This is an interview with Lois North recorded on June 25, 2008. The interviewer is Sherry Boswell for the Women’s History Consortium. We’re going to be talking about the ERA in Washington, and we’re recording at Mrs. North’s home in Seattle, Washington.

Thank you so much, first of all, for doing this.

North: It’s a pleasure.

Boswell: Before we launch into really specific ERA issues, maybe you could tell me a little bit about your family background and education, and then ultimately how you became interested in women’s issues. So tell me a little bit about your family first.

North: I grew up in Berkeley, California. All the way through junior high and high school, I was active in student government and involved in the debate team. At home we had good, lively discussions about politics in general. I’ve just always had an interest in government and political movement. And then after I moved to Seattle, I joined the League of Women Voters. Of course, through the League, you become more and more involved in the political process. I liked their nonpartisan approach to it, and their analysis of ballot issues, pros and cons, and not taking a position for or against any candidates, but interviewing them and publishing the material—their answers to questions.

And then I became the legislative chairman for the state League, which is a fancy title for lobbyist. When I went to Olympia, I guess I became bitten by the legislative bug. I just thought it was a fascinating process, and extremely interesting. But I waited until my youngest child was nine, because it is difficult. You must leave your family and go to Olympia for the session, and that means a lot of time away from home. Not easy to do if your children are young.

Boswell: Let me go back for a minute, though, and talk about some of those early influences you mentioned. So in school, you got first interested in student government?

North: In student government, yes. I became president of the Girls’ Association in high school, and vice president of the student body. I then went on to do more of the same at college, the University of California at Berkeley.

Boswell: Was that unusual? I mean, were there a lot of women at that time at your high school who did run for office? You mentioned the Girls’ Club. What was that?
North: The Girls’ Association was the feminine half of the student body, really. But the people who would run for office or who became involved in the leadership activities, we were a very small group. Most of the girls were either interested in music or sports or dating boys. [laughs] There were not too many really caring about student government.

Boswell: But what appealed to you about it? What was it that drew you in?

North: Oh, I liked the policies that were involved in it. And feeling that you did have a voice in shaping how things were going to be organized in the student body and all that type of thing.

Boswell: And did you have a lot of parental encouragement? I mean, were your parents politically minded?

North: They were sort of neutral about it. They didn’t impede me in any way, but I guess I was pretty much self motivated.

Boswell: So politics wasn’t that much of a part of, say, home discussions or whatever?

North: No. I really brought it in and brought it up more than anybody else in the family. My brothers weren’t particularly interested in it, but I was.

Boswell: And how about at Berkeley? Berkeley since that time had a reputation of being very politically active. Was it when you were there as well?

North: No. Because you see, in the latter part of my time there—I graduated in 1943—most of the young men were off fighting the war. It was kind of a ghost campus. I have been back for class reunions and I just can’t get over the huge student body because I had not experienced that during the war years. It has changed to be a totally Asian-dominated campus. For a Caucasian, you are definitely in the minority. It’s changed a great deal.

Boswell: Were there a lot of organizations that were for women only?

North: There were and still are women’s honor societies at U.C. Berkeley. Panile is the sophomore women’s honor society; Prytanean for the junior women and Mortar Board for senior women. I was tapped to be a member of each one as I progressed through college.

Mortar Board, which consisted of twenty women chosen out of the senior class who were most active in campus activities, was a high point of experience for me.

Boswell: And tell me a little bit more about your academic interests there.

North: Oh, I was a music major. I graduated in three fields: music, economics and history. I then went on afterwards to earn a general secondary teaching credential, and I taught before my family arrived. I taught ancient history and music, primarily, and U.S. history, and enjoyed it very much.
Boswell: Where were you teaching?

North: In Albany, which is a small community next door to Berkeley, California.

Boswell: And tell me, did you meet your husband there?

North: I met him at the university.

Boswell: At the university.

North: He was a senior when I was a junior. And then, of course, he left. He was in the Merchant Marine during the world war. I didn’t see him for a year, at least.

Boswell: Was it during the war years? As a teacher it must have, it must have been difficult. I’m curious about the home-front feeling in education during that time. Was there a sense of people having left and—

North: When I was actually teaching, it was immediately after the peace—from 1945 on—after the atom bomb. It was difficult because many people, primarily from Oklahoma and Arkansas, had come to California to work in the shipyards, the Kaiser Company. You had people with entirely different cultural background and extremely little education. They were plunked into the eighth or the ninth or the tenth grade with not the ability to read or to do much. The discipline problems were pretty horrendous.

Boswell: I can imagine. When you were married and then began to have a family, were you able to continue teaching?

North: No.

Boswell: Or did you want to?

North: I stayed home at that point. Yes.

Boswell: You stayed home?

North: It was a challenging period of my life because I like to be out and about and doing things. But with three small children, that’s pretty hard. So that’s when I joined the League of Women Voters, and I would go to unit discussion group meetings at night. My husband could take care of the children at that point.

Boswell: Now, so let me just clarify this. So you were married in what year?

North: In 1944.

Boswell: 1944, okay. And then you remained in California until 1950?
North: Until we came to Seattle in 1950.

Boswell: You came here because of your husband’s job, is that right?

North: Yes. He was a professor of economics at the University of Washington.

Boswell: Okay. Tell me your children’s names again and their years, too.

North: Douglass Alan is the oldest, and then Christopher and then Malcolm.

Boswell: So they were born when?


Boswell: You did have your hands full. [laughs] Now tell me about moving to Seattle. What was that experience like?

North: Oh, we loved it, because both my husband and I were outdoor fishermen. We were very much into stream fishing and the steelhead fishing, the salmon fishing, the trout fishing. It was just great. So we went and explored and camped and did things to the fullest. After you have a family, it’s not quite as easy.

Boswell: That’s right.

So you came to Seattle, and I take it that you then joined the League of Women Voters here then, too?

North: Oh, very much. Yes.

Boswell: Tell me a little bit more about why that organization appealed to you, and some of the things, when you moved to Seattle, that they were involved in at that time.

North: Well, I became very involved in the redistricting. The League of Women Voters, back in 1957, had written an initiative to redistrict and reapportion the state legislature, which had not been done for years and years. They did it by circulating an initiative, getting the signatures, and the voters approved it. And then the legislature proceeded to dismantle it, which is their prerogative, but it was a hard thing to watch.

It was time for the redistricting to be done again, and I ended up as the state chairman for that project, doing the drafting of it. We worked with advisors from both political parties, and we held hearings all over the state. We had public input as much as possible and presented it to the voters. It was crushingly turned down and defeated. The powers that be did not want any change, and everybody who stood to lose any representation, either a senator or a representative, just got together and saw that it did not pass. So that was quite a learning experience.
Boswell: In terms of the other women that you worked with in the League of Women Voters, can you tell me a little bit about their backgrounds or their particular interests? I mean, how did they get drawn into League of Women Voters as opposed to any other women’s groups that might have been available?

North: Well, they’re all community activists, and they want to study the issues. What I like about the League approach is you always get two sides to the question. You don’t get just one story. When we present ballot issues to the public, there are always speakers for it and against it, and a list of organizations that are supporting it, and a list that are opposed to it, and the reasons why. So that the League will take positions on issues after it’s studied and there is a strong consensus of the membership. They never take positions on political candidates. In other words, they’re nonpartisan. They don’t line up for one party or the other; however, they will take positions after study on issues. It’s a great educational experience.

Boswell: Were there any women in particular involved with the League at that time who were mentors, or who, in particular, you found to be helpful to you or sympathetic to your own interests?

North: Well, the woman who was president of the Seattle League when I joined was Mrs. Harlan Edwards. She was the first—I think it was the first woman on the Seattle City Council. She was a real person for good government. She was highly respected. Myrtle Edwards Park in downtown Seattle is named after her. She was a real heroine in my eyes. And there was Marguerite Pearson, who was president of the Seattle League, and then went on to be state League president. They were women of great intellect and just real quality people. I learned a lot from them. They were great.

Boswell: In terms of the 1950s, this wasn’t necessarily part of the lexicon, but did the notion of women having more rights, or more equal rights, figure at all into the early years of the League of Women Voters? Was there a sense of that?

North: I didn’t hear much about it in the 1950s or 1960s. Our own state equal rights amendment was passed in the 1971 legislative session and approved by the voters in 1972.

The legislative ratification of the federal ERA was in 1973. So in the 1950s and 1960s there was not a groundswell of public support for the state ERA or the federal ERA.

Boswell: I wondered, too, in terms of the League of Women Voters, was there any push at all in the League here in Seattle in the 1950s for more women in office? I mean, obviously you were very involved in politics and very involved in important policy issues, but you mentioned the crushing defeat of redistricting. Was there a sense that women could do this research but not necessarily be in office? How did the League stand? I know it was nonpartisan, but how did the League stand in terms of women as actual candidates and in office?
North: I would say that the League wasn’t spearheading any thoughts or movement in that direction. The National Women’s Political Caucus came into being and became very active in the early 1970s. I think of them as being a dedicated group to forwarding the number of women in representative government more than I do the League of Women Voters.

Boswell: Yes, I think in some material you read, the League of Women Voters is sometimes portrayed as being more—I don’t know if “Establishment” is the right word—but more center. Perhaps like the American Association of University Women, or—

North: I think that’s correct.

Boswell: As opposed to groups who became strong later who might have been more radical or at least more on the extremes, I guess I would say.

North: Well, you think today of Emily’s List, which is an organization of women dedicated to raising money for female candidates that they figure are worthy to represent and do the job. That wasn’t the role of the League of Women Voters. It never really has been. It’s a citizen education program.

Boswell: In your life, at that period, as a wife and mother and also an activist, were there times when you personally experienced things as a woman that you found—“discriminatory” is a strong word—but in that regard? Does anything stand out?

North: [laughs] Yes. I remember going to the legislature for my first session in 1969 and some of the men, well, remember that in a House of ninety-nine, there were only five women. We were definitely a minority. Some of the men when you’d come in a committee room would stand up and pull a chair out for you and seat you like you were a female at a party or something. I could see the expression in the eyes of many of them: “What in the heck is she doing here?” And you did not have the feeling that it was a working partnership, that we were equals trying to solve a particular problem through a change in law.

I always remember as the prime sponsor for the state equal rights amendment, when it was brought to the floor for its first reading, this crotchety old farmer from Eastern Washington rose up and he said, “Mrs. North, will you accept a friendly amendment?”

And I said, “Well, that depends.”

He said, “After the words ‘equal rights,’ I would like to add ‘and responsibilities for women.’”

And I quickly thought, “He’s absolutely right.” And I said, “Yes. I think that strengthens the amendment.” From then on, it was smooth sailing. It really made a difference to the conservative men in that body that it wasn’t just rights, but the responsibilities that went along with it. I’ve never forgotten that.

Boswell: Oh, that’s a wonderful vignette.
North: That was Sid Flanagan from Moses Lake in Eastern Washington.

Boswell: When he said that, did you have the sense that he at least was trying to undercut it?

North: No.

Boswell: No.

North: He was sharp as a tack. He was sincere, and he meant it. And I thought, “He has a good point.”

Boswell: I’m sure that from the other side, they respected you that you were willing to say that.

North: It made the progress of the bill much easier. Yes.

Boswell: Now tell me how you got to that point, though. How did you decide to become a legislator? Did you have certain goals or things that you really wanted to accomplish?

North: Well, I had worked in Olympia as the lobbyist for the League of Women Voters, so I knew pretty much what the legislator’s life was like. I enjoyed and admired the true legislative process of debating and amending and polishing and compromising and coming out—hammering out is a good word to use—for a good strong piece of legislation with the benefit of many different viewpoints. Very often you might propose something, and you think it is ideal or it is in good shape. Then by the time it gets through the legislative hearing and process, it’s improved! It’s the result of many minds rather than just a few. So I always found that a very exhilarating experience.

Boswell: And so, did you just decide on your own, I’m going to run? Or did you get recruited? How did that work?

North: I was asked by the retiring House member who was going on to run for the Seattle City Council. Tim Hill came to me and said, “Lois, I think you should run because I’m leaving. I’m going to run for the city council.”

My husband encouraged me to do it. And I had friends who said, “Yes, it’s time. You should do it.” So, it was a pretty big step to take. And of course you worry about the fundraising. You worry about the fact that who knows me? [laughs] You set about it and you set your goals. I knew that I wanted to work for women’s legislation, and I knew that I wanted to work for good environmental protection. Those were the two main areas that I was focused on.

Boswell: You were a member of the Republican Party?

North: Yes.
Boswell: Did your views at that time pretty much mesh with the views of other Republicans in the city and the state when you were running?

North: That was one of the reasons that I ran as a Republican. When I was in the League of Women Voters, I had no political party. I looked at the leadership in the House and in the Senate. I looked at the governor, who was then Dan Evans. These were the people that I respected and admired and looked up to. Most of the legislation that I sponsored—the state equal rights amendment, the ratification of the federal ERA—they were all with the blessing and I would say total support of Governor Evans. When you know that the governor is ready and happy to sign a piece of legislation if it becomes enacted, it makes it ever so much easier. Of course, the Republicans were in the majority in the House. People forget this.

With abortion reform, which was extremely important to me, [I had] complete support from the governor’s office, and the Republican leadership in the House. What Republicans there were in the Senate were very supportive of it. The Senate was Democratic and strongly Catholic and strongly opposed to the abortion reform bill. It was hard going to get it through the Senate.

Boswell: I can imagine.

North: Joel Pritchard was a Republican senator at that time. He was an enormous help in working it through the Senate.

Boswell: So the party itself in Washington did give you support, though? Aside from the religious wing of the party, I guess you would say, there was strong support for abortion reform.

North: Oh, very. It was very good. It never could have happened without moderate Republicans supporting this and helping it along.

Boswell: Now when you first campaigned to go into the House, did that issue, the abortion issue, and women’s issues come up in the campaign?

North: Yes. People raised them at my coffee hours. And I spoke out and I said, “I’m absolutely for a reform, a change. It’s a crime to have people going to illegal back-alley procedures, and it can result in death, disfigurement. It doesn’t make any sense. That is a woman’s decision that she should make with her doctor.”

Boswell: What about your opponent in that election? Did he take the other side in that regard?

North: At the time that I first ran, in 1968, it never surfaced as a campaign issue. It was interesting. People would ask me at coffee hours in homes about it. I always stood firm on it. In my future campaigns, I encountered some real opposition when I went door to door. It was a very chilling experience to see absolute hatred in the eyes of somebody at a front door. Then you realized that it was their religion, and that this was profoundly
distasteful to them. And you had to respect that, but it meant I didn’t stay very long at the front door.

Boswell: During this period of time when you were running for the legislature, it’s the 1960s. We often think of the women’s liberation movement. I’ve read, though, that there were some people who really just didn’t want to be associated with women’s liberation—that it had so many meanings and people looked at it so differently. What did that term mean to you at that point? Was it something that you could follow or not?

North: Well, Betty Friedan in her women’s “mystique” and everything really came on in the 1970s. At the time that I was working on this legislation, I wasn’t particularly caught up in what you would call “women’s liberation.” I was just thinking that under the law, the situation should be fair. I felt that under the abortion reform bill women had a right to choose, and that it should be firmly bolstered with a law that spoke to that effect. I wasn’t thinking in terms of women’s liberation. I was thinking strictly in fairness and equal opportunities for women.

Boswell: Right. As one of five women then in the House at that time, did you find many men who would sympathize with those ideas about women’s rights and some notion of equality?

North: I had quite a few Republican colleagues who were elected at the same time I was. In other words, the younger members of the caucus were certainly with it. I would say the majority of men in the House were not aware of these issues at all. Hadn’t thought about them, hadn’t paid much attention. It was just like lethargy. [laughs]

Boswell: Did the women stick together? Tell me about the relationships amongst the women who were in the legislature.

North: Well, of the five of us, four were all for the abortion reform. One, Margaret Hurley, was deeply Catholic, and this was just a red flag to her. So we didn’t talk about it. There wasn’t any point. It was a matter of respecting her religion. The Senate was tough, because most of the leadership there was devoutly Catholic. They would all say, “Well, our wives have told us very definitely, ‘Don’t come home if you vote for that abortion bill.’” [laughs] It was pretty tough going over there.

Boswell: But so Evans helped you and others helped?

North: Yes.

Boswell: Did there have to be compromises? How did you do it?

North: Oh, the biggest compromise was making it a referendum. I introduced it as just a straight amendment—I mean a straight amendment to the criminal code. It soon became apparent to me that if I was going to get enough support, enough votes in the House, it had to be a referendum. Because then many legislators could say, “I thought it was an
issue that should be referred to the voters.” They could support doing that. So that was a huge compromise for me right off the bat, but it was the only way that it could have been passed.

And when it was finally passed, it was approved by 56.6 percent, I think, approval. So that is not a squeaker.

Boswell: No, that’s not. That’s definitely not. That’s great. Did you learn things through working on this abortion issue that ultimately led you to involvement in the equal rights amendment process, too? How did you eventually come to be so involved and, in fact, the prime sponsor of the state equal rights amendment?

North: You know, I’m trying to remember. That’s a long time back. I think it was the governor’s office that came and approached me. The governor always had a legislative agenda. He was a legislator himself; he’d been in the House…. I’m sure that that’s how I got started on this. They came to me and said, “Would you be willing to stick your neck out and be the prime sponsor on this?” And I thought it was a great honor because I’d only been in the House two years, and that’s considered not a very experienced legislator. So yes, I did that. Then when the agenda came along for ratification of the federal, I’m sure again it was the governor’s office, and that we worked together on this.

Boswell: Now you had mentioned to me earlier a little bit about Dan Evans. But tell me about his stance in terms of women’s issues, and how it was to work with him on that.

North: Well, he was great. He was very fair, and he believed that our present laws in the state were not giving a fair shake to women. He was very supportive as we went on to try to establish funding for daycare help for working mothers. I think that through the experience of World War Two, we saw that more and more women were working, and that they did need help. Someone has to help out with the childcare when the children are very young. He was always very good on that. And of course he was wonderful on environmental legislation, and had quite a legislative program. That was in the 1970 session. It was great the things we did in that short, very short period of 28 days.

Boswell: He had continued something that Governor Rossellini had started, the Commission on the Status of Women. But then Evans went further, I guess you could say, by executive order establishing the Women’s Council.

North: Right.

Boswell: Can you tell me a little bit about that, and how it was received?

North: Yes. There were a lot of men, primarily, who were opposed to this. They couldn’t see why women should have a special commission on women. There was always resistance to it. Most of the resistance—I’m oversimplifying—came from rural and very conservative areas of the state. The more urban centers all could see this and understand
this. Then gradually you ended up with a Mexican-American Commission, an Asian Affairs Commission, and an African-American Commission. All of these things came about in the 1970s. But it was hard going to start with the Council of Women, to get the funding for it, and to make the appointments, and so on.

Boswell: In terms of your role as a legislator and then the Women’s Council, what kind of relationship was there? How did they come across to the legislature in general?

North: Well– [laughs]-with mixed results. I served on the commission at one point. I remember this because the commission required at least two women legislators from the House and from the Senate. Of course, there weren’t very many from the Senate at that point. But when they did report or make recommendations, there were certain groups, primarily of men, who thought, “Oh well, that’s a nice little frou-frou thing,” and didn’t take it very seriously. But there were others who did. So it was what you would expect. It wasn’t anything received with open arms by any means. No, there was a long way to go.

Boswell: Now, was the Women’s Council actively involved with the governor’s office in helping to get the ERA amendment going, or not?

North: No. As I remember, the Women’s Council really came on with much more strength after that. I remember working on the state’s Equal Rights Amendment pretty much alone. I mean, there weren’t a lot of powerful organizations helping at that point.

Boswell: The national ERA, the congressional push for the original ERA amendment, which I think Congress passed in October of 1971 or something like that, were you watching that along the way? I mean, was that something that in Washington people who were interested in politics followed or not?

North: I followed it in the newspaper. I guess I was just so busy with what we were doing here, trying to mobilize public support and pass the abortion reform bill. The state Equal Rights Amendment, you see, these came before. And being pretty busy and pretty occupied with it, I was aware of what was happening nationally, but I wasn’t just hanging on the edge with that.

Boswell: So when you were approached about the state Equal Rights Amendment and getting involved with that, tell me a little bit it. I’m really curious about how that process then involved. How do you begin to build a coalition that you need to get it passed, and you need to get people in the legislature behind you. So start at the beginning. “I’m going to do this; now what do I do?” I want to hear how it works.

North: Well, of course the sponsorship came with the governor’s office as a partner in it. You start with your Republican caucus. They need to know that this is an executive request bill. You talk among your friends, the newer members of the group, who have been elected about the same time that you have. Of course, you always have friends who are across the aisle in the other party, and you start talking to them. A lot of it is word of mouth and one-on-one discussions with people, just quietly, trying to build the support.
The harder and more difficult thing is to reach the other House, across the rotunda, and you start with the friends that you have there, and for them to spread the word. I don’t remember the state League of Women Voters playing much of a role in ratification of the state amendment. It’s a long time ago, and my memory—[laughs]

Boswell: I think your memory is wonderful.

North: It was 37 years ago! That was 1960, 1961.

Boswell: So you, by word of mouth, get a sense of who might be for it and who might be against it? Do you remember in terms of sponsorship? What would be the strategy to get other sponsors on the legislation?

North: Oh, you take the bill before you’re introducing it. You sit down and talk one on one across the aisle to get some Democrats, so that you have a balance of names showing, a balanced support when you’re introducing. I think that’s very important. You don’t want to—at least I never wanted to—introduce a bill with just one party sponsoring it. That’s not going to go very well, so you want a mixture of both.

Boswell: Then in terms of what goes in the bill, what was your thinking in terms of content? Was it just going to be the text that ultimately was the national bill, too?

North: Well, with the state Equal Rights Amendment, the wording came from the legal advisors to the governor. They had worked it out. They had looked at other states to see; you get ideas from others. With the federal, it seems to me that there was an organization, and I’m trying to remember, that had a model law. That would be sent to the appropriate state legislator.

Boswell: So I know working with the attorney general’s office at that time that Gayle Berry was very involved in, wasn’t she? Or was it really later, after passage? I thought she was someone who was particularly involved in seeing what ERA would mean, for example, in the state, to various state laws.

North: I don’t remember.

Boswell: That’s all right. But so they would help, though, to look at the context and the text itself of the law.

North: Sure. Oh, yes.

Boswell: What about supporters? You mentioned that you didn’t remember that the League of Women Voters was all that involved initially. Were there other groups outside the legislature who were particularly helpful as you put this all together? Do you remember?

North: I don’t remember.
Boswell: I was curious about unions, for example, and whether there was some union involvement. What about the other women’s groups outside: NOW, the National Organization of Women, or others? Did they begin to get involved with it?

North: From what I remember, at that point, NOW and the Women’s Political Caucus were just beginning in the state. They were not very strong organizations. They were just getting going, mostly in the Seattle area. I hate to say this, but I don’t remember having legions of people coming to the capital and working on this.

Boswell: What about opposition, though? Were there certain individuals in the legislature, in particular, who became your strongest opponents?

North: Much more opposition and very vocal on the abortion bill rather than the state equal rights law. When we got to the federal equal rights, there was a small group of my fellow Republicans in the House who were going to filibuster the bill to death, who just did everything to oppose it. Fortunately, the Speaker of the House was Tom Swayze, and he was as sympathetic to what I was trying to do as I was. He could rule the opposition out of order when they became too obstreperous or, too, if they tried amending. They tried doing this and that, and putting it on the table and everything. It was a pretty dramatic fight. I remember that well.

Boswell: But so for the state amendment, it wasn’t quite so contentious?

North: No. It didn’t seem to stir up as much of a storm. Maybe it was because the movement was gaining strength. But by 1973, when this came before us—and remember we’re talking about the state equal rights amendment in 1971.


North: Just in that two year period, there was momentum building towards what you spoke of as “women’s liberation.”

Boswell: You mentioned the abortion issue raising more opposition, so to speak. Were there church groups, too, that were pretty actively against the ERA? The state amendment?

North: I remember going to Ellensburg, to a statewide meeting of women. The Church of the Latter Day Saints, the Mormons, showed up en masse to sit in, to protest. It was an extremely dramatic experience. I don’t know whether you are familiar with it?

Boswell: That would have been the International Women’s Year in 1977?

North: Yes. Yes. And I did go to that. It was dramatic and tense, and not pleasant at all. It was ugly.
Boswell: But so earlier in the state amendment fight, they weren’t as present?

North: No. No. When I look back on it, you’re making me think now, there was amazingly a lack of resistance. Nothing like what I experienced working the abortion reform bill.

Boswell: You know, it’s interesting you say that, because I was reading some newspaper articles from that period. It did seem to suggest that there wasn’t as much organized opposition, at least lobbying the legislature, before the bill HJR61 was passed. It began to build later: first of all when they went to the voters. And then, of course, you had to deal with the federal legislation as well. So there was an intimation that that was the case.

North: I think that’s true.

Boswell: In the papers you see a lot about some of these anti-ERA organizations that evolved: HOME and HOW and the Happiness of Motherhood, or Happiness of Motherhood Eternal, STOP ERA and a variety of others. But so they didn’t really lobby very hard in legislature at that time?

North: No. You know, I never really thought about it, but I think there was a lull in there. And the timing was right.

Boswell: Now from the beginning, the ERA, the state ERA legislation, had to be an amendment. Is that correct or not?

North: Oh, it was an adding of a whole new article, Article 31, to the state constitution. Yes.

Boswell: So unlike the abortion bill then, you were planning from the very beginning that this would have to be an amendment and then go to the voters?

North: Yes, to have the real strength to be there and the law.

Boswell: Right. So we talked a little bit about the compromises in the abortion bill. Did that figure at all into the ERA, the state amendment?

North: No. Only the amendment that I told you about, the farmer who said, “and responsibilities.” That was it, and I felt it strengthened the bill.

Boswell: If you had to generalize about opposition versus support of the state ERA bill, at that time were parts of the state divided? Was it geographic? Was it political in terms of parties? How did you see it fall in terms of support and lack of support?

North: Well, as I said to you, I think of it now as really a fairly quiet course through both houses compared to either the federal ERA or the abortion bill. I would say you didn’t have strong organized groups going to Olympia. I would say mostly it was lethargy and a
feeling by many men, well, “Why is this important? Why are we doing this?” That was more or less the feeling. It wasn’t a fiery uprising of, “No, we’re not going to have this!” by any means. It’s funny, I’ve never thought about this until you brought it up.

Boswell: Well, it’s interesting then, and I guess it makes me wonder why and how it became so supercharged later as an issue.

North: Yes. I think it was because the movement was growing stronger and stronger nationally, and people were beginning to feel threatened. Because when we passed the state ERA, the whole feeling of women’s legislation, the women’s movement, was just beginning to get going, you see. By just a difference of two years, there was that much change.

Boswell: Yes. I mean, that’s amazing. It’s fascinating, too, that that would be the case.

North: But remember, our legislature did approve the federal ERA. Yes. It was just that there weren’t enough states throughout the country to ratify it.

Boswell: For the state amendment first, if it was fairly quiet, then there just weren’t people speaking out about all the things that would happen if ERA was passed and that became strong arguments later—from women being drafted to undermining the family. There were a variety of strong arguments that some of the anti-ERA people used.

North: You know, I don’t remember it.

Boswell: I mean, that’s obviously an indication that maybe it really wasn’t that strong an issue. So you really didn’t feel like you had strong opposition, strong vocal opposition for the state amendment?

North: No.

Boswell: After it passed, tell me about how much you might have been involved in the campaign, then, before the voters obviously voted on it—so between the time that it passed and then the election. The vote on the state amendment, I think, was November 1972.

North: Right.

Boswell: During that interim period, how much as a legislator and as a sponsor of the bill, would you have gotten involved in the campaign? Was that common?

North: No, I don’t remember. I remember writing the arguments for the voters’ pamphlet very clearly. That I do remember. But I don’t remember any big campaign committee formed or fundraising for that. Maybe when you talk to someone else, they will remember it, but I don’t.
Boswell: Now there was an ERA committee, a statewide committee, though, to support the ERA.

North: I think there must have been.

Boswell: I’m just trying to remember if Michelle Pailthorp was involved. I think that was in the statewide ERA.

North: Now that may have been through NOW, the National Organization of Women, or the Women’s Political Caucus. I don’t know.

Boswell: Did you ever get involved with those organizations yourself?

North: I did with the Women’s Political Caucus.

Boswell: Tell me a little bit more about them and their position.

North: Well, over the years they turned to be a one-party organization, and very much opposed to Republicans, and not giving Republicans, I felt, a fair shake or a fair chance or a fair hearing. So I withdrew. It was an unfortunate experience. I felt that originally the Women’s Political Caucus was formed to support capable women of both parties, and that was a disappointment.

Boswell: Were they active in supporting the ERA at this point in time? Or supporting you?

North: I don’t remember that.

Boswell: Normally, as a legislator, if you had a bill that is an amendment, for example, or has to be voted on by the public, is it common to get involved in the public campaign?

North: Yes. Yes.

Boswell: As much as you can?

North: Sure.

Boswell: Reading some of the old newspaper articles about the vote, it ended up being relatively close. Certainly when the first votes came in, it didn’t look so good. Then ultimately HJR61 did pass. But do you remember anything about that election eve? Or the feelings of watching this and waiting to see whether or not the voters did approve it?

No? [laughter] I just was curious. There are some wonderful photographs in the newspaper of some of the women who were involved in the Women’s Council, for example, with worried, slightly worried looks, “We’re going to wait and see. We think it’s going to go.” And of course it did, but it was a long night and days thereafter.
North: Yes.

Boswell: So just looking back on it from having sponsored the bill, you’re probably the old political hand, so it doesn’t bother you by that point in time. [laughter] Now tell me a little bit about once the ERA amendment has passed in the state of Washington, there are laws that have to be changed, and wording in laws. Tell me a little bit about what you might remember in terms of the legislature’s role in doing that.

North: I do remember the governor’s legal advisor. I’m sure he worked with the Code Reviser’s office and other lawyers in Olympia. They did go through and do a housekeeping job—you have to tidy up where it says “his.” You know, it’s strictly a masculine, so you have to change that, and put “his or her,” and so on. I remember that we did have routine, and there were housekeeping bills, code revisions that you made to keep in touch with that. That was after that was approved by the voters. That’s correct.

Boswell: There were other laws where essentially the whole tenor of the law had to be changed, beyond the gender issues—like labor laws and pension laws?

North: Yes.

Boswell: There were major revisions in terms of….

North: Yes, they were.

Boswell: …not just adding women, necessarily, but sometimes adding men to it?

North: Yes.

Boswell: You don’t always think about that aspect of it, but there was a lot of legislation that was protective of women, for example, and men also had to be protected, whether it was sexual abuse or some other issue.

North: No. You’re correct on that. One thing that really came about through this, and I didn’t know whether you wanted to cover this in this interview or not…

Boswell: Sure.

North: And that is that we did an extensive overhaul of the rape laws in this state. That was, to me, a very important issue to women which wasn’t covered by the state ERA. I was in the Senate at that time. It was in 1977 or 1978, and I remember how hard I had to work in my own caucus because the men were convinced that we were changing the law so much that the rapist was going to be on trial for his life and that he was going to be persecuted, when in fact it had been the reverse process. Very few women went to court to try to prove a rape case because they were ridiculed. They were made to feel that it was all their fault. They were torn apart. There was no protection, no equal treatment of
the two. We did work extensively to revise those laws so that it is now the alleged rapist who is on trial, not the woman. And the increase in the number of cases taken to court—I have checked with the prosecuting attorney’s office here in King County—is remarkable since those laws have been overhauled. That’s pretty important.

Boswell: It is really very important. It is an outgrowth of ERA and considers all people’s rights in that particular situation. In terms of your own district and their perceptions of you, once the state ERA amendment is passed and you were involved in these and other bills that essentially helped women in many areas, was your district supportive?

North: Yes.

I never had any trouble with my positions on the federal ratification or the state ERA. I did with the abortion bill. That’s understandable. I knew that, and I expected it. Later on, you see, I went on to sponsor bills for equal rights for people, protection by sexual preference. There I really ran into a buzz storm in my own district.

Boswell: Really?

North: Yes.

Boswell: Oh, that’s interesting.

North: That was pretty hard.

Boswell: You mentioned the ratification process of the federal ERA, and I’d love to talk about that a little bit, if we can. So the Washington State, with a minimum amount, approved the state amendment. And then, of course, came the process for the federal ERA. You mentioned that the governor’s office, you thought, had approached you about that. So you were willing to take it on again? Tell me a little bit about some of the differences in terms of getting a measure like that through the legislature as opposed to the state amendment that we had before.

North: Well now, refresh me on this. If I remember correctly, to do an amendment to the state constitution requires a two-thirds vote in both houses. That is a tough vote to get. Ratification of the federal ERA, I think, is a simple majority. So that is not as difficult. But amending your state document requires a two-thirds vote. So it was a matter of getting a simple majority for the ratification of the federal ERA. But as I said to you, at this point there was a growing national awareness that women’s liberation movement was gaining strength. It was rolling along. You were having rising and increasing opposition compared to what had been two years ago. And I guess I was a little surprised. I knew there would be opposition, but I didn’t expect it to be quite so dramatic and vocal because it hadn’t been on the state equal rights amendment.
Boswell: In terms of that more vocal presence, possibly against the ratification of the ERA in the state, how do you deal with that? We talked a little bit about the process of building the coalitions for the state amendment. But as those feelings get stronger and more vocal against it, is there a different process? Or how do you deal with it?

North: No. You try to shore up the support that you know you have. You know that there are some people that you can try talking to them, but you know they’re so adamant and so emotional on it that you’re not going to be able to change their minds. So you have to do your counting carefully, and work around the people that you know are going to be fighting it all the way. But it’s the same process. You’re talking to people who are sympathetic. You want their reassurance that they will stand with you and that they will vote for it. You’re counting votes; that’s what you’re doing.

Because you see, legislative etiquette is you don’t bring a bill out if you know it’s going to get squashed down. You bring it out if you know there are enough supporters that it’s going to pass. It’s embarrassing to bring something out and have it voted down. It’s not considered good form. [laughter]

Boswell: So, by this time, you had been in the legislature–

North: Four years.

Boswell: Four years. So was there anything different? I mean, you had learned even more about the process by that point in time. Is there anything different that you had done in terms of that?

North: No. You just made sure that you had primed certain people to stand on the floor and speak for it that you knew were effective, strong speakers. They would do that because you can’t fight that alone. You have to have some strong support, and it has to show up amongst the leaders or the people that your fellow colleagues admire and respect very much.

Boswell: So now, looking back, who were some of those people? Do they come to mind, who you could count on and support you in that?

North: I remember that Tom Swayze was great. When he became the Speaker, it was pretty hard, because you can’t do that from the podium. But I always remember in the earlier years he was a very strong and effective speaker. It seems to me, Bob Charette on the Democrat side was a good strong supporter. Joel Pritchard was, of course, over in the Senate. Art Brown was a co-sponsor with me in the House. George Scott. But it’s basically the same process, only you just want to be sure that you have some strong voices to speak out as well as you—you don’t want to be the only speaker on it. No.

Boswell: You were mentioning before in talking about the process that you’ve got to obviously start and get the caucus behind you. Did you find more division even in your caucus at that time for the federal ERA?
North: I would say it was small but very vocal, very vehement, whereas with the state ERA it was just kind of inertia.

Boswell: Okay.

North: It’s a different force that you’re dealing with.

Boswell: In terms of that opposition, first, let me step back a little bit. I think today, maybe it’s because it has become more polarized—I don’t know if that’s fair or not—but it seems as though many of these issues become either a Republican issue or a Democratic issue. Would you say at that point for the federal ERA process, and in particular, the ratification process, that it was primarily Republican support? Or was it fairly bipartisan and it revolved around other issues?

North: The support was bipartisan, and I would say the opposition came from both Republicans and Democrats who were again conservative, from more rural parts of the state. That was your pattern. And the legislators from the urban centers—I rule out Spokane in that, because Spokane is something else again. Most of your east-of-the-mountains legislators were not gung ho on this at all. No. The support had to come from Western Washington.

Boswell: Did you have a sense that their concerns stemmed from what issues in particular? I mean, was it only religion? Or were there other issues that they really were uncomfortable with?

North: No. I think that for most of the more conservative rural elements, it was a basic feeling that the traditional role of the wife at home was going to be changed by this, I really do. They didn’t think this was a good thing, and you can understand that. They liked the situation the way it was, and they didn’t want to see change.

Boswell: In terms of that, there were a few fairly strong leaders in the Democratic Party who did end up seemingly coming out against it. I was thinking of Augie Mardesich and Bob Greive, who are, you know, Seattle-area legislators, or greater Westside legislators, like Bill Gissberg who were not, I think, in favor of the federal ERA. How did that work?

North: I don’t like to say this to you, but it’s Catholic. They’re all Catholic, every one that you mentioned. It was a brotherhood, and they stuck together, and it was really tough. They are very conservative Democrats, and it’s all rooted in that religion.

Boswell: I guess that’s understandable, up to a point, that that would be an issue. In terms of getting it, ultimately, through the Senate, I think it still at that time was all male, wasn’t it, too?

North: Yes, it was.
Boswell: So that, I suppose, made it perhaps a slightly tougher place to get it through. But again, you were successful. Anything else you owe that to, besides your own push and your own obvious skill?

North: Well, there had to be enough people who were sympathetic to it, yes.

Boswell: Do you remember at all when it passed? Any of the feelings?

North: Great relief. [laughter] But at the same time, I was concerned that not enough states nationally would follow through on it. We were, for the record, making it clear where we stood as a state, but that it wasn’t going to prevail.

Boswell: I know that ultimately as the momentum slowed down for the ERA, a coalition was also formed in Washington to try to help keep it going. I think it was in 1976 or something, to really follow through. I think your name was on the list of that organization, to help with that campaign. It was just called the Washington ERA Coalition. I was interested that Dixy Lee Ray was a supporter and advocate, too.

North: Well, she was governor at the time.

Boswell: Yes. Right, but I was just curious about that transition. You’d mentioned how active Governor Evans had been. Then we had a woman governor, and I was curious about what her reaction was, and whether you saw her as being fairly supportive.

North: I didn’t see her as supportive as Dan Evans was.

Boswell: Any reasons why that might have been? Or just her own political persuasion?

North: Her own belief that, by golly, I’ve succeeded, and I’ve gotten where I am, and why can’t everybody else.

Boswell: So almost an individualism, I guess you might say.

North: Yes. Let’s go off the record.

Boswell: Oh, certainly. [Tape turned off.]

In terms of educating people in awareness of ERA and the importance of it, now looking back, what do you see as being some of the effects of the ERA, both positive and also negative?

North: Well, I think you have a great many women in elected governmental positions in Washington. I do believe we are a leading state in the whole fifty states. There is recognition that women can do the job and are as capable in a government role as men are. I think you’ve had more even salaries for women and men, and I think the ERA has helped to move that along. I don’t see any negatives from having passed the law. I only see positives from it.
I think this is a pretty good state for women to live in. I think our amount of support that we have for daycare centers that our government—that our state health department—provides, and medical assistance to women who are too poor to afford an abortion, and I know that our program does carry on with that. So I only see positive things out of this.

Boswell: In terms of your own career, not too long afterwards you did run for the Senate. Tell me a little bit about that transition for you, and why you chose to do that, and if, in fact, there was any sort of ERA-related opportunity that was presented.

North: There was. There was because the state senator, Ted Peterson, who lived close to me, from this district, was retiring. And Fred Dore, who was another senator, a Democrat, moved purposely into this district to run for that seat. He had fought abortion reform. He had fought the state ERA. He had fought the ratification of the federal ERA. When I ran for the Senate against Fred Dore, the number of women who turned out to doorbell for me, put up yard signs, give me money. Small amounts. Women don’t give huge amounts. But the energy and the effort that they put into it was unbelievable. It was like having a women’s army. They all said in recognition of these things, that’s why they were turning out.

Boswell: Wonderful.

North: See, I hadn’t planned for that, schemed for that. It happened, and it made me feel very good.

Boswell: So tell me just a little bit, because I know you had some interesting experiences as one of the very few women in the Senate. So you were elected and went into the Senate in 1975?

North: Yes. That was our first, and then there were three of us: Sue Gould, Nancy Buffington, and me, elected in the Republican caucus. When we were going to go over, Senator Ruthe Ridder was appointed to fill out the unexpired term of her husband, Bob Ridder, who had retired. Well, when we came over, there were no restroom facilities for women. They had to scurry around and convert one of the little senate offices into a powder room for the ladies. So that was how we were welcomed. [laughs]

Boswell: Now you mentioned that when you came into the House, since you were in such a small minority, that you did have some unusual treatment. Tell me about the Senate. Did you encounter some of the same kinds of resistance there?

North: Yes. Yes. Definitely. The Senate was an old boys’ club, and it was tough. There was, I remember, one instance in which our own Republican caucus disciplined us on the floor of the Senate by voting down all school appropriations for the Seattle school district. They did it on purpose to discipline us that we were just getting too vocal on the floor and too pushy. We were just horrified and shocked. Then afterwards, what they did is they went back and amended that and restored the money. But they were doing that to
teach us a lesson. It was like taking some schoolgirls out and giving them a spanking because you felt they weren’t behaving or kowtowing enough. [laughs]

Boswell: Oh my goodness.

North: That was a funny one. But we didn’t think it was very funny at the time because we didn’t know that this was just to discipline us. We thought they were serious, and that they were going to cut all the money for the Seattle school district.

Boswell: Oh, that’s terrible. Did you ever get your own revenge? [laughter]

North: Well–

Boswell: In looking back again, at ERA and at this whole period, is there anything else that stands out to you in terms of significance? In your career, have there been other issues that have been as important, or more important, than this? How does it fit in the spectrum?

North: This was, I would say, my major goal. The other was environmental. There were many opportunities to work for environmental legislation in Olympia, and a few at the county level also. But those were the two main things that I believed in. We did establish a Department of Ecology. We did pass an oil spill prevention bill. We did do laws against strip mining and to improve mining processes. There were a lot of very good things done—automobile emissions tests, and so on. So I would say those were my two major fields of interest.

I guess I was just very pleased that our state has a state Equal Rights Amendment, and that, yes, it did approve the federal Equal Rights Amendment. That it has had a strong abortion reform law, that it has rape laws so that the woman is no longer on trial. That it has strong support for needy women who do need an abortion, who need healthcare for their children. I would say I feel very good about the state of Washington.

Boswell: Well thank you so much.

North: You’re welcome.

Boswell: That was really wonderful.

North: Whew!