

Interview with Mrs Ruth Pratt, Takoma Park's First Librarian (Transcript)

June 24, 1971

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Total recording length: 00:48:17

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This is an interview with Mrs. Frederick L. Pratt, 7324 Piney Branch Rd. in Takoma Park. The date is June 24th, 1971, and I am interviewing Mrs. Pratt. I am Gracia Woods, Mrs. Phillip Woods. For the purposes of this oral history of Montgomery County, I'm going to call Mrs. Pratt by her first name and I hope she will reply with mine as we have known each other and then friends, neighbors for a long time here in Takoma Park.

Ruth, could I just ask you a bit about what your life was before you came to Takoma Park?

PRATT: { 0:53 }

Yes, Gracia, I lived a very quiet life that seemed rather satisfying at the time, but I didn't know how much more interesting it would be when I came to Takoma. I was born in Kentucky and went to Florida as practically an infant. I was educated in the public schools and private schools into in Florida. My parents taught at a small college down on the West Coast. I had my final year in my schooling back in Kentucky in a little school that my parents had attended, Berea College in Berea, KY. And when the war broke out 1914, I don't know that I was so much patriotic as the fact that I thought it might be interesting to get away.

So I took a civil service examination, and to my great surprise and mother's horror, I was given an appointment in Washington in the War Department. Oh, Washington was at that time hardly more than a country town, but to me, coming from really more of a country town in Tampa, FL, it seemed immense and most interesting. Although I was a shy person and I would not go out without a chaperone on regular sightseeing expeditions, I stayed here until 1921 and returned to Florida living with my parents who had then gone to Jacksonville.

My husband married me down in Jacksonville in 1923, and we came back to came to Maryland, living in Silver Spring in a big old estate that belonged to a relative of his. We were staying there as more or less guests until the estate was settled because of the death of the owner. Then we bought our own home in Takoma Park.

WOODS: { 3:32 }

Was that this present house?

PRATT: { 3:35 }

That was this house. The house was on Chestnut Ave. as it was called back in those days. A little street that stopped, oh, quarter of a mile up the hill; the street was narrow. If one saw a car coming, we said come see.

It's so different now when one can hardly get out of the driveway. You ask a lot of questions. Would be better than for me too.

WOODS: { 4:12 }

All right. Now I will interject here something, a question perhaps about what your husband did at this time when you bought this house. Was he with the government?

PRATT: { 4:27 }

Or my husband was in the Treasury Department. All his government career was spent in that one office which was owned in procurement division and he disposed of surplus property and there seemed to be quite a bit of it. He retired in 1940 and enjoyed his retirement in his garden, which he had developed over a period of years.

WOODS: { 5:03 }

Right. The next thing I would like to know is something about Takoma Park at the time you moved in. What were the interests of the people at that time?

PRATT: { 5:20 }

It was a lovely little spot then. The thing that I remember most is the fact there were mothers' clubs here which have some of them continued to this day, although those young mothers are now grandmothers. Oh, the highlight of the year was the 4th of July parade, which was devoted entirely to pageants staged by the parents.

A child or a group of children would be placed on a small float, and the float was invariably pulled by a person. No motorized equipment on those in those days. And one year, somewhat later, of course, when I was in, I think they called me the Marshall of the parade. Our theme was the Tercentenary, the settlement of Maryland as it was down in Saint Mary's County. And I remember these delightful little floats. May I tell you too about this? Perfect charming Doctor Hooker, one of the old timers.

WOODS: { 6:41 }

Of course, I remember his name. Go Ahead.

PRATT: { 6:43 }

Oh he he was lovely.

He and Alsina Branch, Alsina Le Mans, were to be Lord Cecil Calvert and his lady, and he was dressed in costume with this wonderful headpiece on. Oh, with a plume falling down the back. And I said, Oh, little Lord Fontleroy; he said, "I am Sir Cecil Calvert." Well, that, of course, is just the playtime of Takoma. The men were nearly always in government science. The place was founded, of course, by Mr. Gilbert, and whether he made a special effort to get these government scientists out here or whether they just naturally gravitated toward this lovely spot. But at any rate, at that was the main group of people in Takoma at that time. Salaries were small. I suppose they were getting excellent salaries for for the period.

And on our street we had Clarence Reed, who worked in nuts and grasses. Dr. Luton was the curator of textiles in the museum. Doctor Corey retired at the time I knew him. I'm sorry, I can't tell you what he did. I know his sons were in some phase of agriculture, but they did not live in this community at that time. Over on Holly Ave., there was Doctor Linton, very distinguished man in some branch of agriculture. I'm sorry, I never knew what, but he was the most charming conversationalist.

Can I mention someone Gracia?

WOODS: { 9:00 }

Yeah, I was going to ask you about the about Benjamin Morrison.

PRATT: { 9:07 }

Had such a Lot to do with... Why did I forget. Then he lived second over here from me. And when I first knew him, he was a baritone soloist in Saint Andrew's Episcopal Church downtown, where I attended, never dreaming I would ever know him. And I admired his voice so much. And then when I came out here to live, oh, what a joy it was to find him here because he would sing. I'd hear him when I'd be out in the garden. But of course, his main distinction was his contributions to horticulture. When we first came here in 1924, he was working with Doctor Van Fleet on roses. Later, one of his achievements was a pure white iris. And still later he turned his interests to not only collecting azaleas as they grew wild in this country, but to the importing of many fine wonderful species from England, Holland, Belgium, different parts of Europe and different parts of Asia and hybridizing them for this climate. And after many years he was very active in the establishment off of the Arboretum.

After his retirement, he went down to Biloxi, you know Port Christian, Mississippi, continuing his hybridization. And we have now quite a few fine things that he has has developed. And there was an unnamed new species when he died that was purchased from his estate and brought up

here to Takoma and is now called Takoma or possibly Takoma Park. You might have to check on that. I didn't know that. I can tell you whether or not what is the correct name and that will be for sale before too long.

WOODS: { 11:51 }

Oh, how interesting.

PRATT: { 11:52 }

I think so.

WOODS: { 11:53 }

I didn't know that.

PRATT: { 11:54 }

Well, Ben had a most interesting family.

His mother was one of the most charming women I have ever known. Well read, very quiet, but everyone respected her judgement. The father was Scotch descent, with that humor that distinguishes the Scots. There was a sister who'd graduated from Vassar the first time I saw her. She and I were boarding the same trolley car, not buses back in those days, with her mother, and they were heading for a European trip, which her uncle had given her as a graduation gift.

I never got to know Phoebe very well because after she graduated from Vassar, she took some more studies and became a specialist in maritime law. And I can't tell you the exact branch that she went into. She is now deceased, the mother is deceased and the father and them. So that wiped out one nice family in Takoma.

WOODS: { 13:20 }

Now, when you spoke about the Arboretum, that's the National Arboretum, right?

PRATT: { 13:25 }

That is right.

WOODS: { 13:26 }

Isn't there some special garden?

PRATT: { 13:29 }

There I think the Azalea garden there is named for Ben.

WOODS: { 13:32 }

Yes, that was that was my impression a minute ago. You were talking about the trolley car, of course. It's been some time, I guess, since the trolley cars were here. But how? What were they like at that time? Where did they go?

PRATT: { 13:49 }

Noisy, irregular.

At one time we had both motormen and conductors and later it was fixed so that there was only a conductor and he collected the fares. When I first came, there was a short line that went from the terminal out to the sanitarium. Preceding that there was one that went to what was an amusement park down on the Sligo that had had been taken off many years before I came, as I understood, I think somewhere around 19, it was in 1916 possibly, and we had two lines going down into Washington, one which went down, oh, pardon me, one which went down 7th St.

I think I'm right in that 7th St. and Georgia Ave. And then it seemed that there was another one.

WOODS: { 15:06 }

We were speaking about the terminal that went from the terminal to the Washington Sanitarium.

PRATT:

Yes.

WOODS:

What was the terminal? Was that at the District line?

PRATT: { 15:18 }

Yes, you see another fare was collected if one, well, changed cars and went on out. Oh, it's dreadful how my memory affects me.

WOODS: { 15:29 }

Well, it isn't too important. I mean, we know there were that there were the trolleys here and there.

PRATT: { 15:36 }

Oh, by the way, may I mention to gracious that many of the men went downtown to work by way of the B&O.

We had a charming little B&O station up there on the, I can't say the hill, but one climb steps to get up to the railroad level and then there was a the underpass that to cars went through.

WOODS: { 16:02 }

Was that the Cedar St. underpass? I see the trolleys went through there.

PRATT: { 16:06 }

No, not the trolleys. Oh, oh, the trolleys went through at Van Buren, I believe. I see Aspen at Aspen.

WOODS: { 16:14 }

Mm hmm.

PRATT: { 16:18 }

Mm hmm. And there was a local train which originated above Rockville, and I can't tell you how far that could it could be found of. And then this local returned the people in the afternoon. But those days we had steam engines. And do you know when we came here? My home, you see, is only a short block from the railroad and down home it was rather déclassé to live too close to the railroad.

I didn't know whether or not we were settling in the right community, but I got to where the sound of the whistle really was a rather home like friendly sound, and I'm devoted to riding on railroads trains. Later on, that same whistle was asked to be taken off. They whistled for a crossing which apparently did not exist, although at the time we came here there was a great crossing at Chestnuts Ave.

WOODS: { 17:34 }

I see. Yes.

PRATT: { 17:36 }

Oh, as Doctor Cliff Armstead noted in his little brochure over here that that went out because of a tragedy, a child was attempting to cross the railroad. I think he thought he could beat one train, but he didn't see a train coming in from the opposite direction.

The old man who was the crossing keeper dashed out to save the child, and both were killed. So it was shortly after that that the Piney Branch underpass was made.

WOODS: { 18:15 }

I see. And I always wondered how how it came about, but it seems so illogical to have that

dip. I can see now.

PRATT: { 18:24 }

Sometimes comes because of tragedy.

WOODS: { 18:26 }

I guess, yes, I suppose so. Now what about some of the other physical aspects of Takoma Park, for instance? There are so many trees. Was it like that then when you came?

PRATT: { 18:43 }

It was the most beautiful sight in the world.

I didn't learn to appreciate bare trees until a group of artists in Washington ran exhibition after exhibition of etchings, and many of the etchings showed the bare trees well. I associated those bare trees with Takoma Park in the winter and then of course spring with its lovely soft greens covering up those boughs and then as summer advanced, lovely fully branched trees and filled with filled with birds. Takoma was a a bird haven and I don't think I have ever seen a skyline any more beautiful than a skyline where you can find a place in Takoma and look across at the trees. Those fully leafed out trees.

One place where one can see them quite well is down by our little library. We had an art exhibit out on the lawn one year, and the the man who took pictures of it sited it from up on the hill near the school over toward those trees, and aside from the fact that it was a thrilling thing to see that art exhibit, the first that had ever been held in Takoma I believe, and then the lovely trees beyond it, it was home. It just was the most satisfying picture ever.

WOODS: { 20:38 }

I have heard so much about not only, not only persons as a whole, but I have heard that some of the Department of Agriculture people were responsible for much planting around the houses, that is.

PRATT: { 21:00 }

Oh yes. Oh, and around public buildings too. I see the the PTA of which had a number of Department of Agriculture parents in it planted all the things around the Takoma Elementary School, and we had the the Horticulture Society here, which was a great feature in developing our homes. The members of the Horticulture Society were most generous in dividing their plants and in addition in giving information about how to maintain those plants, and in fact they had a person each year who is designated as the horticulturalist.

Further, they had a demonstration of pruning each year in late February when it was cold and horrible, but it was always well attended.

WOODS: { 22:11 }

Just a minute ago you spoke about the art show at the library, and this of course brings me to something that we should get from you. You are known to so many countless persons as the Takoma Park Librarian. I Wonder if you could say something about how the demand for the library arose in the 1st place. Was it already established when you came?

PRATT: { 22:43 }

No, it was not. We had a nice little library on the DC side of the line. Oh, that was open to people who were employed in the District.

So that of course took in of the government people and some other people who went downtown to work. However, as the demands upon the library facilities in the DC were growing all the time, Doctor Bowerman, librarian of the DC system, and they said that they could no longer furnish that system to these suburban people. Oh, and it took something some little time though, for the suburbanites to get used to the idea that they must have libraries of their own. Colonel Conger, who was one of the councilmen, had had quite a bit of experience in setting up libraries in military bases where he had been stationed.

He approached his neighbour, Mrs. James Robertson, and interested her in the idea. When Mrs. Robertson became president of the Women's Club about 1930 and she said that one of her objectives would be to establish a library for Takoma Park, Maryland. I can remember the gasp that went up, particularly from one of our Women's Club members who was an employee of the DC system. I think she felt that there goes my job. It was not not that far for the money aspect because there wasn't too much entailed, but because she loved her work. Mrs. Robertson went through her two years of presidency of the Women's Club and nothing more was done.

I became president of the Women's Club following her and went through my two years without thinking anything about it.

WOODS: { 25:05 }

This was Takoma Park.

PRATT: { 25:07 }

Takoma Park Women's Club.

WOODS: { 25:09 }

And when were you about? When were you president you were from?

PRATT: { 25:12 }

32 to 30.

WOODS: { 25:13 }

Four. Yes.

PRATT: { 25:14 }

And so at the conclusion of some social affair, I was laden with a pitcher of punch, and Mrs. Robertson reached out and said, "I want to talk to you." I said, "Good." "I'll call you in the morning," she says. Now, one said to Mrs. Robertson, all right, it's just such a preemptive approach. So I sat balancing the Punch. She said, "we want to start a library. We have a nucleus of an organization. We want you to be the president."

I said, "all right." I thought, I'll get things started, then I'll get out and enjoy my retirement. I never found a time to retire until 1963. That was a long period, 28 years. Our attempts, our first efforts were pitiful. We had some old books that were old at that time. We had no money and no chance of money. But all during the summer we attracted the children with a story hour and collected books as people would offer them.

Our first little library home was out at Colonel Conger's house on the Jackson Ave.

WOODS: { 27:00 }

Yes.

PRATT: { 27:02 }

And then in the autumn, we moved to 201 Carroll Ave., which is the intersection of Carroll and Ethan Allen Ave. We stayed there until the place was sold. Then we were forced to buy a place. There was a house for sale at #8 Sherman Ave. We saw that we could rent the upper story as an apartment, bringing in enough money to make our monthly payments and to get the down payment.

We had 25 people, couples mainly, so also, which included the women's club, give a donation of \$25 and we were known as founders of the library. Our names are in bronze.

WOODS: { 28:04 }

And they should be and they should be. Did you have help from either the Montgomery County government or Prince George's government?

PRATT: { 28:16 }

No governments or came to our aid at all until Colonel Conger forced the City Council to

give us a small gift of \$50.00, but that was used by library supplies. We needed cards to make up our little catalogue. Oh, as it went on a little bit further, Colonel Congress saw that we could not exist upon volunteer gifts.

But at a very, I can say perhaps stormy meeting of the council, that's an overworked word, but that's just what it amounted to, he put forth the cause of the library. There were some dissenters and some who perhaps felt rather indifferent about the matter. And Colonel Conger was finally forced to say, "If this council does not go on record as supporting financially this library, I will resign and the people of the city will know why." We, we got a small donation or a monthly fee which would come to us. I can't remember what it was. I'm sorry. The minutes will show what it was. Yes, of course.

And we had a boy come in to sweep out for us once a week. The rest of the time we did it ourselves. There was still no paid help for the book series. I'd like to say that Mrs. Robertson was a volunteer cataloguer from the time we started until her death. She would not accept any money and then all our other services volunteered. Many women of the Women's Club came over and gave service both as circulation clerks, typists, shelters, any way they could aid.

Oh, the the members of the Library Board all this time had been looking forward to having a better home, because we had outgrown this house and anyone knowing how to arrange or for that matter how to arrange bookshelves in a building that has windows built down as an ordinary living room with the cut up spaces would realize how utterly impossible it is to house any collection of books. So we had different ideas about where would be the best place for our library. We were offered a space for which we would have to pay up near the sanitarium, but that seemed to us too far from the center of town. Oh, another space that was considered was Manor Circle.

I don't think any actual motions were ever taken to go up there. What we looked at over as time went by, and then I believe it was Mr. Bradshaw who was on the council, knew that the City Council had a spot of ground down at on Philadelphia and Maple Avenues. He made some inquiries and he found out that the city would be willing to give us that land. And I can't remember all the finagling. I shouldn't say that because it wasn't really, but the the things we went through to find. Now how are we going to get a building built? We don't have the money. Will the city furnish that money for us? Well, they did, to make the story short.

And we had a ground breaking ceremony down there. It was winter, I recall, but I can't remember what date. And the building was begun. It must have been autumn, late autumn. And we got into it the next May. The building was incomplete. The furniture had not come. I think we had a charging desk and two or three shelves, but the remainder of the furniture had not come. So with volunteers plus the city, we got the books moved from one building to the other and set up service.

WOODS: { 33:49 }

Was that the library always open to Prince George's people, citizens?

PRATT: { 33:56 }

Well, you see, Prince George in the beginning.

Yes, and the city of Takoma has one third of its space in from Prince George's County and 2/3 in Montgomery. And of course any tax support would have included money that came from Prince George's County. However, the city, Speaking of the council mainly, was strictly opposed to having any part of its government taken over by either of the county systems.

And I've had overtures from the librarians of both counties and from the supervisor of libraries of the state to point out to us the advantages, and there would be certain advantages, but they seem to feel that holding the library as a city function would be better and serve the interests of the city better. I'm in hopes that the time will come when we will be able to keep the library open longer than we do now, because the library is used a great deal and it would be used a great deal more. Oh, Mrs. Fraser, the children's librarian, is doing a wonderful piece of work with the children. I can't tell you how many classes she has coming in there almost daily. Then she runs reading programs in the summertime for the children and story hours the year

round. And Mrs. Reed Robinson, the present librarian, is a a very good administrator.

And of course, with the new edition, it is a little gem, and not such a little gem anymore, but something that the city can be very proud of.

WOODS: { 36:08 }

Of when were you able to begin paying the staff?

PRATT: { 36:13 }

I was the first person paid. Oh, it must have been 1940. I was going to a Catholic University to take some library science. And so Mrs. Robertson said "Mrs. Pratt is having to be away from her home a great deal more time now than she was when she was just librarian. Why not pay her enough so that she can hire a maid for more times?" And I believe it was \$50.00 a month. It sounded a little, but it was a step.

And then sometime later we had we added one more person to our payroll and that was Mrs. Joseph Martin Mildred, more familiarly known, a very fine worker. She was a an excellent routine person. She had not had library science, but she caught on quickly. She was interested. She was well known in the community and a very valuable person.

WOODS: { 37:26 }

Yes.

PRATT: { 37:27 }

And then others were added as part time clerical. I've forgotten now just how much we have. I think it is figured at about 8 1/2 full time persons. Yes, but many of those are just part time.

WOODS: { 37:47 }

Yes, I see.

PRATT: { 37:48 }

But they're all interested in their work, which is the the fine thing.

WOODS: { 37:52 }

Yes, of course.

The present library now is approving a nucleus, is it not?

PRATT: { 38:02 }

Yes, it is.

WOODS: { 38:03 }

Or the the new municipal building, which is now a hole in the ground and the test school built area school building going up there.

PRATT: { 38:15 }

Well, it certainly does offer advantages to to both of those facilities.

WOODS: { 38:19 }

Yes, and with the Takoma Elementary School nearby when Mr. Bradshaw suggested this particular plot of land, was any of this in people's minds, do you think?

PRATT: { 38:36 }

No, I think not. I think that developed a little later, but the city knew that that the space up at Columbia Ave. was really inadequate because they're they're housing the police and they're housing the town offices.

WOODS: { 38:57 }

Yes, yes.

PRATT: { 39:00 }

And we're not too far, you see, from the public works, which also has certain space there as storage for town records. Yes. So perhaps they'll all be gathered together down there in the new city, the civic building.

WOODS: { 39:16 }

Oh, that that will be progress. Certainly it's fascinating to see a town like Takoma Park growing in this way, however gradually it's so; so much of our civilization nowadays seems to be putting up a building and before you get used to the name of it, it's torn down again.

Would you say that, for example, any of the organizations or the city government itself was a steadying force, had been a steadying force?

PRATT: { 40:02 }

Very definitely I see they are. The Women's Club has given us a great deal of support over the years, sometimes coming from the club as a whole, sometimes from departments, either as money to buy a special type of book or a special collection of books. And then the council itself now has a regular member on the library board. The library board is not as serving the same function it did in the beginning because our excellent support from the city and I don't know the future of that. It was discussed at the last annual meeting.

WOODS: { 40:53 }

I remember that the library board, as I recall, was, it's a voluntary board.

PRATT: { 41:04 }

Yes, it is.

WOODS: { 41:05 }

Is the I'm not clear on the charter for the library, or rather, perhaps I should say the legislative Act?

PRATT: { 41:14 }

An incorporation? Yes.

WOODS: { 41:18 }

Could you speak about that?

PRATT: { 41:19 }

I don't remember too much about it. Mr. LeMond was on our board at that time and it was voted in the board meeting that we should be incorporated so we could receive gifts. And he, being a lawyer, undertook the function of setting that up for us.

And it must have been about 19 in the 1950s, I seem to remember, but so vaguely I couldn't tell you really the exact date. It doesn't really matter, no, but the incorporation of the library was of course by county.

WOODS: { 42:04 }

This brings up a question about the attitude of Takoma Park. Not necessarily the governmental attitude at all, about the Montgomery County change of government from commissioner to council manager, what we always call the charter fight. What would you say was Takoma Park's role? As I say, not necessarily the government, but the people as a whole. How do you feel they felt about that?

PRATT: { 42:53 }

As I recall, there were very few who really were deeply interested enough to go to Rockville or to canvas Takoma streets. Of course we had a small civic group which kept certain things like that alive, but As for the the general public, I do not think that they took a great deal of active interest.

WOODS: { 43:22 }

Perhaps neither on one side nor the other. A matter of difference, would you say?

PRATT: { 43:29 }

More or less yes. Unless a thing affected them, I think they just let it rock along.

WOODS: { 43:38 }

How do you how do you see the government in in Takoma Park, the city government over the years; have they always been responsive to what people wanted?

For instance, you spoke of Doctor Colonel Conger having something to say about our contributions to the library and so on.

PRATT: { 44:03 }

Our, our city government now is a much more progressive group than it was at that time. We had always been, so I should say ultra conservative. And the fact that the city prided itself on not having any indebtedness, they went through and came up with their annual report each year, no indebtedness. And I believe, I think I'm right in saying that they're building the library building was the first indebtedness they incurred, I see, which could not be cleared in a year.

WOODS: { 44:42 }

I see.

PRATT: { 44:43 }

But the that indebtedness has been cleared now, which is the reason they were willing to undertake the Civic Center.

WOODS: { 44:49 }

Yes, yes, I remember particularly at the time of of the dispute about the charter, which of course Montgomery County charter which we had over a long period of time, as we both know from about 44, I guess on. I remember distinctly some people saying, well, if we have this form of government in Montgomery County, the first thing they'll do will be take the library away from us. Now, would that have been possible?

PRATT: { 45:31 }

I don't really think so. I don't think that they could have done away with the incorporation of the the town. There are still some areas in Montgomery County that are incorporated towns. So we maintained our independence in that field.

WOODS: { 45:56 }

Also, although this has nothing really to do with the charter, Montgomery County Charter, I had the impression that when I moved here in 1946 that there was a small police force which was county police and there also was a town police force. Is that correct? Can you?

PRATT: { 46:21 }

That is correct, yes. And I don't, I don't remember when our police force was, was whether it was changed a great deal. Oh, didn't I hear just the other day that occasionally county police does a certain patrol and of course they, our, our cases are all handled from Rockville, as I understand. Is that right?

WOODS: { 46:55 }

Once it gets to the court system, yes.

PRATT: { 46:58 }

Well, what about misdemeanors and things of that sort? They're taken to court, aren't they? To each county? Yes, as far as I know, yes.

WOODS: { 47:05 }

But I was thinking about such things as if a burglar was breaking in when I first came here, that you could call either the county police or the town police. But I was told if you call the county police, they won't come. Now, were they assigned definitely to Takoma Park? Do you recall?

PRATT: { 47:29 }

I do not recall, I'm sorry, but I do know that we have a very excellent police force, which they claim is somewhat underpaid but very nice young men who respond very quickly to a call. I had a noise not long ago that I couldn't explain and I put in a call. Young man was here in less than 5 minutes he made a tour. It happened at night.

So he went around my house, around my garage. Of course, there being so much shrubbery around there, a really industrious burglar could hide himself and then crawl away to the next lot undercover a shrubbery. So.

--- End of transcript ---