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The Reminiscences of

MARJORIE MERRIWEATHER POST

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PREFACE

This memoir is the result of a tape recorded interview conducted by John T. Mason, Jr., for the Oral History Office with Marjorie Merriweather Post in Washington, D.C. on February 13, 1964.

Only minor corrections and emendations have been made. The reader should bear this in mind as also the fact that he is reading a transcript of the spoken, rather than the written word.

Interview with Mrs. Marjorie Post May by John T. Mason, Jr.
February 13, 1964 - Washington, D.C. - Interview No. 1

Q: Mrs. May, we are utterly delighted at Oral History that you consent to do this because we realize that you have a very fascinating story to tell, a story that encompasses so much of American life in this 20th Century, so, as I say, we're delighted at the opportunity. As we usually do, we'd like a biographical account of your life, so if you would begin at the beginning.

Mrs. May: Well, the beginning was in the Middlewest, the capital city of Illinois, and I was an addition to the family. The family was quite a big one because my grandfather and grandmother had three sons, two of whom were married, my father and a brother, and they all lived together in the big house up at the top of Sixth Street in Springfield. As in those days, the big houses of heads of families were constantly filled with old-maid cousins and aunts and various visitors of the family. And, I must say, as I began to grow up and heard tales that my father would tell of the tricks they would play on the "old girls," it was really something.

Apparently my advent seemed to be rather an exciting thing because my parents had been married 12 years before I arrived. There had been a little boy, who, unfortunately, died at birth. And then my aunt and uncle had had a lovely little

girl who died of croup when she was only six months old. So, there was a large family, but no babies. So, you can imagine, when I arrived I was thoroughly spoiled. That aunt and uncle continued many, many years in my life and added a great deal to me because they seemed almost like a second mother and father. And even after the family left Springfield, that brother came into business with my father in Michigan, and they moved there, and the aunt had really very strong influence in my life. She was a woman that I admired enormously and loved dearly. She and my mother were probably the most intimate friends that you can think of, these two sisters-in-law, who had married brothers, you see.

Q: As you reflect upon her, what were her characteristics which you admired most?

Mrs. May: Well, first and foremost, she was beloved by every age of people that you can think of. She was a woman who loved to entertain. She had most of her pleasure, it seemed to me, in what she could do for other people. She was a rather large woman with a most beautiful skin and hair, and loved to entertain, loved to do pleasant things for people. She was a marvelous cook: she tried to teach me, but I couldn't learn anything about that. But she did teach my children later on, remarkably, and they loved that aunt, adored her.

There were many things. For instance, she was

meticulous about always thanking a person immediately for something that they would do or had done for them, I should say, and that was something that was drilled into me as a young person. Also Auntie and I were usually the ones who did all the Christmas presents, did them up, you know, so she taught me how to tie the bows so they were flat and wouldn't be turning. Oh, there were so many little things like that. She taught me a great deal about running a house.

I speak of her so much because my mother, unfortunately, from the time I was quite young, early teens, was very ill, and she was away a great deal, and it left me looking to the aunt, more or less as another mother.

To go on a little bit with Springfield and to give you a little picture of what was going on at that time, my grandfather was quite a friend of Lincoln's. Of course, Lincoln had died some years before I was born, but the granddfather was full of stories about him. Also, grandfather was one of the honorary pallbearers who traveled with the Lincoln body all over the United States. He was the last living one of that group of men: he died only in 1920. He was full of stories. He was never incapacitated for a minute in his hearing or sight or health; He was an amazing old boy, having been born in Vermont; it was a very sturdy race. There were generations of them born in Cornwall, Vermont. And then, as a young man, before he married grandmother, he was a forty-niner, with his brother Lafayette, whom they always called Fayette. These two started out with their mule team and armed with three sets of cowhide

boots because they had to walk most of the time. They went on the Santa Fe Trail and it took them over three months. Of course, they were looking for gold.

Q: They certainly had the pioneering spirit, didn't they?

Mrs. May: Definitely. There's a good deal of the pioneer back of me for several generations.

They didn't find the gold, but they did find a very profitable business, because the searchers for gold were pouring in in '49 and there were all kinds of little buildings that needed constructing, and they took to bucksawing lumber at a dollar a foot. And as long as they were willing to do that, they made a great deal of money.

They came back by clipper ship to Panama, and when they got to the Isthmus they took mules across the Isthmus and took another clipper ship up to the east coast. At that time, I believe, they had left Vermont and were living in Ohio, and it was shortly after that they decided to go again to the Pike's Peak Rush, again looking for gold. They never thought of looking for the silver.

Q: That was a minor metal.

Mrs. May: Exactly. And they didn't find it. I don't remember the details of how they came back, probably by stagecoach, and it was shortly after that that grandfather met the young widow,

Caroline, and they were married quite soon. They went to Chicago by stagecoach for their wedding trip, and it was shortly after the Great Fire. He was keeping a diary, which I have, and he tells quite some story about Chicago in those days. I think it was a cow that kicked over an oil lamp that started it.

Q: Yes.

Mrs. May: And, later, many years after their oldest son, my father, had grown up, he was a member of the Governor's Guard in Springfield, and when the second great fire came, he went with Phil Sheridan to Chicago and they had orders to kill anyone they saw looting, because there was such chaos there that it had to be controlled. I think the company was called the Zouaves, which was very popular in those days, with the big Turkish trousers, you know. My father was a marvelous shot and won all kinds of medals in competitions and so on.

Q: Mrs.May, you have given me a little picture of Springfield in the days toward the end of the century, when you were born there. I believe the family didn't stay there very long after your birth, but that your father was involved in a business enterprise somewhere else, in Texas, was he not?

Mrs. May: No, he was not involved in it then, but he got into it very quickly. He had not been well for a good many years

before I was born, and apparently shortly after my arrival, another crisis came. It's a pretty strenuous winter and summer, and so forth, too hot and too cold, in Illinois, so they decided--I think the whole family decided--to leave Springfield and go down to Texas, which they did, to Fort Worth. I don't think that my father went immediately to Texas. It seems to me that we went to California first. I have a cute little picture of myself wading in the Pacific, the first time I saw it, at the age of almost nothing, just walking. Then he joined the family down there, and they were involved in various types of business. He had a woolen mill at one point there. They had a land development business, and so forth, he and some of the brothers.

My father grew worse after a certain length of time, and when I was about three--he had been to various health spots in this country but he had heard about Battle Creek, Michigan as being a very efficient sanitarium--he decided to go to Battle Creek. So, we, mother and father and I went to Battle Creek and settled there. He was in the sanitarium for a year, and the famous Dr. John Kellogg finally told my mother that he had done everything he could for father, and it had not been successful.

Q: What was his disability?

Mrs. May: Digestion, a stomach and intestinal difficulty. You see, he'd been a salesman and a cowboy and various things in his life, and I think the irregular manners of eating perhaps

and the strain of traveling in those days probably brought this whole thing on.

Q: Today we would call it nervous tension perhaps.

Mrs. May: I'm sure it was. So, when the doctor told mother that, she of course was terribly shocked and disturbed. She had had a letter just a few days ahead of this from some cousin in Chicago about a marvelous cure that had been made and suggested that my mother try this for the father. Well, of course, when she got the letter she didn't think anything about it; he was in the sanitarium and she assumed it was going to be all right. And then came the message from the doctor. So, she immediately sent a telegram to this cousin, who told her about a Christian Science practitioner in Battle Creek, right there. So, the very day the letter came, he was taken in his wheelchair to see this practitioner.

It was the most amazing thing what happened, because he had been without any hope, apparently, because I guess the doctor had talked to him long before the doctor talked to my mother about his failure to help him. My father was so impressed with this teaching that when Mrs. Gregory suggested to him that he go back to the sanitarium and come and see her again in a few days, he said, "Oh, no, I'm not going to leave this house. I've found something here, and it's a straw to grasp at. I'm not going to leave." She said, "But, Mr. Post, I have five children.

The house is full. I don't have any room for you." He said, "I don't care, I'll sleep on the floor." She said, "Well, in that case, I'll send some children over to the neighbor's, and fix a room for you," which she did.

Q: Was this characteristic of his tenacity?

Mrs. May: Yes. Grasping at a straw. You see, he had something like nine years of illness, off and on, and business failures because of illness and starting over again, and again failure because of illness. So, after she had arranged the room for him and so forth and told my mother that he was staying there, it became supper time. They had a very substantial supper; I don't remember what it was, maybe chicken. He was very afraid to eat because he had been living on scraped beef and junket for over a year. The poor thing. He was a man of 6'1". He was down to 90 pounds, starving! So, Mrs. Gregory said, "Mr. Post, I assume you are hungry. You are here for treatment. Eat what is put in front of you and enjoy it." So, he did.

After supper she said to him, "Now, Mr. Post, you've had a long day. You'd better retire. Your room is there. My door is there. If you have one minute of discomfort, knock on my door, because you are here to be healed." So, he went to bed and lay awake, waiting to be uncomfortable, and then went to sleep. He awakened in the middle of the night--she had told him, "You'll be hungry during the night; there's cold chicken in the icebox and the door to the pantry is there"--he was hungry,

took his little candle down to the pantry, got to the icebox, sat there and enjoyed the chicken, and went back to bed,waiting to be uncomfortable, fell asleep until time to awake in the morning. Hmmm He couldn't believe it. It was the first time he had had a decent meal in over a year.

So, the next morning at breakfast there were buckwheat cakes and sausage and coffee and everything that was good, and again he was afraid, and she said, "But, Mr. Post, your supper did not disturb you and neither did your midnight meal. Eat your breakfast!" He did. No discomfort. Within three or four days that man could go out and walk up and down--he hadn't taken a step in so long, had been in a wheelchair or in bed--and he put on 30 pounds in 30 days. I have pictures of him that show him to be much too fat and very shortly that extra fat was absorbed and he was of normal weight, feeling perfectly strong and well.

I think on the fourth day he walked down to the town and back from her house. And so, mother had had a little house near the sanitarium, and he went there to stay rather than in the sanitarium and kept in touch with Mrs. Gregory. She had given him the textbook and he began to study very intensively as to what it was that had made him better, made him able to eat what he wanted to and digest it.

Q: This was Science and Health that she gave him?

Mrs. May: Yes, the same Science and Health they use today.

In a very short time he bought the property were Postum was started. It was a lovely farm, a little bit out of the town of Battle Creek. It had a beautiful, big, old Victorian house, way up on a hill, with beautiful orchards and fields and so forth. He set up what he called La Vita Inn, and he was taking patients and healing them in the most amazing way.

Q: He then became a practitioner?

Mrs. May: He became a practitioner. The Christian Science Movement was in a way rather young at that time.

Q: Mrs. Eddy was still alive, was she not?

Mrs. May: Oh, yes. She died in 1904, I think.

Anyway, he became interested in, oh, mental science and hypnotism, and he lost his ability to heal, because of the diversion of thought, you see. He even went abroad to study under the famous Charcot in Paris, the hypnotist, under whose suggestion operations could be performed, you know, with no bleeding, and be successful, and also cripples. He described to me one day being in the clinic where this girl came in, walking on the outside of her ankles because her feet wouldn't go down straight. She was put under suggestion, and all of a sudden she began to shake, and those feet straightened, and she stood

up on them. Charcot brought her out of whatever it is they're in, a trance or something, and he said to her, "You can walk." She started off, and of course burst into tears of excitement and gratitude. And then he saw many operations done there in that clinic. Hypnotism can be quite a dangerous thing, which my father recognized, and I think a great many people recognized it. It was very exciting when it first came before the world, but they realized that a person could be put under so far that he'd never come out, you see. My father was very aware of that, because he used suggestion on his patients when he came back but he never went very far with it. He had a funny little machine, with a whirling thing that was shiny, that would make you very sleepy when you watched it. He also started under K , who was that famous man in Switzerland, and the K cure was to be put out in the snow barefooted for five minutes in the morning and at night, or in the summer to go on the grass when it had dew in the mornings or the evenings. Of course, he worked all of this on mother and me, and during the summer out at the La Vita Inn, before we'd go to bed at night, we'd all three go out on the beautiful lawns in the moonlight and make shadows. We used to have more fun. But when it came winter and he used to get me out of a nice warm bed and make me walk in the snow for two or three minutes, this was a little stiff. But it meant that I could go tobogganing and wading in the snow all day, and I never had a cold foot. Of course, in those days in Michigan we used to have 180 days of sleighing every year, you know, so of course all the kids were out in the snow all day

long, as soon as school was out, and so forth.

There were various things I was taken through with his Christian Science training, all those kids' things that children have, and also for the dentist. I was scared literally to death of the dentist, like most children are, and the baby teeth, I think, weren't too good anyhow--they needed too much taking care of--but when the second ones came in they were good and strong, and they still are, thank goodness. Well, anyway, with the first really heavy dentistry, which had to be gold or silver in those days, I was taken to St. Louis, to a woman dentist, and she did something like 28 fillings. I was there two weeks, and each one of the sessions in the dentist's chair I was put to sleep; I didn't feel anything, came out of it, and was perfectly all right. I practically had very few cavities from then on for about 25 or 30 years.

I remember mmmmmmm one instance shortly after this time in St. Louis when the two front teeth had little holes underneath and had to be done, and it was to be done by a man in Battle Creek, and I was afraid of him. The father put me under three times and the minute the dentist touched me, I popped right out. I could see the father now pacing up and down the room swearing under his breath, and he turned around to me and said, "Now, goddamn it, you've just got to stand it! I wouldn't put you under again for anything in the world. Now, you just sit there and stand it!"

From then on, he never used suggestion; he was afraid of it, thank goodness, because it's not good for anybody, you know.

It bothers their mentality and all sorts of thinggs, which people have learned in the years since.

Q: How did your mother take to the Science?

Mrs. May: Oh, of course, she was so grateful to mmm have him well again after all she had lived through with him, and I must say she began to study, too. Then she came to that middle time of life and had a most difficult period for a long time. Those were the years when I was really growing up, but she was away so much. But she found great comfort in the teaching and all of that.

Following these experiences, my father became thoroughly convinced that he should go back to manufacturing. In the meantime, he had started what was called the "scientific suspender," and in those days the suspenders for the men fastened almost in the front, maybe six or seven inches apart, and they fastened again on the side and crossed in the back. Well, in the summer, when they would like to go without a vest, the suspenders showed, and the scientific suspender was redesigned to come to the side and cross in the back, and they could wear mmm a cummerbund or just a belt and the suspender would not show, so of course it had great success. And I can remember very well the little factory that was making these and the girls who were embroidering ones fof weddings, and so forth, beautiful white satin with orange blossoms embroidered on. And then for some of the fussy old boys there would be the black,

again embroidered perhaps with cherries or this or that, to make them pretty. That business went on for many, many years, and I think after it was sold, he still had a royalty on those suspenders. Of course, they're in common use all over the country. My father was quite an inventor, you know; in his early youth he made a lot of farm machinery, cultivators, reapers, seeders, and most of those inventions are on file in the Postum Company. He also in those years during his illness had made the first piano player, and cut the rolls of music with a penknife. He had this model that would play and, of course, he was sick and could never put it in production. So, when the Angelus came on the market--I was about six or seven--of course he bought one of the first machines so I could play anything I wanted, so I was never given a music lesson; I could sit down at this thing and just have everything.

The same with the bicycle. He was the first one to make a bicycle with two wheels of the same size. When he was a boy it was the unicycle. And, again, he had his patents and everything, but pretty soon the Columbia came on the market. So, of course, I had one of the first Columbia bicycles and could zip all over with it.

He, in both those instances, sent his models to the company with his compliments, because he was busy with something else. But that inventive thing in that man went right along. He worked on Postum with a chemist; at least, he engaged the

chemist to do the work and he didn't, and after about a year and a half he discharged him, and he made it in no time himself and put it into production. And, of course, Grape Nuts, which is a breakfast food; it's the only breakfast food that has ever come on the market that was never copied. It's too complicated in its manufacture to be easy to copy, so it's never been copied, and it's still going. He also was the first one to bring corn flakes on the market and he called it Post Toasties. Then, of course, he was followed by a great many others who wanted to get on the bandwagon and ride. There were something like 125 cereal companies that sprang up in Battle Creek alone, after he got his products on the market.

Q: Why did they all cluster there?

Mrs. May: Well, they didn't all cluster there; it was just that in that little town of about 25,000 that there were over a hundred trying this thing. Of course, Kellogg was one of them. I think they didn't have too good a time, because he was pretty smart about his advertising and his methods of merchandising and so forth.

Q: He had a practical aspect to his inventions because they all reflect in which he lived, do they not?

Mrs. May: Yes. And another one that I did not tell you about that he did when he was in Springfield was the blade of the plow

that
laid the furrow back. It was the first one, and on that he received royalties, I think up to the time he died. It was in common use everywhere.

Q: He was really a competitor of the McCormacks, was he not?

Mrs.May: Well, he was in the implement business for many, many years and connected with the P & O , which was a big company down in St. Louis. His brother was there and he was tied in with them. But he was off on foods by the time those implem ent companies became really big.

Q: This ability as an inventor, were there outcroppings of this before in the family, or is he unique?

Mrs. May: I don't really know about that. Back in the family there are so many ministers and doctors all through. I don't think so. I think he was the first real merchandiser in the family.

The Postum Cereal Company was organized, I believe formally in 1893, and the company, within the first year or two, had become very productive. His method of merchandising was to go to one town, have it introduced with the advertising and have it put into the retail stores, and when that town was selling the product well, to move to another town to do the same things. So, it was rather a slow performance.

Q: Did he do much of this himself?

Mrs. May: All of it. I remember one time he was introducing it in Detroit, which is not too far away. He opened originally in Grand Rapids and then he had one or two others, and then he finally went to Detroit. I heard him talking to mother when he came back from that first trip. He said, "Ella, I met the craziest man today. His name is Henry Ford. He's got a horseless carriage." They discussed it.

He was over there again two or three months later. When he came back, he said, "Ella, that crazy horseless carriage runs. I saw it. I never thought it would." I was listening with both ears flapping. They discussed it back and forth, and he described it to her, and so forth. He described Henry Ford to her.

Then a few months later he, again, was in Detroit because the business was going well and he was over just to see, and when he came back, he said, "Ella, do you know that that man wanted me to put money in his business? Why, I wouldn't touch it with a 10-foot pole. I run my own show." If he had put 50 cents in, it might have been very, very useful.

That Mr. Anderson who was the lawyer who made the organization papers for the Ford Company sent a bill to Ford of $175 and Ford couldn't pay it, so he gave him some stock, and the children of that Mr. Anderson inherited something like 40 millions. So, you see, the 50 cents would have been very good.

Also, in these years while I was growing up, coming towards the teens, I was fascinated with the original setup for making Postum on this property, this farm, where we were living. There was a big old-fashioned barn with a big carriage room and stalls and so forth below, and then a place for storage of hay up in the attic. When my father took the carriage room and the upper floor to set up the Postum business, I think there was one roaster at first, and then as the business went along, there were several roasters. Then, of course, he had to build a building after that.

Well, during the time it was a very small business. When I'd come back from school I'd always go in and watch the roasting or watch the blending. There are only three products to Postum: one is a wheat berry which is roasted to the burning point, which gives it the little coffee taste, and then molasses and bran mixed together and roasted, and then the two are ground and put together. It's a very simple process, and it's the same process today. And then up in the top of the old barn was the packing room. In those days they had the most antiquated methods for packaging food because there were practically no packaged foods in the markets, as there are today. I used to watch the glue being heated and applied to the bottom part of a package, and then a wood mold put in so it would be set, and then it would be filled and greased and turned over. And when you think how it's done today, all by machine, never touched with a hand. Of course, I'd go and love to put the mold in or take it out, and so forth.

Well, after all of that kind of thing, then the father

began to talk about his methods of not only the manufacture but the distribution and the reasons why he was running his business the way he did. So, I would find, when I came back from school in the afternoon, very often a little note, "Come up to the office." So, I would go, and there would usually be a group of men at work and I'd go off in one corner and sit down and listen, because when the meeting was over, father would sit me down and say, "Now, what did you understand of what they were saying?" So, I would tell him as best I could what I got out of it. Sometimes it was good, and then again it wasn't, and so it would be explained, and also with references, "Do you remember the discussion, for instance, of why the advertising is so-and-so," and then I would tell him what I had learned. I think he had in mind, I being an only child, that the time might come when I would have to pick up where he left off.

Q: You were both son and daughter to him.

Mrs. May: Yes. That did happen when I was in my early twenties. He had a very far-flung group of business interests at that point, and it was just the beginning of the World War. He died in '14, in May, before the murder that precipitated everything. So, I was catapulted into this thing, with our government taking our raw supplies away from us, practically trying to put us out of business, we felt. But we found a way around it. We had to build a corn mill, for one thing, and then for the wheat, which

they were taking away from Postum, we used kaffir corn and mila maize which are perfectly good cereals but they just hadn't been used for human consumption. But they roasted and roasted very well, and they were nutritive. But then, of course, when the war was over and we could go back to our original formula, we did it right away. But the corn mill went on. It had so many by-products after we got our kernel, which we wanted for the corn flakes, we found ourselves in the chicken-feeding business, food for cattle, oils, everything you can think of.

Shortly before my father died he had been talking about joining with other companies. So, with the war being over, we decided that we might look around and see whether it might be a good idea to broaden our base, which we did with Jello. It was the first thing we bought, and it's been a very, very satisfactory business. And, of course, that program has gone ahead. We have about 60 or 70 factories over the whole country now, and we're in a good many foreign countries, too, just in recent years. Of course, he had set us up in Canada and in England, not for a factory but for selling.

And, incidentally, in those early days he was selling to the old Empress in China.

Q: Oh, the old Dowager Empress?

Mrs. May: The old Dowager, think of it. I must say we can't do any business with the Chinese just now.

The business in Canada finally extended itself to Birmingham in England on account of some ruling they'd put in that we couldn't ~~[illegible]~~ import in some ways, so we thought it better to manufacture there. And then when we tried to put Maxwell House over there, they wouldn't let us buy in Costa Rica for our raw coffees, which we want to for the flavor; we had to buy in Jamaica, and it doesn't make the same Maxwell House in England that we have here, and we can't do anything about it.

Then we set up in Germany and also over in the Philippines. We were entirely destroyed in the Philippines during the last war, and to re-build, which we were in a hurry to do, wehad to send every bit of raw material from this country into the Philippines: you couldn't get them out there. But we got rebuilt and went on with our business.

So, I've had great pride in watching that business grow from a small beginning into this enormous empire really of manufacturing. It's quite fascinating.

Q: Indeed it is, and I hope you'll say a great deal more about its development. I want to ask you a question about the inspiration back of Postum itself.

Mrs. May: I can tell you exactly. When he was a cowboy, he would be staying in these different ranch houses, and there were no automobiles and the housewife couldn't get into the little town

as often as she wanted, and she'd run out of coffee. So, she would take wheat berry and roast it to the burning point, which, as I told you, we do with Postum. Then she would take chicory seeds and roast them and mix the two. As you know, French coffee always has chicory. But it never occurred to them to take oats and molasses. That's what makes the Postum, you see.

So, that was the inspiration of it. And, of course, my father was one of those that, even after he had been healed of his digestive disturbances, could not take coffee, and that was the one thing in the world he loved. So, he'd drink it a few days and be sick, and he'd drink Postum a few days and be well, and then he'd go back to coffee, and I saw him do that during all my teens.