

THE ELEANOR ROOSEVELT PROGRAM

December 8, 1950

Description: In the opening segment, ER and Elliott Roosevelt respond to a listener's question about the obstacles that married women and mothers face on the job market. In the interview segment, ER interviews interior designer and decorator William Pahlmann.

Participants: ER, Elliott Roosevelt, William Pahlmann

[ER:] Just what is this question you're asking me today, Elliott?

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, this is a rather long question and it comes from a Mrs. Margaret T. Musome of New York, and I have to read quite a lot of the letter in order to get it across. She said uh not long ago you discussed over the radio the working problem of the married woman. You suggested that a woman give up her position while the children are small and start later when the child has reached nursing school age. Now would you discuss the problem of finding a position for a woman over thirty-five years of age? Uh ads up to the big New York uh newspapers specify ads--rather, she says in the big New York newspapers specify young or up to thirty and, in rare cases, up to thirty-five. Even at a time when our country needs every working hand, clerical workers, semi-professionals, and executives over thirty-five seem to be outlawed.

[ER:] Well, that's one of the things, of course, that everybody is writing about and uh asking about today. I-I-I think that those restrictions are primarily actually enforced when the labor market is uh not very tight. [Elliott Roosevelt: Mhm.] As soon as the labor market begins to be really tight, and it's hard to get people, you'll find people much more willing to accept qualified people who are a little bit older and, of course, at the age when a woman might uh-- might be resuming her work, let's say between thirty-five and forty, having brought up um a family of children. Um at that age, she would have difficulty if it was a time when uh employ--when jobs were rather scarce, but in that case, I think she has to devise a job for herself, develop it in some way eh uh as many women have done as they grew older, have developed some kind of a hobby which they've taken up and turned it into a small business, or have found in their own environment some way in which they can go back to work. But um I-I um think, for instance, of a woman who wrote me just the other day, who's quite an elderly woman and who says that the real trouble with older people is that they don't go on living. They live in the past instead of living in the present and the future, and they think when their children leave them that their lives are at an end instead of simply going on and creating more interests and getting to know more people and-and keeping in with the youth of their community. Well now, there's a good deal about getting a job that uh-uh can be uh affected by that same attitude of mind, and while I think um there are difficulties, we know there are difficulties, but I still think a well-qualified person can either find a job or make a job (4:00).

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well, uh of course, you make it sound very, very easy uh, but say--[ER: It isn't easy.] All right well, we'll just say that uh ah, for instance, one of your young secretaries, of years gone by who is--who's gotten married and-and uh quit work for--in order to have a child, and the child is now eight or ten years old, and that person goes back and wants to become a secretary to add to the family income.

[ER: Well I--] Now what-what would you say that that person--

[ER:] If I had a free place, I'd take her back.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] I know you'd take her back, but supposing you didn't have a free place?

[ER:] Well, if I didn't have a free place, of course, then I would have nothing open, but somebody else might easily take her.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Yeah, but supposing in that interim period that uh she's gotten rusty or --

[ER:] Oh, she mustn't grow rusty. That's part of her responsibility.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Ah uh-huh, all right. So now-now she can't grow rusty. What does she do? Sit at home and practice all day long?

[ER:] Oh no, she doesn't have to practice all day long, but you can go on typing and you can go on remembering how you did research and you can go on a lot of ways uh that are useful at home. You can keep on if you really want to.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] Well now, what about the woman that never had a job? And gets--it gets to be uh thirty or thirty-five years of age and she's got her children off at school all day long and she wants to add to the family income and wants to get a job.

[ER:] Oh goodness, that's a much harder situation because [Elliott Roosevelt: Much harder.] she probably hasn't ever qualified.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] What do you suggest for her?

[ER:] Well, she'll just have to take the kind of a job she's qualified to take and she isn't qualified for anything, and so then she has to--then she has to really go to work and um find out what her taste or her particular kind of education will allow her to develop, but it's much harder for her than for someone who had training beforehand. (6:14)

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right now, ah we'll say that she's ah got a difficult task ahead of her, and she canvases the whole field and she says well I can become a saleswoman. Now, she goes in to apply for a saleswoman's job that she feels that she can handle, is she got a chance to get a job like that?

[ER:] I doubt it because she's already older [Elliott Roosevelt coughs] than they ordinarily in big organizations for sales ladies, and that sort of thing, take on someone, because the group insurance system and so forth makes it for the employer um advisable to keep his age -- his average age down. So he's apt to keep employers who-- employees who've been there right along rather than to take on an older person. But you know I have an idea that the only thing a woman um who has never done any work and decides then she wants to do work can do is to develop something that she's become proficient in. Now, I had no training for any kind of work, none. Now, I'm--I'm just thinking of--of what I would have done if I had um suddenly, at a certain point, um reached um a period when I wanted to earn money which is what I actually did do. Um I decided um that I wanted to do something that was more or less professional, after all the boys-- all of you'd gone to school and I was quite well on. But I'd done quite a bit of work um politically-- I mean in political organizations, and I'd learned how to manage people in a certain way how to run certain things, but I decided what I'd like to do is to teach. And I'd met some various people in the course of time, and they had decided that even though I had no college degree um I had had through being educated abroad partly a rather wide contact with certain things which made it possible for me to give certain courses um and make them interesting to um advanced young people, by that I mean the older groups. I had no training for teaching little children; I didn't know how. But take a girl of sixteen, seventeen, eighteen, my own teaching in literature and in history had given me uh a fairly good background and I was willing to work, and as a result I did teach for several years in a private school.

And I think I did a satisfactory job because all my youngsters passed their New York State examinations; that's the only way I can judge.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] All right now, ah let's offer something concrete. Would you say that uh-uh some of the paid jobs in charitable organizations and civic organizations offer openings for the average housewife with no previous experience in business?

[ER:] Well, not unless they've done quite a bit of money-raising in the past.

[Elliott Roosevelt:] No, but there are lots of jobs that uh that are open in charities that have nothing to do with the raising of funds.

[ER:] Well, you can't- you can't uh take on charitable jobs unless you have some kind of training. Eh you eh you've either [Elliott Roosevelt: What about civic organizations?] because they either deal- they either deal with raising money or they deal with something where you need special training as a social worker, and I-I really think it's probably easier to take on the type of job where you're um a paid hostess of some kind if you've had no other kind of training. (10:24)

(Break 10:24-10:38)

[ER:] As I've remarked before, this is a day and age of change, and one of the most drastic of these has been in our surroundings, our houses, and what we put in them. Mr. William Pahlmann is one of our outstanding authorities in the design and decorating field, and I know he will give us very good advice and information. Mr. Pahlmann.

[William Pahlmann:] Thank you very much, Mrs. Roosevelt. I shall sincerely try to give our listener's good advice, and what information I may give them I-I trust it won't be the wrong information.

[ER:] Well, first of all, Mr. Pahlmann, I know that our listeners always like to hear something personal about my guests as well as the subject on which they're going to talk. So tell us first about you, yourself. Where are you from, and what started you in the designing field?

[William Pahlmann:] Well, I think what starts a young man is um well it's rather complicated. Uh I was brought up in Texas, and uh unlike most Texans I don't like to boast about it, but I grew up in a very healthy sort of normal average way. But for some reason or other I-I didn't want to stay in Texas and study architecture which the family had decided I should study. I ma-matriculated at Texas U, but I suddenly found myself going slightly far afield. I wound up in Houston working for an importing firm of Chinese um importations, and finally, with no provocation at all, I was on board one of the old Clyde-Mallory line ships called the San Jacinto to New York. Arriving in New York, I had hoped to go to the wonderful--uh my old alma mater where I finally got, Parson's School of Design, but it was mid-term and uh they weren't very friendly about my starting at mid-term with practically no money in my pockets. So I went into the theater. I spent a year in uh [ER laughs] *Good News*. Now, you remember that was back in 19-late 1927 and '28, but after the show, once it got started on Broadway, I did go to Parsons and went to school in the daytime and worked in the theater at night. After *Good News*, I was asked by Mr. Schwab [Laurence Schwab 1892-1951] to go in to *Follow Thru*, it was another year's run, but in the midst of *Follow Thru*-- I was still in school, you know, all this time-- Mr. Parsons, who was then alive, gave me a scholarship to their Paris school, and I asked Mr. Parsons if I could postpone my departure until the end of the-the term. [William Pahlmann laughs] Which is--it gave me a little bit more money to spend in Paris, you see, because the scholarship was strictly tuition. After my time in Paris, I did come back to the United States and uh went finally in to the merchandising field, but that's a long, long story and I'm [ER: Well I--] sure you don't want to hear about it.

[ER:] I think it's interesting. Uh first of all, uh that you stuck to the decorating even when you went into the theater, and then that you didn't stay on in Paris because most uh decorators probably would have wanted to stay on awhile. (13:48)

[William Pahlmann:] You know the temptation was very great and you--I believe the real reason I came back, there was a very prominent decorator on East Fifty-Seventh Street at the time, uh John Hamilton, he was one of our most conservative decorators and designers and he did principally the English type of interior and he offered me a job in Paris, and I think that had a great deal to do with my coming back after my year abroad.

[ER:] Why because he offered a job there, you felt you could get one at home?

[William Pahlmann:] Remember this was in late 1930, there ah was a thing called the Depression going on in the United States and a job was a job.

[ER:] A job was a job, I see. [ER laughs] But I thought--uh you mean he offered it to you in New York?

[William Pahlmann:] No, no, he was in Paris. I-I met him in Paris, and he knew my record in the school and eh the job was in New York yes, but I did meet him in-in Europe.

[ER:] I see, and-and then he-he uh said that if you came back here you'd have a job.

[William Pahlmann:] That's right, but it didn't last long.

[ER:] It didn't last long? [ER and William Pahlmann laugh]

[William Pahlmann:] I think the Depression caught up with John Hamilton too. (14:44)

[ER:] Well, I what- what did you do then when the job didn't last long, [William Pahlmann: Well, this is rather--] because the depression days were bad days to get started.

[William Pahlmann:] They were bad days, and its-its rather an amusing story in a way because I was terribly depressed. My first job, losing it after six months, and um but before I knew it I had a job in a local department store, rather one of the big ones, and after nine months there I was fired again, and I thought that really is the end of my career. But I wasn't fired because of lack of efficiency, and this, I think, is rather entertaining now, I was fired because I had too much flair and imagination for the stuffy patrons of the store.

[ER:] Oh, that's a lovely thing, isn't it? They just felt you were leading them astray into uh new things I suppose, they didn't want to do.

[William Pahlmann:] Well, I think you're very kind to say that, but I do think that what I did at that particular time, was a little bit in advanced of that particular for that store's thinking. You know stores have policies. Later, after uh I left this particular store, I freelanced and was quite fortunate in getting two or three rather prominent houses to do on the East Side and I uh, evidently, was spotted by um Miss Dorothy Shaver [1893-1959], who is now president of Lord & Taylor, and I asked to come down for an interview after two or three interviews, I did go to Lord & Taylor, uh where I stayed for six years. (16:07)

[ER:] Now, did you have any--specialize in any particular style of furnishing or design during your department store days?

[William Pahlmann:] You know that's rather interesting that you should ask that. Uh it so happens that I started work at Lord & Taylor on the same day that Walter Hoving [1897-1989] went in as chairman of the board. He eventually became president of Lord & Taylor, and he decided that the decorating department needed stimulating and some imaginative outlook, and uh I was given practically carte blanche to go ahead and do what I wanted to do. Of course, this didn't happen overnight. This took a period of months. Stores are great corporations and then things just don't happen quickly. But we instituted there a policy of very interesting, unusual type of um house decoration. But we showed how we would like to do unusual rooms for people in a series of rooms every six months. We showed six rooms, usually three modern and three in the traditional manner, but for some reason or other, regardless of how modern I tried to go I was always, well um to be um rather um vogue in a way, I was stuck with the appellation of being uh rather baroque and traditional with a great deal of flare. But they always overlooked the fact that I was rather modern in my thinking. I suppose it was a little bit too much color and imagination in the traditional things.

[ER:] That's interesting, that's um-um you really uh--do you like modern uh rooms now?

[William Pahlmann:] Well, I like modern very much, but I think modern is uh a rather a strange um name to give this sort of thing uh that we all try to do these days. We're living in the 20th century, and I think modern means living today, whether we live with traditional furniture whether with traditional backgrounds. You know so many of us inherit things from our family, and uh regardless of what we have to work with, I still believe in being modern, convenient, and living as of today.

[ER:] Don't you think it's possible to make your old things sometimes convenient? I don't know whether they would be as of today, but don't you think you can make them um comfortable? (18:29)

[William Pahlmann:] Oh yes, indeed, but what I mean uh actually what I mean, is take advantage of everything that this great and wonderful land of ours has given us in the great conveniences of living. Whether you live in a tiny flat or whether you live a great house, you have the conveniences of electricity, proper plumbing, and all those things. But by living modernly, I believe living simply but living, as someone told me later, uh earlier today, I had lunch with some people, and this women was saying, "I don't care how I live I want to live well, I want to live in a fourteen foot house in New York just as comfortably and as modernly as I would live in a fourteen room house in the country." By that I mean, let's live of today, whether we live with--in grandmama's Sheraton uh chest of drawers and breakfront, or whether we buy something of [Terence Harold "T.H."]Robsjohn-Gibbins and-and go extremely modern.

[ER:] I think I'll have to tell you a funny story, which uh the historian in the Hyde Park house uh told me once. Um it happens that my mother-in-law was of the generation that never threw anything away. If it was uh good, it continued to be good whether the taste or the type or the uh everybody else had something different, she still stuck to the things she had always had until they fell apart. [William Pahlmann: I subscribe to that.] And they happen to be very well made and they never did fell apart. So they went right on in the house and one day some--the historian told me that he heard these two people, these two women talking, they looked in to a room with an old-fashioned wooden bed, a double bed, and old fashioned furniture that was upholstered and chintz but that had--was walnut furniture -- "oh fancy their having anything like that, why we threw those out years ago." [ER and William Pahlmann laugh] (20:24)

[William Pahlmann:] That's a mistake a great many people make.

[ER:] Well, that always amused me because I thought my mother-in-law would have died. [laughter] She never would have had anything thrown out.

[William Pahlmann:] But still Hyde Park was extremely convenient and comfortable.

[ER:] Oh perfectly comfortable, absolutely comfortable.

[William Pahlmann:] And-and very up to date.

[ER:] But not uh not up to date, no. It had -- as far as furniture went it had a great mixture in it.

[William Pahlmann:] But I mean as far as convenience [ER: Oh, convenience!] and-and living today.

[ER:] Oh yes. Oh, convenience certainly, but that's-that's about all! [ER and William Pahlmann laugh].

(Break 20:59-21:09)

[ER:] Well now, I know that somewhere in your life you must have had a break because like a great many um other young men you must have had to do something about those horrible war years that we lived through, [ER laughs] and what happened to you?

[William Pahlmann:] Well, I was very fortunate. I was tapped by the Air Force for their camouflage section. And I was [William Pahlmann clears throat] in this work three years of my four years in service, and I must say that I had--it was a great experience, great fun. And funnily enough I found that my experience and my decorating work, in fact that's the reason I was tapped for it, because of my sense of color, but I found that my work even with people in the department store had--was a great-of great help in the army with the men.

[ER:] Curiously enough I have uh a young nephew-in-law um who um was studying architecture over here um though he was an English boy, uh and he went into the Canadian navy and they used him for camouflage[ER laughs].

[William Pahlmann:] Well, that's very interesting.

[ER:] Evidently it was a sense of color. He was studying in Birmingham, Michigan, in the Cranbrook School, [William Pahlmann: Oh yes, that's a wonderful school.] and that uh sense of-of color seems to have been a help in that sort of thing. Well, I remember very well traveling during the war between Washington and New York seeing from the train the Martin airplane plant just outside Baltimore. It looked like a giant-sized edition of a crazily painted toy [ER and William Pahlmann laughs]. Uh there were more zigzag patterns on it, and there must have been, I suppose, real science back of it, but it just looked crazy when you went by. What did it look like from the air? Did you ever see your own things from the air?

[William Pahlmann:] Oh yes, I-I flew over the Martin plant, but there's one thing about the East Coast that counts particularly in the area of Baltimore that we have changes of seasons, and uh the Martin plant was done for one season so the opposite season it wasn't a very good camouflage. But on the other hand, on the West Coast, uh I had uh rather some interesting experiences in flying over the Douglas plant and consolidated where the seasons are scarcely any variation at all, and they can put up one type of uh camouflage and it would be good--it would be effective ah year round that's the um--

[ER:] Now what, what can you do about that changing seasons business, because what did you do, change your camouflage?

[William Pahlmann:] Ah the Germans taught us plenty about that, they changed their camouflage with the seasons and they were very clever about it. To be effective you must change your camouflage with the seasons as --I mean from a strategic point of view. (23:55)

[ER:] That's very interesting, that's um-um--

[Elliott Roosevelt:] You know, I'd like to just interrupt because uh-uh I was in reconnaissance work during the war, Mr. Pahlmann, and uh when the--when we were looking for the V2 sites uh and the V uh the V1 sites where they launched these bombs against England along the coast of France, uh we had great difficulty even in identifying them from photographs uh because of the cleverness of the German camouflage work, but we eventually worked out a method that-that completely did away with the value of camouflage. We used infrared film and that went right straight through [clears their throat] the-the camouflage.

[William Pahlmann:] You're quite right. I know all about infrared. I went to an intelligence school where we studied photo interpretation and that was in one of the most interesting phases of the-that particular intelligence work.

[ER:] Well, I wonder if the camouflage that um uh you had to do during the war had any influence on your designing later on?

[William Pahlmann:] Frankly, I don't think it had. I'd like to say so, but um my experience in that division had a great deal of influence on my handling people later on. (25:15)

[ER:] Oh, changed your handling of people?

[William Pahlmann:] It did indeed.

[ER:] I see, well after the war did you go back to Lord & Taylors?

[William Pahlmann:] Oh no, I went into my own business, ah and um I really had quite a wonderful lot of interesting work. I started out with one of these rather shaky ideas of being my own boss you know;

[William Pahlmann laughs] everyone aspires to that.

[ER:] A lot of people who went to the war came out with that desire, being their own boss.

[William Pahlmann:] That's true, but my first job was really quite interesting. It was for the Matchabelli people, and I did their quite very well-known crown room which was a little bit on the-the phase of decorating that I had done in some of my work before the war uh: flair, imagination, and all that sort of thing, but a little bit flamboyant, and I was somewhat criticized for not coming back with some new--vibrantly new ideas. But shortly after that, Walter Hoving, who had then bought Bonwit Teller, called me in and I now have done three Bonwit Tellers for him and planning a fourth one in Cleveland. [ER: Cleveland.] And while we are modernizing to a degree, we still keep a certain idea of tradition in our background, because I have a great belief that women like to shop where they're--where--in other words, in pretty surroundings. It's a word I don't like [laughter], being a southern--southerners use the word pretty, but it does describe a sort of a glowing interior of a shop. Women like to go where they look well, and they like to shop there.

[ER:] That's good, that's an idea I never really thought about because I just go in to a shop and uh get what I want and come out. [Walter Pahlmann laughs] I don't think I know what the shop looked like most of the time. [ER laughs]

[William Pahlmann:] It would amaze you how many women browse in shops, and it's rather an appalling thing to admit, but a great many women have nothing to do and they spend a great deal of money because they have nothing to do, because the shops are attractive they buy.

[ER:] I never thought about that at all. Well, do you believe-- uh I'd like to ask this because it seems to me that we are practically being changed in our taste by the kind of architecture and the type of buildings that are being built in which we have to live. Now you find all these young people are living in certain types of functional apartments or if they have a little home, it's a sort of ranch house type perhaps, or -- um I-I just wonder if it would really completely change uh the kind of thing you lived with inside. (27:51)

[William Pahlmann:] Well, you know, it is strange, and I hate to admit it and it's the sort of thing I don't like to see happening too much, we're being regimented to a certain degree with the type of architecture that is being built. And um I am sort of one of the persons against that up to a point I subscribe to the modern feeling the simple wonderful backgrounds against which you put wonderful beautiful things, but I-I have an expression for some of the uh the austere, modern interiors. I refer to them as the hair shirts sort of interior, where uh some of our architect friends and some of uh our people who try to influence the thinking of our young people. They wear stub-toed shoes and baggy tweeds and uh they um-- I think its sort a phony intellectualism that they're trying to foist off on our young people. They're even trying-trying to make the chairs fit- chairs fit the human body when perhaps the human body doesn't fit the chair [ER laughs]. But I do think that we-- sometimes we strain at our condemnation of this. It's uh--we're going through a phase of trying to find out what is right for us. But in America, we're people of imagination, we're individuals here, and uh I don't think we can be regimented too easily along those lines. I like to think of a young people coming, a young couple rather, coming in to me telling me openly what they like, what they want to do, and if I can help them and if I think they're going wrong I'll-I'll tell them so.

[ER:] Now, a good many young people have very little money, and you're rather on the expensive side aren't you sir? [ER laughs]

[William Pahlmann:] Well, the terrible part, I have that terrible reputation, but I'm not! [laughter]

[ER:] You're not? Can you actually tell a young couple how they can do something with very little money?

[William Pahlmann:] Yes, I do it all the time. I--we make a great point in my small organization of taking on several apartments and houses each year for young married people to sort of steer them in the right direction. I don't believe in laying down the law to them, what they should or shouldn't do, but I want to-- I want to go a little bit farther in to that with you later on than this interview because I [ER: Well.] have great belief along those lines. (29:59)

[ER:] Well, what is--what is your own house? Is it a modern house or a--?

[William Pahlmann:] I live in ah one of the most interesting little houses in New York on East 58th street. It's one of those small brick houses that actually predates the brownstone. And uh it uh is only sixteen feet wide on the inside and the two upper floors which I occupy is only fourteen feet wide on the inside. I call it modern; a great many people wouldn't call it modern. I've travelled a great deal. I like to collect things and I like to live with the things I collect. But there isn't a lamp in the entire two floors with the exception of a little desk light because I have indirect lighting pin spots on all my paintings. But because of the lack of the clutter of lamps the room seem wider, and uh I-I call it modern and a great many of my friends well they don't think so at all.

[ER:] Well, are you helping young people to go modern?

[William Pahlmann:] Well, I--it all depends on their upbringing and what their educational background and what they've inherited from their family and also it has a great deal to do on how much money they have to spend.

[ER:] Well, here in America, do you only have women asking your advice or do men come, too?

[William Pahlmann:] Ah that's the great fallacy in the thinking of these great United States. Men are just as interested in houses as are the wives. And I'm-- I should say the percentages that we have is about 50 percent uh thing both uh husband and wife. In fact, we sell them to a house an apartment that the husband is on practically all the decisions.

[ER:] I'm perfectly delighted to hear that. Thank you so much for being with me tonight.

[William Pahlmann:] And thank you very much, Mrs. Roosevelt.

(31:45)

Transcribed from holdings at Franklin D. Roosevelt Library (FDRL)
File(s): 72-30(43)

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