that. We finally got a small dormitory, the one up on Bay State Road, but that only took sixteen girls so you can see how small it was -- it might have been twenty-six -- a very small number of girls. But it really began to show them as a group within MIT.

I think it was around 1965 that it became evident that they would have to have some kind of housing for women. The Institute considered eliminating women from going to the school, keeping it masculine. Those of us who had been involved with it so many, many years, we were shocked at this possibility. I think that was when they started to run these things -- it would have a larger profile. Up to that time, we had just a little

bit of a room in the main building. It wasn't anything like decent space given over to the women.

**Ragucci:** Is that the Cheney Room? The Margaret Cheney Room?

**Pierce:** Yeah, the Cheney Room. That was all we had, the Margaret Cheney Room. The other room -- everybody used that -- the faculty's wives had their teas there and another organization of teacher's wives, they're not faculty members but they are teaching -- I don't know what the organization's called. Anyway, they finally decided they would have to give up some more room to the girls. But when this idea that they would be barred from coming was such a shock to us we kind of all rallied around and at that time they talked about what they could do and I think that was when they got Mrs. McCormick and she decided to give the first part of it, which is half of what the building is now. It was not the whole building. It was a real breath of fresh air.

I will say that the top executives were not in favor of eliminating women ever as far as I know of. It was simply some of the Corporation or something that thought it was, but they decided that if they were going to admit women, they would have to somehow or other give them a place to live and so Mrs. McCormick provided that. And then we got into the mess of the sixties when there was so much rebellion about everything and they damaged her picture and acted like young animals.

I guess it was at the time of that birthday of Ellen Swallow Richards because I was involved in that celebration of her birthday I was approached



by the man who had charge of raising funds. He said he'd like to have me on the fund board. I said "Oh, I'm terribly busy." He said "Oh, you wouldn't have to do anything." Well that was a damn lie. So the first meeting was in one of the small rooms at the Faculty Club and I got dressed in what I thought was appropriate and I came to the meeting. We were packed into this tiny little room there at the Faculty Club hotter than Hades. All the men had taken off their jackets and coats and here I sat in a suit which I couldn't shed. They went around the table and said "You'll have charge of telethons, and you'll have charge that", and I saw it coming my way and thought, what am I going to do? When it got to me I said, "Well, if I have to raise funds it's going to be something that's meaningful to me. So I'll see if I can raise some more money to complete the Ellen Swallow Richards Fellowship, which had been established by somebody else." I think it was established at the time of her hundredth birthday. Anyway, then of course all the wheels take off. A committee formed, and they got out posters and we worked very hard at it, but every time I'd get what I thought was a good lead -- for instance I had a job over in the next town to Sherborn -- and the owner was the son of one of the wealthiest men in the middle of the country. I don't dare to go on because you'll know who it is. (telephone rings) Oh damn. Excuse me.

**Ragucci:** Certainly. (she returns from the other room) Okay go ahead, we were talking about...

**Pierce:** I was giving you an example of how frustrating the whole experience was. I would get somebody that I thought I might be able to get some money from and you have to clear it with the main office each time.

I had a close relationship with this man -- he was really a young man. I said I went to MIT and I was trying to raise money for Ellen Swallow and he had never heard of Ellen Swallow. So I gave him the pitch about it, you know, who she was and what she had done and what a wonderful person she was and he was mildly interested. So I went back and I called the Institute and I said "Is it all right?" And they said, "Oh don't touch him! His father was a graduate, all of his boys were graduates of MIT, and we're looking for a major gift from him. We don't want you to upset that." Well, as I say, I can't tell you who it was because they finally they did get it. He was kind of sour about MIT because of something to do with one of the music groups that he was interested in when he was an undergraduate. And then I found somebody else that was head of one of the big companies -- "Oh no, you mustn't ask them, we've got somebody important going after them." That was a very frustrating experience.

Well, we never completed it, but we did manage to get it up to where it was within -- it takes a million dollars I think to fund a Fellowship. Finally, as I'd say, I don't know, I won't be quoted, I bugged the hell out of MIT to complete it because we got it up to something like \$700,000. It had been lying there dormant. By a lot of effort to get it from the women, we managed. Of course the number of graduates in my age group are very small. I think there were ten girls -- it may have been more than that -- in my class, but it was a small number of people. Now, as you know, it's thirty-eight or nine percent.

**Ragucci:** Do you think it would have been easier if you had gone after women more to ask them?

**Pierce:** Oh we went out after the women.

**Ragucci:** But there just weren't?

**Pierce:** I think many of them said, well, my husband gives because they had married MIT people, or they had a modest income that they couldn't afford, or they were graduates from another school before they came to MIT. For instance, one of the gals that lives here in town, she went to Wellesley, and she's very active at Wellesley so her gifts to MIT are very modest. Her first loyalty seems to be to Wellesley. That's true with a lot of the students.

Of course in looking at this long time of my career, there were some very low spots. The Depression years were absolutely terrible -- there were no jobs at all of any kind -- and then there was a war and architecture dries up. You know, it was always something like that. It wasn't that they weren't interested, it simply was that they didn't have, or their husbands were giving and they couldn't afford to.

There was another thing that I thought of and I wanted to tell you. Sometime in the sixties, around 1965 or something like that, MIT considered eliminating women from graduating and I was absolutely shocked. I couldn't believe that they would. They took a long look at it and finally they decided that they would go along with it. The other thing that's kind of amusing which goes back a long way -- Mrs. Swallow got it into her head -- she lived in a real country atmosphere in Massachusetts

here -- she went to some kind of a finishing school and then she got a scholarship to go to Bryn Mawr. When she graduated from that she wanted to go on and study; she was interested in something scientific. There are two wonderful autobiographies of her written, but I can't tell you what's what. Anyway, she wrote to MIT which was a new school, it had just been founded, and asked for admission. They took it under consideration and they decided that they would let her come, but they didn't feel that they could take the chance on guaranteeing her that it would work out. So they didn't charge her any tuition, which I think is a wonderful story.

**Ragucci:** I think they made her a "special student". That's what they used to do. I've done some research on the first women that went to universities.

**Pierce:** Yes. So you knew that story. But of course, as you know, they not only didn't charge her anything but they put her in a separate room. But you have to think of how strange it was that this farm girl should have this idea. She was the founder of the whole idea of hygiene in the home and a great deal else. So my problem was trying to complete it, and as I said we got up to about \$700,000 and we knew that MIT had the money if they wanted to finish it up. We bugged them until finally they transferred enough so that they could name a chair for Ellen Swallow. The first person that was suggested for it was in one of the places -- something that she was studying was something to do with psychology or something like that, I think it was even more different that what Mrs. Swallow was interested in -- she was a very practical gal. I said I couldn't possibly go

along with that. I thought they ought to get somebody in that chair, the first time anyway, who was interested in science. So they did back off that one, but this was something that had nothing to do with her life at all. They've chosen since then every time that they have a reason to choose another scholar to have that chair, and that much helps. That is, I think, one of the reasons that I've gotten to be known down there is because I had definite ideas. Pointing to this gal, no matter how worthy her cause was, I thought it was so far-fetched from anything that Mrs. Richards would like or would be interested in, so it was transferred to somebody else. I think that Dr. Gray has always been so supported of, and listened to the once in a while that I raise my voice because he knows that I usually have a reason that I can talk about.

What else is there to say about MIT? I told you I was president of AMITA for a number of years and it was one of the presidents after that, somewhere around 1980, that she thought that we should phase out AMITA, that it had had it. I was against that. I felt that AMITA was the only voice that had nothing else to lose or gain. It was important to stay in business if they could. It's struggled because it's been hard. There are so many girls now graduating, and they have loyalties to other things at MIT, but I still think that until it's absolutely established that there is no reason for AMITA, it ought to exist. It was the only time we ever got together as engineers, architects, chemists, you know, the different fields and interests. I think it was AMITA that had to work so hard to open the pool to women.

**Ragucci:** The Alumni Pool?

**Pierce:** Yes. It was not open to them for a long time.

**Ragucci:** They're trying to build another pool now. They want to have two pools because the Alumni Pool isn't big enough and there are so many people that want to use it they need another one.

**Pierce:** Of course now it's such a big school, there are so many parts. Something I'd like to see down there -- do you know about the building that has all the trains in it, the toy trains?

**Ragucci:** No.

**Pierce:** They had it on television not long ago about it, and I never heard of it. It's one of those buildings I think that you wonder what's in them along Vassar Street. You know where you go in under the arches to get into the back door under the dome?

**Ragucci:** Yes.

**Pierce:** Well, somewhere, there are several funny buildings along there. I go in that archway and I turn right and then I go down underneath the back of the new building. Finally I get into what I call the "inner sanctum" and you're pretty close under the dome, but it's way back in there where the president has his parking, and several others are reserved. Especially on weekends when they're not there, I can usually get a place to park in there and I'm pretty close to the dome. That way I go in the back door underneath and land in the basement and go up the elevator to the

third floor. It's kind of a funny one. You kind of wind down under this archway, and... anyhow.

Well, I don't know what else I can tell you.

**Ragucci:** Let's see. Oh, in 1977 you were given the Bronze Beaver Award. That is the highest award you can get for service and dedication to MIT. Could you tell me a little about how you feel you got the award or circumstances surrounding it?

**Pierce:** Well, I think I can show you what it says on it. Wait a minute. (She goes into the other room and brings back the Bronze Beaver Award) Here it is.

**Ragucci:** That's really nice. Oh, I left the machine on. (She hands me some other papers with it.) This is a citation for the Alumni Centennial Convocation Committee.

**Pierce:** Yes. It was in there. That's the one I remember.

**Ragucci:** So was this an inspiring award for you or was it kind of like just "old hat" by now?

**Pierce:** Oh no, it wasn't old hat. It's a big convocation that they have every year. It's really something. What I have done at MIT seems to me very small considering the things that most of the Bronze Beaver people are really tremendously important people. I kind of feel as if I'm

outclassed. I got invited to the kickoff dinner. In fact, I keep getting invited to all kinds of things. One of the things I wanted to tell you before I forget is Mr. Seamans, isn't that his name, wanted to know if he could have my diploma. As I have no relatives, I said "Yes, sure." It was up on the wall in my office, but why did he want it? He said, "Well, we have the signatures of all of the presidents of MIT, but we haven't one for the man who was president when you graduated, and could they have it for that?" I thought that was a howl. It wasn't me, it was the name. But they had had trouble getting a copy of that. And then I had also a Watercolor Award. When I was at MIT there was an award given for the most progress in painting in watercolor in the Art Department. It wasn't for what I had done but for how much I had done to get that. But anyway this kickoff dinner, Glen Strehle had charge of it, there were a lot of very good givers and important people there, and he said "I'd like to have you say something. It would be only for five minutes." He repeated the five minutes about three times. So I decided I heard it. But I was so afraid that I'd make a mess of it that I wrote it all down and rehearsed it, and that's the speech. (She hands Ragucci a piece of paper.) I thought you might be amused to read it. It got a few laughs and it was within the five minutes.

**Ragucci:** Why don't you read it? And that way we'll have it on tape?

**Pierce:** (She reads from her written speech) Recently, I went to a house to deliver some drawings for a kitchen alteration. A little boy came to the door. When I identified myself, he turned on his heels and yelled at the top of his voice, "Ma, the old woman with the plans is here!" That says it all. No lady architect. No senior citizen. Just the old woman. So here I



am, an old woman who remembers that almost seventy years ago I applied for admission to MIT not because I thought I might become a great architect or a second Madame Curie, but because I thought that if I could earn a degree from MIT I would always be able to get a job and that turned out to be true. I could never repay that debt.

The other memory I want to share with you is that for four years I ushered at the Exeter Street Theater, working five nights a week from five to nine-thirty, Saturdays from two to ten-thirty, and Sundays from seven to ten-thirty. I sat at the head of a long flight of stairs, studying under and EXIT light while Douglas Fairbanks leapt from a balcony, swung while the organist played "Charge of the Light Brigade". My salary was seven dollars a week, which just about equaled the tuition that was three hundred a year at that time. My point in recounting these stories is what I think this campaign is all about, namely an endowment large enough to enable MIT to continue to attract the finest faculty in the academic world and to help through financial aid any qualified student, regardless of color, race or gender to obtain an education that may lead to a Nobel prize or a fortune, or just the improvement of somebody's kitchen. I would like to say something about women at MIT. Every so often someone says to me, "You must have been the first woman to graduate from the Institute." Well, hardly. Women students have always been here, since Ellen Swallow Richards graduated in 1872 and taught here until the end of her life in 1912. She was a real pioneer. Today the campus is swarming with brilliant and dedicated young women with access to all facilities, athletics, housing and faculty positions. I hope the day will never come again when a

class of forty men holds one woman student. I hope Max Seltzer and I are like wine between the entree and the salad. Bon Appetit! Thank you.

**Ragucci:** That's really nice. Now, what year was that? Do you remember?

**Pierce:** The year they started the kickoff for the last big -- that's about three years ago, wasn't it?

**Ragucci:** Probably. Sounds right.

**Pierce:** I struggled long and hard over that.

**Ragucci:** Really?

**Pierce:** I got such a nice response to it. For instance, a man who has given millions to MIT came up at the dinner. One of the funny things that happened was that Mr. Strehle was so worried that I would run on and on and on, you know, the five minutes he had repeated so many times. The day before, I suddenly realized that I'm so short I probably wouldn't reach the podium. So I called him, and he had a carpenter make a little step stool so I could get up there and look over. Here was the podium up here, and I couldn't even see the audience much less speak to them. So I stepped up on that, which was kind of funny.

**Ragucci:** It would have been terrible if you hadn't thought of it before and you would have been standing up on the podium just kind of peeking over with your eyes.

**Pierce:** I would have had to stand out from behind it and spoken. It was interesting because Max spoke first and he talked about how different the world was when he graduated. There were no washing machines, and there were no this, that and the other and all the different things. So it was very different from what he said and I was glad that I had taken another tact and at the same time I had a chance to put in a word for the girls.

**Ragucci:** That's great.

**Pierce:** I thought that was a real hard one to do. So you don't say anything at the Bronze Beaver, you just get it. You come up and they award it. It's a great honor. John Hutchinson, who was Margaret's niece's husband is a wonderful guy -- he comes over quite often to see me -- he has a bad heart -- he always pats it.

**Ragucci:** That beaver, he's quite something.

**Pierce:** It's so ugly. They've tried awfully hard to get -- some pretty good ones have been made in recent years -- but it's not an easy animal to make attractive.

**Ragucci:** I think the beaver is pretty strange actually.

**Pierce:** It's a good idea, all right.

**Ragucci:** You know the story behind it, right? Nature's engineer.

**Pierce:** Yes! Did you know that the center part of MIT is sinking?

**Ragucci:** It is?

**Pierce:** Yes. If you go down in the lower level under the dome, you can really see where it's very bad land it was built on. One of the graduates who is in the field of earth things...

**Ragucci:** Earth and Planetary Sciences?

**Pierce:** Yes, something like that. He had made a big study and has given a lecture about it several times. But that whole dome section has dropped considerably. Maybe this much. (She makes a motion with her fingers.) It's surprising. You can see it down in the basement. When you walk along that corridor you can see where the drop is.

**Ragucci:** That's kind of unfortunate. Some of the athletic fields are sinking too because it's bad landfill and they're going down.

**Pierce:** That whole Back Bay is where the Charles River comes down, and the reason the New England hills are so low -- they're not big mountains -- is that it's all washed down into this valley, a huge valley there at the bottom. So it's amazing how that soil is so poor. I did some

work on a fraternity house over on Bay State Road a few years ago, and they wanted to do something about the basement for they were having problems with it. It was noticeable how much.

I guess I should say something about the WILG house.

**Ragucci:** Oh, yes, that would be good.

**Pierce:** I wasn't in on it from the very beginning. In fact, I think if I had been, I would have used the funds a little differently. But that's a personal matter and probably ought not to be broadcast. MIT bought that big apartment house and they made it into a -- WILG applied for half of it and the fraternity applied for the other half of it.

**Ragucci:** ADP.

**Pierce:** Yes. They had a budget of a million dollars. It had an enormous old heater in it that heated both houses. And the boys being in the south end of the building and the women in the north end, and all the windows were just ready to fall apart they were in such tough shape. So the girls were freezing to death in their half, and the boys were overheated in the other half. Well, somewhere along the line, the original faculty members, one of which was Dottie Bow. She was in the, what do they call the department where they kept the scholarships and so forth?

**Ragucci:** Financial Aid?

**Pierce:** Financial Aid, she was head of that. She decided to retire and Liz Drake was very active and there was another gal who was teaching at MIT and she was very active. So after they got it off the ground and going they wanted to get off the board so they were looking around for somebody else and they asked me if I would be on the executive board. That's how I got interested in it. Of course I had people who did architectural work so I got somebody to do the windows over so they would at least not leak air like crazy and there were some other things that I did.

But what bugs me about it was that the man who had charge of it, the way they spent the money. They should have put in a good heating system to begin with. WILG has had to do that over. Then they finally got it separated so that they weren't overheating the fraternity and under heating the others. They have their own heating system and it's on gas. So this huge oil tank in the basement got pumped out and was taken. Then they had one after another things -- almost all the lighting is recessed lighting. That's the poorest light you can get except right under it. It doesn't light a room at all. It's expensive to put in, and the bulbs burn out while you say "Jack Robinson". It's not smart at all.

(End of tape 2, side 1)

Well that's a very expensive thing but I think if they had done less in some areas -- they had the money. We had to put in a whole new heating system with the new radiation and everything. We, I say, because the girls had some money that they set aside, and I gave some, and other people did

too, I guess. Anyhow, one way and another they've survived and I think MIT never expected that. They had a lease for 20 years, and my understanding that that has either run out or is running out and whether they've been able to renew that or not. I'm sure MIT never thought that would work. I just think they thought it would be some idea that a few girls had. I'm amazed at what a wonderful living experience it is for those girls. They have a crew that does the housekeeping; they have another crew that does the bookkeeping; they have somebody else who does the cooking. How would you like to cook for forty people every night? It bugs me to think of it.

**Ragucci:** I've been over there quite a few times. My roommate that I have right now, she lived there for two years and she really liked it.

**Pierce:** They are girls who don't like living in a huge dormitory. I hope it doesn't get completely lost. The last time I was down to something there for a mixed population. But I hope it doesn't get all so mixed that it's no longer any Native Americans I guess is the way I'd put it. I don't know how to put it any other way. I think that it ought still be mixed but there ought to be some of the full-time Americans. I don't know how to put it exactly.

**Ragucci:** I think its got a pretty good mix right about now.

**Pierce:** It has it so far. I used to go to the board meetings and I'd like to go them, but the girls speak so softly and I cannot hear them. So I've finally given up on it. But I got so interested, I thought I would see if

I could fund a scholarship. They put me onto a man who has charge of that, and he said it took a million dollars to fund a scholarship.

**Ragucci:** That's terrible.

**Pierce:** So I thought about it, and as of the moment, and it may have to change, I hope that after a couple of gifts that the rest of my finances go to WILG, because if you just send it in, it goes in a pot and you don't know. I must say it bugs me the amount of mail I get from MIT. It's just incredible.

**Ragucci:** What kind of mail? Asking for money?

**Pierce:** Everything! The Architectural sends one once a month, the Review sends one once a month, but every single mail is a piece of mail from MIT. Its incredible what their budget must be. And I suppose they know what they're doing. I spoke to Mr. Strehle about it. I said, "Every day something comes from MIT. And I'm just one person and thousands of pieces of mail go out. What is going on?" And he said, "Well you save it and let me see it." I work hard for my money and most of us do and to see it just (she makes a vanishing motion with her hands). When I was doing the Ellen Swallow, I have to tell you that they got a person to do a great big poster. What for? It just seems so unrealistic.

Well, I don't know what more I can say about MIT.

**Ragucci:** Let's see.



**Pierce:** I finally, as I said, stopped going to the WILG. And the girls came out and they said that they found WILG such an awkward name that they wanted to name the building. And I said "Oh that's ridiculous." "Oh no, we'd really like to do it" they said. So there it is, on a little brown plaque.

**Ragucci:** Right on the door.

**Pierce:** The only other one like that is down in West Virginia. I did over a courthouse into some apartments and a very old building, any my godfrey they've got a little plaque on that. Architect - Marjorie Pierce.

**Ragucci:** Well, I read an article and it said that they chose your name because of active involvement in alumnae affairs and because you worked very closely to help them develop the house and things like that and they were very thankful for it.

**Pierce:** Well I tell you I went to their annual meeting a couple of times -- there were dances -- and I think they're a wonderful bunch of kids. But I don't drive nights anymore and so many things are in the evening that its hard to get anybody. I've just been invited to that whole day affair for the new president.

**Ragucci:** On May 10th?

**Pierce:** Yes. If I drive myself down, it's questionable whether I'll find a place to park and it's not simple.

**Ragucci:** It's true. Parking is really terrible. I live off-campus and it's really hard to drive in. I can't drive in. I have to walk in when I have class and then come back because with sports and everything I'm not getting home until like 8:00 at night and I don't want to be walking around god-knows-where at eight. Usually I walk to class and then I walk home after class and bring the car in. They have lots, but after a certain time the people that watch the lots leave so you can park in there.

**Pierce:** Well I'm trying to figure out -- I think the only thing that I can do is to go to the luncheon and hope that I find a place. At the worst, I can park up at the hotel there and take a taxi down. But that's kind of nuts because when you come out, try and find a taxi. That's a long walk up to the hotel. It's a long walk from the Vassar Street Garage over to the Faculty Club.

**Ragucci:** Oh yes. The Sloan School is a pretty big hike for anybody. Last year, I lived on Memorial Drive -- in the new dorms that are down there -- down in New House. I lived in Spanish House and my classes were all at Sloan, which is where the Faculty Club is. It takes a half an hour to walk there. It's a long time.

**Pierce:** Yes.

**Ragucci:** So what's left for you to do?

**Pierce:** Well, I'm doing a big house over in Lexington for a graduate of MIT. I think they both are MIT people. I love it. I've got two or three jobs and I know damn well I should quit, but I don't. There's over a thousand sets of plans in the basement and I think it's a shame to send them to the dump. They ought to go back to the houses. But where do I get the time or the energy to do it? When you came, I was talking with somebody about a, they have a name for it, these trips that they get up for MIT people. There's a trip coming up this spring, the sixteenth of May. I'm not sure that I want to go on it. It's places I've been before. It's a great big ship, and fly to Nice and then it stops during the day and you get on the Princess Ship and you get off in Spain and in Portugal, where I've never been. And then it goes to the port for Paris and the port for London and Copenhagen and you fly home from Copenhagen. There's a gal that I'm very fond of that lives in California -- she would go with me. But the least expensive for the sixteenth to the first -- that would be fifteen days, I guess altogether -- is four thousand dollars each. That's a lot. There's another wonderful one that flies to Berlin and then goes up the North Cape and all those places, but I've been there. I don't know whether I'm nuts to think of going off on such a wild chase. I'd like to go up the Nile, but that's out, you see, until things simmer down. They're not booking anything for that trip.

**Ragucci:** Right. So are you satisfied with what you've done? Do you feel like there's something besides the Nile trip? Is there something you would really like to do that you haven't, or do you feel like

**Pierce:** I'd like to get those plans back to the houses that they belong to and I'd like to finish writing my biography, which is a different point of view than yours.

**Ragucci:** Right. I think it's good to have both though, because talking is one thing, but written is a totally different thing.

**Pierce:** Entirely different, yes. That story about Rogers building I think could be expanded. The first little bunch of things is letters that I wrote when I was on the Fellowship which we never talked about at all. But that has nothing to do with MIT, really.

**Ragucci:** Do you mean the James Templeton Kelly Fellowship?

**Pierce:** Yes.

**Ragucci:** Carissa has some of that in the first one, so I think we do have a little record of that.

**Pierce:** That was awarded by the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts; no, the Boston Architectural Society.

**Ragucci:** Right.

**Pierce:** I think that that was to salve their conscience. I think that I didn't get the Rotch. Not that I necessarily won it, but I don't think they ever considered me even, originally. I think it's extremely unfair.

**Ragucci:** Yeah, I agree.

**Pierce:** Yet as it worked out, I don't know how it would have happened. That was the year my father died, and I don't know what would have happened.

**Ragucci:** Well, I think that we've covered a lot, and we've got a lot of background and MIT and your work experience and your own personal experiences, so why don't we just stop the tape, is that okay?

**Pierce:** It's been very nice seeing you.