

Interview with Jeanette Lyons by Regina Lyons
Women in Antiquity

Age: 82

Age at which married: 28

Age at which had first child: 29

Number of children: 5

Children's genders: 2 males, 3 females

Children's ages: Gerald, 53, Louise, 52, James, 51, Michele, 49, Grace, 45

Number of grandchildren: 15

Range of grandchildren's ages: 5-25

Education: 2 years of college

My first job, I fibbed about my age—I had to be 16, so we were able to fudge our birth certificates to make it look like we were older. I worked at a Woolworth's 5 and 10 store at an enclosed island. First I was at a miscellaneous eyeglasses and sunglasses booth, then I got moved to the cookie counter, and that was kind of nice. I think I had that job for about two years in a row, but it wasn't like a full time job. I think I even took that job as a full time job after [high school], but not for that long.

It was St. Mary's [Catholic High School for Girls]—that was the name of it. I don't know if there was much difference, except the people, the time, the styles. It's pretty much the same with the holidays. As you came in the entrance, there was Sister Columba that stood at the top of the stairs, and there was a big grandfather clock and she stood right in front of it. As soon as the bells rang she would be there, so if you didn't get up those stairs by the time she'd be there, you'd have to turn right around and go to the Principal's Office because you were late and get a detention slip. I remember we used to try to sneak in real fast. We used to take what you'd call a streetcar to school, so that's different. We did have student passes, and I had to transfer [to a second car]—many girls had to transfer. We had uniforms, of course. And even the shoelace, if you had the wrong shoelace, you were out of uniform. At that time there was a style called saddle shoes, and you could not wear those to school, and you couldn't wear dress shoes, like pump shoes. You had to wear plain shoes, like Oxfords, as part of the uniform.

During my time, we had to wear a plain navy jumper. It was sleeveless, and the neckline was low because you had to wear a blouse with it. And it was just straight down with I think a little pleat on the front. And there was a little bow to close the collar that had a little bell on it because we were called the Bells of St. Mary's. Oh and you couldn't wear makeup to school! So some of the girls who were really keen into wearing makeup would run into the washroom as soon as the bell rang to put on their makeup and change from their school shoes into sporty shoes or sandals or whatever. They would do something with their hair—you know, you couldn't just put colored bows in your hair. Oh and you had to wear long stockings in school, so they'd slip off their stockings and put on socks before they'd leave school. Because the boys' school, I think it was St. Ignatius, was about 6 blocks away, so a lot of the boys rode the same streetcar. They would come to school like that too and wash off their makeup and change their shoes. They would not get on that streetcar without being dressed up.

Oh I know another job I had after school. I worked downtown at Goldbladt Brothers, which was a big department store on State Street, and I would take a streetcar

and transfer to a bus. I used to work up in the fur storage office, because people used to come and have their fur coats stored for the summer. And I would come upstairs, and I had the big ledger, so the boys would wheel them in on a rack and call off the number and I'd have to write down the name and address in the ledger and record the date and blah blah blah. So they'd come in at the end of the summer to retrieve the coats, and I'd have to record that time and everything. I liked that job, it was a pleasant, enjoyable job. And I won a bet at that place too from one of the top bosses. He came in and saw me writing with my left hand, and I don't remember how the conversation went, and he asked if I ever tried writing with my right hand, and I said yes. And he offered me 5 dollars or some big amount, and I was smart—I could only write my name with my right hand. So I did it and I won the bet. I was really proud—I was really shining that day.

I went to Loyola [University Chicago]. Now what I did was after high school I went to work, I didn't go to college. My friends who I grew up with, their father was a professor at Loyola. And they went to school and worked in offices too. We were talking about school and blah blah, and finally, before you know it, my sister Jeanne and I were thinking about going to college. And my dad said we always had to give money when we worked into the house—I think it was like 5 dollars a week and that was like your board and that was to show you that you had a responsibility to the house. So we both joined up and she went to the business school and I did liberal arts. We went to Loyola Downtown, and we went in the evening. And then my friend—her father also ran the Choral Society so we joined that, so it was a lot of social life with that. We even put on a one-act play, and I loved working with the props. We had no money so we had to kind of make it with what we had. One thing I learned, somebody was able to get brown paper, and we'd coat it thick, thick with starch and let it dry, and then you could crumple it up and paint it different browns and greys, and crush it up in big hunks and it would look like rocks! I would love to be in the prop department in Hollywood because that was so much fun. One opera that we did was *La Forza del Destino* and it was at night in the caves, and we sang in it too. It was wonderful! So anyway, I was in college for the equivalent of two years because I did it for a few years and I'd go during the summer and work through the winter.

I did love going to school, but really it was the money that made me quit. You want to go out and get clothes, and spend money, you know, so I gave it up. If I could go today, you could borrow money, but back then you couldn't borrow money. You had to have it paid up front. But it was fun, and I met some nice guys, and it was all kind of tempting. But that was my college career. And after that, when I quit college I just continued working. I can't remember jobs—I had quite a few jobs. Office work was not hard to find because we didn't have the technology we have today, so there was a lot of need for hands-on jobs. I took shorthand in high school, so I could even use shorthand to take notes and letters for my bosses. So that was my career.

In the world, I think generally there was discrimination, not that we were aware of it because that was the norm then. So we didn't consider it discrimination. It just was the norm. It wasn't until time went on and we started to see little signs of it. And I mean much later, and probably some people felt it more for other reasons than being a woman. And then much later, I would say, oh, I think I was married and everything before that. I would say middle 60's, and I was married for almost 10 years then. Then that Women's Lib was kind of the spark. There was all this talk about burning the bra and all that. But

we were not aware of discrimination then. I mean, here's the thing—it was not discrimination. We were aware that men get the better jobs, we were aware that there's certain things men could do and we couldn't do, certain jobs you knew we couldn't do. We knew all that, but we didn't consider it discrimination, but it was the norm. So a lot of times we'd go, "Well of course he could do that." So we were all aware of it—you know, we didn't like it but were aware of it.

I met my husband through one of the girls I graduated with. Rosalie Moriarty was her name at that time, but she married. So she called and we were going to see a play at our alma mater, at St. Mary's. Her boyfriend was driving us there and he came to pick us up. We had fun and met some friends there, and it was time to go home, and conveniently his friend came with to pick us up. He was a policeman and they were partners on the job and really good buddies, and he said, "You don't mind if I bring my friend along?" So of course we stopped somewhere for ice cream or a snack or something. And that was that. And then another time we planned another date for the four of us. So I realized what that was all about by that time. We did that for a while and you know we had some nice outings, and finally he asked me out alone of course. And then they broke up, and then my husband and I got pretty serious and we got engaged and married. Isn't that funny though? They broke up and we ended up getting married. And then I ended up having all these children.

When I got married—let me see, it was May and we got married in September, I was 28 years old. Old! And then Gerald, you know, Uncle Jer, was born on July 6th. So it was definitely within the nine months. In those days, there was no such thing as the other—I guess people did, but it was kind of an embarrassment.

My wedding was pretty much the norm of the day, you know some people had bigger ones or more exotic ones, but it was just my sister and his brother. She was my maid of honor, he was his best man and we had no others [in the ceremony], just the four of us—well you know because I was 28 and he was older too, he was 41, so it wasn't like a youthful thing. And it was in Notre Dame, which is a huge church, and we went to breakfast afterward because in those days you had to fast before receiving [a sacrament], so the driver had coffee for us when we came out of mass because we hadn't eaten. Then we went out to breakfast just as I'd said with my mother and father and his mother—his father was dead, so just his mother. Oh and one of the little ones, my brother's oldest, Kitty, was staying with my folks but I forgot why, so my mother asked if she could join us. So Kitty was listening to the whole thing because she was like part of the wedding party so she was on everything. She was a quiet one, I mean you wouldn't know it, she was kind of like you were, she didn't make big sounds, but you could see she was enjoying being all in that. Then we had a reception that evening at one of those nice banquet halls. We left from there on our honeymoon. We drove down through the south and ended up in New Orleans, and it wasn't a big thing. The whole thing wasn't very big, we didn't have a lot of guests. We were both big families, he had brothers and sisters and I did too, so just the family was big, and then he had a couple of his close friends and I had a couple of close friends. So that was it. And I didn't have a long train, I just had a little short thing with a hat, and my dress was three-quarters, which was kind of coming into vogue then, it was common. For mine, I think when you were older it was more simple.

When my kids were young, we didn't have all the handy things we do today, so I got up, changed the babies, fed them, then they'd play. Then I'd dress them up and we'd take the buggy and walk to the store, which was four or five blocks away, and that was twofold because we'd walk through the park, Wilson Park. It was a small, one block park, so we'd walk through there, which gave them a chance to kind of run a little bit, and we'd walk back the same way. Then by the time we'd get back they were tired so I'd put them for a nap. It wasn't a solid routine, but it became that. You know, then I'd fix the dinner and all that. It really wasn't anything unusual, except that you had to do everything by hand, and it involved more of that. So the day was just filled up with things with the kids, and I was always washing their clothes. I didn't have a dryer right away either, and I'd wash every other day. But that was about it.

I did get a part-time job right around the time when I had a lull, before Grace was born and I didn't have an infant. I got a job at this insurance place and I worked in the evening. It was a cheap little job, didn't pay much, but it was in the evening and it was a little extra money. And my husband would be home so I'd go to that job when he'd get home, and he'd pick me up later at night with all the kids in the car. Nan didn't live with us at that time—you didn't know her, you weren't even born [when she died]. My father's sister was living alone and her husband died, and she had no relatives, well we were the relatives. So she came to stay with us because she was afraid to be alone. So she lived with us until she went to a nursing home and died. In fact, your grandfather died before she did. He died and she was still with me, and then my sister Grace took her because it was too difficult for me to go back to work and take care of her.

When my husband died, your uncle Gerald was 12 years old and Grace didn't turn four yet, so I had all little ones. And the challenge, besides the void in my own life, was trying to help them because everybody else had their parents. So when they did things with their dads, my kids couldn't. So that was the biggest challenge, and I tried to point out to them that everybody has problems and don't look at that house and think, "Their dad does this and that," because they have other problems that we don't know about. I was always trying to help them out because in their younger years it was so hard to understand that. It kept me constantly stressed mentally and emotionally, but I was more worried about them, and I didn't even have time to allow myself the luxury of mourning widely. So that was the big thing. But I guess it worked out pretty well—they all seem to be pretty good people.

I had a couple of good friends that, as they got a little older, would go to a show with me on a weeknight. On weekends they'd go out with their husbands, but we would go out on a weeknight. Both of them were named Mary. And that was a big help to go to a movie and get away from it all—that was my distraction. And in many other ways they'd tried to help, and they were there for me. I could call on them, you know I never did, but that was the feeling I always had. At different times they'd take Grace because she was in pre-school and their kids were older, so I could get something done and just get a break. My friend would take her with to the store, and it was such little things but I always knew Grace had a good time.

I met Mary Kelly first. We all sent our kids to the public school for kindergarten because Our Lady of Victory didn't have kindergarten. So I took Gerald and she had Jimmy, and you'd pick them up and you'd see each other, you'd nod, and you'd see each other every time and you'd nod. Jer and Jimmy became friends, so we'd see them

playing and that's how we became friends and kept that up. And then Michele and her next one went to school together, although they never became buddies. Through her, her neighbor was Mary Murphy. Her kids were all older—her youngest was my oldest's classmate, so those boys already knew each other and those mothers already knew each other. So that's how that came about.

When my kids were growing up, well it didn't change much for me, it just got probably a little easier, first of all they were adults and I didn't have to worry as much. It was like a new plateau we reached—they were young adults. They were more aware of our situation—when they were young, other than their dad being gone, they have no clue how tough financially things were. And I'd have to say, "No I can't buy you that pair of shoes," you know. They had to accept that, but now they kind of slightly understood, and they realized they had to pay for a lot of things themselves. They all reared themselves in a way in spite of me. They were all so good about doing that, and they really accepted responsibility so young, when most other kids were carefree. They all had jobs, they had to work, so it was work and school and everything.

Once my kids were all married, I moved into a two-flat with my son and his family, your family of course, and I think they thought that would be wise because it would cushion my days when I would be on my own and totally alone. So that was wonderful, and of course I got to know my grandchildren and my daughter-in-law, which was so nice for getting us to feel so close. She understood me and I understood her, because when you're different families you don't always understand why they think a certain way. So that was a good opportunity for me. I had more time, but I was still working though. Then your dad and your mom wanted a bigger place, which we had agreed that we were only going to stay together a few years—I think five was the number. So then they went out and found a home, and then they were going to build these condos, so we signed up for me to get one of those. I still worked for another year, almost two years, then I quit. I was past the retirement age, but I still worked. When I did retire, I was like a lady of leisure, and being close to all my children was so nice I could see them as the families were coming on and growing. Other than that I had a lot of time to read, and I didn't have a big social life, I didn't try to, but I had a few friends and we'd go to the theater. I had one good friend—she became my friend because our husbands were cousins. Going to two funerals was how we got friendly. We would go out to dinner and go downtown; we went to the opera a few times. So I had enough of a social life that didn't put me into boredom and a life of sitting at home and watching tv. I played bridge, and I started finding more time to see my sister. We were able to see each other more, and I was more free to be active socially. My life changed into more quiet times and no more worries because my children were off on their own.

Oh I've seen tremendous changes for women, and I think all for the better. I think women have always had the intellect and had the abilities, however it was never given as much focus or attention, it was never considered as important as educating the man. So in a family, they would send the boys to college, and never the girls. But even the girls' schools versus the boys' schools—it was more important for the boys to go to the "better" or more expensive school. And after that it was always that way. I remember, my younger brother Bob got ice skates for Christmas one year, and my mother took me to watch him skate. So I walked with my mother to watch Bobby skate with his new skates and thought nothing of this. I watched him and thought it was interesting, but I didn't

think that I should have them. That was just so normal, I don't know how to describe it. Trying to look at it from here, I think wow, but at that time, I didn't feel that way, nor did any other, my sisters included. And now, you see women getting these jobs and moving on. First of all, it was tremendous when you started seeing women going to college because it used to be only ritzy, rich ones who could afford it. But now, it's important, and women can seek almost every job there is, including president. So the glass ceiling is broken, and it's hard for me to even describe the feeling of thinking of all those things that have changed within my lifetime.

It's like a bunch of horses, you know they put them in the pen and then they go out. Well these were always kept in the barn on the side, and then finally one day, they start opening a gate, and then a couple of them go through, and another time more go through, and then before you know it, they say, "let's go!" and they all go through. That's what it was like, a big swell. At first, little changes were made in the schools and in teaching, and just like that, more and more, it seemed like it was all over—in science, in the labs, and everything. Something that was so much the norm, we recognized that it was the norm, but it shouldn't be the norm. As it went along, I accepted it, and I thought that's right. It took a younger generation and the evolution of the awareness in all young women as they became more educated. I think that's the secret: education.