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Tibbie Roberts: Free As The Marsh Ponies

by David Cecelski. "Listening to History [2]," *News & Observer*. Published 1/14/2007. Copyrighted.
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I visited Tibbie Roberts at her home in the coastal town of Morehead City. Born 92 years ago across the river in Beaufort, she has been a women's rights activist all her life. She was a pioneer for women in the state's banking industry and in the North Carolina Bankers Association in the 1930s. She was a church, school and women's club leader. In the early 1970s, she coordinated the N.C. Council of Churches' statewide campaign to pass the Equal Rights Amendment.

The mother of four daughters, Tibbie has never lost the irrepressible joy or wide-eyed sense of wonder that she had as a child. We talked about growing up in Beaufort and the older generation of suffragists, social reformers and neighborhood "saints" who inspired her.

In Tibbie Roberts's words:

Tibbie Roberts. Photo by Chris Seward, 1999. To request permission for further use or to purchase a print, please contact the News & Observer.

I was born in Beaufort on June 2, 1914. I lived on Ann Street, and my grandparents lived in what they call The Academy now on Front Street. It was only a block away. By the time I was 3 years old, I could run down the street and go to Granc

We were as free as the marsh ponies. We swam from the old Inlet Inn dock to the Peanut Shoals, and we would play on the menhaden net reels out there like they were Ferris wheels!

We could also get in a little sailboat and go to Fort Macon. Nothing was there but the mosquitoes and the marsh ponies, and the fort was all grown over. Nobody was there but us.

My family had been in Beaufort since the early 1700s. It felt like we knew everybody! We would walk down the street, and people would be out in front of stores and we would stop and talk to them.

Everywhere you went, you met interesting people. We had a man, his name was Mr. John Bunyon, and he said he could hex chickens into going into a coma. I don't know how, but he would get out in the middle of the street and he could reai

I was out more with the boys than I was the girls. I never played with dolls and stuff. But the boys would test me. They pushed me.

The worst thing I ever did, the boys jumped out of a crow's nest on a menhaden boat. They said, hah, you can't do that! So I jumped out of that crow's nest. I thought that I would never hit the water! When I came back up and opened my eyes

My grandmother was my inspiration. Her name was Laura Nelson Duncan, and she is still a presence in my life. Her house was the headquarters. She always had something good for us to eat, and she always had a good story to tell. That wa

She could do anything. She was blind, but it never slowed her down. She ran the Western Union office for my grandfather, and she was involved with everything in town. Her door was open to everybody.

She was a charter member of the Beaufort Women's Club, and she had a group of children called the Willing Hands Society. They helped neighbors and ran errands and raised money for the Methodist Orphanage and all kinds of projects.

She was also involved in Lyceum, which was like the old chautauquas. I remember going. They held it down at the old courthouse square. They would come in the summertime with a big tent and have all kinds of speakers, singing, drama, al

I didn't know it then, but my grandmother was a suffragist too. I found out when I read a little thing that she had written at Greensboro College in 1878. Aunt Lena found it in my grandmother's old trunk right after the North Carolina Council of (

It was entitled "Turnabout is Fair Play." It started off, "Move over, you liege lords, and let the ladies show you what they can do!

So I sat down and I wrote the Council of Churches. I said, my grandmother has spoken to me from her grave, and I'm going to have to say yes!

As children, we also had five or six teachers, real attractive, interesting women -- Aunt Lena, Gladys Chadwick, Annie Mae Gibbs, Cousin Lessie Arrington, Annie Morton. None of them ever married, but they taught for 25 and 35 years and m

I don't know why they never married. But one thing that happened was, in 1930, when the Depression hit, they passed a rule that women couldn't teach if they had a husband. That might have had something to do with it, I don't know.

The women at Ann Street Church were just so wonderful, too. There was Ms. Neva Bell, Ms. Alma Potter, Miss Vera Stubbs, many others. They were so kind, so supportive, so gentle, and they were so happy. There was just a joy that flowec

When I moved to Morehead City as a 19-year-old bride, the women here took me in, too --women like Anne Royal and Miss Madie Bell. Anne challenged me on everything, just like my grandmother. To this day, if I'm working on a class for St

And Miss Madie would always say, "You can do it. I'll be here." Of course I had children, so I needed help if I was going to do things. Anything I had to do, I had support, wonderful support.

I had a great life, but you know, I think one of the greatest challenges of any person is to fulfill who they were created to be, or find what gifts and graces they have, and use them.

Who are we? Don't you discover new things about yourself all the time? You'll do something or try something new and you'll discover a new perspective and a new "you" to a little degree? I think that's one reason why my life is so full and rew

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