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INTERVIEW WITH
MRS. MARY ALICE BOOKHART

CONDUCTED BY

JUDY RITTER

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FOR THE

JACKSON SYMPHONY LEAGUE

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This is Judy Ritter with the Jackson Symphony League. Today is Thursday, February 11, 1982, and I'm here with Mary Alice Bookhart, Mrs. John Bookhart, to talk about the Jackson Symphony League, particularly about the first Pops Concert, the string classes and some other things.

Q. Mrs. Bookhart, let's start first with something about you. Where were you born? How long have you lived in Jackson?

A. I'm from Little Rock, Arkansas, but I've lived in Jackson since 1937, and it's home.

Q. I'm sure it is by now. You have been a newspaper woman most of your life, correct?

A. Yes, and I got into it entirely by accident.

Q. How was that?

A. Well, I had played with the idea of writing off and on ever since I was a child, and when I was in my teens, 15 or 16, the editor of the Arkansas Gazette invited me to come down and spend the summer, which would be what is now an internship. They gave me subjects to go out and research and write stories about. Well, you know, there isn't anything like a by-line.

Q. With your name in print?

A. Oh, goodness. Really wonderful!

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Q. You were the Women's Editor for the Jackson Clarion Ledger for a number of years. When did you first take that job?

A. When did I--with the Clarion Ledger?

Q. Clarion Ledger.

A. All right. Now, when I married and moved to Jackson, I wasn't planning to go back into the newspaper world. I had worked for the Graphic and done freelance work for the Gazette and other papers for four or five years. The Graphic is now defunct. It was the morning paper, but it was awfully good training, because I had an editor who really edited, and your father could tell you what the joy of having a story that had been edited, how good it was, it thrilled you, and anyway, I came to Jackson.

Q. And weren't going to work, but you did?

A. I wasn't going to work, no. Martha Harrison called me and said Mrs. Barksdale, Mrs. Harris Barksdale--the late Mrs. Harris Barksdale--asked me if I would be interested in coming down and working for the Daily News. Said Maude Lake was going to get married and they needed somebody in a hurry, and I said, No, I hadn't thought anything about it, but I did. I had to have an interview with Clyde Matthews and one with Mr. Fred Sullens, the editor, and as a result, I was hired at what was a munificent salary. Well, anyhow, it turned out that I stayed with them until a month before my daughter was born, and then I thought I

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was retired or was going back or something--I didn't know what to do--but anyway, I didn't go back for about two years, and then Frances Baker met me on the street one day and said, "I want to go into the WAVES, and I don't want to go off and leave them without a Society Editor"-- that was the term that they used then.

Q. This must have been during World War II?

A. That was World War II, yes, 1942, because I worked at the Daily News from '37 to '38. Well, I didn't intend to go. I was enjoying being a housewife and looking after my little girl, but I did. And you know, I could not have picked a more gorgeous time to go back to work than during the War because at that time we were able to build a department that had been formerly old-fashioned news, old-styled news and clubs and things like that. As it was, we got a chance to work with the Red Cross, work with the fund drives for the Red Cross. I never will forget going up into the Mansion with a photographer when Mrs. Paul Johnson, Sr., was up there and having her demonstrate how to take a tin can, remove the lid and smash the tin can. We built a man, a tin can man, out of that and had a picture made of him.

Q. For the salvage drive?

A. Yes, for the salvage drive. It was most important. And at that time, Rodney Defenbauh, Advertising Manager for

the Clarion Ledger, said, "You know what you're doing? You're throwing society out the window and building something." I said, "That's what I want to do. It's fun. It's wonderful."

Q. Were you working for the Clarion Ledger when you first heard of the effort to start a symphony orchestra in Jackson?

A. Yes, I was. Mrs. Duke Thornton, whose husband was then superintendent of the Clarion Ledger composing room (you know, he's the father of Lorene Cain), said to me one day: "Why don't you do a story about this symphony they're starting here?" You know, we couldn't get people to come because of the transportation difficulties. The artists had absolutely written us off their list. With the war effort and all, they just couldn't do it. So we scratched around in the back yard and we found all of these lovely people--well, we found doctors and teachers and lawyers and newspapermen, students--anything you want--housewives, and they formed an orchestra under the direction of Ted Russell, or Theodore Caskey Russell, who was himself a very accomplished violinist. He taught violin here. He worked so hard with it, and we had the first concert at the Heidelberg Hotel--I have a copy of the original invitation to come and hear our symphony. Well, I won't say that it was absolutely breathtaking, but it was people

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up there doing what they--with their talents, what their
mamas and papas had wanted them to do all their lives.
And we built a symphony orchestra from that. My main
interest was really congealed, or--let's see, what would
you say--it really came to a head when I heard A. Lehman
Engle conduct our orchestra in a Pops Concert. I didn't
realize they had all that music in them--it came out
beautifully. The sounds that he pulled from those people
were marvelous. Now, Ted Russell was a very generous man
as far as supporting the Symphony. He was concerned. He
bought the music many times from his own pocket. The
people in town were not particularly interested in a
symphony. There were a few. You know, we've always had
a group of people who were very, very conscious of our
lacks and our needs, and the love of music. And the
other day when I was writing a resolution, a memorial
resolution for Winifred Hines Williford, I found out she
was one of the original orchestra members. She had studied
violin and had a degree in it, and she was one of the
original members of the Symphony Orchestra. They used to
rehearse on Sunday afternoons at Belhaven, and she decided
in this--I found out--that her husband and her sons needed
her so much, that she just couldn't give that time any more.

Q. So the first orchestra members were housewives?

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A. Oh, yes. It was all volunteer. Now, Vincent DeFrank was really one of our first professionals that Ted hired, and as you know, he started the Memphis Symphony. He came down for the concert and rehearsals. We did a very unusual thing about those concerts. We tried to divide them in the town because at that time we were having to use the high schools. So what we did, we had the Monday night concerts at the Murrah High School auditorium--brand new--and the Tuesday night concerts at Provine High School.

Q. That must have entailed a good bit of moving back and forth of equipment?

A. It was very much of a burden to all of us, but they were glad to do it. And as I said, they were volunteers. Finally, Ted saw that we were unionized and members of the Federation of Musicians and they had to pay, so they paid them for rehearsals, and we're paying them today for every performance.

Q. Oh, yes. Now that the musicians are all members, I think?

A. Well, the birth of the symphony was really a phenomenon, and it has been the backbone for the revival of interest in a good many things here. Now, we've had two music clubs: the Chaminade and the McDowell have kept music, the spark of music alive. In the meantime, Belhaven College was kind enough to help Skreet Caldwell, Mrs. John T. Caldwell, Jr., with the first operas that were

presented here by the local guild. Oh, our big stars were Gene Loper, you know, for one, and then they would always hire Evelyn McCool and there was another one--

Q. Later on there was Edwina Goodman?

A. Later on.

Q. She did a lot of that?

A. Edwina Goodman did a great deal for it.

Q. But these were local people?

A. These were local people. Edwina was a bride. She came here as a student at Belhaven, from up north of here, and Edwina McGuffee, I believe her name was.

Q. Now, I would like to talk a few minutes with you about the first Pops Concert.

A. Okay.

Q. Velma McLaurin said that she gives you and Amalie Robinson all the credit for making the Pops the fantastic success she says it still is today.

A. We didn't know what in the world we were doing. I got a call one night from Velma saying: "I have asked Amalie Robinson to be chairman of the Pops Concert, and she said she would be glad to be chairman if you would be her co-chairman." Amalie and I had worked together on several projects and we worked together well. We were good friends and there was harmony there. Well, anyway, we

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said, "What is a Pops?" There was a case of an education there for the community as well as us. The Boston Pops, of course, had become extremely popular, and Pops comes from the name light popular music. We felt that that probably would be the best introduction we could give the people of the area, a feeling for symphonic music played in a light vein. So anyway, Amalie and I went down--we accepted it--we went down to the Hinds County Supervisors and asked them if they would rent us the old stadium--it was in terrible shape, but it was there where the new one is now, and we did rent it for \$100.00, which included the cleaning fee. We saw to that because we couldn't see ourselves going out there sweeping up. We got the Jaycees to agree to sell hot dogs and popcorn. At that time, Pickney Keel was working in the Clarion Ledger Sports Department. He was a music lover, and I asked him if he would cover it, and he said: "Yes", he'd be glad to. He estimated that first crowd--we didn't know whether we were going to have one person or twenty or a hundred--he estimated that first crowd at 8,000.

- Q. That was remarkable. Who played with the Symphony that night?
- A. All right. We hired Sharkey's Dixieland Band from New Orleans. One of the classic remarks of all time was when Sharkey turned around after the Symphony had played

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something, and he said, "Well, the big band plays pretty good, don't it?"

Q. The band?

A. The big band, yes. So we had not only Sharkey, but we had the Hinds Hi-Steppers and A. Lehman Engle to conduct a special number. A. Lehman Engle is another product of Jackson in whom everyone can take great pride. And my husband made the remark: "Well, you've got everything out there except a strip tease", and as it turned out, that was when the Hinds Hi-Steppers took off their little skirts and did a high stepping routine. It was very clever. Anna Bee trained them, you know.

Q. So he was not disappointed, he almost got the strip tease!

A. He was not disappointed. We had a lot of fun with that first one. We learned the hard way. I called Lois Clover who had just moved to town and I said, "Lois, would you do the publicity?" She had done the publicity for a Baptist Auxilliary and I was impressed with her cleverness. She handled everything so professionally, and as it turned out she had worked on the Alexandria Town Talk, and she was a professional newspaper woman, so she did a beautiful job. And then we got Virginia Matthews, who is long gone from here, she moved, of course, to Huron, Michigan--to be our financial officer. We don't know where tickets went or how they were done, but we succeeded. We came out

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ahead.

Q. What year was that?

A. That was in--you know, I am trying my best to remember-- it was when the Symphony was 10 years old.

Q. That would have been '55? The Symphony dates from '44 or '45?

A. I believe it was. It was in the early '50's, but it was a huge success. And then after that, you know, we had Polly Bergen as our next star. Oh, we had a terrible mess about that, because we had asked Giselle McKenzie to be our star and she backed down at the last minute, and Polly Bergen agreed to come. She had never been here before. She was from Tennessee, but she had never been down here before and she was just a little bit leery of it. We had for her a portable dressing room out on the field. We got a trailer and had it outfitted for her to change clothes because she said she wanted to catch the evening plane back to New York. She got into that sequined dress that fit like there wasn't room for one more inch, you know, and she belted out her songs and was a huge hit. I'll never forget Polly Bergen for that. She really gave us a good send-off. Well, the next year, we had another artist--I'm trying to remember--I think it was Alec Templeton. Do you know--

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Q. The pianist?

A. Yes, the blind pianist, and it rained and we had to move at the last minute and the next year, we had a repeat of the rain. See, we called our first concert "Music Under the Stars", but we had stars that night. We had rain for the rest. And every time we mentioned to Ted Russell, "Let's have another concert at the stadium," he'd get green. So, we moved it to what we called the "Cow Palace" down on the fairgrounds. The acoustics were great. Wonderful. It was a natural shell there, and we had Mary Ann Mobley--that was in '59 when she was Queen--

Q. Miss America?

A. I mean Miss America. I remember that. Emma Pippin did the decorations and everybody was so entranced with Mary Ann that they walked off with the decorations as souvenirs. They were very expensive flowers, but anyway, we had a great time, and it was just one thing after another. We had little Eddie Hodges here, and for his appearance, we had to move to the City Auditorium because it rained again. Hattie Pearl Lea made all the arrangements for the Hodges concert. Eddie was responsible for starting the Eddie Hodges Scholarship Fund, which is still in existence. We send a group of children selected by their teachers and by the conductor to music camp.

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So we're very proud of our contribution. Eddie, of course, I don't know what he's doing now. He was a little red-headed boy from Hattiesburg. Do you know his background?

Q. Yes, I remember. I think I may have seen him, too, when he was here.

A. And then he played in Huck Finn--I mean Tom Sawyer and Huck Finn, in the movie, which was a wonderful production. They've tried to imitate it several times since.

Q. Well, the Pops has continued as an unbroken tradition since that first one?

A. Absolutely. From the very first one when we didn't know what we were doing. In the meantime, they built our beautiful new stadium.

Q. Right.

A. Then, of course, we had to move from there because of conflicting dates and also the high price.

Q. The cost, I think, had a lot to do with it.

A. We moved out to Old Trace Park. Now, that was Lois Clover's idea, to take the Symphony out to the Reservoir. It was finished and the park was there. It's quite a sight to see families coming out there together and spreading their picnic lunches and sitting there listening to the music and see the boats coming up from

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every direction and hanging around in the water, so people can listen to the music.

Q. Family entertainment?

A. Family entertainment.

Q. You went on from being Pops Chairman later to become President of the Symphony League, among other jobs that you have held with the League. Which years were you President?

A. I was President from '64 to '65, and I had the great pleasure or the privilege of representing the League at the national meeting in San Francisco the year that I was president-elect. Virginia Busby was the president and something happened that she did not feel that she wanted to go, so I went in her place. We organized, at that particular convention, the present day Woman's Council of the American Symphony Orchestra League, and that has been a great addition to our music.

Q. And also a help to Leagues everywhere?

A. Oh, yes. I think that probably the most exciting thing was the--Opal Dees came to me before a Board meeting out at the old Shady Oaks Country Club. You remember that, I'm sure?

Q. I sure do.

A. All right. She said: "Ted is very much concerned because the schools have discontinued the teaching of

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string music, and he said we need the string players to come into the orchestra for that has been our source of string players and we're not going to have it any more." And I said, "Well, Opal, let's see what we can do", and so I took it up at the Board meeting, and the Board gave permission to send two teachers or three out to Abilene--the price was so low, you just wouldn't believe it in nowadays terms, but they went to Abilene, Texas, and studied the Suzuki method and came back and taught these little fellows that had never seen a violin. They had the tiniest violins you could imagine. They taught them to play well enough that in three weeks when the Pops Luncheon took place that preceded the annual Pops Concert, they were able to play a few numbers. It wasn't magic, genius or anything, but it was music, and it came from those little fellows with those little violins. Now, I have got to give Elsma Atkinson, Mrs. Muller Atkinson, all the credit in the world for the way she got that thing pulled together. Now, I was working and didn't have all the time that I needed, but I went with her. We went out to Belhaven and asked for their assistance, and Elsma knew the school system so well (she had been cafeteria manager for the school system for years, she had all those contacts), and she went out and around to all the schools

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and she said: "Can you give us someone who will teach on a volunteer basis? We can have the classes at Belhaven."

Q. This would have been after school hours?

A. Yes. You see, Belhaven has pitched in everywhere--with the orchestra, with the opera and then with the string classes--and they deserve a world of credit for their generosity. Harold Avery was at that time head of the Music Department, I believe, and Ted Russell was a member of the faculty and a violinist himself. His wife was a cellist.

Q. When I talked to Mr. Russell this afternoon, he said the same thing: that Belhaven had been a very supportive group for the Symphony and its activities.

A. Oh, it has. I don't think we can ever thank them enough. It's just remarkable the way that string thing, that string project grew. It went from school to school. It was highly successful. We had volunteer teachers at first, and you know, that took time.

Q. It sure did.

A. And those people were very generous with their time and talent. I can't imagine anything more difficult than taking a child who had never seen a violin and teaching him to play, but that's what they did. And we found that other places copied us. Mississippi College was one of the first. And then it went all over the state.

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- Q. And now the schools have put the string teachers back in with our support and cooperation as a joint venture?
- A. Yes, but it was because they had discontinued--I don't know why they discontinued it. Do you by any chance know? Have you ever heard the reason?
- Q. I don't remember.
- A. I think it was money.
- Q. I would guess that's what it was, but I do know now that they are back with our support and it's a joint venture.
- A. Yes. Doesn't Mickey Davis have a lot to do with it?
- Q. He sure does.
- A. He plays a marvelous country fiddle, oh, boy.
- Q. I think he directs the string program, but I'm not absolutely certain about it.
- A. I think he does, too. But Lew Dalvit stepped in when we needed him the most. He came here from Beloit, Wisconsin. He didn't know what to expect of this community, he and Pat, his wife, and his two daughters. The girls were quite young at that time, and they were accustomed to the ways of the Mid-west and this was a new world to them. Clytee and Ralph Hester, Lois Clover and Hilda Conley made them so at home here, they were absolutely charmed. This has been a happy move for them. And Lew, of course, had the ability to get the most out of our orchestra. You know, I heard Sir Thomas Beecham conduct the orchestra

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here during the Music Association series, and I had no idea of what a conductor--I sat right down there in front and watched--and you know, Sir Thomas Beecham yelled at them and bellowed at them and hollered at them and shook his fist--it was fascinating, and I realized that he was getting the music out of them that way.

Q. He was pulling it out?

A. He was pulling it out. Now, Lew does it much more low key, but I think Lew is one of the most graceful men, and the way he stands up there and in that gentle way, really gets the same results.

Q. Yes, he does. He gets very, very good results. And the orchestra now has professional musicians playing for it, too?

A. Oh, yes.

Q. You said when we talked earlier, that you used to go to rehearsals?

A. Yes, on the night before a concert.

Q. Mr. Russell told me that lots of times the players wouldn't even show up for rehearsals.

A. Oh, no. I wrote those reviews from the rehearsals so that we could get them in the paper, and I will tell you this: I am not a musical writer. I can tell good music from bad, but I'd say: "Ted, what do you think about that string section? What's it doing? Well, what about

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the horns?" and he'd say, "Yeah". It was very interesting that he coached me and we were able to have something in the paper. I'll tell you, people love to see something in the paper--

Q. Don't they?

A. --right after it has happened.

Q. Or before?

A. Or before.

Q. They really do. Well, this has really been an interesting conversation, and you have filled us in on a lot of things and lots of names of people that helped. You know, they're just not in the minutes. The bare facts are there, but these are the kinds of things that we wanted to get on tape.

A. I'm so glad I was able to help you in some small way because we really did have wonderful leadership, and I will tell you this: The Symphony League owes a lot to--I think she's the late Mrs. Coleman, now--Mabel Coleman, Mrs. Ervin Coleman. She was the one who organized the campaigns the way she had seen it done in Texas. We started off that first membership campaign because the Symphony League had organized under Velma McLaurin. We needed something to prod the people, and Mabel Coleman came up with this brilliant idea of having the first big party in the showplace of showplaces which was, at that time, the Leland

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Speed home. Brand new in Eastover. And that's where we had that first party. Then it became a sort of tradition. You start the campaign with a party. Jacksonians and Mississippians are still party minded people, because they like other people, I think, as much as anything.

Q. That's what Velma McLaurin said, too.

A. Did she?

Q. Yes.

A. Well, I'm glad I said the same thing; we agreed.

Q. She said: "We'll have a party at the drop of a hat."

A. Yes, we will, and what's more, it brings results. You see, now, the Symphony League is responsible for the maintenance fund drive. Now, the Orchestra Association backs us up in that. They go out after the big corporate memberships now, but for several years, it was the Symphony League that raised every dime, and our budget, when you think of it back in those days, it was tiny compared with--we've got, I believe, a \$350,000.00 budget now, don't we?

Q. It's about a half million.

A. Now, the Symphony League has a huge party to launch each drive, as I said. Then they sponsor, among other things, the Pops--the League sponsors the Pops, organizes it, brings the people together. It sponsors the Sub-Debs, young girls in the eleventh grade in high school who serve

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as ushers at the concerts also. And then they have their own ball in the wintertime. And they raise something, a nice sum, which goes immediately into the treasury. In fact, everything that the Symphony League earns, and its various branches, goes into the Association fund for the operation of it.

Q. Ticket sales have never really supported the Symphony one hundred percent, it's always had to have some extra funding?

A. That's right, but we've had more fun. As I say, it has been amicable, quarrelless and happy. You don't have to beg people to be an officer. They accept with all the graciousness under the sun and happily, because they know they are going to have the complete cooperation of others.

Q. I'm going to pause there. I think that's a good note to stop on: that we've had complete cooperation.

CONCLUSION OF INTERVIEW WITH MRS. MARY ALICE BOOKHART

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