McLeod: This is Maria McLeod, oral historian, and I’m interviewing Susan Paynter. It is May 22, 2008, and we are at Susan’s home in the Ballard neighborhood of Seattle. Thank you, Susan, for doing this today.

Paynter: You’re welcome.

McLeod: Will you state here, for the record, your full name, date of birth, and where you’re from?

Paynter: My name is Susan Patricia Paynter. My maiden name was Oakes. I was born on August 29, 1945, in Portland.

McLeod: Could you tell me, in brief – we’re going to go into more of this later – what’s been your occupation, and how your particular historical perspective sheds light on HJR61, the state House Joint Resolution for the Equal Rights Amendment, or the national campaign.

Paynter: Well, I started out in the newspaper business when I was still going to college and ended up dropping out of college because I got a job at the Bremerton Sun. So I was nineteen when I started working at the Bremerton Sun. I went to work at the Sun just a week or two after I got married.
I think that is key because so many things that I ended up writing about fairly soon after that really spoke to some of those early experiences. For instance, during my first interview with my first editor at the *Bremerton Sun*, he explained that it was only logical for me to provide proof that I was on birth control pills before he could hire me. Because you know, you couldn’t possibly trust a newlywed nineteen year old not to go get pregnant.

Just a block down the street from the *Bremerton Sun*, at the bank where my then new husband and I were purchasing our new home, they explained that they would only be able to count half my income, although I made more than my husband did at the time. Of course, you could only count half of the income of the wife because she could get pregnant. I’d also had to show my doctor proof that I was getting married before he would prescribe birth control pills.

So, I’m telling you that within a short range of time when I first started working, it was very clear to me that there were a lot of men in charge of what we were supposed to do with our bodies. They were very worried and had a lot to say about what we should and shouldn’t do.

I covered a lot of softer issues than the ERA. Of course, you had to. I was writing in the women’s pages. I started out doing a whole range of work. I was doing my own photography, my own developing, my own editing, my own layout. I was taking pictures of club presidents and the members of the Cootiettes Club (a women’s auxiliary of the Veterans of foreign wars) and people’s fiftieth wedding anniversary pictures. It also was clear that this was an opportunity to pursue some of the issues that were touching my own life. Why was it okay for these people to ask me these questions? Why was it the case that when I went to that same editor to ask for a raise, he explained that he had this much budget, and he had to save the raises that year for the men who had families to support?

This was all very out in the open and on the table, but to me it was somewhat of a shock to think well, somebody should be questioning this, and they aren’t. It was partly because they didn’t expect much to come from the women’s pages that I, and others, tackled these issues. Before they really knew what was happening, we’d sort of taken that ball and run with it.
McLeod: So if you were nineteen when you started working for the *Bremerton Sun* and you were born in 1945, then this was 1964 when you began?

Paynter: ’65. I was just there at the Sun for three and a half years. I’d written the first series on abortion while working there, and that won some awards. My husband was being transferred to Seattle, which was another reason women moved in those days. The *PI* had become aware of me because of the award I’d won for the abortion series, so they sort of knew they were getting a troublemaker, but I don’t think they expected quite the range. [laughter]

McLeod: Well, I want to know a little bit more about your upbringing. We’re going to go back to your experience at the *Sun* and the *PI*. But, I want to know, prior to becoming a journalist, what kind of upbringing you had. What was your experience, or your education, prior to college?

Paynter: Well, my father’s side of the family settled on Bainbridge Island before this was a state. They came from Norway, which is, of course, why I live in Ballard by law, and am married to a Swede. I’m one of two children, two daughters. My father worked for the state of Washington, and my mother sold insurance. I grew up in Bremerton, and I went to West High School in Bremerton. There’s now just one high school, but then it was East and West. Then I started in Olympic College, which was just sort of across the street from the high school, not a big move.

I worked on the newspaper and the yearbook at Olympic College. And I knew, always knew, I wanted to write. But really, at that point in history and in my own mind, I didn’t conceptualize how, or who would pay me to do it. I assumed I’d have another job, a real job, a secretary or something. Then I’d write at night. I’d always written when I was a child, too. Kept notebooks and written stories and things.

Ironically – I say ironically because of my feminist bent – I was Miss Olympian at the college, which was sort of the equivalent of homecoming queen. In fact, the man that I married was a student then, and he was a year older than I. That’s where we met. We
went to this crowning, this dance. Because of my title as Miss Olympian, I went to a lot of community events where I’d cut ribbons and things.

I met this woman who was the women’s editor at the Bremerton Sun. Her assistant had gotten pregnant. You couldn’t keep working if you were pregnant. She needed to replace her assistant. I was headed toward the University of Washington at that point. She offered me a job doing what I’d dreamed of doing, you know, writing, and on-the-job training. I didn’t know anything about what I was going to be doing, except what I’d done in college, and in journalism classes. So I took the job.

A year and a half later, I had just turned twenty-one when she took off in the middle of the night. Left her husband. Left a note on the editor’s desk that she was going back to Iowa. So he called me in and offered me the job of women’s editor.

McLeod: At twenty-one.

Paynter: At twenty-one. So I ended up not going back to school.

McLeod: Yeah. It sounds like that was your education.

Paynter: It was ironic that I got to begin, sort of, because I was a prom queen.

McLeod: But interestingly, a woman had left her husband in the middle of the night. And then you, well, it all fits together, doesn’t it, historically?

Paynter: Yes.

McLeod: Were there any role models in your life, or any particular women, or any teachers, or anybody who kind of lit your fire?

Paynter: Really early on, there wasn’t any role model — except my mom, I suppose — that I thought of in terms of a mentor, until I actually got to the Bremerton Sun. There, it was more a matter of two women who, I would say, gave me my head. Rather than me
emulating them, they gave me my freedom. Lettie Gudmestad was one of them. She became Lettie Gavin, reclaiming her maiden name, and she was a real pioneer. She later wrote books about women in the military.

Then there was Sally Raleigh, who was the women’s editor then, but not a feminist in any sort of recognized sense. She was the fashion editor. But they both seemed to sense that things were changing in terms of readership. And they realized that they needed to take advantage of having these young women on their staff, and the ideas that those women brought into the workplace, and their experiences.

It was basically either through that or just benign neglect on the part of the male management, who didn’t think we were going to really cause any trouble, that we ended up breaking lots of ground in the women’s pages. The women’s pages became, really, the center of social-issues reporting. The news side wasn’t doing it at all. We were doing it, as you can tell from what I was able to do and what others were able to do. We were doing it back there when the men were sort of not looking until it started getting a lot of both awards and flack. Tremendous flack. By then it was too late, because the ball was in our court and we were running with it.

McLeod: Did that increase readership? Could your editors see that people were picking up the paper?

Paynter: Yes, but it also increased flack. It was a great experience for me for later as a columnist because I learned to develop a thick skin fairly early on. I don’t think newspapers were really prepared for the kind of flack they were getting. It’s something we’re very used to now, and we know how to process it and counter it. We have these talk shows that have point/counterpoint. But in those days, it really scared editors at first, when letters started pouring in about killing babies, writing about killing babies.

And writing about — because I did a lot of, early on — same sex marriage and getting rights for gays and lesbians. You know, I wrote the first series ever in the state of Washington, maybe the Northwest, at least, one of the first in the country about two lesbians who had met in church. They were both married, and got divorced, and were
fighting for and had won a landmark decision for custody of their children. So it did create a lot of readership, but it also brought the fire and brimstone down on our heads.

McLeod: 1965 was a year after the Civil Rights Act, Title VII had been passed. Had you followed things like that in college? Where did your interest in civil rights come in?

Paynter: Well, I mean, I was a fairly typical college girl in many ways. But I was always questioning. I was always nosy, and I was always questioning authority. Then, suddenly, I was living in an era where that was what was happening all around us. We were going into Vietnam. The boys I went to college with were being drafted. People were resisting the draft. People were marching.

My first assignment at the Seattle P-I, in August of 1968, was when the Central area was sort of a mini Watts riot. I was interviewing a storefront preacher who was accused of shearing his flock, shall I say, and some people were lighting buildings on fire and trying to turn over my photographer’s car. So my photographer ran in and said, “We’ve got to go. They’re turning my car over!” I bring that up because so much of what I ended up pursuing in terms of writing was helped along by the era I was living in. All these things were happening at the very time that I had access to ink.

McLeod: And you had come of age when John F. Kennedy had been assassinated already, 1963.

Paynter: Yeah, I graduated in ’63. So that fall when he was assassinated I was in my US history class on the campus of Olympic College when we were all called out into the quad and told that he was dead. You know, it was chilling. Of course soon after, there was Robert Kennedy, and soon after Martin Luther King, Jr.’s assassinations. It was a time when I didn’t see how you could possibly be in this business and not use it to try to change the world. I mean, you’re in your twenties, early twenties, you think that’s what you’re going to do. All these social issues were ripe for my picking.
McLeod: I want to go back a little bit to Referendum 20 when you were at the Bremerton Sun. How did you pick up on Referendum 20? Did the editor assign it to you? Did you go to the editor?

Paynter: No. It was my idea. It was early stages of discussion about the idea that there might be a referendum at some point about legalizing abortion. I’d had an experience with a friend of mine. I was fifteen years old, and she was slightly older, a family friend. She got pregnant while she was going to the UW. I went with her to the quote, “Pink Poodle Beauty Salon,” unquote, in a medical office building in downtown Seattle. That’s where she had her abortion. It’s something that a fifteen-year-old-girl will never forget. The aftermath of that, and the pain she went through, and the fear, and the literal blood.

I just felt that these were issues that were not being dealt with in the news. There was so much fear and so much misinformation. So when I got access to writing about these issues and people would let me, I didn’t see how I could just stick to writing club news.

So I went to my editor and I proposed a series of stories about legalized abortion and what the pros and cons were. He said yes, and I did it. It won an award with the Washington Women’s Press Association.

So when I went across the waters from Bremerton to the Seattle P-I, that was one of the things that they knew that I’d already got some recognition for writing about. So I very soon proposed to do a more thorough series of articles on Referendum 20, and I wrote that in 1969. It was voted on in ’70. Then I, of course, followed it up.

McLeod: What’s unusual, I think, about Referendum 20, is that ours was the only state where the people were able to vote it in? Is that true?

Paynter: Yes, that I’m aware of. Yeah.

McLeod: I wonder because you were born here, and you lived here, if you have a national perspective of where Washington stood on such issues. What were your feelings about the time?
Paynter: Well, that was one of the exciting things about having this opportunity for me to pursue. We were keenly aware that Washington was in the forefront on so many things. I’m not even, to this day, sure of all the reasons why, but we were. People were looking to Washington State and noticing what we were doing here. That, of course, gave me even more fuel for pursuing what I was writing about. I had access to the University of Washington YWCA, which I wrote extensively about. It was this tiny little thing. It had split off from the regular YWCA because it had gotten too controversial.

McLeod: This was in downtown Seattle?

Paynter: No, it was in the U District.

McLeod: Oh, the U District. That’s right.

Paynter: It was this little walk up office on the Ave. A woman named Jan Knudsen was one of the organizers there, and she became a lifelong friend. She and some others, many others, had literally built this place themselves. That was part of what was going on at the time, women empowering themselves. They got carpentry tools and carpentry skills, and they built everything in there — the shelving and the examining tables and everything. This little hub, it’s amazing how small it was, became the place where there was the first Rape Relief, which later became the Rape Crisis Center, the first crisis line for rape victims ever.

McLeod: You mean in the nation?

Paynter: It was probably one of the first in the nation. It was the first menopause resource center, the first place where people came and talked about going through menopause. Now that sounds like nothing, but then it was not spoken about. So that brought older women into the mix with all the younger women who were there. There was Aradia Women’s Health Center, which just recently closed after what, thirty-five
years or more, started there. That was when women would come and learn to examine themselves and look at their parts for the first time ever in mirrors.

McLeod: I’m trying to remember when *Our Bodies, Ourselves* was published.

Paynter: That’s about the same time.

McLeod: That’s why there were exam rooms? Were there actual nurses there? Health care workers there?

Paynter: I don’t know if it was the UW or Hall Health they contracted with or somebody else, but they had visiting nurses come in.

McLeod: When you say it was small, how small? Can you compare it to your average dental office or something like that, with three examining rooms and a main lobby?

Paynter: Oh, no, I think there was only one examining room and a meeting room and sort of an office. So I guess it would be like a small dental office. But just a beehive. [laughs] I got so many stories out of that place. That’s where I would go to report on so many issues. Or I’d find people through there. When I went to do my research on Referendum 20, and the ERA, later, I had forged all these contacts through there, because so many people’s paths crossed through that place, so much networking that resulted. Then, slowly, there was an increasing number of women being elected to office. You’d meet people through that place, and then you’d have these contacts. So when I wanted to write about Referendum 20 or the ERA or equal credit for women or any of those attendant issues, I often had a starting place because of somebody I’d met there.

McLeod: Tell me, what are the things that you wanted to tell me or that we should remember about Referendum 20? I’m interested in the way — and I could be mischaracterizing it — such legislation might have greased a path for the ERA itself. But who were the people you were reporting on that you remember?
Paynter: There were certainly brave women, women I met through Aradia Women’s Center and the YWCA, who weren’t well known. These were women who were just everyday people who gave me a lot of great information. But also, I had access to people like Dr. Donald McIntyre who was head of the Washington State Medical Association, whose role it was to bring together a committee to draw up the rules and parameters for safe and legal abortion in Washington State, how it would be handled, where it would be done, who would oversee it. There was a lot of fear about whether it would be done in a hospital, in a safe-, or in a fly-by-night clinic, which would get us back in the dangerous situations we were trying to avoid. There was a lot of fear, also, about people running amok. He was a stalwart who took a lot of flack.

Even in the political realm, there weren’t that many women in office. Helen Sommers was one of the early ones. But state Senator Joel Pritchard was a real brave pathfinder who was out there willing to take the risk of not being reelected by standing up for women’s right to choose. So there were those people.

There was Dr. Franz Koome who was very controversial, but was one of the first in the nation to run an open, aboveground abortion clinic. So there was a lot of that happening here in Washington State that made us kind of the cauldron of so much that happened.

McLeod: When you say they were brave, what did they risk? What would happen to them? What could happen to them?

Paynter: Well, Dr. Koome risked and was, indeed, arrested. Donald McIntyre risked reputation. He was one of the most respected physicians emeritus in the area. I’m sure that his colleagues gave him no end of grief. You know, “this is something that’s beneath you, and how dare you do this, and it’s against religion, it’s against God, it’s against country.” You know. I’m sure that he suffered censure from people that he thought liked him and respected him. Senator Joel Pritchard, of course, risked all those things as well as not getting reelected. The flack came down on all of us. I mean, I certainly was
learning what it was like to be in the eye of the storm as a young writer. You can risk being fired, even.

McLeod: Did you ever feel, when you were writing about Referendum 20 or the ERA, that your life was threatened in any way? Did you have an identity? Was your photo associated with your column in the paper?

Paynter: Not at that point. I wasn’t a columnist. But as you will see, this was reprinted several times.

McLeod: The ERA series.

Paynter: The ERA series was printed in the paper originally, and then it was reprinted in tabloid size. Then there was so much request for it that it was reprinted, I believe, two or three times. My picture ran with it, with a little brief biography of who I was at that time.

So, of course, I got letters saying that I should die, and I should burn in hell, and other people were lighting candles for my soul. I didn’t get death threats that I remember, just people said that I should be dead. Certainly later, as a columnist, I got death threats. But we weren’t quite so gun happy yet in those days, at least we didn’t seem to be. But it was part of the exhilaration. I mean, certainly doing an interview during the middle of a riot gets your blood pumping. [laughter] But I thought, this is where I’m supposed to be. This is the big time. I like this. So I don’t think, you know, I wasn’t afraid. Maybe I should have been, but I wasn’t.

McLeod: Right. Was anyone afraid for you? Or did your editors worry about you?

Paynter: My editors were concerned for me a little bit, yeah. But the only time I actually was in danger, I was in danger of going to jail for refusing to reveal my sources on a story. It was on a different story that doesn’t have, really, anything to do with women’s rights. Well, it was about prostitution, actually. I knew about this guy who was a very
successful pimp who had been a previous executive at Boeing. I wouldn’t reveal his name. So there were times when it got a little dicey, and the paper would say, “There’s really nothing we can do.”

But it was only later, much later, that I was really aware that there were people literally gunning for me. But that was not about the ERA.

McLeod: Let’s go back to that context of the newsroom just for a minute. Then I want to go from Referendum 20 and the ERA.

Paynter: Sure.

McLeod: Can you tell what a newsroom looked like? What was the ratio of women to men in the newsroom? How women reporters were treated as compared to their male counterparts, and their ratio of pay, all those things? Just kind of provide me with what it was to be a female reporter in the ‘70s.

Paynter: Well, one of the reasons we were able to accomplish so much in terms of social issues writing, I think, was because we were sort of ghettoized in the women’s news department where they just didn’t think we could cause that much trouble. When I started out in the P-I, there was just one woman in the newsroom, Maribeth Morris.

McLeod: And what was her role?

Paynter: She was a general assignment reporter. There was, later, not too much later, but about that same time, there was the first and only black reporter, who I ended up having a seven-year relationship with after I got divorced. We were involved in a lot of civil rights things together. But it was very much a female bastion back in the women’s news department. We saw it more as license than we did as restriction.

Certainly it helped to be young and cute, which is too bad, but that was the way it was. I mean, I think that I probably got away with pitching sort of semi-toxic story ideas
to the editor because, you know, I could. There was this little pat on the head thing. “Oh, okay, you go ahead and do that little thing,” you know.

McLeod: So the kind of paternal?

Paynter: Yeah, I mean, they thought it was cute. So we just ran with it.

McLeod: Who was your editor at the time? The managing editor?

Paynter: The managing editor was Lou Guzzo who wrote the infamous memo.

McLeod: Would you tell me about the infamous memo?

Paynter: Yes. It was called the Amazon memo. Actually, it was when I was starting to do the ERA series. Lou Guzzo had been approached by me and by my boss, my editor, Sally Raleigh. We had said that we were proposing this twelve-part series, or multi-part series, on the ERA. So he had to sign off on it. So he wrote a memo that was posted on the wall. It said, basically, that this was okay to go ahead and pursue this, but what he really wanted, and he was right, was both pros and cons. He wanted us to explore potential downsides. He said that he really feared that there were some real risks to our society if women had equal rights because we could be “creating a generation of Amazons.” Those were his words. There would be no more retreating. We’d be out there with our freedom, and what if we didn’t like it? What if it destroyed families, and people didn’t stay in family units and raise their children anymore?

Around that time — I’m trying to remember exactly the timing — I did a story about a woman named Wanda Adams who became nationally famous. She was a Seattle woman, and she became the Nora of her era. She walked out and left her children and her husband to find herself. I mean, there was a lot more to it than that. I wrote about her. About the same time, almost simultaneously, she was on the cover of Life magazine.

It sounds like nothing now, but she was this woman who became nationally incendiarily famous, if that’s a word, incendiarily, for having the gall to get a mutually
agreed divorce, to leave her children with her husband to raise so she could go out and reclaim a career and go back to school and find herself — to discover what she wanted to do after she’d been married for many years and devoted her life to raising children. Of course, she became this lightning rod for anger and fear. I wrote that story here. So all this was happening at the same time.

McLeod: Oh, that’s right. So when Lou Guzzo writes this memo, who is he writing it to? To the women’s newsroom in general?

Paynter: He’s writing it as a cautionary memo to my editors, my assistant editor and the editor of the women’s news department, and to me, and to anyone else who might write about these topics, to make sure that we were considering the downside of equality.

McLeod: Be careful what we wish for, or we’re going to get Wanda Adams. So when you broke this story, and you could see the complexity of this issue, how did you handle this story that a lot of people are going to go to of proof positive that this will occur?

Paynter: Well, you just have to handle it honestly. You have to deal with people’s fears and write about them and explore them, and try to contrast what men had done for many years. Men had left their wife and children for various reasons, for career reasons or for another woman or for whatever they were doing. It was never going to destroy our society if a man left his wife and children and paid support but didn’t stay in the home. But if a woman did it, oh my God. We’ve suddenly lost our footing completely and are going to go spinning off our axis. I mean, she paid a terrible price for that. I did a follow-up, big cover piece, within the last four or five years, about her thirty-five years later and what had happened in her life.

McLeod: What had happened?

Paynter: Well, she paid a tremendous price. Her children hated her for many years. She finally had, just recently, regained relationship with them. You know, her name became
so emblematic of what people were afraid was going to happen in terms of women’s freedoms that she got death threats. If she’d be in public and sign her name, people would say, “You’re that horrible—” It took its toll on her.

McLeod: So, I want to go back to what it was like at the PI, where you wrote these stories. How women were treated, what your pay was compared to men and all these things.

Paynter: At the old P-I, where now it’s Group Health, it really looked like the Daily Planet. It really looked like a newspaper should look. Now they look like insurance offices. I mean, it was very art deco, and it had this big marble entryway. Some of the editors still wore green eyeshades.

McLeod: You mean like those visors with the green in the bill?

Paynter: Yeah, yeah, a couple of them still wore those. There were those pneumatic tubes. When I started at the P-I, we’d come in, my very first year or two, we’d come in and we’d make “books” in the morning. You’d take tablet paper and carbon, tablet paper and carbon. You’d make a big stack of these, because you’d be typing on a typewriter on carbon paper. Then when you’d get your story done, you’d roll it up and you stuck it in a pneumatic tube, and it flew through the system and into the shop where they’d set it into type.

McLeod: So like the pneumatic tubes used at the bank drive-through?

Paynter: Yeah.

McLeod: So twenty years from now, no one’s even going to know what that is. But you know, they get sucked up, via some kind of vacuum. When you said it looked like the Daily Planet, what street was this?
Paynter: It was on Fifth and Wall. Because of my previous background at the *Sun*, I knew about the shop — we called it the shop — where, in those days, it was still a hot metal shop. Print was still set on linotype machines. These little slugs would come out with the metal. So I would do layout, and I’d work in the shop with one or two of the printers. You’d look at a page form, and you’d learn to read upside down and backwards. So, that actually stood me in great stead later on, because when I would be waiting in the mayor’s office or something, while he went to get a cup of coffee, I could read his mail [laughter] by standing in front of his desk.

McLeod: A reporter with special, supersonic skills!

Paynter: So it really felt like a real newspaper, then. Every afternoon the presses would start to make this huge roar. There was a big hallway with a window, and you could see the presses start to roll, and the whole floor would shake, and your story was going out on this big roll.

McLeod: And you could hear the “ticky-ticky-ticky-ticky, ding,” of all the manual typewriters as well.

Paynter: And the sound of AP and UPI wires. We had a little room for that off the city room. When something big broke, like when Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated [1968], for instance, you’d hear this, “Ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding, ding,” and then everybody would run in and read the wire to see what was what was happening. So when the ERA passed here, and the Referendum 20 passed here, those were some of the best ding ding dings I ever heard.

McLeod: So Referendum 20 passed in 1970, right?

Paynter: Yes.
McLeod: Then the House Joint Resolution for the ERA passed November of 1972, and then went into law January of 1973.

Paynter: Right. And Roe v. Wade was ’73, too.

McLeod: So Washington’s Referendum 20 beat Roe v. Wade by three years. So, tell me was there a relationship between writing on Referendum 20 and writing on the ERA?

Paynter: Oh, I think that they were very, very commingled. In fact, there was really no separating many of these issues, especially because the civil rights issues we were covering at the time as well. I wrote a lot about women in prisons, for instance, and women in education, women in the job market, and the first women in trades who would get jobs in unions. They were all commingled together. I don’t think you could really tease out one thing. Because equal rights meant the right to control your body, as well as the right to get a job, and try to be paid somewhere near what men were making. Certainly we weren’t, in the newspaper business, being paid anywhere near what the men were making.

And fair treatment by the police for rape victims, for instance. It was a tremendous change in the early ‘70s, and later in the ‘70s, from how they used to be questioned. The women were immediately questioned by a male police officer because there weren’t many female police officers. There wasn’t any sensitivity training. The immediate approach was, “Well, what were you doing wrong to cause this to happen?” So there were all these issues that I think my writing about Referendum 20 was very closely tied to writing about the ERA because many of the same issues of fair treatment, equal access to medical care, all those things.

Then, of course, very connected to that is getting women elected to office so that they will have a voice in laws. Women judges, and women in the military. It all was tied together.
McLeod: I remember, in particular, that Helen Sommers joined the House in ’73 when there were few women in the legislature, none in the Senate, and she also was president of the Seattle Chapter of—

Paynter: NOW.

McLeod: She was the Seattle chapter of the National Organization of Women’s second president, and that was just previous to her having joined the legislature as a representative. Then she was chair of Capital Budget and, later, Appropriations at the Legislature. I think she joined in ’72 or ’73, but she was one of the few women who had been elected to office here in Washington State.

Paynter: Yes. But just having women didn’t always help, either. I mean, I have to say that sometimes women were their own worst enemies. There was a columnist at the Bremerton Sun who was syndicated, and she was actually a mentor of mine in some odd ways. Adele Ferguson was her name. Incredibly conservative. She was one of those women who was happy to be the only female in the boys’ club. But she was very good to me when I was a young reporter. When I started writing about these issues, after I had left the Bremerton Sun, she would write me letters and say, “My God, girl! What are you doing? Have you lost your mind? You’re going to be writing about chickens marrying dogs next,” or something.

So, it certainly was important to get women in power positions. But we also had to change the mindset of the women, too, because some of the women were the ones who were the most afraid.

McLeod: So if you had this sort of conservative woman who was your mentor, I assume you did care about her opinion somewhat, and she’s writing these little nay-saying messages to you, maybe teasingly as well. Who, then, were your supporters? Who gave you license? Who helped bolster you?
Paynter: Well, my two editors that I mentioned, Sally Raleigh and Lettie Gavin, were very supportive and really went to bat for me. There were some men, as well. Then a lot of the women I met and interviewed became supportive. I mean, Gisela Taber, for instance, was one who I interviewed for the ERA series who became a good lifetime friend and was very supportive. She would write letters to the editor whenever things were getting a little hot.

You have to remember, and it’s still true today, that newspapers really do respond to what the readers think, and what public pressure there is. If they get ten letters from somebody saying, “This is a good thing that she’s doing, she’s writing this series and it’s helping to enlighten people, please keep this going,” they’re much more apt to do it. So that kind of support from people like Gisela was very key.

McLeod: Wasn’t Gisela named by Governor Dan Evans to head up what was called the Washington State Women’s Council, a governmental position.

Paynter: Yes, Evans started that.

McLeod: How did you approach the series of 12 articles on the ERA you published in 1972? I want to add, here, that these are long articles. They look to me around two thousand words. They seem very research dense. I think non-writers might not know how dense, how much work it takes to get some of these details. Sometimes it takes a half hour to chase down a sentence worth of information.

Paynter: Yeah. It does.

McLeod: How did you approach this? Did you start at the onset and say okay, I’m going to break it up, and here are the themes I’m going to break it up into? Where did you begin?

Paynter: Well, it’s funny. Looking back, I can flash on my card table. I set up a card table in my living room, and I had these stacks and stacks of information I gathered. I
Paynter: I turned that into my war room for a month or two or three, or however long that took. I sat down and I started by making a list for myself and, then, with my editor and I figuring out what were the key issues we needed to touch on. First there was an introductory, overall historical beginning, speaking about the fifty-year struggle for equality, going back to the vote. We have to remember that the women’s movement didn’t start in the ‘60s. It started back—

McLeod: In the late 1800s.

Paynter: Well, yeah. With Sarah and Emma Grimke being these radical sisters. I named my dog Grimke at that time, for them. [laughter] Then after writing an introductory overview, the next pieces needed to be on the key issues that we felt people would most want to know about. Education, jobs, military, social issues, marital contracts. So we divided it up into twelve parts. Now I laugh because there’s no way that a newspaper would print twelve parts on anything, much less a women’s rights issue. But then, they did.

McLeod: And the tone you take, I mean obviously you’re a columnist and you have this very lively voice.

Paynter: Well, I wasn’t a columnist then.

McLeod: So tell me about the tone you decided you were going to strike. You could even read the first graph, if you want, of the first piece, or however far you want, and then talk to me about it.

Paynter: It’s been a long time since I read this. This is the first part, it starts, “Equality for women. Does that mean unisex? Does equality mean women have to work? Will it break up families? Aren’t women equal now?” In other words, I wanted to start right out with the misconceptions and try to show what it would and wouldn’t do. Were women
going to be forced to leave the home? I mean, it sounds so silly now, but people really feared that for a long time, and to some extent still do.

Out of all the years of writing such controversial things about gay marriage and gun control and abortion and job issues and violence and all the things I’ve written about, I never got so much angry mail as I got whenever I would write about women working versus women not working. You wouldn’t think so, but that still goes to the core of what people are concerned about. The people who choose to stay home are put in a defensive position, and the people who go out to work and have children are in a defensive position. They’re pitted against each other.

I thought it was really key with this series to go right to the sore spot and deal with what people were afraid of. Really? Would we force every woman to work? It sounds ludicrous, but it’s what people were scared of.

McLeod: You know, it’s so interesting. I’m trying to think historically, it’s a fifty-year struggle. You’ve got 1920, women get the right to vote. You’ve got three years later, Alice Paul, who was head of the National Women’s Party, and she’s proposes the ERA. That’s in 1923. Then there’s the Great Depression, and then you have World War II, when all these women go to work.

Paynter: But only if they would go back home. The idea was that it was okay for women to work for the war effort, but only if they would be willing to go back home after it was all over and the men came home.

McLeod: So is this some kind of response to that? I mean, was there concern women wouldn’t really go home and stay? Was it that women had a taste of freedom and autonomy? Or what happened?

Paynter: I think it’s part of that same fabric that we’ve been discussing, whether it’s about Referendum 20 or the ERA, or whatever. It’s controlling women, and fear if you don’t control them. We still have it today. I mean, we still have the big battle that I wrote about up to the end of my career about Plan B. “Oh my God, we can’t allow girls to get
over-the-counter morning-after pills, cause they’ll run amok! They’ll run around having unprotected sex.”

McLeod: Is that RU486?

Paynter: Well, no. Plan B is not RU486. It’s very important to know the distinction.

McLeod: Sorry, right.

Paynter: Because RU486 is the abortifacient pill. That does cause spontaneous abortion. Plan B just simply prevents implantation. So no fertilized anything is being disturbed. But people still think of it as an abortion pill, and it’s not. As a matter of fact, I wrote extensively about that, trying to explain to people that it doesn’t destabilize an implantation. It just simply prevents implantation. So what I’m saying is I think that the reason for all these things is fear and control. That’s at the root of it.

McLeod: So you broke your series apart into twelve pieces. I see several themes here: equity in court, equity in retirement years, equity in education, equity in military service. You don’t just say, “There’s going to be equity.” You say what this means. You explain at what point men and women will be treated the same if the ERA passes, and at what point, because there are physical differences, they might be treated differently. You write about equity in the work force, protective labor legislation, equal opportunity, equal pay, labor and the working girl, the AFL-CIO’s opposition to the ERA, the ERA’s impact on family, ERA and religion, and support the ERA versus funding.

Paynter: I want to mention, taking up one of those examples, there was so much fear about equal employment and opportunities for women in the trades. What would happen if a woman was working on a construction crew and, again, it sounds sort of ludicrous now, but there was a lot of fear by unions. You know, we had to be very honest about the fact that there are some physical, possible physical, differences in terms of what women and men were able to lift.
So what I did was I went to the experts, like people who dealt with medical injuries, or injuries on the job. It turned out that most physical labor jobs that would be dangerous to a person of smaller stature – A.K.A., a woman – were also not safe for men to be doing because they were being injured. So the outcome would be that everyone would be safer. But the fear was that they would have to cover for the little woman, and they’d have to do her job for her, help her, or they’d be injured trying to help her. Or that they’d be having sex in the construction trailer. You know, the men can’t be trusted to be around women without being tempted. Which is still a pretty prevalent idea in a lot of countries. That’s why the women are covered up.

So it was important with this series, to me and to the paper, to go into each of those areas, sports or whatever it was, and deal with the concerns, and then deal with the realities. Talk to the real experts on the job, on the ground, and talk to military people about the very issues that we’re still grappling with as far as gays in the military, what would happen, and deal with it that way. Unblinkingly.

McLeod: So tell me about some of these people you were interviewing. I want to go back to Gisela Taber, who you said you got to know very well at the time. Initially, how were you introduced to Gisela?

Paynter: When they created this council that she was to head up, the Women’s Council, I’d been — as all women reporters were assigned to in those days – interviewing women such as Mrs. Evans when Governor Evans was elected. So you’d get in the door that way because they’d always send the girl reporter to interview the wife. I mean, I interviewed Rosalynn Carter that way, too. But once you’re there, and your foot is in the door, then you’d meet all these people. I met Gisela through the fact that Mrs. Evans’ husband had appointed her to this job.

McLeod: Governor Dan Evans, yeah.
Paynter: When I first started working at the *P-I*, we’d cover a social event or something, and you’d always have to identify people as “Mrs. John Jones.” But some people were using their own first names, and some were starting to use Ms.

McLeod: Now you just mentioned interviewing Governor Evans’ wife. So it was “Mrs.” Evans I assume.

Paynter: Oh, definitely. And it was “Mrs. Daniel Evans.”

McLeod: She has no first name, no identity outside of “Mrs.”?

Paynter: Oh, absolutely. I got sent on a lot of social events to cover the opening of the opera and the symphony. They always had to be “Mrs. John Jones,” or we had to at least ask them what they would prefer. Then an editor would say, “Well, that’s Mrs. It has to be Mrs.”

We had many interesting fights over choices of words, over choices of language. We couldn’t say “penis.” We had to say “male member,” which always sounded like you belonged to a club to me. We couldn’t say “vagina.” [laughter] Really. So we had to fight for accuracy, because we had to use these little, you know, poo-poo-caca words. “My private place.” We finally won the argument that we could use Mrs., Ms. or Miss, depending on the person’s preference. Then we finally shifted to just their first name. But for a long time, that was a big problem.

There was a big fight over Muhammad Ali versus Cassius Clay. This was when he changed his name to Muhammad Ali, but we continued to use Cassius Clay for some time after that. There were editors who, during the protests, would make certain remarks. This included those protests I stepped out to participate in, like closing down the freeway, I-5 freeway, to march against the bombing in Cambodia, which I did on company time. Not reporting it, I was out there marching, hoping I wouldn’t get photographed and show up in my own paper. But there were photo editors who would see civil rights protests or protests like that and say, “I’m not putting those jungle bunnies on my page one.”
McLeod: You had mentioned, earlier, that you had a seven-year relationship with an African American man at the newspaper. What was that like?

Paynter: That was hell, too. I mean, not the relationship. That part was fine. It’s weird. We think of Seattle as always being so liberal, especially as opposed to Eastern Washington. But I remember people left leaflets about sickle cell anemia on my windshield, saying that this is a scourge that the black people are trying to infect us with. I had printers in the back shop with whom I worked, some of them were great, but some printers with whom I worked would come up to me and say, “I’ve heard this horrible rumor, I’m sure it’s not true that you’re sleeping with a nigger.” This is a guy who worked at the paper, you know. Or that “you’re going to marry a nigger.”

And when my friend and I would go out fishing together, because we were both fly fishermen, fly fisherpeople, suddenly the KFC would be closed to us, or out of chicken, or the gas station wouldn’t have any gas, or a motel wouldn’t rent to us. It was at the time that we were doing a lot of team testing, too, where you’d go and try to rent an apartment. I’d go in, and they’d say, “Oh, there’s a vacancy, and it’s so much money.” Then he’d go and it was suddenly not available, or it was twice as much money.

McLeod: So, were there other instances like that, in terms of women’s issues?

Paynter: A photo editor, looking at a photo of women protesting, might say, “I’m not putting their pictures in the paper. Look at those dykes.” Anybody who’s protesting for women’s rights had to be a lesbian. This was during Vietnam, too, you have to remember. There was this gulf between people under thirty and people over thirty. You know, the “never-trust-anyone-over-thirty” thing.

Paynter: People didn’t speak to each other in the same newsroom. There was a lot of–

McLeod: Hostility?

Paynter: Oh, yeah.
McLeod: That is related to something else I’ve wanted to ask. We’ll get back to Gisela in a minute, is that’s okay. If they’re having those troubles with getting certain photos in the paper, or if photo editors are making those photo choices, did you ever have any troubles getting certain pieces of text in the newspaper? I mean, you mentioned that using certain terminology was difficult. But did you ever have to go to bat on any certain issues, or pieces of text related the ERA series?

Paynter: I did. I had to prove, and reprove, and reprove, and get yet another source on many of the issues where an editor would say, “You know, I just don’t believe that.” Or, “I don’t like that.”

McLeod: Do you remember anything specific?

Paynter: I’m trying to remember now. I’m sure a lot of it was to do with employment, because I remember going to labor people for backup on that because the editors didn’t necessarily believe it. I mean, they were concerned about equal pay. They weren’t paying women equally, either. So they didn’t really like the parts about equal pay. They wanted a lot more validation before I could say how much of a dollar a woman was actually earning.

McLeod: Like the comparison to every dollar a man earns, a woman’s making fifty-nine cents?

Paynter: Right. Right.

McLeod: I think at that time, it might have been somewhere between fifty-nine and sixty-two cents?

Paynter: Right.
McLeod: Did you find that true? You had a relationship with a reporter. Was he making more than you?

Paynter: Oh, sure.

McLeod: How much? Was it really 25 percent more?

Paynter: Well, he’d been there slightly less time than I had. So he wasn’t making dramatically more than I was, because I had a few years on him. But certainly, there were times when it was very open that they would just say, “Well, we have to pay the men more because they have to support their families.” Like women didn’t have to support families? It shouldn’t be based on that, anyway. What about single people? Weren’t they supposed to be paid equally on merit for the work that they contribute? Regardless of how many kiddies at home they’re supporting. So, those issues. There was an editor who had a military background, and there was a lot fear related to women in the military. They’d always bring up, “Well, what would you do in a submarine?” So if I wrote about anything in the ERA series that touched – and I did, of course – on any of those issues, I would run into a roadblock. I’d have to go back and re-source and drive it– I don’t remember actually, to their credit, having to take anything out.

McLeod: But you had to argue certain points.

Paynter: Just really trying to sell my case.

McLeod: And how long would it take you to write a two-thousand-word article? How long did they give you? Did you get a week?

Paynter: I think it was slightly more than a week. It probably went over a weekend. And then I know that Lettie and I, my assistant editor, spent an entire weekend at the P-I laying it out and working on how it would run and what the art would be, what pictures,
and what the copy blocks would be. We spent all day of Saturday and all day Sunday hammering this out, working with the people in the shop, and getting it up and running.

McLeod: Were you supposed to work on weekends?

Paynter: No. No.

McLeod: It was unpaid time you were working?

Paynter: I don’t remember if they paid me or not. But I mean, I didn’t care. I should have been. I’m sure we did get paid. We might have gotten overtime, I’m just not sure. But I’m sure we didn’t get overtime for the whole weekend.

McLeod: But it’s just a measure of your dedication.

Paynter: It was such a labor of love, for sure, for both of us.

McLeod: So I want to just go back. We had broached the subject of you meeting Gisela Taber in 1971. You interviewed a lot of people, and I want to ask you about some other people. But on the local level, Gisela Taber, she shows up in every newspaper. I’ve probably seen the most photos of Gisela in my research than any other woman who was active in the cause. She was speaking in front of people all the time. So what was she like?

Paynter: Well you know, Gisela was the perfect person for that groundbreaking role. By appearance and by tone, she was very non-threatening. She was a beautiful woman. Red hair.

McLeod: Oh, red hair! In the back and white photos it turns out dark, so you don’t know.
Paynter: Red, light red hair. And very soft spoken. And light skin. And she had an accent. She was German and had a very light accent. People were charmed by her. It was great. But she had a spine of steel. It worked beautifully because she was a mom. She had a little boy at the time, Andrew. So she was “okay.” She was a mom, and she was feminine.

McLeod: But if it had been Billie Jean King up there.

Paynter: Exactly.

McLeod: Interesting. So what did you see as her role? Of the many women and the many people and the many groups that were taking part, what was the role of the Women’s Council, and what did she serve to do?

Paynter: You know, I don’t remember a lot of the details about that. I know that she dealt with a lot of the state rules and regulations of how various laws and various regulations would be impacted by equality issues, and hammering that out.

McLeod: She talked about the hundred statutes, the changing of the language and things like that.

Paynter: Right. But I’m just, specifically I don’t remember exactly.

McLeod: Well it seemed like when I was reading quotes from her, they weren’t — how should I say — they weren’t really excitable quotes. They were more similar to your series on the ERA.

Paynter: Very measured. Very reasoned. Yeah. That put a lot of people at ease. I had to kind of dial myself back, because I would tend to be a little more bombastic.

McLeod: [laughs] I also find these pieces on the ERA very measured.
Paynter: Well, I had to be.

McLeod: Yeah.

Paynter: Of course, I wasn’t a columnist yet at that point. So I couldn’t write opinion. But you could tell, I’m sure, from reading them, where I stood. That’s another thing is that I’ve never really understood why people say, “Well, you have to be objective about—” I mean, you do have to be an objective reporter. You have to be sure that you’re presenting points of view, people’s fears and concerns and whatever, and people’s realities. But in the — not even the back of my mind, in the forefront of my mind in writing about the ERA — I’m thinking well what’s the case you can make against it. Equal rights? I mean, you have to bring up the potential problems and mechanisms and concerns people have, certainly. But how can you be totally objective about equality? I mean, isn’t it just the right thing?

McLeod: What do you remember about interviewing these women from HOME, Happiness of Motherhood Eternal, or HOW, Happiness of Womanhood, or the League of Housewives? These were Washington state anti-ERA organizations. Mrs. W. McCoughey and Mrs. Robert Young were organizers among others.

Paynter: Oh, I still remember that day so, so well. We had a little interview room off the city room. They came in, and they both had suits and hats on, and I think gloves, maybe. They saw me as the enemy, and were steeled, you know, and frightened. I mean, not frightened of me. But they were, I remember, wringing their hands or twisting their fingers. I remember that they would say these outrageous things. I remember that I was trying to make sure that my hand didn’t shake with anger, that I didn’t get angry, or to remember to have a measured response. My role was to get their point of view and evoke their guarded and unguarded response. That’s my role as a reporter, to make people relaxed and comfortable and let them basically hang themselves with their own thoughts, if they want to.
But I still remember the fear. They clearly were fearful. I felt sorry for them because they were so worried that the world was just going to turn on its head, that Women just wouldn’t be protected anymore. In a way, it reminds me, this is a little digression, but if you’ll humor me. There’s a line in *Inherit the Wind*, the play, and the movie *Inherit the Wind* where Clarence Darrow is arguing for teaching evolution. He says, “Yes, women, you can have equal rights. You can vote. But you’ll lose the right to retreat behind your petticoat and your powder puff. Yes you can fly in airplanes, but the clouds will smell of gasoline.”

There were a lot of people who felt like these women, the Happiness of Motherhood Eternal women, were fearful for themselves and their daughters and their granddaughter that they were going to be thrust into this cold, cruel world where they’d have no protections. And I felt sad for them.

McLeod: How much of a struggle do you remember it being to get House Joint Resolution 61, the equal rights amendment on the state level, passed?

Paynter: It was a struggle. It was a fairly tight, I don’t remember the numbers.

McLeod: I have it here, in November of 1972 it passed by 3,369 votes.

Paynter: It was tight. And I remember the jubilation when it passed. Because we thought, well, for sure the rest of the country would see the light, you know. I mean, for years later I was stunned that the national ERA didn’t pass, and never has. And you know, the arguments about well, we don’t really need it. Well, why not have it, though? Chicken soup couldn’t hurt, right?

McLeod: What were the parts that were in place on the state level, and you’ve mentioned a few, that made HJR 61 possible? Do you see yourself as having a role in having made it happen?
Paynter: I don’t know. It wasn’t me so much as it was the P-I’s choice to give such extensive coverage to this issue that helped with public education. Public education was at the seed of passing this law because it was a matter of getting rid of the red herrings and the fear and debunking the myths, and assuring people of what would happen and what wouldn’t happen. So to that extent, I think that we did play a role. In fact, I heard that from people who said that they had been on the fence, or they’d been afraid of it. I heard that they changed their mind because they saw that it was actually going to be good for their daughter or their granddaughter, or whomever.

McLeod: So, you were able to sway the undecideds?

Paynter: Well, I don’t know if it was me, personally, but I heard from some undecideds, yes, who had decided that it wasn’t a problem and that they were going to go ahead and vote. But that opposition was really entrenched.

Also, interestingly, it was the first time that I was aware of, and maybe it was the first time it occurred, that the churches were so organized against something. Now we’ve become very familiar with that. But at the time, there wasn’t the evangelical movement in terms of politics, in terms of having a real part in politics until this fight.

McLeod: Was the effects of the Mormon Church felt locally? Or what churches are you talking about?

Paynter: Well, the Mormon Church, to some extent, the Catholic Church. Certainly they opposed Referendum 20 and still do. Not so much church organizations as various church leaders. I don’t remember names, but people who spoke out in opposition and said that this was not going to be good for families. At the core of everything, it was always that was going to hurt families.

McLeod: As I was doing research on the ERA, I began to think about the spectrum of standpoints from which people responded to the ERA. I know there were actually groups that were further to the left than the ERA itself, and opposed it because it wasn’t far
reaching enough. We do tend to historicize it in polarized terms, but I wondered if there might have been something more out there. Did you run into a spectrum?

Paynter: I didn’t hear so much from people who opposed it because they didn’t think it went far enough. I mean, we certainly ran op/ed pieces from that point of view. There were people that I was aware of who did feel that way. But the spectrum I was aware of were people who were all for equality and didn’t buy into the pitfalls argument; people who were for equality, but had concerns that needed to be answered about how it would all shake out in the real world application; and then people who were very fearful.

McLeod: Can you tell me or reenact or remember any particular events or protests or rallies or speaking events that you covered that are memorable to you now?

Paynter: To me it wasn’t so much one or two striking interviews or events as it was the bravery and the heartfelt need and concern of the women I met in places like the U.W. Y (University of Washington district YWCA), where there was a lot of emotional electricity in the room when people would talk about issues, even about divorce. There were the older women who were curious about equal rights, but would stand up in a room, their voices shaking, and say “Well, I stayed married to this guy, and he hit me. But I stayed married. So why should you get a divorce?”

I remember the electricity of those encounters. They weren’t people with names you would know. They were people who were really in the middle of all of this change, and they were trying to figure out what it meant for them. People would shout at each other, and then at the end of a meeting, they’d be crying and hugging each other because they could offer each other support and exchange experiences, and maybe babysit each other’s kids. Then one of them could go to a rally because the other one could stay home with the kids.

I did, as I said earlier, participate in a couple of rallies, including the march that shut down the freeway to stop the bombing in Cambodia. There were a couple of civil rights skirmishes where I was in downtown Seattle, a couple of demonstrations that I went down to see and got tear gassed at one memorable moment.
Paynter: But the big events don’t really capture the essence of the ERA. It’s more about what I was talking about with these people who were just trying to work out what does it mean for my life, and what’s it going to mean to my marriage and to my job, and will I get more pay or will I not? That’s the bread and butter of the issue, those people.

McLeod: Do you remember, I’m sorry, this is not to contradict what you just said anyway, but do you remember Janice Niemi who was a founder of Washington State Women’s Lawyers Association?

Paynter: Yeah. And she became a judge later.

McLeod: She became a district court judge. I saw that you used her as a source for your series, and I wondered what she was like at the time and how you ended up interviewing her.

Paynter: Those people, Janice Niemi for one, and some others I can think of, were just so important in terms of being the voice of reason in an authoritative position, so that the readers wouldn’t think that this was a bunch of radical, ragtag people who were bomb throwers. Those were people in establishment positions with good credentials, people they trusted, and who could make a case for equal rights and show that it wouldn’t destabilize our society. That’s why those people were so important. Some of them did change laws, and led fights for changing ridiculous laws or punitive laws. But I thought their role, more importantly, was as a stable figure, a spokesperson who could explain to people that it’s going to be okay.

McLeod: There’s another question about the era I’ve wanted to ask you. That is, what was the impact of Watergate, which I believe broke in 1971, on who you were as a reporter, and how you were able to approach these people and ask these questions? People who might have been difficult to approach, I should say.
Paynter: Watergate and the reporting that Woodward and Bernstein did, and then others, really gave courage to reporters to question authority and not just accept the boilerplate answer. To probe beyond that, and not just take a release from Boeing or whoever and not question it. It certainly affected me. Soon after, in 1975 I started covering television, and covered television for sixteen years. That was my first role as a columnista, so I could then write opinion. That was the springboard for me getting the column that I ended up doing later, which was the long-term column that I did, because I really found my voice in covering television.

The reason I brought that up is I remember going to Los Angeles and New York several times a year to cover the networks and the news operations as well as the entertainment portion. At the time, two things were happening. One was that, in the ‘70s, when the networks were more of a force than they are now, they were starting to cover the very same social issues I’d been writing about. They were just starting to do TV movies about lesbian mothers. They were doing documentaries about a lot of the same issues that I’d been writing about. So that was great because I could use the TV beat as a way to get into those issues in a much broader way that people could actually relate to because they could see it on TV.

I wrote about women in the networks. Why weren’t there more women running production companies? I wrote about the Bullitt sisters who owned King TV. I did a series about women in television, both locally and nationally, and I interviewed producers and heads of network divisions. The Bullitts were the only women who were really in charge who owned a station: Patsy Collins and her sister Harriet Bullitt.

When I was in New York, or in Los Angeles, covering the networks, I and the other reporters were much more brave about holding the networks’ feet to the fire on questions of their programming decisions, because of Watergate. We’d seen the role model already. It was okay. It was, in fact, necessary to not take anything for granted. To not take their word, to really check, to go to the press conference prepared with notes so that you knew if they made a claim you could say, “Well, excuse me, but back in 1964, you did this. How can you explain this?” Any good reporter should do that, but I think we were even more energized to do that because of Watergate.
McLeod: I want to ask you, since we went to the national level with Watergate, I want to ask you about some of the women who you interviewed, national figures. For example, you interviewed Shirley Chisholm, here in Seattle, in 1971, the year she announced that she was running for president. I think she was the first black woman elected to the House of Representatives, was she?

Paynter: She was a double first.

McLeod: Yeah, double first. So you also interviewed these other incredible figures: Gloria Steinem, Flo Kennedy, Shirley Chisholm. So can you tell me about Shirley Chisholm, what was the occasion of your getting access and being able to interview her?

Paynter: She came to town for a speech, I believe. We knew she was coming to town, and I was thrilled to be able to interview her. She had a steel-trap mind, just a brilliant woman. A tough cookie, believe me. She’d been through the fires, and she was steeled for it. She knew what was coming at her. She had great wit, a great sparkle in her eye. She knew she wasn’t going to be elected, but she thought it was so important to break this ceiling, to get out there so that other people could follow her. In retrospect, I think why didn’t a man go and interview her? Why did they send me? They sent me because she was a woman candidate, and I was a woman reporter. Isn’t that cute? There were so many occasions like that that happened to me.

McLeod: It’s interesting. There have been candidates that we’ve known are not going to win, and we know that they know they’re not going to win, but they stick to their stump. Did she do that with you?

Paynter: She wouldn’t say, “Well, I know I’m not going to win, but I’m trying to make a point here.” She did the usual candidate thing of saying, “I think I have a good chance. Times are changing.” And, “This is the time to go forward with it.” And times were changing, but she was pretty pragmatic about it, too. She was so imbued with the importance of making it okay for women, and African Americans both, to be taken
seriously. She was dedicated to bring to the table the issues that didn’t get brought to the table by other people. So that was a great experience.

Flo Kennedy was a whole different ball of wax.

McLeod: Flo Kennedy, we should say who she was.

Paynter: Florence Kennedy. She was an incredible feminist speaker, author, icon. Very bodacious.

McLeod: Didn’t she stage a urination, on the East Coast, of women who peed publicly?

Paynter: Yes. She was a very close friend of Gloria Steinem’s. They were very close. I wrote a story about Flo; it was one of my favorite leads ever. I think it read, “The mouth of Flo Kennedy walked into the room followed closely by her body.” She was a quote machine. She always wore jaunty hats, and she was tall, statuesque, bigger than life in every way. She always had pins on. She wore pins all over, and she gave me one of her pins, which said, “Stop sucking and start biting.” That was her favorite pin of that day. [laughter] She was the opposite of Gisela in every way, in the sense that she made people afraid. But she was effective because she was so funny.

McLeod: She made people want to look.

Paynter: She made you look, and she made people aware of their fears and confront their fears. She would be so outrageous that you knew it wouldn’t really be that bad.

McLeod: Right.

Paynter: That everybody would be peeing.

McLeod: So what did her presence here do for the campaign for the ERA on a state level?
Paynter: Oh, well, I think it helped raise money, for one thing, which was really crucial. It helped get people out of their homes and activated and to see that there was a camaraderie, a sisterhood of people to join that would be fun to be around — to see that it wasn’t all dour and sour and people complaining and whining. That you could be outrageous and still campaign for women’s rights and get somewhere and have some fun doing it. People started to realize that women could be mobilized in a way that was energizing and fun and maybe even eventually good for networking and good for jobs.

McLeod: And when Gloria Steinem came, did she do so in collaboration with the Seattle chapter of NOW?

Paynter: Usually. That was way before Ms. I mean, she started coming for Ms. later, but originally she came out for NOW. She was an icon to me, just so articulate and thoughtful. In contrast to Flo, she was very gentle in the way she would say things. I mean, her tone. What she said wasn’t gentle, necessarily, but she was just laser like in pointing out the hypocrisies. And she did it in an entertaining way, in a readable or quotable kind of way, telling anecdotes that people could relate to. She has a great sense of humor. She’s very funny.

McLeod: I don’t think most people know that about her.

Paynter: No, I don’t think so. But I can still hear her laugh. She’s just got a great laugh. So those people are important for all of those reasons, I think.

McLeod: We didn’t talk about the Seattle chapter of NOW at all yet. Were you involved with NOW at all?

Paynter: Well you know, it’s interesting. I don’t know what the rules would be now, but in those days you couldn’t be so politically active when you were a reporter. I could write
about NOW, but I couldn’t belong to it. But I helped organize the NOW chapter up in Fairbanks, Alaska.

McLeod: How did that pass under the radar?

Paynter: I just went on my vacation. NOW became very active here. Soon it planted the seeds for women to get elected to office. It planted the seeds for what became things like Emily’s List later on. Before NOW, there was really no way for women to organize to raise money for women candidates, not really, unless they were fulfilling their husband’s term or something.

McLeod: Yeah, I think Emily’s List came around in the early ‘80s, did it not?

Paynter: Yeah.

McLeod: And that’s early money, stands for “early money…” something, I can’t remember.

Paynter: Early Money Is Like Yeast.

McLeod: It’s like yeast, because it…

Paynter: It will rise.

McLeod: Yes. Then there was Helen Sommers, who, as we said, joined the House of Representatives here in Washington State, she was the second president of Seattle NOW. So that did become a springboard, really, for her.

Paynter: It did, and for a lot of other people as well. It was the forerunner of the Women’s Political Caucus, or at least its activation here. I don’t know how long that’s been in the United States. But NOW was kind of the beginning for all of those things. It
taught people tools about how to organize, how to campaign, how to raise money, how to network.

McLeod: We’re about to wrap up, but I realized there were a few other questions I didn’t get a chance to ask you. We didn’t talk about your interview with Ethel Kennedy. I’m curious because Bobby was killed in 1968. I’d read that she had their eleventh child six months after his death. So she was three months pregnant when he was assassinated. You had mentioned that you had interviewed her during that era when you were interviewing other feminists, and I actually didn’t see her in my mind as a feminist figure. So I wondered what point your interviewed and in what context?

Paynter: I don’t know that she was a feminist figure. I mean, I don’t know that she would have defined herself that way. I think she de facto was because she was such a strong woman. And you know, Jackie’s image was one of beauty and fashion and decorating the White House and all of that. Ethel Kennedy was important for me to interview because she epitomized how — certainly she had money and power, which made her different from ordinary women who were trying to be activists — but she showed how women could be involved. She acted as a role model for women and mothers to be involved in things like children’s issues, like the Special Olympics. She showed that there were ways to be active and bring about change without necessarily becoming a Gloria Steinem or a Flo Kennedy. Again, it was about allaying fears. She was very effective, and very strong, but she remained behind the scenes a lot of the time. Her activism was in areas that people could swallow a little bit better, because it was for children, or for the handicapped. But it was important, you know.

When I interviewed her, it was very soon after her husband was assassinated. I’m trying to remember.

McLeod: Was she still pregnant?

Paynter: She wasn’t pregnant then that I could tell, no. I think it was in the year. They weren’t allowing any interviews because it was so soon after the assassination. So she
was at a bowling alley down at the South End somewhere. I knew she was going to be there, and I wanted to interview her. So I showed up, and she was sitting on a raised platform with Jim Whittaker, you know, the mountaineer?

McLeod: Oh, yeah.

Paynter: They were watching handicapped kids bowl. So he got up to go to the men’s room, and I slipped into his chair and pulled out my notebook and said, “Hi.”

McLeod: So it wasn’t it wasn’t a scheduled interview.

Paynter: Oh, God. It was prohibited!

McLeod: I’m sorry, I interrupted you. You said, “Hi.”

Paynter: I said, “Hi. I’m Susan Paynter from the P-I.” And I told her how great I thought this event was and how I knew that she hadn’t scheduled any interviews, but I thought it was really important that people find out about the Special Olympics. So we ended up doing like a half hour interview seated next to each other.

And when Jim Whittaker came back from the men’s room, he looked and said, okay, and he kind of stood next to us while I did my interview.

McLeod: Aren’t you smooth! That’s really great. [laughter]

Paynter: But it was a great opportunity to interview somebody like that. I mean, I got the chance through the years, especially after I started doing TV, to interview countless celebrities, and a lot of the newsmakers. I mean, Jesse Jackson and Muhammad Ali and all those people. But that one stands out in my mind because she was just so open, even though I’d been told no, no, no, no.
McLeod: After the ERA, the House Resolution 61, is passed here in Washington State in November of 1972 and ratified in 1973, what kind of changes did you see take place, at the workplace and elsewhere?

Paynter: It was very incremental. You know, we went from the fear that this was going to change everything to the fact that it changed very little at first. But, it was the important underpinning. It was what we needed to define just basic equal treatment and to allay fears.

Then, little by little, the first thing I was aware of was in the trades. As I mentioned before, women had to fight a battle with the unions. But they were able to get jobs in the trades. That had a big effect, both in practicality and psychologically, on people—to see women who were working with big equipment, women on road crews, women climbing light poles. At first it was treated as a stunt.

There was the inevitable “first” story. I always had to do the “first” story. The first woman firefighter. The first cop. The first lineman, linewoman. “What do we call her? Tee hee hee.” We got so sick of doing the “first” stories.

McLeod: [laughs] Why did it become something you were sick of doing, the “first” stories?

Paynter: Because it was so patronizing. I mean, that was how it was supposed to be treated. But I have to tell you that I, again, took the opportunity to turn it into what I wanted it to be. There’s a little digression here, but it serves as a model of what I did over and over again.

They sent me on a cutesy assignment to spend the weekend with the National Guard in Yakima. Oh, isn’t that cute, she’s going to ride around in tanks and up in a helicopter and watch their training mission, and stay overnight, sleep on a cot. You know, and all that. The Army was all for it because they thought, this is great, this is just going to be a puff piece.

Well, I ended up interviewing all these guys who had joined the Guard because they wanted to stay out of Vietnam. Then the Army changed the rules, and they were
going to go. And these guys were furious. They were not trained. They were being trained on equipment and in tactics that were almost outdated during World War II. They were going to be sent over there as fodder. So I wrote that, and the Army was pissed off.

So, again, with those “first women” stories, if you have to do them you’d just took it for what it was and tried to make some points with it. That was happening when I was still being assigned stories. That was before I was a columnist and I could choose my own. I didn’t get assigned a lot, but inevitably they’d turn to me if they had a first woman anything.

McLeod: In what year did you become a columnist?

Paynter: Let’s see, when my son was born? He was born in ’89. So, in ’91? I went back after I had my baby and did a little TV for a time. But I didn’t want to travel that much anymore. So it might have been late ’91, early ’92. I think ’91. They needed a columnist who could write news and opinion, and one of our previous columnists had left. I didn’t really want to take it on at first because I had a baby, a small baby, and it would be a huge commitment of time. But they felt that I could do it because I developed my strong voice covering TV issues. In other words, making the switch from being an objective reporter to doing opinion, which is a big switch, but I’d already done it, because I was covering TV. So it was a fast learning curve because I hadn’t covered politics or anything, really.

McLeod: What do you mean you hadn’t covered politics?

Paynter: Well, I mean I hadn’t been assigned to go cover the state convention. I hadn’t been a general assignment reporter. I had briefly, but even then I did mostly social issue stories that I wanted to do, stories about refugees and issues like that. I’d never been a the general assignment reporter who has to slog to all the water hearing meetings and the city council meetings, and go to the legislature. I had to learn all that really fast. I had to learn how the city structure works, and how it’s different from the county, and all that. So
I started doing that. I did that right up to when I retired. That’s when I wrote my most, probably my most controversial stuff.

McLeod: What were some of those controversial pieces?

Paynter: Issues like women being denied apartments because they were married to a battering spouse, and he might cause trouble at the apartment building, things like that. A woman being denied her fair share of her ex-husband’s pension because he was a battering husband, and he was a cop. If she reported him, she should have known that he would lose his job and his right to carry a gun. So therefore, she didn’t have any right to her share of the pension.

I wrote a lot about, oh, gee, gun control and abortion and Plan B and sex education, real sex education versus abstinence only.

McLeod: You wrote about Initiative 120, the repeal of Referendum 20?

Paynter: Right. Right.

McLeod: And that was a strengthening of the law, more or less, right?

Paynter: Right.

McLeod: My goodness. You’ve had quite a career. You know I didn’t realize you’d become a columnist later. I read this article “The Pendulum Stops on the Pro Side,” about the ERA. It’s an article, but I thought it was maybe a column when I first began reading because of your tone.

Paynter: Well, we used to do this kind of thing once in a while, usually if it was with an illustration, and you sort of knew that license was going to be taken.
McLeod: I wanted to ask you to read some of the beginning of this, “The Pendulum Stops on the Pro Side.” I thought it was a really comical beginning.

Paynter: Okay. Boy, I haven’t seen this for so long.

McLeod: [laughs] But it’s great, so don’t worry.

Paynter: Oh, good. I’m glad to hear that. “'In again out again, Finnegan,’ my father used to say. Finnegan must have been an absentee ballot counter for HJR61. The hotly debated state equal rights issue was in and out more often than a cat in potty training last week as county results dribbled in.”

McLeod: That’s great. And that’s in November of 1972 that you wrote that. And you said that you chose that tone because of the graphic, right?

Paynter: Well, no. It was kind of a collaborative thing. We knew that we wanted an opinionated overview piece about the struggle of this amendment. We wanted something with a little personality to it. Then Ray Collins, the illustrator, would usually do cartoons for things like that.

McLeod: Yeah. So you have a woman in the illustration, the graphic, holding a megaphone and she’s screaming, “We won!” And her husband, who looks like his been watching TV, is jumping.

Paynter: Yeah, he’s jarred off his chair. Ray did a lot of great illustrations for me over the years.

McLeod: I guess that illustration exemplifies that exuberation you described that people felt about the passage of the ERA.
Paynter: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. Then, fairly soon, there was feeling stunned that it wasn’t going to just go across the nation. I mean, it did in many states. We always thought if you just explained it well enough, so that people understood, then there wouldn’t be all these stupid fears, and the next state would benefit from our experience.

McLeod: It almost sounds like it’s a presidential campaign. It’s like, well maybe I can’t win the people on the far side of this issue, but maybe I can take the tack of educating the middle ground.

Paynter: Exactly, I always thought, especially as a columnist, that my most rewarding feedback came from people who started out not agreeing with me — people who didn’t even say that they’d changed their mind, but that they were now thinking about it, or that they hadn’t thought about it quite that way. I think that’s better than, “Oh, you’re wonderful,” any day.

McLeod: Do you have any thoughts as to why it didn’t pass on the national level?

Paynter: I don’t know. I really don’t. I have no idea. It certainly wasn’t because anything bad happened in any state that passed it?

McLeod: Did you report upon the International Women’s Year conference that was held in Ellensburg in 1977?

Paynter: No, but you know, that’s interesting. That was in what, ’74?

McLeod: ’77.

Paynter: ’77. The reason I didn’t is that I started doing TV in ’75. Interestingly, a precursor to that is that happened in 1974, just before I started doing TV. I was chosen to go to Germany with a group of twelve women from all over the world for the first International Women’s Year. It was a group called, “Internacciones.” There were two
women from the United States. One was a women’s studies professor from USC and me. Then the other women were from all over the world — Sri Lanka and the Netherlands, and all over. We traveled as a group with one German overall guide, and then different guides in different cities to compare the status of women in Germany with the status of women in our countries — issues like childcare and employment and equal pay, and how much time do you get off for maternity leave and things like that. So that was my International Women’s Year experience before the ’77 conferences.

McLeod: How did you remember the US comparing, or what were your thoughts when you were there?

Paynter: Well, certainly that they had it all over us in terms of childcare and maternity leave, as well. Oh my God. Much more generous maternity leave and childcare. They also were fighting low birth rate problems, so they were trying to encourage women to have babies.

But even more interesting to me than that were the nights we sat up all night talking with the other women on the trip. What was happening with women in Germany was fascinating, but to be able to sit and talk with a woman from Kenya, or Uganda, about birth control and about sex and female mutilation and jobs and everything was just, that was the icing.

McLeod: And you came back and wrote about that?

Paynter: Yeah. I did.

McLeod: That’s great. How do you think that the ‘70s impacted you professionally and personally?

Paynter: It was a time to forge yourself to be stronger. It certainly made me much more adventurous, much more willing to take risks as a reporter, much more impatient with the status quo and with taking mealy-mouthed answers and not questioning them. It gave me
my voice, which resulted in me being a columnist. It gave me all that background for all
the issues that I would revisit over and over and over through the years. Whenever I
would sit down to write almost any opinion piece having to do with families or women or
education or employment equality, same sex rights, equal rights to marriage or
nondiscrimination in the workplace, any of those things, I’d often come back to the
grounding I got in the ‘70s, and the issues I learned so much about.

I’m sure it changed me personally. I probably would have gotten a divorce
anyway, but I found that the marriage that I had made in 1965 with a perfectly nice guy
was just not roomy enough for stretching my elbows. I just had a lot more growing to do,
and a lot more that I wanted to do out in the world, and that that was not going to happen
within that framework.

I think my experience with the women’s movement in those early reporting days
gave me the feeling that I could go ahead and do that, and do it in a thoughtful way. Not
hurt people, but that it was okay, that I didn’t have to feel guilty about trying to be who I
needed to be.

McLeod: Great. Is there anything else you want to add?

Paynter: I know one. Even before Roe v. Wade, and before our referendum here, when I
did my research, I remember reading about Griswold. You know, the Griswold versus
Griswold case, which was in the ‘60s, right? That was the Supreme Court decision that
married couples had the right to use contraception. I mean, when you’re a young
reporter, and you read that there’s actually a reason to question whether— I mean, talk
about shaking your brain.

McLeod: It was 1965.

Paynter: See? And that’s the year I got married. 1965.

McLeod: And you had that editor question you about birth control.
Paynter: That’s the year I got married, and that’s the year I went to work at the Bremerton Sun. So my journalism started then, and that’s when I had to show that I was on birth control to get a job. Here was this law, were they even allowed to use birth control within their own bedroom? My God!

McLeod: [laughs] My goodness. A lot of these things were so normalized then. And with forty years, fifty years of perspective, we see how absurd some of these things were.

Paynter: But then there’s still a lot of absurdity going around, even now. I had learned, by the way, or at least it was widely known that the Seattle Times was working on an abortion series when I was starting mine, and they squashed it.

McLeod: I meant to ask, and I’m so glad you brought that up, about other journalists writing at the same time.

Paynter: They killed it.

McLeod: Why? Do you remember?

Paynter: Too controversial. The Times was much more conservative.

McLeod: Oh. And did you have reporter counterparts, any female counterparts at other papers who you spoke with?

Paynter: Not that I spoke with, no.

McLeod: Were they considered the competition? Would you not speak with them?

Paynter: Oh, no. It was more that nobody was really doing what I was doing, that I knew.
McLeod:  So when you were covering events, it was you and some guys who were also covering ERA or rallies or protests or marches?

Paynter:  I’m sure there were women from other papers. I’m sure there was somebody from the Times. They just didn’t manage to get a series on abortion written.

McLeod:  And in the spectrum of those reporters, where would you place yourself and the series that you did?

Paynter:  I think that the P-I devoted far more time and space to this than anybody I was aware of, by far. It was interesting, the confluence of civil rights reporting and equal rights reporting. Because you have to remember that women actually had to fight for a position of respect within the civil rights movement. So people think of them as the same now. But you remember the famous Eldridge Cleaver quote about, “What’s the position for women in the Black Panthers? The only position is prone.”

That made it an interesting challenge because I was so committed to writing about civil rights and race relations issues, but it was clear that it wasn’t a great place for women always, either. You think of it now as being oh yeah, if they’re for civil rights, they must be for women’s rights, but they aren’t.

McLeod:  Well sometimes the way it gets sliced is that there are only so many pieces of rights in the pie, right? And the idea is that we can’t have everything happen at once. So one group tries to trump another.

Paynter:  Well, we’re having that again now, aren’t we, with that presidential election? [laughs] I guess the women will not be first. Not that he shouldn’t get elected but, you know, we’ve waited a long time.

That’s it.

McLeod:  Okay. Thank you so much.

[END INTERVIEW.]