

TEMPE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT  
Tempe Historical Museum  
809 E. Southern Avenue  
Tempe, AZ 85282

Project Director:  
John Akers, Curator of History

Narrator: DOROTHY COOPER NELSON

Interviewer: LISA K. MILLER

Date of Interview: March 28, 2001

Interview Number: OH - 165

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### Biography

Dorothy Cooper Nelson was the first woman to serve as a councilwoman for the Tempe City Council. She was elected to two terms, in 1966 and 1970. As the wife of a Tempe city manager in the early 1960s, who was killed in a plane crash after three years in that position, she felt it her "calling" to serve the city on the Council in his stead. She feels her greatest accomplishments on the Council was planning for and building the city hall and the library.

Born in Indianapolis, Indiana, Dorothy Cooper Nelson attended San Diego State College and moved to Tempe in 1961 with her husband and three children. She married her second husband the year she ran for City Council and became the mother of two stepchildren.

## BEGIN TAPE ONE, SIDE ONE

Miller: This is Lisa Karen Miller for the Tempe Historical Museum Oral History Project. Today is Wednesday, March 28, 2001, and we are in the home of Dorothy Cooper Nelson. Dorothy, can you start by giving us background information on yourself—where you were born, educational background, and so on?

Nelson: I was born in Indianapolis, Indiana, and my family moved west when I got out of high school. Subsequently I was able to attend San Diego State College for a couple of years where I met my husband to be. He was interested in being in city government. His ultimate goal was to be a city manager, so he spent a good part of his life applying for jobs as city manager and taking jobs that would eventually lead him through to being a city manager. He worked for San Diego County; he was the first trainee for city manager in the city of [unintelligible]. We moved from the San Diego area to Fresno, California, where he went as the deputy public works director. They also came up with the city manager form of government, and he then became the deputy city manager. He was there for about seven years, or maybe shorter than that, and then we moved to Tempe, where he became the city manager.

My background with him, of course, was his wife and mother of two children. He was city manager for three years, and he was killed in a private plane crash. So having gone through this particular interest and dedication towards city government and being involved, it occurred to me after hearing him say it throughout the years about getting good people to run for city council that I might be able to fulfill this job. So, that is what led me to run for the City Council of Tempe.

Miller: Successfully, on your first try. Besides the city council, what other Tempe civic or social organizations do you remember?

Nelson: Well, there weren't a lot in Tempe at that time.

Miller: And this was what year?

Nelson: 1961 when I came here, and of course, I was a mother, and I was active in the PTA, and I was a member of the Alpha Kappa chapter of Epsilon Sigma Alpha, which is a national social service sorority. I was an active member of my church, but I was a young mother and that's mostly what we did—be a mother—in that day and age. Other than that, I didn't have any other outside organizations that I belonged to.

Miller: You talked about your husband's influence leading to your interest in local politics. Was there anything in your childhood or upbringing that might have led to that interest?

Nelson: Other than the fact that I've always been interested in people. I was always trying to organize something. Organize a club, which I did in high school. A group of our friends decided to have our own club. That's about all that I can really think about that....

Miller: The essential skills for politicians....[Laughter] What would you count as your greatest achievement, either personally or professionally?

Nelson: This one I had to think about a little bit, but I did think that as a child of the Depression in Indianapolis going to high school, I took a college preparatory course. This is three years of language, English and history, and all the things that it really took to get into college, but never thought I would ever get to go to college. When we moved west to California, I worked for one year and found out that you could go to San Diego State for \$250 a semester and \$21.50 for your books. That is unheard of in Indiana. I really think that that was about the greatest thing that I got to do, just thinking that maybe, maybe....because there certainly wasn't money in my family to be sent to college. You went to high school, and you went to work at something or other.

Of course, I am a mother.

Miller: Yes, another big accomplishment. Can you describe the social and political climate of Tempe during your tenure? Talk about what some of the key issues were then.

Nelson: The key issues were certainly the redevelopment of the downtown and the library, and what we were going to do about that. As far as the political climate, most of what I can remember about it is that there were two prominent people who were going to run for mayor, and if they both ran, they were going to cancel each other out. Finally, I don't know at whose insistence or encouragement, the one decided that he wouldn't run, and therefore that allowed the other one then to get the votes.

Miller: Who was that, do you remember?

Nelson: Yes, I do. That was Rudy Campbell, and the other person was John Moeur. John Moeur had been mayor before.

Miller: Was he the son of Benjamin Moeur, the doctor?

- Nelson: Yes. His grandfather was the governor. It's hard for me to keep track of all the people and their relatives, anymore especially. Those were the two people, and that took care of that dilemma.
- Miller: How was your family life affected by your Council membership?
- Nelson: Of course, it became extremely busy. At that point, I did have five children, three of my own. I had gotten remarried the same year that I got on the City Council. I was married in October of that year, and I had two stepchildren and three of my own. But I think it had a positive effect on my family. I had a very supportive husband. He ran my campaigns the next time that I ran, and he was excellent at that. So other than the fact that I was busy, I think they were all pleased to have their mother being a member of the community....
- Miller: Did your kids like to get involved in some of the activities?
- Nelson: Of course, we took them wherever we could take them, but they were in high school and had their own interests.
- Miller: The next question was, Did you have help raising your children, a supportive husband and family?, which you just said you did.
- Nelson: I didn't have any outside help. I did have some housecleaning help from time to time.
- Miller: Do you think that you and the other women who served on the Council have made some unique and separate contributions? In other words, did you as women offer some special insights that a man perhaps could not?
- Nelson: Well, I think every person is truly an individual, man or women, but perhaps women have more understanding of people and their desires and are able to listen to them more.
- Miller: A general feeling I have gotten from some of the other Council members is that women had more of an insight for the social issues, that they were involved and willing to work on those. What is your fondest memory of service on the Council?
- Nelson: I think the fondest memory is that we did dedicate the city hall and the library, and since I had run on that platform, it was an exciting time to be a part of. Then we did hire one of the finest city managers that ever was, Ken McDonald, and he set the tone for the city and its progress and how the city just ran well.

Miller: How does exactly the city manager work with the mayor and the council? What is his role in that?

Nelson: He sits obviously with the Council, and he does at the direction of the Council. After the vote comes, he does what the City Council would like. He carries it out.

Miller: You give him the vision and he makes it reality.

Nelson: And, of course, he has the day-to-day operation as far as the Council. It is a very difficult job. You have seven people, and they have to placate all seven people. If they're going to be good at their job, that's what they're able to do. And Ken McDonald was. We had another one who Ken McDonald hired, Jim Alexander, who was the finance officer, and he became a city manager—a fine man, just able to do that kind of a job. You've got to really have the personality to be cut out to do that. I understand that this Will Manley that was just appointed said that Ken McDonald was one of the people that he emulated. So kudos to him if he's had some contact with that because it can't help but help him in his job.

Miller: Did you encounter any stumbling blocks or great difficulties during your Council service?

Nelson: I truly didn't. The only things that would disturb me were the politics of the moment. My husband says I am not a politician. It would disturb me when we couldn't all seem to come to an agreement. We had a disagreement with the city hall. I thought we were all together, and then there was a 4-3 vote as to whether we were going to put that city hall in downtown Tempe. Somebody just changed their thinking completely and got a couple of other votes to go with it. And so it made a fuss, a fight. Those types of things did disturb me immensely. They were hard to take. But that must be the story of a lot of things.

Miller: The year that you took office, a charter form of government was adopted in Tempe. How did this affect how the Council operated?

Nelson: I think that this was when you did deal with your city manager and you weren't supposed to be out dealing with the rest of the staff, that anything you wanted to have done was to go through the city manager. I didn't participate in any of that because I came there underneath this charter form of government. That's really what had changed was how we would do day-to-day business; it would be done through the city manager.

Miller: Made it more streamlined, logical....

Nelson: Right. I think people had to learn a little bit about that, but it worked out

extremely well.

Miller: You mentioned already that you were instrumental in building a new library. Can you tell us more about that?

Nelson: I can tell you about the fuss with that. All of this was supposed to go into the downtown area, both the city hall and the library. But Elmer Bradley, who was the mayor at that time, decided that it really should go at Southern and Rural. In fact, that's where he wanted the city hall to go. So, as a compromise, we determined that the library would go at Southern and Rural, and that was not a bad decision. It was a good decision. That was the biggest headache whether we're going to do it, where it was gone to go.

Miller: You were also involved in the new city hall in 1970. How did this affect the downtown development?

Nelson: I felt that—and there was that controversy where it was going to go—the city hall truly needed to go in downtown Tempe because I felt like, if the city didn't have any faith in their downtown and put their city hall there, where were we going to get....

Miller: Doesn't look good.

Nelson: No, it doesn't when you're developing your downtown if the city hall were to be moved out, and there was talk about that. That was my biggest (I guess I have to say) "fight" to keep it there where I thought it should be. It does need more parking, I have to say that. [Laughter]

Miller: Was there also some controversy about the design? The upside down pyramid.

Nelson: Oh yes, it has become a showcase. The architect was hired. I'm sure his name is known, Michael Goodwin, and he hadn't had any work from the city so our mayor at that time was Elmer Bradley, and he thought that we ought to give the Goodwins some business. So we did, and then they came up with that design and the mayor thought that was ludicrous. He didn't like what they had come up with. Square footage-wise it was too expensive and wouldn't house the offices. With that in mind, and we were just about ready to build, and if we had stopped with the design and gone back and started all over with another architect, we might still be waiting for the city hall to [be built]. We had a real conflict over getting that building.

Miller: How do you view the changes that have taken place here in Tempe over the time that you've lived here?

- Nelson: I view them as everybody else does, some good and some bad. I think most of them have been good. I am truly pleased about how the city has developed and continued to do...I was still on the Council when we were talking about the Rio Salado. It was in that stage that it was going to be bigger, and some of the other cities didn't desire to participate. I really didn't know if they would ever get going. So I am pleased that I am still here to see that.
- Miller: It was 25 years ago, you said, they started talking about that on the Council.
- Nelson: Yes, it came first from ASU and then off to the City. I remember we used to go around...The legislators would come out and spend a weekend with us, and we would take them on bus tours, and take them to dinner, and different things like that. I remember discussing the fact of what the Rio Salado might do for the area.
- Miller: I imagine it was hard to visualize what it would actually look like when you are talking about all these ideas and trying to convince people to do it.
- Nelson: I had lived in San Diego when the Mission Bay project was just beginning. I used this in my talk to the legislators when they would come on these bus tours and say that we had seen that in San Diego. It used to just be swamp area that you couldn't hardly get your car through, and how they had developed that over there. So, I could envision something like that happening. Not that we had a swamp area or muddy area or drainage problem, but I could envision it myself.
- Miller: You say that in 1966, which was the year you ran for Council, this is the year for women. As a pioneer of sorts, being a woman in politics, do you think that was an accurate assessment, and have opportunities for women in local government increased since?
- Nelson: I certainly think they have increased. I know that for a fact. There have been many City Council women to run since I ran. Someone has to be first, and I just happened to be here and thinking about it and wanting to do it. It is interesting to see how many women have run. In just recent years, we didn't have one, but now we have one. For several years we had two.
- Miller: In the Sixties, do you think there was more of a climate in Tempe with the women's lib movement that people were more amenable to electing a woman? That trickled down to the local level?
- Nelson: I truly don't know about that. I know my name... in the political arena you do have to have a following. You have to have some identification, and my name was very well known in the community, and of course, the community was much smaller. I just had it going for me in that respect.



Miller: It is probably a lot more difficult to campaign these days and more costly with a larger population.

Nelson: Oh, yes. Some woman was telling me, who was thinking about running for City Council, but she doesn't have any following. She doesn't have any background where people would know her. You just have to have that.

Miller: Yes, that's the feeling I got from the other City Council women I've interviewed is that they came to that position not strictly through politics but through community service. They had been involved in a lot of other things in the community so that they did have those connections.

Nelson: You've got to have name recognition, and that's mostly what I had because my husband had been the one that was in the forefront with the city. He was extremely well-thought of, too. The second time around it was a little harder because we maybe hadn't pleased everybody even though we had done the things we said we were going to do. I had to work really hard. That was the year I have 20 more votes than Harry Mitchell did, or he had 20 more than I did. There was the dark horse. No one thought he would—at least I didn't—that he was going to win. It's interesting about politics.

Miller: Do you think you would have run the first time had your husband not been killed in that accident?

Nelson: I doubt it. It was, really, I felt like a calling. I just had that feeling that I could contribute something from what I knew. And I think I do. If I had anything coming into it, I think I had that. The way to get things done is to listen and see what's being projected, and then you're always going to compromise.

Miller: You said in 1966 that rapid growth was one of Tempe's major problems. Do you think Tempe has grown wisely since, or would you rather have seen it take a slightly different direction?

Nelson: No one likes the traffic, but I don't know what we could have done to have changed the growth. We had a problem with the fact that Chandler—and this is one of my disappointments—had annexed some property that allowed them to have leeway into the freeway, and that's what cut us off down here at Ray Road so that we couldn't even go any further south. So, we're landlocked, and you can only grow so much. We only have so many roads.

Miller: Do you think you'll start growing up next?

Nelson: I think, yes. That seems so farfetched to me coming from where I come from, but

I think it is. I think the downtown area is where it's going to be, too; well, it already is.

Miller: What is your fondest memory of service on the Council?

Nelson: Well, I would think it is the dedication of the city hall and the library. Those were such positive times when we accomplished something. I had a good eight years on the City Council, and I am glad I left when I did because those were big things that you could do and accomplish, the things I was involved with. Not much had been done with the city. It was just beginning to grow, to really grow, so our accomplishments were really noticeable. We had good times doing it. Now some of the fusses that they have are kind of mundane, and not as exciting certainly as the things I was involved in.

Miller: Do you have any favorite stories about Tempe or about the Council?

Nelson: I can't think of anything.

Miller: If someone is listening to this tape in 100 years, someone is doing research on Tempe, what would you like them to know about yourself, about Tempe, about the Council—anything?

Nelson: Being a member of the City Council is a great service to the community, at least, most people think of it as that way. It's not necessarily going to be a stepping stone to higher political office. It's very fulfilling to accomplish the things that take so long to get accomplished since there are seven people involved.

Miller: A lot of the other Council members I've talked to said that Tempe, in comparison with even other cities in the Valley, is a place where, if you really want to be involved in the community, you can be, and you can see the results of your involvement, and that people don't use Council membership as a stepping stone to higher things. Would you agree with that?

Nelson: Yes, I would. I know so many outstanding people in this community that—maybe they've been on the school board—I'm thinking of one in particular, Virginia Tinsley. Right now we are working on a project for the Garden Club, the Tempe Garden Club, which I've become a member of. She was on the school board, and I know she's involved. And then there's Juanita Harelson, another member. She was in the legislature, but she was a school teacher before that. I consider it a privilege to have lived in Tempe and to have raised my children here. Even though they don't like some of the things that have happened, the growth and whatever....

- Miller: It must be very strange to see your hometown grow up around your ears.
- Nelson: I have one son who doesn't live here; he lives in Colorado in a little, tiny town. When he comes home, it is difficult. He talks about going over to the Botanical Garden, and he said, I used to ride my bicycle over there when I was a little boy. Those are the kinds of things you wish you didn't have to happen because you remember when. I think it is good they got to live here. It has so much—the university, the camaraderie in the community. I got here when people were really close, and they invited you in to be a part of what it was they were doing. I hope newcomers are finding it out that way.
- Miller: It is probably easier to get involved in community service when you feel that connection with the community.
- Nelson: Yes, I felt at home right away here.
- Miller: Is there anything else you would like to add? Any closing comments?
- Nelson: I hope someone 'way down the road can understand and have the same appreciation that I had when I came to Tempe and decided to really make it my home, that they'll be enthused and think positively.
- Miller: I'd like to thank you again, Dorothy Cooper Nelson, on behalf of the Tempe Historical Museum

END OF INTERVIEW