Felda Looper

Page, U.S. House of Representatives (1973)

Oral History Interview
Final Edited Transcript

May 21, 2007

Office of the Historian
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, D.C.

Table of Contents

Abstract

In the midst of the women's rights movement, Felda Looper became the first female Page in the U.S. House of Representatives. Her noteworthy achievement came after a vigorous and lengthy letter-writing campaign in which she pleaded with future Speaker of the House Carl Albert for an opportunity to serve as a House Page. During her short tenure as a House employee, Looper recalled receiving a warm welcome from House Leaders, Members, and Pages. Her interview revealed many details about the Page program of the period, such as the daily assignments and typical living arrangements for Pages, as well as their access to lawmakers and the Capitol complex. Moreover, Looper's descriptions of the politically-charged atmosphere in Washington, D.C.—fueled by the Watergate scandal and the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA)—provide a firsthand look at the behind-the-scenes role Pages played in the congressional institution. More than a symbol of the women's rights movement, Looper successfully changed the face of the Page program by making it possible for countless young women to serve as House Pages.

Biography

Felda Looper was born on January 9, 1955, in Kansas City, Missouri, to Omer (Joe) Looper, an osteopathic physician, and Maxine Moody Looper. On a family trip to Washington, D.C., in 1966, which included a visit to the Capitol, Looper questioned her Oklahoma Representative, and the Democratic Whip Carl Albert, about the longstanding tradition of only hiring young men as congressional Pages. Not satisfied with Albert's response to investigate the matter, Looper wrote numerous letters to his office reminding him of her interest in serving as a Page and of the inherent gender discrimination in barring young women from holding the position. Shortly before graduating from Heavener High School in Heavener, Oklahoma, in 1973, Looper's determination paid off when she received an offer to serve as a Page from Albert, who by then had risen to serve as Speaker of the House.

Appointed on May 14, 1973, Looper began her Page tenure a week later on May 21, 1973. Her historic appointment received widespread media coverage. During Looper's first day on the job she answered questions from reporters, posed for pictures, met her fellow Pages, and toured the Capitol. As a Page, she performed the same tasks as her male counterparts, primarily running errands for the Members of Congress. Although employed for a brief period, Looper had the opportunity to witness historic debates, speeches, and hearings during the summer of 1973, which focused on women's rights and the Watergate scandal.

At the conclusion of her Page service, Looper attended the University of Oklahoma. She graduated in 1977 with a degree in political science. Two years later, she earned an M.A. in Special Studies (Industrial Psychology-Motivation and Achievement) from George Washington University. She later lived in Paris, France, where she worked for the International Counseling Service. Looper went on to open her own retail business in Washington, D.C., before working as a Web site developer,

marketing director, and consultant. Currently a resident of Washington, D.C., Looper is employed as an independent consultant.

Editing Practices

In preparing interview transcripts for publication, the editors sought to balance several priorities:

- As a primary rule, the editors aimed for fidelity to the spoken word and the conversational style in accord with generally accepted oral history practices.
- The editors made minor editorial changes to the transcripts in instances where they believed such changes would make interviews more accessible to readers. For instance, excessive false starts and filler words were removed when they did not materially affect the meaning of the ideas expressed by the interviewee.
- In accord with standard oral history practices, interviewees were allowed to review their transcripts, although they were encouraged to avoid making substantial editorial revisions and deletions that would change the conversational style of the transcripts or the ideas expressed therein.
- The editors welcomed additional notes, comments, or written observations that the interviewees wished to insert into the record and noted any substantial changes or redactions to the transcript.
- Copy-editing of the transcripts was based on the standards set forth in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

The first reference to a Member of Congress (House or Senate) is underlined in the oral history transcript. For more information about individuals who served in the House or Senate, please refer to the online *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, http://bioguide.congress.gov and the "People Search" section of the History, Art & Archives website, http://history.house.gov.

For more information about the U.S. House of Representatives oral history program contact the Office of House Historian at (202) 226-1300, or via email at history@mail.house.gov.

Citation Information

When citing this oral history interview, please use the format below:
"Felda Looper Oral History Interview," Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives, [date of interview].

Interviewer Biography

Kathleen Johnson is a senior historical editor for the Office of the Historian, U.S. House of Representatives. She earned a B.A. in history from Columbia University and holds two master's degrees from North Carolina State University in education and public history. In 2004, she helped to create the House's first oral history program, focusing on collecting the institutional memory of Members and staff. She co-authored two books: *Women in Congress: 1917–2006* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2006) and *Black Americans in Congress: 1870–2007* (GPO, 2008).

— FELDA LOOPER—

INTERVIEW

JOHNSON: This is Kathleen Johnson interviewing Felda Looper, the first female Page for the U.S. House of Representatives. The interview is taking place in the Legislative Resource Center conference room, Cannon House Office Building. The date is May 21st, 2007.

Before discussing your time as a Page for the House of Representatives, I wanted to begin with some biographical information. When and where were you born?

LOOPER: I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, in 1955, January 9.

JOHNSON: And what are the names and occupations of your parents?

LOOPER: Well, my father is a retired physician. He is now living in Miami, Oklahoma, but it's pronounced "Miam-a," Oklahoma there. And my mother is living in Paradise, California.

JOHNSON: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

LOOPER: I do. I have an older sister, Ivylyn, and a younger brother, John; he's about 10 years younger.

JOHNSON: What schools did you attend before coming to the Capitol?

LOOPER: Well, let's see, there was good old Heavener High School. Then I went to the University of Oklahoma, and then I went to graduate school here at the George Washington University.

JOHNSON: What did you study in undergraduate school?

LOOPER: In undergraduate school I studied political science and a lot of sociology. When I came to grad school here, I had a degree which was in those days a pretty new degree. Now, I think it's quite widely used. It's an interdisciplinary study where I combined psychology/sociology and some business and studied motivation and achievement and how that varies with race and gender.

JOHNSON: Did you always have an interest in politics?

LOOPER: Yes, I think I always did have an interest in politics. My mother—both of my parents were very active politically, and my mother especially, she was the first feminist I ever knew. And she was very active in the Oklahoma politics and then therefore also in the national campaigns—presidential campaigns. The first one I remember was the [John Fitzgerald] Kennedy-[Richard Milhous] Nixon campaign [1960] when I was really quite a little girl. But she was very active in that, and I can remember doing some when I was about five years old when that election was going on. The neighbors had a Nixon sticker on the back of their car, on the bumper of their car, and I tore it off. It was the black and white sticker and I tore it off and proudly presented it to my dad who immediately, immediately, trotted me right back down to the neighbor's house and made me apologize verbally to them about ripping it off. Even though we were Kennedy people, it was wrong to rip it off. So I had to make that apology right then and there.

JOHNSON: An important lesson to learn.

LOOPER: Yes it was. It was.

JOHNSON: Before coming to Washington, D.C., you had mentioned that you worked as a page for the Oklahoma legislature.

LOOPER: Yes.

JOHNSON: Can you describe this experience?

LOOPER: Well it was really, because it was a high school experience, I think it was really in those days more the excitement of going and meeting other kids from all over the state than it was really actually being participatory in the page process because it was just for a week. So I think that experience was more on a social level than it was on a political level. Though, of course, it was very interesting to see the legislature in action and to meet the senators and members of congress [state representatives] there. And I knew some of them.

JOHNSON: At this time, were there other girls that held these positions, too?

LOOPER: Yes, there were girl pages there. That wasn't such a big deal. College students—or, I'm sorry—high school students who would apply to it and would be able to go. It was just for a week. There was no education part of it. It wasn't any big standing, it was more to expose high school students to the legislative process.

JOHNSON: What sparked your interest in becoming a [House] Page?

LOOPER: When we came to Washington one summer, and I'm trying to remember the year; I'm thinking it was 1966. And we were—my parents were—we were here and we went into all of the chambers so we could see what was going on. And I could see the Pages down on the floor and I asked my dad, "What are they doing here? Why are they here?" And he explained to me what the Pages were and what they did and I said, "Well, why aren't there any girl Pages?" And he said, "Well, I don't know, we'll have to ask Mr. [Carl Bert] Albert, if we can see him, we'll have to ask him that."[1] So after we had done our tour we went into what was then his office. The Whip—he was the Whip. And we went into his office and, lo and behold, we were fortunate enough to be there when he walked in. And he was familiar with my mother, he knew her, and he stopped and spoke to us and he asked us if we would like to have lunch with him in the Member's Dining Room. Well, we were all over that. We went, had lunch, we talked, and so I had the opportunity to ask Mr. Albert why there weren't any girl Pages. And he said, "Well, it's just sort of an unspoken rule, we haven't had any girl Pages." So I said, "Well, that's not fair, that's not right." And he said, "Well, we'll look into it and we'll see what we can do about it." So after we did our tour here and we were here for several days, and we got back to Oklahoma. I was in the seventh grade, and started writing him letters. And I wrote him letters for years, until finally I started to give up on it. It was during that process that I went to the Oklahoma legislature to be a page.

JOHNSON: Did you receive any replies to your letters?

LOOPER: Oh, always. Oh, I always got replies. I mean, that's what the staff is there for, you know {laughter}.

JOHNSON: But did they give you reasons as to why you couldn't be a Page?

LOOPER: Well it was always sort of, as I remember, well, we're working on it, we'll look into it, and then finally, when Mr. Albert got to be the Speaker and had some real clout, you know, he basically said we're going to do this. And so Mr. Albert called my dad, which I didn't know, my dad told me subsequently—and I spoke to him about this last night as a matter of a fact and asked him if he recalled, and he said, "Oh yes, I was in the clinic, and the nurse knocks on the door and says, 'You've got a call from Mr. Albert, the Speaker of the House.'" And so he comes out, he takes the call, and Mr. Albert asked if it would be all right with Dad and my mom for me to come to Washington to be a Page. So they discussed it, and the next day, Charlie Ward, who was Mr. Albert's administrative assistant, called me and asked me, "Felda, would you like to be the first woman Page?" And I'm going, "Well, I'll have to ask my parents." And he said, "Well, we've already taken care of that, and it is all right with them." So I said, "Of course." This was very exciting.

But the exciting part was whenever the news got a hold of it and we started getting telephone calls and the TV people from Fort Smith [Arkansas] and Tulsa and Oklahoma City, which of course, we only got three channels in those days {laughter} and those were the three who were in close range and they came and they took all kinds of footage of what was going on. And it was all very exciting in the town of 2,500 people, Heavener was all a buzz. It was a real fun and exciting time—it was.

JOHNSON: What was the reaction of your parents upon hearing the news?

LOOPER: Oh, well they were very excited for me, obviously, and very supportive. Very, very, supportive of me, always. And as a matter of fact, I've told you this little tale before. When we were on our way to meet the plane—there was a jet that Mr. Albert used that was landing in someplace, I can't remember where in Oklahoma, but they said basically, "If you can get Felda to the plane, we'll take her to Washington with us."

So here we were, off to meet the plane, and late, and Dad's driving like a fiend and we got pulled over. The highway patrolman pulls us over, and my dad explains the story, and the guy had heard about this "to-do," so he gives us an escort to the plane so we were going even faster than we were before. But we get there, and I got to ride on the plane—the jet—to Washington, which was very exciting.

JOHNSON: At the time, were you cognizant of the fact that you were making history?

LOOPER: I think—yes, I was. I think that initially I was just so excited about being able to go and do this that it wasn't really until all of the press stuff started to happen that I realized that people were really interested, and when I got to Washington, people were sending me news clips from the newspapers all across the country. And that's when it hit me how the media makes it so public that everybody was aware of it, and it was a buzz because it was a first. And people did pay attention to it. And it was also, in the time, and this was 35 years ago, where women were making firsts. The whole opportunity for women was different. So, yes, I became more aware of it as it happened, as it unrolled, than before I did it.

JOHNSON: Thirty-four years ago today, May 21st, 1973, was your first day as a Page for the House of Representatives.

LOOPER: I remember it well. I wouldn't have remembered the date, but I remember the day.

JOHNSON: Can you retrace some of your memories from that day?

LOOPER: Oh, well yes, I can remember getting up and putting on my suit and doing my hair and putting on these new shoes and going in and then of course there was all of the press coverage that first day . . . people asking me all these questions that I wasn't

really sure how to answer. They asked you a question and then they'd leave the microphone in front of your face and nobody told me that this is a tactic to get you to say more. I was so totally clueless.

JOHNSON: What kinds of questions did they ask you, do you remember?

LOOPER: Oh, I'm trying to remember. Off the top of my head I don't remember, but they were things like, "How do you feel about being here," and those kinds of things. And I was just hugely excited. Mr. Albert was just terrific. He was such a sweetheart and so supportive of me. And just a delightful man. So I spent some time in his office for some photography ops and then we took a tour, and I went down with the Pages to meet them and be with them on the first day, and to get the lay of the land and to see what was expected of me and meet and greet sort of thing.

JOHNSON: One newspaper account indicated, and you just mentioned this a few minutes ago, that you received some mail from the public.

LOOPER: Yes.

JOHNSON: Can you provide an example or two of the type of mail that you received?

LOOPER: Well most of the mail was very, very supportive in saying, you know, "Hooray, it's about time," or "Congratulations, we think this is terrific." I think I also got some mail from one of the Members of Congress, I think Congressman [John Chester] Culver, who basically said, "Oh, you've inspired some of the young women in my state and they want to become Pages. I've gotten letters from them and so you've been an inspiration to them, this is very exciting."

But I also got some hate mail. Not too much, but I remember specifically one. A man wrote me a letter basically saying that it was a really bad thing that women were taking money away from men. These were jobs that men could have, etcetera. It was a little upsetting to me because the kids who were Pages, I mean, they weren't supporting anybody, they're teenagers. So I was a little unnerved by that, but I didn't even respond to it. So there was all kinds of mail.

JOHNSON: Besides the press conferences, were there any special luncheons or celebrations in honor of you?

LOOPER: Yes, there were as a matter of a fact; and I thought it a little bit inappropriate at the time, even myself trying to get my really young brain around what's fair and what's not fair because women hadn't been in so many places before and there were a lot of firsts. There were the Members—the women Members of Congress had a luncheon for the new female Pages later in the summer and there were by then, oh, probably a dozen of us, maybe, I'm guessing. I don't remember exactly, but once the door was open—the floodgates—they were coming by the droves. Because all the Members of Congress wanted to be supportive of that, I believe. And there was a luncheon that was held for us that the boy Pages weren't invited to which I thought really wasn't fair. I mean, I appreciate what they were trying to do, and it was very nice of them to honor us. But you can't have it both ways. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Who was in attendance? This was thrown by the women Members at the time?

LOOPER: Yes, it seems to me that Patsy [Takemoto] Mink organized it, though I can't exactly remember. She had a woman Page there from Hawaii. And I'm trying to remember—oh, Pat [Patricia Scott] Schroeder was there, Bella [Savitzky] Abzug was there, Patsy Mink was there, Barbara [Charline] Jordan was there. I'm trying to

remember who else—anyway, those are the ones that are coming off the top of my head at this point. It's been a long time. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Right. Related to that question, what I was wondering is if some of the longtime women Members made an effort to greet you, because all of the ones that you mentioned were sort of the newer, younger generation of women. For example Congresswomen [Julia Butler] Hansen, [Martha Wright] Griffiths and [Leonor Kretzer] Sullivan, women that had been there for a longer period of time—do you remember them?

LOOPER: Right, right. Yes, I do remember them, as a matter of a fact. But also one of the people who greeted me on that very first day was Wayne [Levere] Hays who came and spoke to me, and after he left he said, "Congratulations and welcome." Some of the guys were saying, "Wow, he never speaks to us!" {laughter}. But it was nice to be acknowledged, and I appreciated that, and it was, I mean, there weren't girl faces around, and it was a first, and it was an interesting thing to try to remember all these names and faces of 400 odd people who you needed to learn their names pronto. And well, it was a new experience coming from a place like Heavener where you knew everybody in town, and now you have to memorize these faces and names in a week or less.

JOHNSON: Well since you just brought up some of the other Pages that you worked with, the male Pages, what was their reaction to you becoming a Page?

LOOPER: Well, I think in the beginning they weren't really quite sure. It's like, "Okay, this is another door down and we've got one less bastion of exclusivity is now taken away." But I think in the beginning there might have been a little bit of resentment, but I think as these guys got to know us and realized that we were wanting to do the same

things they were wanting to do, we ended up having a lot of fun together. So I think it was acceptance.

This was a life-changing experience for me. This was the first time I ever saw kids fighting over a newspaper and really knowing what was going on in the world, or certainly in our little world. And plus this was also the summer of the Watergate hearings, and we were fascinated by that whole process.[2] The first time we had been able to experience anything like an impeachment and then to be a part of, right here, with it, the kids I grew up with were—we didn't read newspapers. I mean, maybe we'd read the newspaper sometime, but it wasn't like this. All these kids knew what was going on, and who was involved, and that was really life changing to me, to see kids so fascinated by all of this stuff at such an early age. So it fascinated me, and I wanted to know, too, and I wanted to find out what was going on, and that was part of the interest in the politics, starting really then.

JOHNSON: Going back a little bit from when you first started. Maybe people that inspired you. Did you know Julie Price, or were you aware of her being one of the first female Pages in the Senate.

LOOPER: Yes, I knew about Julie Price. I did not know her personally, but I knew that she had gone to the Senate.

JOHNSON: At the time, the Pages fell under the jurisdiction of the Doorkeeper.

LOOPER: Right.

JOHNSON: Did you get to know the Doorkeeper at the time, "Fishbait" Miller?

LOOPER: "Fishbait" Miller, yes I did, and he would put peanuts in my Coca-cola, {laughter} because in the South, that's what you do. Yes, "Fishbait" Miller was quite the character. He was quite the character and it was always fun to go into his office because he'd always have a cold Coca-cola, "Co-Cola," and peanuts to put in them, and I'd sit there and talk with him for a while. He was really quite the character. And then our head Page was Jack Russ, who was such a cutie pie, and a sweet guy, and he took good care of us. And, yes, I can remember seeing faces of the people in the cloakroom, Donn Anderson.[3] He took good care of us, too. He had his handlebar moustache and really, really a nice guy. And they made sure we were on track and they were sort of parenting us and shepherding us along to make sure that we were doing what we were supposed to do, and staying out of trouble, and we were high school kids after all.

JOHNSON: Since you were a Page, you had the opportunity to spend a lot of time in the Democratic Cloakroom.

LOOPER: Yes.

JOHNSON: For people that don't really know what goes on there, could you describe some of the activities?

LOOPER: Well, it's kind of like a little—like you think of your teachers that have a lounge. It's that kind of a thing—comfortable chairs, and newspapers, and a little place to get snacks. And—oh, I'm trying to remember the name of the guy who—I think his name was Ray. He always made sure that I had coconut cream pie. {laughter} But it was a place to get a snack, and if you needed something there were telephones, and of course, this was way back before anybody had a cell phone, and there were phones there and it was a place to be able to get off of the House Floor and go and rest and

read up, or whatever you needed to do, confer with somebody, whatever. It was just a nice little room off to the side where people could relax.

JOHNSON: Well there weren't many female Members at the time, but do you remember some of them actually coming into the cloakroom?

LOOPER: Sure, oh yeah.

JOHNSON: And they interacted with the male Members?

LOOPER: Absolutely, yes.

JOHNSON: Going back to "Fishbait" Miller for a second, did he do anything special in recognition of you being the first female Page?

LOOPER: I'm trying to remember. Not that I remember. Not that I remember. He was just—he was always—he was very glad to have the women Pages there. And he did—he would get us into his office and he'd give us Cokes and tell us stories, and he was just a terrific guy.

JOHNSON: You already talked about some of the other female Pages that were there, and there were a lot of women that came after you, young women that came after you during that summer, what do you recall about them? Did you feel a special bond because you were starting something new, breaking a new barrier?

LOOPER: Well you know, we worked all the time. I mean, when we were there, we were working. And it wasn't, it was really, because I lived very close to the Hill, I could stay later than some of the Pages because some of them lived out, and some of the

boy Pages lived at home or lived places that were further out, and they drove in. But I was just blocks from the Capitol, so when somebody needed to stay late, I always offered to stay late. And so it was when the offices were closed down and we weren't actually running, doing deliveries, or whatever we needed to be doing, which took us away and active and busy all the time, when we had the chance to sit in the House Chamber and talk, that's when we really had the camaraderie. And I didn't stay close to any, really, of the women Pages. There were a couple of the guy Pages that I still am in touch with, but the camaraderie really was the after hours because we were working during the day. We had lots of things to get done, and there were lots of deliveries and pickups, and it was really part of the job, was the gopher part of it. But that was the really important part of it because it took us into all of the different offices and we got to meet people, and got to see what their offices were like and how they ran their specific kind of operation and—we met people from all over the country. It was a really exciting, fun thing.

JOHNSON: Did you get to know Charlotte King, the first African-American female Page?

LOOPER: No, I did not.

JOHNSON: What kinds of things did you do as Pages when you weren't working? You talked about having a bit of leisure time.

LOOPER: We did. Well, sometimes we'd go down to the Hawk and Dove, and there were sometimes Members of Congress who would be down there, and back in those days you could buy a beer when you were 18. Of course, it was hard to afford them very much, but we'd go down there and have a beer, and talk, and sometimes there would be a Member of Congress down there, and it was always interesting to pick their brains about what was going on politically.

And, of course, we were glued to the television watching the Watergate hearings. That was all very interesting to us. One of my friends who was a Page that summer with me, Jim Cline's father was the head of the Judiciary Committee, or legal counsel for the Judiciary Committee, Jim Cline. And Jim's parents became very good friends of mine, Jim and Fran Cline. So that was another interesting end to what was going on because he was the legal counsel for the Judiciary, and so to be able to talk with him about what was going on was yet another facet of information that as a kid, as even an adult in the city, you don't necessarily get. But as a Page, it was really exciting to be able to find out what was going on, and to hear, and to really get the inside of what was going on.

JOHNSON: As a Page, did you perceive any differences among the Members at the beginning of Watergate in '73. Did you sense any sort of change in the behavior among Members in the cloakroom, or just in general?

LOOPER: Well, everybody was a buzz about it. And of course, we also had some scandals that summer, too. Speaking of Wayne Hays, that whole thing. And there was another one, it seems like, that summer, too. I can't recall. But it was a hotbed of—and these were back in the days, these were smoke filled rooms, and Members of Congress would close the doors and decide what was going to happen. It was a really different way of doing things than we do now. It was very much an old boy network, and even some of the women who had to be old boys in there had to wield some power to be able to get some things done, but it was very much that way.

JOHNSON: Of the women Members, are there any that stand out in your mind that you felt particularly close to?

LOOPER: Most I felt close to, but I really, really liked Bella Abzug. And I'll tell you a little story about her. I happened to be on the floor of the House back in the Page section, and they were having a debate about whether the federal government should fund abortions. And I remember seeing, she walks past me, and she goes down there in her floral dress, she trots herself down there with her hat on and she delivers herself this fabulous speech about how important it is for the government to fund abortions because the women who need them, who can't afford them, are the ones who most need them. And she put out this mathematical equation saying, "Let's do the math here. What's it going to cost to deliver this baby? What's it going to cost to take care of it under welfare for 18 years? What's it going to cost in crime that this kid's going to perpetrate for not being able to—if this parent didn't want it in the first place. So she does some interesting math, and she says, "Okay, so you don't want to spend $150 for an abortion, okay, you do the math, this is what's going to happen." So she was really, I really admired her, and she was an inspiration to me. I really liked her. She didn't care what people thought. She said, "This is the way it is," and I liked that about her.

JOHNSON: Switching gears a little, I was hoping you could talk more about what it was that you did as a Page. Can you describe an average day on the job?

LOOPER: Well, in the beginning, they did some pranks to me. Like they told me that I had to go get the *Congressional Record* Player. Well, there is no *Congressional Record* Player. {laughter} The *Congressional Record*, of course, well I don't know how they do it now, but in those days, it would be printed up, all of the words of the day. Whatever anybody said, it was all typed up and put in a book, went in the *Congressional Record*, and there was a book under each seat that we had to tie these paper things into. I'm sure it's got to be different now. But every morning we would come and get those and tie them into the books. And then once the offices started the head Page, the

seated head Page at the desk would—there was a phone bank there and the phones would light up—"This office needs this package to be carried to that office," and "come pick up this package and do that," and so it was really basically a lot of running the hallways, which the lovely gorgeous stacked shoes that my mother bought me before I came here went by the by because my feet were killing me after the first day. Mary Ward, bless her heart, Charlie's wife, went out to buy me some shoes with some crepe soles that were soft and leather. Oh, I could have kissed her. My feet were just killing me, and I wore ugly shoes but I didn't care. {laughter} Yeah, the stacked shoes, I'll remember those.

JOHNSON: Were there any responsibilities or any jobs that you weren't allowed to do because you were a female Page?

LOOPER: I don't remember anything that I was not supposed to do. No, we did everything pretty much the same. Whoever was next in line got the call to go do this, and then the next one, the next call that came, it would be just down the line. I didn't get any preferential treatment, and there wasn't anything that I can remember that I didn't get to do because I was a girl.

JOHNSON: Where did you live while you were a Page?

LOOPER: At first, in the very beginning, I lived with Charlie and Mary Ward over in Crystal City [Virginia]. They had a lovely apartment over there. But after a few weeks, a couple weeks I think, I moved in with Sherry Tonnabee, who was this lovely, lovely woman, beautiful. She had a lot of Native American in her and just a lovely woman, inside and out. She had an apartment over on Duddington Street, and so I moved in with her and I spent the summer there with her and lived there. It was a great little place. I could walk just a few blocks.

JOHNSON: I read in a few newspaper articles, contemporary newspaper articles that the female Pages at the time had to have forms signed by their parents that they were responsible for your well-being and that this was something that the male Pages didn't have to sign.

LOOPER: That's correct. My dad was very, very upset about that, and he made it known, that why is it that you're making us sign for our daughters and you're not making the parents of the sons sign the same thing? I don't recall what became of that practice, but that's very astute. Exactly, when my dad asked that question they said, "Well no, we don't ask." He said that he was very, very unhappy with that because that's just not right.

JOHNSON: Do you know if there are any other rules that were created for your protection, so to speak?

LOOPER: You know, I don't know, and because I was the first, and I was just there for the summer, when I left and then went to the University of Oklahoma, I kind of left that stuff behind me with regard to what was going on with all of that. So no, I don't recall if there were any kinds of rules. I'm sure that there were because in the past when these stories have come up about misbehavior on the part of a Member of Congress and a Page, it's been with boys and with girls, since then. But the Members of Congress are adults. They're the ones that should be really taking care of this in the sense that misbehavior on their part is inexcusable. And kids are kids, but yeah. By the time you're going to come and be a Page, you should have had some sort of training to say, "Here's what's going to go on in your life. Here's what the expectations are of you, and you need to behave accordingly." And if you're mature enough to go and be a Page, this is the behavior that you need to adopt.

JOHNSON: Since you mentioned training, did you receive any sort of training or orientation in your first few days as to what it was you were going to be doing, and what you were going to be exposed to?

LOOPER: Not so much what I was going to be exposed to, because that was a whole different thing in and of itself, but there are certain expectations. Like you come to work at this time, and here's what you're going to be doing, and the Pages will show you what you need to do, the ones who are already here and experienced. And there was a sort of an orientation, and we took a picture so that you had a card, and all of those kinds of things. So it was basically an orientation, but knowing what to expect was a totally different thing. Coming from a small town in rural Oklahoma, where everybody is good to each other and you don't lock your car doors or your house or any of that stuff, to a place where you don't leave your door unlocked. And I can remember leaving the door unlocked one time and Sherry comes in and she's just all over me. "You left the door unlocked!" And I'm just thinking, "Dang." {laughter} I didn't realize it was such a big deal. But in Washington, D.C., in the '70s and still even now, you don't leave your doors unlocked. But I was clueless. I didn't know what to expect. So I kind of learned the hard way.

JOHNSON: What was the most challenging aspect of your job?

LOOPER: That's a tough one. Well, I think probably just being able to realize what life in a big city is like. Fortunately I was surrounded by Pages, friends who, I was with somebody almost all the time. We would go out, we would go to Georgetown, or we would go someplace up on Capitol Hill to eat, have a drink, something like that. But I don't remember, work wise, any major challenges.

JOHNSON: Some of the women staffers that we've talked to that worked during the 1970s talked about some of the basic things that they had to overcome, like not having access to readily available restrooms. Do you remember anything like that?

LOOPER: No, actually I don't, because I mean, as a Page, we were in all of the buildings all of the time, and there seemed like there were restrooms anywhere I needed to, but then I was walking all over the place so it was a little bit different perspective for me, I think.

JOHNSON: And as a Page, then and now, you were able to travel, as you said, to the different buildings and to the Capitol. Can you describe the access to the Capitol that you had during the 1970s?

LOOPER: Oh, everything was wide open. I mean, you just walked in. I had a Page badge so I could go into the House, onto the House Floor, which other people could not, unless they were escorted. And I can remember Dr. Galusha coming up from Oklahoma. He and his family were visiting and I got to take them, as a Page, into places where other people might not be able to go.[4] So I took them on a little tour of the Capitol. No, I think with a Page badge, we got to go anywhere. And there were the tunnels—if you wanted to do the fast way you'd go through the tunnel, if it's pouring rain. If it was a really pretty day we'd walk outside and cross the street and just walk into the building, there was no detectors, there were no—there was a police person at each door, always, but—I think, it seems like there was somebody at the door, but there was no searching and electronic stuff. None of that existed.

JOHNSON: Were you able to go into the Speaker's Lobby?

LOOPER: Yes, I had access to everyplace.

JOHNSON: And the dome of the Capitol?

LOOPER: Yes, yes. There are lots of little nooks and crannies that most people don't know about. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Can you recall one that most people wouldn't know about?

LOOPER: Well, most people wouldn't, there's one place around the back and you go down some stairs in the back of the Rotunda and it goes downstairs to this room, this little sort of room place that's kind of an off the beaten path kind of place. But whenever it was closed and all the visitors were gone and most of the staffers were gone and the House was still in session, always somebody would have to be there, but it was really quiet. It was a really neat experience to be in the empty Capitol by yourself, with a friend, or with another Page, and walk around and just be by yourself. Nobody else there. It was a really neat experience.

JOHNSON: What were the uniforms like for female Pages?

LOOPER: Well it was the same really as for the guys. We were told just to wear like a dark suit. And I always wore slacks. I don't think I wore a skirt at all. We always wore slacks. I don't think I remember the women wearing skirts. I guess it's possible, but we just didn't. It was a sort of a uniform, navy or black. We didn't have to wear a tie which was nice, but I tried to always wear my little donkey pin on my lapel.

JOHNSON: You already talked about Watergate, and the 1970s, of course, were a really important decade in the women's right movement, as well.

LOOPER: Yes, yes.

JOHNSON: How conscious were you of the changes that were taking place in the country?

LOOPER: Oh, I was very conscious of it. I can remember when abortion became legalized, and the advent of the birth control pill which was a little bit earlier than that, back in the '60's but then it became widely used. And so women were starting to have some sexual freedom for the first time in our existence. And that was a really, really cool thing. My mother was the first feminist I ever knew, and as I said, I still have her Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique*, that she gave me. I think it was 67¢ or something the book cost, or something like that, and I still have it. But it was an important time because women didn't have the same rights as men, and women had a lot of the responsibility of child rearing and they didn't have the right to be able to say, "I can't have this child. I've become pregnant, I don't want to be pregnant but I am, and either I can't afford it, or I can't emotionally take care of it," or whatever it is, women didn't have the right to say this is my body and I ought to be able to make that decision. And there are still a lot of people in this country who don't feel that way, but I, for one, do, and I think that women ought to be able to have the right to choose. And we didn't have that right. If you became pregnant, you didn't have a choice. And women were being butchered by people who were giving them illegal abortions, and it was a horrible, horrible, horrible time. There were a lot of things that were changing.

And I can remember my first week on campus at the University of Oklahoma and they had all of these booths set up for all of the different organizations, and I went down and I bought a t-shirt that had the female sign, the circle with the plus at the bottom with an equal in it, and I still have that t-shirt. And I think it's been through the washer a whole lot of times,{laughter} and actually it would still fit me. {laughter}

But I still have that t-shirt, and I can remember thinking, "This is a really cool t-shirt." But I mean, it was changing, and women . . . that was the fall of the streakers. I don't know if you've ever heard about streakers, but that was the fall when all of the students would take off their clothes and run naked through the campus. It was always at night of course, but that was to me—like this is just insane, this is fun, I love this place. {laughter} But I mean, lots of things were changing . . . and men's attitudes towards women were starting to change because we were asking them to change it. And it's funny how you go full circle because in those days, I didn't want a guy to open the door for me. I can do that myself. I wasn't ever sort of the militant sort, but I was certainly—though some of the women Pages were a lot more than I, but I thought that there's a way to do this and still be a lady. You can still be feminine and you can still be polite, but you have to have equal rights, but with that comes equal responsibility. You can't have it both ways. Now, I appreciate when somebody opens my door. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Well in 1972 the Equal Rights Amendment [ERA] had been sent to the states for ratification.[5] While you were a Page, the process was still going on. So were you especially aware of ERA because of your presence in the House?

LOOPER: Well, not just because of that. Mostly because of my mother, and understanding what all of that meant. Yes, I was very aware of it, and I was very, very disappointed in it when it wasn't passed, when it wasn't ratified, so we've had to go on, and do it without that, but we have. And women now I believe find it a little bit hard to believe that someone would be prejudiced against them because they're a woman, especially because you're bright and well-educated, and you come out of the university ready to find a job, you would be incensed if somebody hired someone, a male, who didn't have your credentials and paid them more money. Now young women expect—and should—demand that. Unfortunately, we're still not there.

Women are still making less money than men in the same positions, and we're still faced with a lot of problems of who's going to take care of our kids while we're at work. And those issues are . . . we still grapple with those.

JOHNSON: When you just brought up money that made me think of your pay as a House Page. Were you paid the same as the male Pages?

LOOPER: Yes, I was paid the same amount, and I was so psyched to get that paycheck. It was the first paycheck like that I had ever gotten, and it was, to me, a lot of money. I am trying to remember how much it was; I think I have a pay stub in here someplace [referring to a folder she brought to the interview].[6] But whatever it was, it was more money than I had ever made before and it was exciting to actually make some money.

JOHNSON: Going back to the 1970s again—do you think that looking back on your time as a Page, do you think it's a fair assessment to say that you were a symbol of the era in the House because you were the first female Page?

LOOPER: Well you know, I didn't really think so much about that myself, but I went to a reunion, a Page reunion a couple of summers ago, and I saw a lot of my buddies from the summer I was there. It was so great to catch up with them. And we've all changed. {laughter} Some were a little bit more recognizable than others, but there were some Pages there from younger years, from later years, that didn't know me but then when they heard my name they came over to say, "Oh, I wanted to meet you because you were the first," and evidently that legacy was passed down at least for a while. So that was kind of a neat thing that people knew who I was. I didn't . . . to me, it wasn't such, I guess personally to me, it wasn't such a big thing, and then I realized as time has gone by that it did make a difference. Somebody had to be the

first. Somebody was going to be the first. It was going to happen, and I was psyched that it was me. It was a really exciting time, and the letters I got from people were indicative of the fact that people were paying attention to that.

JOHNSON: In 1973, Congresswoman Yvonne [Brathwaite] Burke made headlines when she announced that she was pregnant. She went on to become the first Member to give birth while serving in Congress. Do you remember this being a big topic of conversation?

LOOPER: Not so much a big topic of conversation, but she was—and she probably still is, I haven't seen her in a while—a beautiful woman. And she would come in in her maternity clothes and she was this beautiful, elegant, lovely woman. No, I thought it was terrific. You go! {laughter}

JOHNSON: Did you view yourself as a role model at the time?

LOOPER: No, I was too busy having fun. I didn't even think about myself as a role model. It was just a lot of fun, and it was like being a kid in a candy store. Everything was new and different and people were interesting, and the stuff that was going on and was electric, and the city was electric and so fast-paced. I can remember coming out of a restaurant in Georgetown at about 10:00 at night and all these cars were bumper to bumper in the streets. In Heavener, the streets are dead by 8:00 at night. So it was a fascinating thing to me, that whole experience. It was more like an individual learning experience than it was more the Page experience in and of itself.

JOHNSON: Well that was at the time. What about today? Do you view yourself as a role model today?

LOOPER: Well when I think back on it, I think at that time, yeah, it was at time, because I said, if these young girls from other Members' districts wanted to become Pages, then yes, I suppose I was.

JOHNSON: You spoke of your mother, and Congresswoman Abzug as being role models. Did you have any other role models at the time?

LOOPER: Oh, at the time, I also liked Pat Schroeder from Colorado. She's such a smart woman and she takes everything on that she finds important and she doesn't waiver. I liked her a lot too, and I had a great deal of respect for her. I think she still lives in Washington, I'm not sure. But all of the women were. Every single one of those women was a role model to me. Barbara Jordan of Texas. I really, really, really, really admired her. But all of them. I think every single one of them. It takes a lot to get here, man or woman, but especially as a woman to get here, it's harder. Or it used to be. {laughter}

JOHNSON: At the time there were only a few. I think it was less than 20 women in 1973.

LOOPER: Exactly.

JOHNSON: How did your time as a Page and the distinction of being the first female Page impact your life?

LOOPER: Oh, it totally completely changed it. I don't know that being the first necessarily changed it, but certainly coming here to Washington and having that experience totally changed it. That there is so much beyond the borders of one's county and state and even one's country. It inspired me in a lot of ways, the excitement, as I said earlier, of the kids just clamoring to learn and to know what was going on and to be

right here with regard to the hearings on Watergate and all of the changes that were going on. Plus, I was also excited to get back to Norman [Oklahoma] and start college, start the university. It was a very exciting time in my life. When I went back to school, and that—the Page part wasn't such a big deal to me at that point. I mean, it was a great experience to come here and do that, but I didn't think of it as that in and of itself. I guess maybe I'm a little bit more surprised that other people think it's really cool that I did it. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Did it foster a lifelong interest in politics for you?

LOOPER: Well, I came back here to work one summer, Congressman Jim [James Robert] Jones' office, he was kind enough to give me an internship here. My experience of the Hill, and not relative to my experience in that office, but on the Hill and Members of the Congress in general, and how frustrating it is to try to get things done. And when you can't get things to happen the way you want them to, sometimes it's easy to give up and say, "How can I make a difference?" And you lose sort of the starry-eyed part of the kid who thinks, "Oh, look at all this exciting stuff that's going on," and then you get into the reality of the game playing and the politics that go on that have to happen to get things to change, for laws to pass, for anything to change. Like they say, it takes an act of Congress. Well, {laughter} that's not always so easy. So my interest in politics is still there, but it's not the passionate fire-breathing dragon that it used to be.

JOHNSON: One of the newspaper articles that was done on you after you came to the Capitol—just talking about the press coverage—had a quote that I just wanted to read back to you. You said that, in reference to not being able to be a Page when you first came to the Capitol in 1966, "It was the first time in my life I ever felt discriminated

against as a woman, and it made me furious." Do you remember making that statement?

LOOPER: Actually, I do, actually, now that you repeat it. Yes. That's what I was saying to my dad, "Well, that's just not fair." And I said it indignantly to Mr. Albert. "That's just not fair." {laughter} And he goes, "You're right, we'll have to look into that." So I was fairly excited about all of that, and excitable, and I think the people in my town who knew me, this wouldn't have surprised them. I was always sort of the one who would stand up when things weren't right, when somebody was discriminated against, or somebody said something that was off-color about someone. I was the one who would say, "This is unacceptable." And so the people in my town kind of new me as the black sheep. {laughter}

JOHNSON: If you had the opportunity to impart advice to someone interested in becoming a Page, what would you tell them?

LOOPER: Oh, I would say absolutely and I'll help you in any way that I can because it is a great experience. Even if you don't have any interest of going into politics or any of that stuff, just understanding the system and how it works and meeting the people who make the laws—it's just a life changing experience if you let it be. And I think there are a lot of people who came here because maybe their parents donated a lot of money to a campaign so they got given the right to do it, but everybody who really wants to do this should have the opportunity to do it, to be a Page, even if it's for just a summer, like my experience. Most of the kids come and go to school here and that's a really tough, tough thing. I admire those kids who get up at "0-dark-thirty" and study and do what they need to do before they come to work, and then work all day and then have to study in the evenings. It's tough. It's like college but they're

younger. And I admire them for that. I didn't have that experience, but I did get the good part, the working experience part.

JOHNSON: Would your advice differ for girls and boys?

LOOPER: No. No. If you want to go do this, go do it. I think, especially in those days, women's jobs in the House, and in the Senate, were generally support roles. I mean, there certainly were a few Members of Congress and there were some very high-powered women administrative assistants, I'm sure. But most of the jobs here were support roles for women. But this city, this city and this is, for women, is one of the best places, I believe, for women to get ahead. But for Pages, you bet. I'd say for any kid who's interested in it, don't come to do it just because your dad gave a bunch of money or your mom gave a bunch of money to the Member of Congress and you have to go do it for a summer. That's not the way to do it. If you've got a burning desire I would hope that any Member of Congress would make sure that kid got to come and have the experience.

JOHNSON: Definitely from what you've said today it sounds as if you've had a positive experience.

LOOPER: Oh, absolutely, it was a very positive experience.

JOHNSON: What were some of your favorite aspects of being a Page?

LOOPER: Well I think being on the floor of the House was really—I really liked to be watching what was going on there. That part was very interesting to me. And the running of the stuff, that's just part of the deal you have to do, but you can make anything positive or negative if you want to. I chose to find going into people's offices and

meeting with people there and getting to know them to make it a positive experience, because we were all over the place. We had to run to whatever building it was, and so we got to know this place pretty well. {laughter}

JOHNSON: Was there anything else that you wanted to add today?

LOOPER: No, I can't really think of anything else I would like to say. But part of the reason that I got to be the way that I am and the way that I was to get here is certainly because of my parents, both of whom were very supportive in giving me unconditional love and support and they were just the best.

JOHNSON: Well thank you, I really enjoyed the session today.

LOOPER: Thank you very much. I've enjoyed it too.

JOHNSON: Great.

NOTES

1 Speaker Albert represented the congressional district which encompassed Felda Looper's hometown of Heavener, Oklahoma.
2 Beginning in May 1974, the House Judiciary Committee held a series of hearings to debate several articles of impeachment against President Nixon. Before a nationally televised audience in July 1974, the committee, chaired by Congressman Peter Wallace Rodino, Jr., of New Jersey, adopted three articles of impeachment against the President. President Nixon resigned on August 9, 1974, before the full House had the opportunity to vote on the impeachment articles.
3 Donnald K. Anderson served as Clerk of the House from the 100th through the 103rd Congress (1987–1995). The Office of the House Historian conducted eight oral history interviews with Donnald Anderson covering his 35-year career working for the House.
4 A resident of Tulsa, Oklahoma, Dr. Galusha was a family friend.
5 The Equal Rights Amendment was a proposed constitutional amendment granting women equal protection under the law. Passed by Congress in 1972, the ERA then went to the states for ratification. Despite a 3-year extension to the constitutionally mandated 7-year deadline, the ERA amendment failed to gain passage in the requisite three-fourths of the states and expired in 1982.
6 The pay stub—dated June 29, 1973, and made out to Felda Looper from the U.S. House of Representatives—was for a gross pay of $625.50.

INDEX