

NWHP Oral History Transcript

Molly Murphy MacGregor and Mary Ruthsdotter are two of five Sonoma County residents who co-founded the National Women's History Project (NWHP). The organization began twenty-five years ago this month as a grassroots effort and has mushroomed into an international movement. It started with the creation of a multi-media slide presentation on women's history and soon evolved into the establishment of a Women's History Week as a focal point to recognize and celebrate women's historic accomplishments. Now there is a National Women's History Month. Molly Murphy MacGregor started the NWHP with the help of Mary Ruthsdotter, Paula Hammett, Bette Morgan, and Maria Cuevas. The NWHP is a national clearinghouse for general information and curriculum materials about women's history and for specific information about National Women's History Month celebrations.

Transcription of an oral history interview recorded for Sonoma County Museum's exhibition: Sonoma Confidential

As with any idea, this one had a lot of different sources that came together. I was in the Women's Studies at Sonoma State University and we put together a multi-media slide presentation on the history of women in the United States. We traveled it to schools mostly, and we ended up traveling throughout California with it. Every time we showed it, the audience just couldn't believe it—they were just wowed by it. When Mary saw it, it changed her life. The response is really what kept reminding us of how important it was that we do this.

I taught a class at Petaluma Junior College, a Women's History class. And the women in the class decided that as a project they would go into the schools and discover what the kids were learning about women's history. So, they looked at three different elementary school libraries and of the five to seven books on women at all that they discovered they hadn't been checked out in anywhere from five to fifteen years. At the same time, the Sonoma County Commission on the Status of Women had an array of task forces; it was a very active commission. I joined the education task force, and in that capacity, I said to the education task force, I think we should do a women's history week. We should set aside one week out of the school calendar where we really recognize and celebrate women, because if we do this in the schools then the teachers will have a reason to assign these books, and we would provide the curriculum materials to go with it.

We were quite deliberate about when the Women's History week should be. We wanted it to be the week of March 8th because that's International Women's Day. We wanted to make sure that it was from a multi-cultural perspective and international in scope. And we also wanted it to recognize women as workers, because in 1977 when we were

laying out these plans, what we knew was that nine out of ten young girls would marry, but what girls weren't seeming to realize, or not wanting to realize, is that nine out of ten of them would work for at least thirty-five years outside the home. Those were our three threads that sort of wove together why March 8th, International Women's Day, became the focal day, and it was always the week of March 8th that would be Women's History Week.

Mary Ruthsdotter, who is really into community organizing, and Betty Morgan, wanted to do a home town parade, a women's history parade. We got a call from the Cloverdale American Legion Auxillary, and the women in the Auxillary had just carried the colors in a big parade in Canada and they wanted to know if they could lead our parade by carrying the flag. These women who all had white grey hair and looked totally legit in every way, so they lead the parade, followed by a troop of girl scouts, a couple of baton twirlers, brownies. It was wonderful. Helen Rudee and Helen Putnam were both on the Board of Supervisors at the time, and they were also at the lead of the parade.

So, the parade kind of dissipated all the fears of rowdy women taking to the streets. Later, in 1979, I attended a conference at the Women's History Institute at Sarah Lawrence College with the photographic slides in hand of what we had done for our own parade. Here we had this successful week in our own county, we had curriculum, we had an organizing guide, we had posters, and now we had the slides to show them and so I did a presentation. We were very successful, they signed on immediately and that's really where the national effort came from. Because, many of these women were close friends with President Carter, they had been the leaders at the National Conference in Huston in 1977. They knew who to call and how to get things done; and many of them went back to their states and called up their Governors that they were close to--so we had this kind of movement almost immediately, it was larger than anything we expected and we weren't really ready for it. Which is why we ended up going from the Women's Support Network (our local effort) to pretty quickly becoming the National Women's History Project. Everything expanded quickly.

There was an article in Ms. Magazine about the work we had done and that we had curriculum materials, so then we started getting all these requests from all over the country. And, of course, that wasn't what the Commission on the Status of Women in this county was set up to do. So, who was going to provide the curriculum materials? So, we had this organization the Women's Support Network that they could pay to provide the resources. We also wrote grants and received funds from the Federal government to fulfill orders for all these curriculum requests and to make a slide show entitled "History Revisited," which is now a video. We are forever grateful to The Women's Educational Act Program funded by the Congress through the Clinton Administration. Over the course of years, we had eight or ten projects totaling nearly a million and

a half dollars that were funded, all of them creating products which we then could sell through the Women's History Project catalogue and many of which are still in the catalogue. By 1987, we had a Women's History Month.

So, the real story is we said, "OK, this is a challenge and what are we going to do with it?" It's really the way we talk about women's history. We are never saying that things haven't been difficult or continue to be difficult, that there's not racist, sexist, homophobic problems in the world, but what's the real story—it's what people do about it. And that's really our story too. We said, "This is not easy, how will we solve it, what can we do? And then did it!"