TRANSCRIPT OF INTERVIEW WITH BESSIE BONDY

QUESTIONS: Carl Loeb, oldest grandchild

ANSWERS: Bessie Robinson Loeb Bondy

NOV 30, 1996

Portland, OR

Location: 4135 NE 27th Avenue; home of Carl and Allison Loeb

CARL:

Grandma Bessie, thank you for doing this today. I’m trying to record the family history and record all the members of the family, and…I’m glad to be able to do this with you, too. I know we’ve talked about the family history a lot before, but never at a time when I was actually able to record it.

BESSIE:

You got the pictures.[[1]](#footnote-1)

CARL:

Yes.

BESSIE:

Did you read any of the letters?

CARL:

I haven’t read any of the letters yet.

BESSIE:

He writes quite well.[[2]](#footnote-2)

CARL:

There were a lot of good writers in the family. You said that Clarence was a good writer.

BESSIE:

That’s a different branch. Clarence was a Loeb. My family were business people.

CARL:

(unintelligible)

BESSIE:

Except my Uncle Ben. He went to Harvard and then McGill Law, and he practiced in Montreal. He became a judge.

CARL:

But the rest were all in business?

BESSIE:

Yes. My Uncle Max was the oldest. And I don’t know what he did. I think he owned some real estate with my father.

CARL:

Could you tell me a little bit about where were you born and where did your family come from?

BESSIE:

I don’t know where they came from. Probably came from Poland. But, you’ll find that on the family tree…

In the old country, their name was Yecht. And I understand when my Grandfather[[3]](#footnote-3) got to immigration they couldn’t spell “Yecht” and there was a lawyer or a judge whose name was Robinson, and he said, “If that’s good enough for a judge it’s good enough for me.” And that’s what my Uncle Sam told me. I don’t know whether he was kidding or what.

CARL:

Was this your grandfather, David Robinson?

BESSIE:

My Grandfather’s name was David Robinson, and according to your father, they came to America in…about…1885, I’m not sure…but they came in contingents. My Grandfather came first, with his father David[[4]](#footnote-4), a sister, Rose, to take care of the house, and my Uncle Morris. They were brought to this country first because my grandparents didn’t want them to go into the Army. My Uncle Max had already served in the army.

CARL:

Was that the Czar’s army? The army in Russia?

BESSIE:

Yes. And, so, the, I guess four of them came over. My aunt Rosie to keep house, for the three men.

CARL:

And that was David, Morris, and who was the other man who came over?

BESSIE:

I think my Uncle Morris.

CARL:

I have David and Rose and Morris, but who was the fourth person?

BESSIE:

My father!

CARL:

Oh! Your father. Abraham. Did they come to the United States, or to Canada?

BESSIE:

No, they probably came to Portland because I think my grandmother had a sister living there.[[5]](#footnote-5) And that’s why they settled in Portland.

CARL:

Where was your family house located in Portland?

BESSIE:

The first house was 26 Hampshire St. When we were at Bowdoin, for Eric’s graduation or before that, when Daniel and Emily and Lucky and David and Ruthie[[6]](#footnote-6) and I were in Portland, and I took them to the different houses we lived in. My father owned this house with a man by the name of Nathan Silverman.

CARL:

Who was Nathan Silverman? Just your father’s partner?

BESSIE:

Well, they bought his first house on Hampshire St. We lived downstairs, and they lived upstairs, and that’s where I was born, and Robbie, and Harry. Were born there.

CARL:

And what part of Portland was that. What was that neighborhood like?

BESSIE:

It was a Jewish neighborhood. The shul was on Newbury (Newberry?) Street, about three minutes away. And my father’s name was on the plaque, and my Uncle Morris because they were amongst the early settlers of Portland. And now they are buried in a cemetery that is a National Landmark.[[7]](#footnote-7) The cemetery is enclosed, it has a gate with a key, but in order to get into the cemetery you have to get permission from the …. I don’t know the name of the place. Some kind of a Jewish center. And, caretaker there gave us the key. And we went inside.

CARL:

I remember visiting that with you and Dad.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Was that cemetery near your house?

BESSIE:

Oh no, that was in South Portland. It was near where I used to teach school.

It’s strange. My Grandfather was a Hasidic Jew. And he is buried away from most other people. And he faces in a different direction. He faces away from other people in the cemetery. And I’ve always wondered why, and I’ve never been able to get an answer. My mother and father are buried there, my Uncle Max and his first wife; he was married twice. They never had children. And, it’s very funny, in my family, every other son had children. The first one wasn’t able to have children, the next one did; that was my father. Then Uncle Morris couldn’t, then my Uncle Jake did. It’s very strange?

CARL:

What about with your brothers? That wasn’t true with your brothers… Robbie didn’t have children, but Harry and…

BESSIE:

Well, that’s because he got married very late. I don’t know if it’d be considered late now, but, I don’t know if they wanted children. Because Pearl was a PMS (?), and I have an idea she didn’t want children.

CARL:

When did you leave that first house and move to your second house?

BESSIE:

The second house was on Federal Street. I think 69 Federal Street. And my father always bought a house where there were other people living in it, so it gave him an income, and we got, like, free rent. And this was an attached house. There were three apartments on one side, and three on another. And the center was like a…the steps were separated like a slide, and we used to slide down. And that was, sort of, a little away from the Jewish District. The Jewish District used to have grocery stores, Jewish grocery stores, and a Jewish meat market. My father started peddling. And then he made enough money to open a store on Fore Street.

CARL:

What kind of store?

BESSIE:

It was a clothing store, but they sold harmonicas and other musical instruments because it wasn’t far from where the ships docked. And the sailors could walk to fourth street, and do their shopping there, and of course they liked the harmonicas and the other instruments, but of course, when I was a little girl I used to like to go in and play with the instruments. And he was in that store for quite a while.

And I remember my father coming home for lunch, and I think he had a bicycle. In those days, they would have the big meal in the middle of the day.

And, after that, when I was going to high school, we moved up the hill, which was a very nice area. It was right near the Eastern Promenade. That was in a three-story building. The apartments were beautiful. We had a kitchen and a dining room and a library and a parlor; three bedrooms, only one bathroom, and a big foyer. There was a dumbwaiter in the house, and you could, when you were in the cellar, and you wanted to send something upstairs, you would put it in the dumbwaiter. In the cellar, we had a cold room where you kept a bag of potatoes and other food. My mother did a lot of canning in the summer and we would keep the canned goods there. There were three furnaces and they burned coal, and every fall you would have all this coal shoveled in. In the kitchen, we had a coal-burning stove. My mother would bake every Friday. She would make challah and gefilte fish and strudel. We had a, I think we called it a shed, I’m not sure. But I think we had the refrigerator, and there was ice in it, and when we wanted Ice, my mother would put a card out in the window, and turn it a certain way, so they knew how much ice to bring up.

19:33

CARL:

What were your Shabbat dinners like at home on Friday nights?

BESSIE:

Oh, that was beautiful. We ate in the dining room then. We always had a table, a white tablecloth. It was very festive. My father went to shul before we ate. We always had gefilte fish that my mother made, and the challah she made, chicken soup and chicken and prunes. [LAUGHS] And on Saturday, you weren’t allowed to cook, so my mother would prepare a *cholent*, and that would sort of sit in the stove all night. Friday night after dinner, particularly in the summer, we would go to my grandma’s and sit there and she didn’t turn on the lights. I don’t remember. But if she did, they had a Shabbos goy come in and put them out.

21:31

CARL:

Did you and your brothers help out with the prayers or the dinner? Did you have family table traditions?

BESSIE:

My brother Robbie, so I understand, was very smart. He was very precocious as a child, and they would take him to the synagogue and he would get up and pray.

CARL:

Did you help your mother cook the meal?

BESSIE:

I had to wash the dishes; there was no such thing as a washer dryer. My mother would have a woman come in and she would scrub the clothes and we had a clothes line and they were hung out. Later on there was what was called the wet wash, and everything would go out and the sheets would come back and the pillowcases all ironed and the rest of the stuff would be sort of wet and they would have to be hung up.

My brother Sam was born on Federal Street. He got pneumonia when he was a baby, and that left him with a bad heart. He was the favorite because he was the youngest and he was very very handsome. With blue eyes, like Claire. But he was very independent. And when he was about 12 or 13 years old, this outfit was looking for a messenger boy, and they had the suit, so they had to find somebody who would fit into the suit, so my brother Sam got the job. [LAUGHS] This must have been when he was about 12 or 13 years old.

CARL:

So how long did he work for them?

BESSIE:

Oh, I think a couple of years until he outgrew the suit. [LAUGHS]

CARL:

Did your father always own the store? Was that his main business?

BESSIE:

Oh, no! On Fore Street, he bought a property on Middle Street, and then on the place called Garden Lane, which ran off of Middle Street, he built three stores. (Chute?) had the grocery store. My father was in the middle. He had the men’s furnishing. And then the third store was a drug store. On top of the stores, there was a hall. It was called Robinson’s Hall.

CARL:

Is that building still there?

26:46

BESSIE:

The building is still there. When I was in Portland and Daniel and Emily and Lucky we went to that area and it was all a big drug store now. Middle Street became a very, very nice street. The Jewish grocery stores went some place else. The kosher meat markets went some place else. And they had these beautiful big buildings there, occupied by lawyers. My father owned all the houses on Garden Lane, up to Newbury Street. But that is all changed now. My grandmother lived in a corner house. But my father owned the rest of the houses. He went into real estate. And that’s where he made money.

They…he bought a garage, a big garage that he owned with somebody called Mr. Press.

CARL:

Did your mother ever take a job, or was she always home taking care of the kids?

BESSIE:

In those days, the women didn’t take jobs. They stayed home, and marketed and cooked and I think my mother would play cards with somebody called Mrs. Lerner, that was her girlfriend.

CARL:

Your mother was Nehama, right?

BESSIE:

My mother was Nehama.

CARL:

And what was her maiden name?

BESSIE:

Spiegelman.

CARL:

Spiegleman.

BESSIE:

My grandfather Spiegelman had a big shoe factory in Brooklyn.

CARL:

Now the stores, on Fore street that Abraham owned, is Fore Street anywhere near Hampshire Street?

BESSIE:

Fore Street is now a very important street. It is very close to the waterfront.

CARL:

I remember you telling me once that…was one of your houses ever on the water?

BESSIE:

It wasn’t on the water. There was a railroad that ran on the street below. It was called commercial street. But when I was there, the railroad was gone, and it had become a beautiful area. That was one of the choice sections in Portland. Wherever we lived, you could always see the water. But when we moved up to Wilson Street, I could just run down the hill and get into the water there, and that’s where I learned to swim. I just saw people going in the water and doing this (waves arms) so I did that.

31:31

CARL:

You taught yourself how to swim?

BESSIE:

Oh, no. I got to Leisure World, and I was swimming in the pool, and I said to the woman there who taught swimming and she also was the lifeguard, I said, “What’s wrong with my stroke?” She said, “Everything. You need to take lessons.” So I took lessons.

But I got a job. After I graduated High School, I got a job working in a place where they made chocolates. Where they dipped the chocolates. And I became, like, an assistant. And I worked there for about a year and my brother Robbie had gone off to college, and Harry went to Bowdoin…Robbie went to MIT. Robbie was a wonderful student. He graduated salutatorian of the class.

CARL:

From MIT?

BESSIE:

No. High School. And he had no trouble getting into MIT. He was a whiz when it came to figures. I wasn’t such a good student. I didn’t…although I skipped the last grade and went into high school. And then after I worked at this candy place, I decided I wanted to go to school, so I went to Gorman Normal School.

CARL:

Where was Gorham Normal School?

BESSIE:

It was in Gorham, Maine. I lived at the dormitories. After six o’clock, we weren’t allowed to go out. We had our meals there, and Saturday night we always had the same dinner: baked beans on, I forgot what kind of bread. And after dinner, you couldn’t go out, so you danced. There were like, four boys in the class. So girls danced with girls. And then, I don’t know until what time, and then we went off to our rooms.

34:55

CARL:

Between you and your brothers, where were you in the birth order?

BESSIE:

My brother Robbie was the oldest, then I was next. It was only about 18 months difference between us. Then my brother Harry.

CARL:

And how much younger was Sam than Harry?

BESSIE:

About three years. I think there was about five years difference between Sammy and myself, but I was the big sister. When he changed schools, I was the one that took him to school and registered him. And every time he’d come into the house, he’d say, “where’s Patsy?” He called me “Patsy.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

CARL:

Why did they call you Patsy?

BESSIE:

There was a prizefighter by the name of Patsy Brannigan, so my brother Robbie and I, I guess we used to have little fights, so he called me “Patsy Brannigan.” And my mother said, that wasn’t a very nice name. So he called me…Patsy.

36:35

CARL:

I’m sure all of the four children in your family, you know, one would be the leader, and so on. What was your role? How did you act with your brothers? Were you always in the lead?

BESSIE:

No, no. Robbie was a wonderful student, and when he had a job, when he was quite young, … and I have an idea he sold Fuller brushes.[[10]](#footnote-10) But I’m not sure. During the summer. Harry was a good student too. But not like Robbie. He was accepted at Bowdoin, and then, in his second year, he got into Harvard. He wasn’t happy at Harvard, and asked to be transferred back to Bowdoin, where he graduated.

CARL:

How about Sam?

BESSIE:

Sam went to BU. He was the fraternity type of guy. He became head of his fraternity, and they would have liked him to join up with the Robinson Wood Turning company because he had a wonderful personality and he was handsome to look at. But the doctors said he had to go to a warmer climate. So he went to San Antonio, where he met Ruth, and eventually married her.

CARL:

Were Lucky and Nancy born in San Antonio or Dallas?

39:30

BESSIE:

No, he, Sam went to BU Law, too, and he was practicing Law in San Antonio, and he wasn’t doing that great. He was already married. So somebody came along, that worked for the railroad, and they said, “Would you like to work for us?” Like I said, he had a wonderful personality. And he had to go to Houston, where Nancy and Lucky were born.

CARL:

Who owned the Robinson Wood Turning Company?

BESSIE:

The Robinson Wood Turning Company was started by my Uncle Morris.

CARL:

Where was it?

BESSIE:

My Uncle..they started it in Montreal. They would…My Uncle Hymie[[11]](#footnote-11) joined the business. He was in Montreal. They had a clothing store, too. But he put up some money. My Uncle Morris found this place where they made brooms, and eventually my Uncle Hymie. So three of them found the Robinson Wood Turning Company. My Uncle Hymie would go to Europe and buy broom corn, and they would bring it in and sell a lot of it locally. They made brooms there. Then in Burlington, Vermont, they opened a wood turning place, where they made dowels and wood turnings. And your…go back to Clarence.

43:05

Clarence studied to be a dentist. And he originally wanted to be a doctor. But he couldn’t get into a medical school, so he got into Columbia dental school. He was good in the book part, but when it came to the fillings or the making of teeth, he was so fussy. It took him forever to finish something and then he wasn’t happy. So when he graduated, he found out he couldn’t graduate with the rest of the class because he had to make up some work. So he quit. And had to look for a job. It was 1932, 1931, there was the Depression. He sold Fuller brushes, and then my uncles were looking for salesmen. Their business was expanding. So Clarence became a salesman for the Robinson Wood Turning Company.

Harry had a job, a good job, when they found out he was Jewish, he stayed out for a holiday, they fired him. So he was looking for a job, too. And they both wound up working for the Robinson Wood Turning company.

CARL:

Terrible story about Harry. Did things like that happen often?

BESSIE:

In those days, they did. They did happen, I think, until there was a book, “Gentlemen’s Agreement,” and that sort of changed things. Now, when the boys and your father were going to Twin Lake Camp, we would send the boys out and we would join them. And we would stay at the lodge. But there were, sort of rooming houses in the area, and they would have a sign, “For Christians Only. No Jews Allowed.”

CARL:

I think we need to stop for today because, uh…

BESSIE:

The outfit – Fuller Brush was the house customer. Empire Brush. I think that was your grandfather’s account. And he…all the customers loved him. He couldn’t get up in the morning, and he couldn’t go to bed at night, but he managed to do very well, and my Uncle said, if he put in a full day’s work, he’d make more money than they did. He could charm anybody.

CARL:

You give me the impression that Clarence was sort of a scatterbrain.

BESSIE:

He was very bright! He wrote beautifully. But it was… he was spoiled as a child. He was an only child growing up. His mother was an outstanding woman, she was like one of the leaders in the German Jewish society. She founded the first Hebrew Day Nursery and conducted tours when she was growing up. She gave elocution lessons. And Lowenstein had a glove factory in Gloversville, NY. At that time, he was active in the shul in Gloversville. I have no idea where Gloversville is, but I met somebody who came from Gloversville, and she told me that he was one of the founders of the synagogue there. The Lowensteins came over in 1848.

CARL:

Did they come to New York, of did they come to the Carolinas?

BESSIE:

The Lowensteins came to New York. The Loebs I think went to Charleston. They … your grandfather was born in Florence.

CARL:

South Carolina?

BESSIE:

South Carolina. And Sandy has a friend that goes to Florence quite often and she was going to do some research work on the Loebs. They were very active there in the Masons. Your grandfather, Great-Grandfather, they were a past master. His brother was a past master. They were in the tobacco business. And when the tobacco business failed, they came to Brooklyn. I don’t know, they must have kept some money, because they were able to buy the big garage. Two big garages. And they lived in one of these old houses, with the kitchen on the first floor, then the living rooms, then the bedrooms. Something like that. But when I met your grandfather, they were living in an apartment.

[CUT. REPOSITION CAMERA. RETURN TO CONVERSATION]

BESSIE:

My uncle max, and I think my uncle Jake, would be in the upstairs part of the shul, where they had a balcony, and my grandmother always sat over there. She had her own seat. And my mother sat next to her.

CARL:

What was it like, living in the Jewish Community in Portland, in that neighborhood? Is there anything like that now?

BESSIE:

The Jewish neighborhood has gone. When I was…it’s become…middle street has become sort of high class, where they have these big buildings now, and Louie Bernstein’s the lawyer, across the street from where Robinson’s Hall was. Oh – and Robinson’s Hall, they would have weddings. Everyone knew Robinson’s Hall! They would have large meetings, and my father would have to go down there at about 10 o’clock, and put the lights out so the people would go home. I learned to dance there. I think they used to have little dances. And so I went and there was this boy by the name of Barney and he was a wonderful dancer, but he didn’t come from a good family, so that was a no-no. I used to meet him at somebody’s house afterwards. ☺ Barney Kaplan.

------------- END PART 1. ----------------------

1. I don’t recall these letters. -- CL [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I have several poems Clarence Loeb wrote to Bessie – one from their Honeymoon, several from anniversaries and Mother’s Days. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Robinson [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. I think she means her father, Abraham. She corrects herself later. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This would be the Lapides family; apparently they came to the US before the Robinsons. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Eric Adam Hillman Loeb, Daniel Norman Loeb, Emily Malsin Sitkin Loeb, Lynette “Lucky” Robinson Weening, David Weening, Ruth Weening [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Smith Street Cemetery in South Portland, Maine. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Stanley Robinson Loeb [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Sam’s daughters, Lynette and Nancy, referred to Bessie as “Aunt Pat.” [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. The Robinson Wood Turning Company, of Vermont and Quebec, was a primary supplier to the Fuller Brush company. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Hyman Robinson [↑](#footnote-ref-11)