

**Interviewees: Joan MacLeod**

**Interviewer: Elizabeth Fitting**

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The following interview was conducted as part of the Nova Scotia LGBT Seniors' Archive's Lesbian Oral Histories Project.

*EF: Wonderful. So, we always start off asking if you can tell us a little bit about yourself. You know, like how you identify, and you know, when you were born and where and how long you've been here and that kind of thing. And I should say if I'm double vaxxed and if you prefer to take off your mask, I'm totally find with that.*

JM: I would prefer to take off my mask, and I too am double vaxxed, *and* in fact, today, I'm getting my booster. My third dose, I guess they call it because I'm immunocompromised. That's why I'm allowed it a little early, just a little early, but also, it's always really good to have it like a couple weeks before I go to Mexico too because then you're protected

*EF: Absolutely.*

JM: Yeah. I noticed – I don't have COVID, it's just [*EF: I know, the weather*], yeah. So, a little bit about myself. My name is Joan MacLeod and I was born in 1948, which makes me currently 73. Seventy-three. And I was raised in a lovely little village on the north shore of Nova Scotia called River John, which is still very dear to my heart. And I left there after I left high school to go onto university at Mount A, where I went for three years. All that time I never even thought of being a lesbian. I, you know, it never occurred to me that that was a possibility. Funnily enough. And then, so I was straight, and then I went from Mount A, I came here to Halifax, where I worked as a social worker. I was hired as an unqualified social worker, and I worked for the Children's Aid Society from 1969. The first job I'd ever applied for. That was a different time, a different era. Much harder to get jobs now. In 1969 I got a job as a social worker for the Children's Aid Society of Halifax, and we were, at that time, headed, our headquarters were on South Street. And we had a fleet of Volkswagens, so I soon learned my way around Halifax. Going to visit foster homes. I had to- I went and looked at- I was in the field of sponsoring an adoption. It was quite a nice time, and I made some nice friends.

But I don't know, somehow or other I got the travel bug. I started skiing, I started skiing and I – I'll never forget this guy. It was in our apartment, and he said, he said, I've just come back from Europe, and I said, oh, I'd always loved to go to Europe. And he said, well everyone says that. You get a passport and you'd go. Oh, is that what you do

[*laughing*]. So, six months later I was on a plane by myself with my backpack and my skis heading for the Alps. And I thought, you know, looking back, it was very adventurous of me. In 1974, I was what, 20, 24, anyway, early-, mid-twenties and I took off, and at that time, you know, prices were lower. Like inflation hadn't hit and I had, my dad helped me buy a car which, I'd also sold that, so I had the money from that, and I'd saved my money. I'd got a cheaper apartment. I planned this. I got a cheaper apartment so I kind of had my rent, so I was able to save. At that time, and I don't think people would ever do it now a days, but I was able to bank half of my income and live on half of it. I mean it wasn't a huge income, but it was cheaper to live then, I guess. So, I had a little bit of a reservoir of money, so I was able to live in Europe for 18 months on my earnings, on my savings, and buy a Volkswagen. I was one of those hippie Volkswagen van people [*laughing*].

So, I bummed around Europe. I had a wonderful time, really and I met all kinds of people and in those days there was no email, so communicating with people, it was just kind of a fluke that I met this American guy stationed in, oh I think Frankfurt. I travelled, I was in Germany quite a bit 'cause I kind of liked, I kind of liked Germany. I picked grapes in the south of France, I went to Greece. I loved Greece. I came back to meet an old boyfriend, and we promptly broke up which pissed me off, but anyway, that was, so – yeah, yeah, I, and Amsterdam was a wonderful city in those days, you know. Hippy city. And so I bummed around Europe and in, and then I got a job that first winter in a ski resort, in Austria. And I was a cook mädchen and a kinder mädchen – I helped with the children and the kitchen and I learned a little German although, it was kind of interesting, because I mean my German was not great. I'd never studied it in university, so it was, taking it up, so at first German, it was baby language German. I was learning, I was learning from this little child [*EF: Right, right*], “eggie” isn't an egg kind of thing [*laughing*].

So anyway I – so I ah, so I lived there for six months and then when the time came up to leave there, in the meantime my parents had come over to visit me. I met them in Paris and brought them back to that spot. We'd rented a car. That was kind of fun. And then, I, when it was time to leave Austria when the spring came, I went off to Amsterdam and bought a Volkswagen van. And I'd left my stuff in Austria, came back and picked it up. And then set off. And I wanted to see Scandinavia. And I picked up three other travellers – two Americans and a French girl, and we – to share the gas – and the expenses because Scandinavia is very, very expensive, even then, it was very expensive. So, we, we toddled around – yeah so it kind of did, saw about, no, ten different countries in that time. It was quite fun. And then in the end, I was saying about meeting this guy from Frankfurt, and he, I had met this Australian guy in Austria, and we'd been together for a bit. You know, it was the 70s. AIDS hadn't come in then. And

he had written this guy in Frankfurt to say he'd got a place to live in London. I don't know, we used to write snail— we used to write post cards, and we used to write letters at that time, and when you're travelling, you could send them to the American Express poste restante and you'd get mail and it was, it was kind of a weird time. We would never even think of that nowadays, would we. It seems so outmoded does it not? But anyway, anyway this guy in Frankfurt gave me [a man's] address in London. The only person I knew, and they had kind of done this kind of funny deal to get this apartment. It was kind of hard-to-get apartments. And, so I set off, and from Stavanger. I took the boat across to, is it York? Way up north in England. And I was riding on the wrong side of the road, on the highway, it was a miracle I got there. But anyway, I was, I had about a right-hand drive, not I had a left hand drive vehicle and it, it was a right-hand drive roads. You know, like the roads were not [EF: Yeah] yeah, yeah. Anyway, I managed to make it to southeast London to where my friend [redacted] lived. And meanwhile he had another girlfriend. It didn't matter. But he actually had a spare room in his flat which I, I was welcome to rent for nine pounds a week [laughing] pretty cheap.

So, I set off there. I got a job. First, I worked at McDonalds, I worked in different things, but I initially got on, on with the local authorities as a social worker there and in the meantime, I also met my, the person who became my future husband [name redacted]. Anyway, so there was a mad love affair that went on for, why, I suppose 10 years. Anyway, so, and I have a daughter, [redacted], who is now 40. So, we're not talking yesterday. It's amazing I have a daughter that's 40. Anyway. So, so there I was in London. I'm not talking much about being a lesbian am I? But there I was in London, and I was very involved with [my future husband] and then I thought, well, you know, maybe I better leave 'ex he's married. So, I set off in my van — no I didn't, I tried to sell my van. I sold my van, but the guy hadn't given me the money, which is kind of a weird thing. Like why would I let him have it? But anyway. So I, I set off to Spain. My whole idea was to go, to get, to go to the Azores where you can get a ride on a sailing boat across to North America. And then I was going to go ski the, the powder. I never did get to ski the powder in Colorado. I was a skier, remember. And then I had skied a lot that winter. Anyway, and then, and then I was going to make my way up and go to the 1976 Olympics. That was my plan. Anyways, so what, when I got to Madrid, the guy said, "no, I'm not going to buy your van. There's something wrong with it. You didn't tell me about it, so, I'll give you your money back. Ah, no, I'll give your van back. And here I am in Madrid. It was kind of a bit of a stupid arrangement that some— but anyway. I don't know what possessed me. But anyway, so I had to go back and get my van back, and I had gone to the Embassy, because I had no money. I was relying on this money, you know. And I had gone to the Embassy, and he said, oh, why don't you call your parents and go home. You know, this is not a shameful thing. I said, no, I want my van back at least. That guy ripped me off [laughing].

So, this guy in the Embassy was very helpful. I think he let me stay there for the night, and I hitchhiked my way back to, back to England. And got back and went back to the same place. I still had a room [*laughing*]. My backpack. And my ex [husband], helped me get the van back and fix it up, and yeah, we sold it again. But, in the meantime I thought, well I might as well stay the winter, so I did. And of course, I, got kind of more involved with him. That was '75. So then, and then it's spring and you know, what am I doing, this guy is married, he's got two kids. Like what is wrong— like, hello! You know, grow up, you know. You know it was a mad love affair, but you know, it was not— so I went back home that spring. Or that summer of 1976 and I did get to go to the Montreal Olympics. I bought a car when I came home, bought a little car, little Volkswagen and toddled up there and spent some time with my sister.

And then, in the meantime, [my ex-husband]'s marriage broke up, and so, I went, came back to him. And of course, we were homeless initially, so we lived in different places. Richmond, different places. France and stuff. And eventually we got an apartment. And then, later, we had [our daughter]. And then later again, I was not happy. You know, I guess, I had become a feminist. I had been very unenlightened. I was very traditional, I think, in my views. And as I became aware, you know, the horrors of the nuclear family and the oppression of women, I got really disgruntled. And my husband, I'd thought he was such a charming, sweet man, but I, I realized he was just like any other man. He was, you know, he did his own thing and, you know. You know it was, after a long time I realized it was a lot of hormones involved there [*EF: Oh*]. And yeah, so anyway. So, we parted. He was very unhappy. I left him twice before it stuck. I left him once and went back. But anyway, so I, so we had been together ten years by this time. So, I left him in 1985 when [our daughter] was only four. In the meantime, we'd been coming back to Canada every summer, every other summer or so, you know. We'd come back when she was one, and we, I came back with her alone when we were babies. I worked as a social worker in London too, yeah. And, so, one of the things that helped me to change was that I, I met a woman who was also American — she's passed now — who was an assertiveness trainer. And she taught me about it, and I joined her business and I became an assertion trainer too, assertion trainer too. And I, we got contracts with loc—we got big bucks for that. It was kind of a fun time. I used to, you know, I used to have a regular places I'd go and train and you know —

*EF: You said assertion?*

JM: Assertion. Assertiveness, assertiveness. Yeah, have you ever heard of it?

*EF: No.*

JM: Well, it's a, well it was big in the '80s. It's a behavioural based program and it's done in groups and with role playing, we can point out that, you know, you can be – you could state your needs and ask things in a more direct way that women have traditionally been trained to do. Which is basic – I was trained to be whiny, or manipulative.

*EF: So this came out of, this came out of your feminist, kind of* [JM: Well it, that part –] *conscientiousness –*

JM: Well, that helped me to develop a feminist conscientiousness [*EF: Oh, I see*] partly, it was all, it was together. So I was, I became kind of well know actually because I think it was kind of neat that I was Canadian, because it gave me an edge, like you couldn't type cast me, you couldn't classify me, anyway, so, you know I did have a lot of contracts in that. And I left social work for a while doing that and then I ended up going back doing part time social work when [my daughter] was small and did a little bit of both. So, um, so what happened. Well, after I left [my ex-husband] I had, I was living in a, it was, it was called a squat, but it was a kind of organized squat. Squat is an empty house that people take over, but the council allowed us to have it. It wasn't like, we weren't breaking any laws when we had this society that provided houses. We worked for a housing society. And this was a fourteen room, beautiful mansion on a park with a really big garden in the back, with something, I said, fourteen grown trees. It was beautiful. And it was a walled garden. It was a nice spot. And, and the house was like derelict, and we had to, my friend and I, my friend [*redacted*] and I, actually repaired the slates on the roof on the three-storey house with nothing. We didn't even know how to do it. I'd come home, [*inaudible*] anyway, so finally they did hire a roofer. They thought maybe that's a little bit dangerous for, you know, volunteers to be doing that.

Anyway, we fixed up this house and we lived as a family, and it was a wonderful time. It was called Sunnyside. Had its own name, Sunnyside. And my, it was, one of my best friends, [*redacted*], and I, and [my friend] invited her sister to join us, and we'd met through a baby group for young moms, you know, and [my friend]'s daughter, had a daughter the same age as my daughter, and we shar-you know we'd babysit to each other, and we'd share and stuff, you know. And then, and so we had this group, and everyone just loved it. And we'd have wonderful parties and, you know, it was, and [my friend's sister] was an artist, and, very artistic. And then we would have different other people come and go, but basically there were the three core people, or the four core, [my friend's future partner] was in there from the beginning. Four; [my friend's sister], I, [my friend] and, [*redacted*] and her sister [*inaudible*]. Anyway, so, we had this, this, and we would join, we would cook meals jointly. It was really a fun time [*EF: Mhm*],

communal living. It was only afterwards that I realized, that I think [my friend] was in love with me, but I wasn't really ready.

*EF: Mhm.*

JM: After I left [my ex-husband] I still had seen, I still saw a couple of guys for a while. But I think, [my friend] and I are still very good friends. Yeah. She married [our other roommate]. But I think she did love me, and I think she still loves me. I think I love her, but it was, it was just, my timing was off I guess. I wasn't quite ready. Yeah. And, so, eventually I started seeing women, and you know there's no going back, is there [laughing].

*EF: Now tell me, how did that happen? Like did you, how did you know you were interested, or what did, and, what did you know about lesbians, you know.*

JM: Well, I tell you, one of the things that happened to me, and I still remember that so clearly. And I don't know why I was in a hairdressers, but I was in the hairdressers, and because of this communal housing thing we had a lot of people around. They would, they were volunteers who helped us with different building things and there was a couple of black guys who hung around, and of course they were flirty and stuff, and I remember of them kind of approached me and I said, I'm lesbian. And I said it without being lesbian. But once I said it, it was an ah-ha moment. I thought, oh, that's why I'm not interested in men. I felt like, you know, I felt a bit like dogs sniffing around me. You know, like men, if you're a single woman you're targeted. I just felt so put off by that. I thought... the F word off [laughing]. I didn't want anything to do with men anymore. I thought, yeah, I just went off men. I mean, I just, I'm done. I'm done with this. Right. The sex was good at one time, but you know what? Moved on to other things. I have way better relationships with women. Way more, and it took me years. The other thing about that, that I think is important to recognize, is that as a woman growing up in the, in the culture of Nova Scotia, in small town Nova Scotia, women were your competition for men. My mother, I remember my mother saying all is fair in love and war. You know, if you were a single woman, you were dangerous because you could get their man, and so I grew up in a culture where women had to compete with each other. Like, a little like Downton Abbey, you know Downton Abbey, all that intricacy, and all that manipulation. You know that, that was a culture that really I grew up in, so it took me years to learn to support and value and cooperate and love women. Really love women and not feel like they were a competitor. Isn't that sad? It is sad.

*EF: So, growing up did you hear the word lesbian? Or –*

JM: Oh gosh no. You never said the “L” word. And still, we don’t say it. Like, I’m *[laughing]* on my high horse here. We never knew, I said I never knew there was such a thing. And gay was really wrong, of course, you know. And, but the, the, Sunday, last Sunday I went to a group called OWLS. Have you heard of it? Older Wiser Lesbians. And I made a point to tell everyone I knew, I’m going to OWLS and that stands for Older Wiser Lesbians and they hahaha’d, you know. You know it’s, people are still scared to say lesbian. It’s, it’s misogyny. It’s nothing but sheer misogyny, in my opinion. Sorry. Now that my eyes are opened, I’m telling you.

*EF: So, when you were growing up there were no references to, you know, somebody who was different and you...*

JM: Oh, yeah, well, not ‘til I got to university. There was a woman that someone said, I think she might be lesbian, and I thought, oh what’s that? Like I, I didn’t understand that. But you know, as not, as a child, no, no. It was like a very homogenous village. I don’t even know if I knew any gay people. Or a gay man, or lesbian – I don’t, I’ve never called myself gay. I think that’s appropriating the male language. I’m lesbian. And why is it such a frightening thing to say? Because it threatens the patriarch – sorry *[laughing]*. Misogyny, misogyny, misogyny. You see it everywhere. You get so tired of it. Anyway, *[laughing]* where were we?

*EF: So, you met somebody?*

JM: I met several different people, yes. I had quite a few little lovers there. Well, you remember, don’t forget. I’m talking about the ‘80s *[EF: Yeah]*, what was going on in the ‘80s. A lot of dissent. A lot of, a bit like now, a lot of campaigning. Campaign for nuclear disarmament, Greenham Common. So, we went to Greenham Common several times, two or three times. My friend *[that I lived with]* was actually arrested for having bolt cutters. Breaking in. Anyway, we won. We won that war. They got rid of the nuclear, the cruise missiles. But it was always, a ridiculous premise anyway. Yeah, so there’s the campaign for nuclear disarmament, there was, the other one was, there was an abortion rally, anti–, you know anti-abortion was coming. You know, we had to protest that. I was in a group called Babies Against the Bomb ‘cause they said, well, we’re trying to be campaigners but we have young children at home so why don’t we meet in the afternoon when our children are napping and then we can, so it was Babies Against the Bomb. And so, so we went to rallies and then, and then I was involved in anti-racism work, and, yeah, so there was a lot of campaigning.

I was, when *[my daughter]* was just a baby there was a terrible incident happened in *[inaudible]* that really shocked us all. It was a terrible, terrible thing. It was called the

Lewisham 13. There was a group of young people in a house party, and loud, and they wouldn't stop. And they had loud music. And they were fire— the house, they were firebombed [EF: *Oh, god*] and they have never, ever charged anybody. It was called the Le— it was just before [my daughter] was born. It was 1980-81. They called them the Lewisham 13. And the police, they always thought the police were behind it. Yeah. It was a sad, sad thing. And, it was, I lived in a very multicultural area in the, southeast London. There was a lot of Jamaican people there and in 19-, what year was that... god, that was before [my daughter], must have been '77-'78. They allowed a march of— what were they called? They were a fascist group. They were, they were a racist group. I can't remember what they were called, but there was a march through southeast London — my area, which is largely black area — of these people, and they, they were protected by the police. The police were protecting — what were they called — United Front or something. It was, sounded like [EF: *Yeah, maybe*] you know, United Front they might have been. Anyway, I went on that mar— I was there on my bicycle and I remember people throwing rocks, and I was said “No, no, no!” like, take the rocks, “Don't throw rocks, don't, no violence!” and so I had all these rocks. My husband said, “You're walking around with rocks in your pocket in a march, come on Jo,” like, [laughing] I was disarming them. But I had [laughing], but I think 'til my dying day I'll always, I'll never forget the, I did see a policeman. I think they were, anyway, rocks went through the windscreen up above the police van and it was, and it was attacked. Yeah, it was sad. That guy never worked again. I think he was blinded. It was a police officer.

*EF: When you came out in that environment, did you feel supported?*

JM: That was earlier, I guess, I'm saying, that was, that would be about maybe. Yeah, I don't, did I feel supported? Well, my husband was furious. I don't know if I felt — I felt supported with my communal, my communal house, yeah. Yeah, you know. One of my first lovers was a black woman, which was, yeah, it was interesting. And, yeah, she stayed with me one Christmas. She was there with her two kids. And we had, had we were very supportive to her and then she attacked us for being racist. We gave her kids all these presents, it was sad, you know. Because she, yeah, she, I think she was just very, not very stable, and someone didn't look at her, they were going through a hard time and then she just. . . Oh gosh. That was sad. So, did I feel supported? I guess so, I mean I was, yeah, I did, I mean yeah, I did, yeah.

*EF: And how about when you came back to Canada —*

JM: Oh, I'll tell you what happened.

*EF: What happened?*

JM: I'll tell you what happened. I belonged, it was, what happened was, we formed the Lesbian Mother's group. That's where I got my support and I made good friends in the Lesbian Mother's group and I'm still friends with some of those people today, and it helped my daughter too. 'Cause my daughter was, she was unhappy about it. Yeah, so we had a, I had good friends, [redacted] and [redacted] and they had a daughter [redacted], who was just a little older than [my daughter], and, [my friend's daughter] said she ended up coming over here twice to visit [my daughter]. [My friends' daughter] is also a teacher now. So, yeah, that was, that was where we got our support. We formed this group and we met in each other's' homes, and we actually even got a little bit of funding from the council, which I think we got criticized for in one of the right-wing papers. But we did get the funding from the council for Lesbian Mothers group, and we went on holiday together. We went off to this retreat for the weekend and, with these girls were like, "We never had wellies before, we bought new wellies". They were all excited [*laughing*].

And we went off to this, and there was another place, it was kind of, we used to call it Lower Shaw Farm and that was a very good, supportive place, a very healthy place. It was a, they did become a weekend retreat and it was very reasonable, and you could actually, they got, knew us and liked us and they liked our energy, and we would, we would help them put it on, and then we would get a reduction off our fee, or maybe we didn't pay anything and we'd be workers, and it was, it was, it was an old converted dairy farm. The facilities were not grand, but it was just a really fun time. They would do all kinds of weekends. They did, I didn't do basket making, but we did a mushroom, where we'd walk around the woods. We'd go there for Easter, and we'd do egg rolling. I don't know if you know what egg rolling is. It's an English thing. They boil hard boiled eggs and run them down the hill, yeah, yeah. Anyway, egg roll, and we did, we did Easter bonnet. I made an Easter bonnet which they kept for the longest time, which was a hen [*laughing*] out of paper mâché. And we had a lot of time there. And then, the best weekend we've ever remembered, and [my daughter] agrees, was when we played a games weekend. We played games the whole weekend. And we played a murder mystery game, and we, and people kept dying, pretending to die, and you had to figure out who the murderer was. And that was just one of the many games. Oh, and we had, the first evening we played name – it was about 50 of us. And the first evening we played name games the whole night. A number of different series of names games and by the end of that evening everybody knew everybody's name. It was just the most remarkable weekend. Yeah, the place doesn't run weekends so much anymore, but it still exists. People that we know still live there. It was a really good time in our life when we would go to Lower Shaw Farm. It was in Swindon. It was a couple miles drive west of London.

*EF: So, were you in London for most of the '80s?*

JM: Yeah, yeah, all of the '80s.

*EF: So you, so like the AIDs crisis and – ?*

JM: That was later I think, wasn't it?

*EF: Eighties to early '90s.*

JM: Oh, yeah, was it. Yeah, I wasn't so involved in that. But that was more like when I came back here. I came back here in '93.

*EF: Right, yup.*

JM: Yeah, '93 I moved back to Canada. I have some, whole bunch of literature about that. I was thinking maybe it's like archival, I don't know.

*EF: Yeah, if you have stuff to donate to the archives, they'd be interested.*

JM: I do, I do, but you know what? Right now, so what's happened with us, this is, this is, okay. [My partner] and I have been married for over 20 years. Flash forward, fast forward. We made a big lifestyle change in our retirement. In that we have, we had two residences. We had a house and a cottage, and we have, over the last ten years invested in the cottage, although it's still not twelve months of the year. It's still seasonal, it's still three, it's still like ...

*EF: Yeah, you can't use it –*

JM: Three months, it's still three months of the year. Still three seasons, but not four [*EF: Right*]. And so, so this is the first, this is our new step forward since we sold our, our village house, which meant divesting in tons of clutter and, we sold our village house. Some of that clutter is in my storage locker. We have, that I haven't sorted through yet.

*EF: Right.*

JM: But I didn't, papers are the things that I didn't throw out, you know. I've got rid and sold ton of stuff. But anyway, so this is, this is year one of our new lifestyle. Isn't that

exciting? And so, this year in November, December we're living in Halifax. January, February, March we're going to be in Mexico. Next year, who knows. We, we're thinking of having a trip to the west coast because I've never been to the west coast. I've been east, I've been always to Europe. So, we're thinking of going to the west coast. And I have a niece in Australia, and I long, I long to go back to Britain for a longer period of time. But, right now, there's too much COVID. But we were there for a wonderful trip in 2019, before Covid. Oh my, we had such a lovely time. Five weeks. Visited old friends, yeah.

*EF: Okay. So, you came back to Canada.*

JM: I came back to Canada, in 1993.

*EF: And was that to Halifax?*

JM: No, no that was to River John. I had, don't forget, I had an elderly mother. I had an elderly mother by that time who was 80 in 1984. 1994. She turned 80 and I wanted to spend some time with her in her last years and support her. What's wrong with that? So, and I did. And my partner ended up moving in with me, [My daughter] and I, moved, lived with her. She was at that time wintering in Florida, so it was like, it was, and then we had a cottage, so we were like, you know, musical houses. But anyway, but you know, I was there for her, you know. And, I was, I think I was the closest to her really. I was the youngest and we just got on. My sister was always critical of her. And my brother, well, my brother, my brother. But anyway, so yeah, we got on. And in 1995, I moved back here in 1993 with a woman, [redacted], and her two dogs, and we had a cat, and [my daughter]. It was, [laughing] the person at the airport just about tore her hair out when she asked how many dogs and cats, anyway, it was funny. Anyway, in, but that didn't work out. Yeah, [my former partner] had really, you know, it's maybe a little unfair to say, but she, I would say it's honest, she had some mental health issues. And she couldn't handle it. And, so, she and I broke up, and then she got together with another, a friend of mine whom I introduced her to, who is forever angry with me for doing that [laughing]. I tease her, about it, so you're grateful –

*EF: I think, bit [inaudible] –*

JM: But anyway they, yeah, that wasn't a happy relationship with her, for her. For [my former partner] either. Anyway, [my former partner] ended up moving back to Britain. But, anyway, in the meantime, we had broken up. She was very, she was kind of a, a bit of an angry woman. She had a lot of issues. So, so I was on my own with [my daughter] and then that's when we moved back in, into my parents, my mother's house. My

mother, meanwhile, was in Florida. So, we moved back in that first winter in '93, '94. And so, I said, in '95, but '95 I met [my current partner] and [she] moved in. And, so –

*EF: So, what was it like being back home but now you're a lesbian?*

JM: Well, that's an interesting, it's an interesting that you should say that, because I thought, how in the heck am I ever going to meet any other lesbians in rural Pictou County? Like, what's going to happen?

*EF: Mhm.*

JM: But don't forget, I was coming home every two years. I was coming home every two years, and guess what? There was a network. Although it was hard to find them, but anyway. It was called Wild Womyn Don't Get the Blues. Did you ever hear of it? Oh, that's got to be written up in the archives. That is just so important. [Redacted] was one of the instigators. You must have heard of [redacted], have you?

*EF: Mhm.*

JM: Yeah, anyway. So, and she was a, oh, I fell deeply in love with her at one point [laughing]. I invited her to come over to England. Anyway, lucky escape. Anyway, so, there was this network of women and I heard about them. And they had a camping trip in the summer, so I made sure, I was home when that camping trip was on 'cause it was always on the bank holiday in August. And, of course, in England school goes on 'til the end of July. So anyway, it would be naturally time to have my holidays anyway, it being August. So, I would go, I went to that. I left my daughter with my mom and my sister, and I would go to that. and I went to that in 1987 and then I met other lesbians. Ah Hello! And I could network. And then I made, I went in '89 and then I think I went in '91. So I was the furthest away of anyone who was coming to that event, but I could, I gathered up some camping gear and I [laughing], my mother must have had some. I don't know what, I bought a tent, maybe, I don't know what. I don't think I would have brought all that stuff with me, but my parents had a lot of stuff. So, I yeah, so that's how I –

*EF: How many women would go camping?*

JM: Oh, on that annual camping weekend?

*EF: Yeah.*

JM: Oh, there might be fifty to a hundred. Oh yeah, there'd be a lot, yeah. And there was no, the last, the three times I had been it was in this wonderful field, it was nowhere, it was like a field in the middle of nowhere that [the organizer] knew the, she rented a cabin near there and she knew the guy that owned it. And, and he let us have it for not, I don't know, for very little. And there was this stream on it but there was no water, no facilities, we'd run a generator for power. We brought in a, we put in a, we put up a marque of some sort, but we all cooked our own meals and stuff. We probably had a potluck and then a variety night one night. I remember reading a poem one night at it. And people sang, and yeah, there was always a Saturday night kind of event. But it was just a wonderful thing. A wonderful, wonderful event. So that was how I kind of made contact with other lesbian women in rural Pictou County. But you know what, Pictou West is really rife with lesbians. It's cheap land. A lot of people from there. More and more coming all the time. So, anyway, so that was 19, so by 1993 when I was, when I was coming home, I knew some other lesbian women. Yeah. So that was important. I don't think, I don't know what I would have – I think before I met them, I remember one time I was home; that's right, and I came to the big city. I must have begged mom for the car for a night off. I came to the big city for the night and then that was the time there was a bar named Rumours [EF: *Mhm*], and I went to Rumours, and I think I was by myself. I don't know if I was with anybody. I didn't know anybody or anything. But I walked in there and it was like, it was the old theatre, remember, it had been an old theatre and there was a bar, and there was a guy on the bar. What's wrong with these Canadian women? Why have they never heard of separatism. Why do they got a man serving at a bar for – I was outraged because we were separatists.

*EF: Right.*

JM: Like at one time there was a big separatist movement [EF: *Yeah*], well of course you can't do it, it was, it was, you know, it was a big movement. And we had a weekly time, it was called Women at Reds? It was a socialist workers club, and they would let us have it for one night a week – Wednesday nights was Women at Reds. Women at Reds? Reds – r-e-d-s – Reds [EF: *Okay*]. Women at Reds. And Reds being socialists, workers. Yeah. And so, we would, that was a fun evening. We'd have drinks and socialize with friends and yada, yada. But we, it was always women there. All women, like, like there wouldn't be any men there, you know. Like, I had friends who were radical, radical, radical separatists, feminists and you weren't really a feminist, you weren't really a lesbian if you'd ever even once had sex with a man. So, you know, you had to be pure, a pure lesbian, you know. I mean, some, a little bit, a little bit ridiculous, but, you know, there you go [*laughing*].

*EF: Were there any other lesbian or LGBTQ organizations that you got involved in?*

JM: In London?

*EF: No, here in Nova Scotia?*

JM: Here in Nova Scotia. Well, I was busy earning an income as a single parent. I didn't have much time for that kind of thing. Well, of cour— and I met my partner and we, and we got together. No, I don't, I mean I'm talking about Pictou County. There's not much, in fact, the only LGBT organization in Pictou County was one I created. So that we could get together regularly [*EF: What was it?*] called the Birthday Club [*laughing*]. And it started and, we used to be good for having parties, we had a lot of parties. We'd have, you know, mostly private, so, but anyway, we had a party one time and I, I'm a great game person, I like to play party games and get people socializing and talking and bringing out the shyer people and stuff, and so this particular game was about our birthdays. I, you know, you put your hand up if your birthday was at; well, it turned out there was almost a birthday every month. And I thought, you know that's kind of interesting isn't it, that there is that much variety in our birth dates. So, I said, well we should have a birthday club. It was twenty years I ran it. Twenty years. And it was just getting together in a restaurant once a month. I'd send out an invitation. Got everybody on the list. And you know, there'd be anywhere from six to twenty people come, and anyway. And the last time that I did, I did it was in October; they gave me a bouquet of flowers. They, a beautiful arrangement of, of flowers [*EF: Very nice*]. That's sweet, to thank me. That was very sweet. They lasted the longest time. Yeah, so that was, that was kind of my creation. When I went to OWLS the other day, which in my opinion, my opinion, not very good because they get together on 11:30 on Sunday. Now some of us go to church. I'm a church goer, and I think, and poor Lori Crocker's a minister, like, why have this thing on Sundays? Anyways, this OWLS was at 3:00, but when I went there, I said, I said something which is, oh I got the idea from you, I said, "What?" [*laughing*]. That's kind of funny. So yeah, so someone else is carrying that on now. Someone has taken it over.

*EF: Right. So, so are there any, do you have any stories about what it was like to be a lesbian in the '80s in Pictou County, or, sorry, in the '90s, early '90s, in the '90s?*

JM: Well, I have to tell you the story about my coming out to my mother because, oh — what I didn't tell you was that, while I was still living in Britain in 1984, my father died very tragically. He was, he had, he was lucky in some ways in that he had retired very early. He was only 57 when he — he was a businessman so could, you know, retire. And he was sport fishing with friends, and he drowned. Because he wasn't wearing his lifejacket. It was just ridiculous. He had, he was sitting on his lifejacket. Anyway, he died

of hypothermia, anyway, in 1984, so it was kind of, it was a tremendous shock to all of us. I remember coping with, by telling everyone I knew, “you know my father just died.” You know, I just could not believe it. So anyway, we were on the next plane home. They made sure we got on, my daughter and I. In 1984. And we came back for that. So, we stayed for a month or so, I guess. And so, then my mother was a widow, you know for over twenty years, yeah, even longer. But she come through well with it eventually and she ended up even having another boyfriend at one point. And he came over to Britain. The last year we were there, she and [her partner] came over. It was kind of nice for her.

Anyway, what was I going to say, about coming, oh yes. So that was '84 so I was still with [my ex-husband] then. I was with him 'til '85. So, it must have been when I was here in '87, or something. '84 we would have gone; you know we used to go every other year, we used to come back. So, it might have been around '87. We were picking raspberries. Mom and I were picking raspberries up in, I've a property in River John. I have to go back a little bit. We were very strong United Church people and my parents had been to the conference in '88 when they had voted in favour of lesbian and gay rights, so, intellectually and religious-wise, they were kind of like, oh, yeah, maybe this is right, you know. Oh, we, how do you argue that? You said, what about your own les – you know, and so, so there was some, a little glimmer of hope there. Anyway, we were picking raspberries and, and by this time I had only been talking about women in my life, you know, and so, my mom said, “You know, Joan” – she's pretty astute my mom – “You know Joan, sometimes I think you might be, like a lesbian.” And I said, yeah you're right mom, I am. And, [*laughing*] and she said, we didn't drop the raspberries or anything I don't think, but she said, but she said, “but that's not what God wanted, what's God's will” and I think, you haven't known me many years – and I said, well how do you know what God wants, you know, are you, do you have a direct line to him or something?

But I have to tell you, the other thing that happened that was also positive, also part of Why Womyn Don't Get the Blues, is that there is this amazing woman who moved to River John in, earlier than that, to take over, after [a local doctor] died, she took over the medical practice, and that was [one of the Wild Womyn's Weekend organizers]. And she was a butch, absolutely stunning, strong lesbian and my mother used to write me letters. At that time, we wrote letters back and forth, and that was one of the things I tried to keep. Like I have found, in, when cleaning up the house, I found all these, I found old letters that had been kept. I haven't gone through them all yet. But I did find letters from my girlfriend written in '61 when she was in school, telling me about all our classes. My girlfriend had left and gone to Ontario, and we would write, and I finally said, and this summer she was home and we read them, we read them, and they were

hysterical, but anyway, that's an aside. And, but my mom had written me a letter when I was in England saying that there's a new doctor, [this Wild Womyn's Weekend organizer] whose, who's moved to the village, and they say she's a 'lesbinian' [laughing]. Oh. Oh dear! And they say she's a 'lesbinian' [laughing]. It was so funny,

*EF: So that was before she asked you if you were a lesbian?*

JM: Yeah, that was bef – yeah, I don't know, I'll have to figure out the timing there. I'm not, yeah, it was before she asked me, but it was, it was before maybe, maybe it was before I became lesbian. I'm not sure, yeah. But I remember falling really deeply for that [doctor]. Oh my god I was panting after her – she's, she is quite a woman, quite a woman. Anyway, she's a, yeah. So that was, and I even invited her to come to England to see me, but anyway, I'm glad I fell out of love with her too, because she would have been a piece of work [laughing]. Lovely woman, but needy I guess in some ways, yeah, so. So, where did we get to?

*EF: So, you came out to your mom. That's how your mom came out, but what about the, and we were talking about like the experience of being lesbian in Pictou County in the '90s. What about the church? Because you mentioned you were a church goer and United Church was supportive. Can you talk a little bit about, you know, how that was, did you take time off from the church when you came out?*

JM: Oh, oh, I'll tell you when I took time off from the church. All the time I was in Britain I didn't go to church. I couldn't find, well there was no United, there was like, the only, the few times I would go to the Anglican church, it was like Catholic, and I, Catholic has always been, not an anathema to me, but I, I just, that Jesus on the cross suffer, I don't like, I can't understand torture. Like I never, I never really liked the – [my partner] is, was a devout Catholic. But she's become a United since then. But, no, I took a break from the church in all the time I was in Britain, and, and, I also became more of a Wiccan, and I still celebrate, and, no, I shouldn't say still. I, so I learned to do the Pagan festivals and understand them and have rituals, and I love it. And, so, I feel like I am Wiccan and Christian. So that's okay, I can be both. No one says I can't. But, just in the last year I've started making a point of celebrating the six, the six different times of the year. And so, we'll have a little, we'll have a Solstice ritual and I have, I have pared down my little, my little things to this size so I can take it to Mexico with me, you know. A feather, and you know, represent the elements, and I have a really good ritual book, and this really nice little, yeah. So, my friends that I'm going, I'm going to Mexico with another lesbian couple. We rent a house together, and we're really, really good friends. And, anyway, they love, they love me leading in this. They're doing, we try to make time. Even it it's not quite on the day of the Sols– it's near about, like we did Samhain like a week early

or something, but anyway, it's – so anyway, that's part of my spirituality that's very important to me too. And I'm just, just kind of going back to it and honouring it and developing it. I used to be much more practising when I was in Britain and I had friends who were really strong, but anyway.

But, so that's part, but what happened was, it's interesting that you said that, what, so I didn't really go, I didn't go to church when I first came back. And then one time, I remember going, and I was kind of late and I was, and then I went and sat down and there was a woman who said to me, "Hi Joan" And you know what? I felt so touched by that. I thought that woman has known me all my life. It felt like, oh – there's someone who's, when she says hi Joan, she knows who I am, she knows me as, from me as a child. It felt so comforting to be back in that, the fold. I'll never forget [the doctor I had a relationship with] saying hello to me, and so, and being very gracious and pleasant in saying that to me, and so. But anyway, I still didn't go very much, but [my partner] was a church goer. Remember I said she was Catholic, and my mom wanted to go to church, so [my partner] started taking my mom to church, 'cause mom wanted to go. And she'd get all dressed up, and you know. So, [my partner] kind of, so mom and [my partner] got to really like what the United church was offering, you know, and so, and like now, we're like, we're you know, we're right in there. Like we're doing [*laughing*] all the committees and the [*inaudible*] and the, fortunately there hasn't been so much work lately because of COVID, but anyway.

Yeah, yeah. In fact, one of the things that I left when I left, one of the things I divested myself of was one of the fundraiser things that I, it was a lot, it was a lot of work. It's called FundScrip. It's, you buy, you sell gift cards and it brings in money for the church, and, I'd done it for ten years. I was, okay, enough, enough. And so, someone did take that over. But that is one of the things I have been very involved in in my community is community work. Various different community work. And community work can be thankless and annoying and time wasting, but someone has to do it. [*laughing*]. So, I'm, why I say community work is that there is an organization that kind of runs, at least it kind of – the River John Community Action Society, and for about three, or maybe four years [my partner] and I were the joint secretaries of it, and then we stepped down. And then we weren't really getting anyone to kind of be chair, and anyway, I stepped up as chair a couple years ago, but, now that I'm going away I've stepped, of course stepped down, and we've had to get someone else in, but anyway. It's, one of the things, one of the – a new project is getting a sidewalk for the village. That's a new project, but our previous project was developing the waterfront. Get access, so it was like a park, and a dock, and having that built, getting grants. It was a lot of work. Not that I did it all, but you know, we had a lot of volunteers doing it too, but we had, we have an accessible waterfront now which we never had for years.

*EF: Mhm.*

JM: And it's right by the bridge and it's kind of nice for boats to dock and stuff. Small. It's really tiny, but you know, it's just a, it's an idea. So that was one of the things that was my passion was community work [*EF: Mhm*] and it kind of burned me out really. It was just too much, I did too much. And one other project, along that line, one of the projects on that is a little small community newspaper. And I haven't let that go. I'm the editor of a newspaper. It was 32 pages the last one – and eight pages colour. And we get, and it's local news, local babies, local this, local, local stories about the past, and I wrote some of the stories, and we collect stories and it's just a sweet little newspaper. It's just sweet. And we sell enough advertising that we make money. And it's a project of River John Action Society.

*EF: Right.*

JM: So, anyway, so that's me and the community part. Now that's not really, you know we haven't, I haven't answered all your questions. I've skipped around a lot.

*EF: Well, is there any, so, okay, so you felt accepted in the United Church community when you started going back with [your partner]. You felt like, as a lesbian, you were accepted there?*

JM: Well, I'll tell you who got me accepted more than anybody. [My partner]. When they have a church supper [my partner] would just be right in there. She's a better, [my partner]'s very practical, and she's very good in the kitchen, and the older ladies of the church said, [my partner]'s a good worker [*laughing*]. I'm too busy talking, I have other skills. I'm the socializer and the getting er together. We all have different skills. Anyway, oh that [my partner] is a good worker, so she was very much in there, and it wasn't long before she was taking over the kitchen. People wouldn't make a decision. No, you do that, you do that, warm this up [*laughing*].

*EF: But you never had, like a real homophobic experience where somebody said no don't come to this church, or you're not part of the community, or –*

JM: Oh, not in River John. No, I was too well known. Our family was too well known. My family was prominent in the village. They wouldn't dare [*laughing*]! My father was a merchant. And also, he did have a, the sideline is, he was, he had an undertaking business too. But he was a merchant and sold business supplies and it was quite successful. And he also dabbled in real estate. So, he did very well in his life, you know, he was a good businessman. And my mother was a teacher. And she did go back and

teach some after we were in school. 'Cause in those days when you got married you had to give up your job. As a teacher. Sexist. Misogynist, anyway, whatever. It's everywhere. Anyway, so, she went back later and she did used to do some student stuff. She like teaching, and so, and my dad would, yeah. So, I don't think, I don't think they – I just feel like I am part of the establishment. I don't think they would dare. And then, of course, [the lesbian doctor I knew] was, you know, she was a doctor and everyone looked up to the doctor. And if she could be lesbian, then hello, you know. She paved the way for a lot of us, yes.

*EF: So, I guess, I'm just wondering whether any other stories about your experience being lesbian from this time period that you think might be interesting for people who want to know about Nova Scotia in the '90s.*

JM: Gosh, I'll have to think about that one. Yeah, you know what I think we need to do? Is a reminiscent group.

*EF: That's a great idea.*

JM: Because I know one time, we were together and we were saying, remember that... and then it would be, oh yes, and what about... especially, a reminiscence group would be really good. 'Cause it sparks other memories.

*EF: Mhm.*

JM: So, for example, for example. I came from being in England, from camping in England and we'd have a little fire wherever we're camped and so I would go to the Wild Womyn and I would make my little fire in my campsite, and [my friend], whose my dear friend, and who I'm going to join in Mexico, would come over to me and say, has, does the word fire ban mean anything to you Joan? [*Laughing*] 'Cause in England it was always raining. It would never be that much of a risk in England. You're not allowed to have a fire. But, like, I thought I could get away with it, like, she wouldn't smell the smoke? Hello, anyway. It's in the annals of the, Wild Womyn history, it's one of the ongoing jokes - and Joan would always put a fire and [my friend] would have to come over and tell her to put it out [*laughing*] because it was a fire ban. Anyway, that was fun. Yeah. One year, I took my daughter, actually the year that [my friend] was over here – [*redacted*] my daughter's friend, girlfriend – one year she came over to visit [my daughter]. I think, was it the first year we were back? It must have been, yeah. It was in '94. We came back in '93, was it '93 or '94? No, '93 [my best friend/former roommate] and her husband and the two children came over, so it must have been '94 [my friend] came, and we went to Wild Womyn. And that, they decided for some reason that we

could take children that year, or girls maybe, but anyway, whatever. So, we camped out, so that was fun. I don't remember much about it except that, I think they thought it was fun.

*EF: Neat!*

JM: Yeah. And I took her to Cape Breton. She loved Cape Breton.

*EF: Well, this has been really interesting. I'm just wondering maybe if you have, if more stories occur to you, or you know, we can have a follow up [JM: Okay] and I think I'm going to mention to the people who are organizing this oral history project your idea of a reminiscing group [JM: Yeah] I think that's a great idea.*

JM: Yeah, okay. So, you're interested in the stories of the '90s particularly?

*EF: Well, I mean, I'm just saying that because that's when you came back when you were out.*

JM: In Canada?

*EF: In Canada.*

JM: But what about the stories in the '80s when I was in England? Oh, I see, you're interested in the Canadian history more. [EF: Yeah] Yeah. Well, I mean, you know, one of the reminisces, you know one of the things that would be a really good focus of the oral history project would be those Wild Womyn events, 'cause they happened, you need to talk to [the lesbian doctor/Wild Womyn's Weekend organizer]. [Redacted]. And she also founded, she also founded the New Year's dance. We used to have a New Year's dance and I ended up taking that over too. But, oh, but the Wild Womyn project, the Wild Womyn Don't Get the Blues stopped, sadly. I was gutted when I heard it wasn't going to happen anymore. 'Cause it, I don't know if I could have come back to Canada if I didn't, if I hadn't been able to connect to, with lesbians. And I don't know how I would have found them, if I, yeah, so, yeah, that was kind of important.

*EF: Well, thank you so much for your time.*

JM: You're very welcome. It's been fun.

*EF: It's been an honour.*

JM: I hope I haven't taken too much of your time.