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Interview no. 24

Mrs. George Benson

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Mrs. George Benson

INTERVIEWER: Leon C. Metz

PROJECT:

DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 30, 1969

TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 24

TRANSCRIPT NO.: 24

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Life in the Big Bend area of Texas during the early part of the 20th Century; ranching and homesteading.

45 minutes (1 7/8 tape speed); 8 pages.

*Transcript was heavily paraphrased and edited at time of transcription.

Mrs. George M. Benson
Interviewed by Leon C. Metz
January 30, 1969

Mrs. Benson, will you tell us something about yourself, where you were born, etc...?

I was born in Archer County, Texas. My mother died when I was two weeks old and my father died a year later. I was raised by my grandfather, Sam Reynolds. I stayed with a woman who nursed my mother until I was five and then I went to stay with my grandparents. They were the first settlers in Denton County.

Was your grandfather a rancher?

Yes, all my people all the way back have been ranchers. I never have known anything else.

What do you recall about your grandfather?

His ranch was at Roanoke. Between Denton and Dallas was where it was located. This was my mother's father. I don't know too much about my father's people except that they were from Georgia.

How big was his ranch?

I don't remember exactly but it was pretty good-sized and he had one up close to Justin, which is close to Fort Worth. It was big, too. My grandmother died when I was ten and I stayed on with my grandfather until I married at 18.

What did your husband do?

He was a rancher, too. He was from Olney, Young County. We lived on some land that I had inherited in Archer County. We had two sections there. It wasn't like this country out here. We just didn't have as much land. The biggest town was Wichita Falls. Then in 1909, we came out here to Alpine. I've lived there for 60 years. I was 25 years old when we came. Alpine wasn't much of a town when we came. There weren't any sidewalks. It had one little high school. Our church was made from adobe; I guess all the churches were. All the other buildings were made of adobe. Alpine was called Murphysville before we came.

Why don't you tell us about your first impression of Alpine?

Well, we had shipped our things from Graham, the horses, buggy, I mean everything we owned, by freight out to Alpine. We got there at night so I couldn't see the countryside. We stayed in the Ritchey Hotel that night; it was the only hotel in town. The next morning I looked out the window towards the north and I told my husband that I always said I'd go to the jumping off place with the man I married and I think I'm there.

Why did you think it was the "jumping off place"?

I just didn't like it. I never had been in the mountains and there were quite a few Mexicans and I had never seen a Mexican. I had been around Negroes; they worked for my grandfather. But I had never been around Mexicans. It was such a lonesome-looking place to me. I cried the first year we were there. I don't know how he ever put up with me.

Wasn't the place you came from lonely, too? I mean, living on a ranch?

Well, I had my people there. Three brothers and one sister lived there and our land all joined there in Archer County, the land that we had inherited. Alpine just looked like a lonesome place to me.

How many people did Alpine have?

I don't think there were even two thousand there then--mostly ranchers.

Who were some of the prominent people there in town?

Well, the J.C. Birds were there and the Nebbles had a ranch there. Of course, that's all there was, just ranches, Alpine has always been ranchland.

Were the Gilletts there?

Oh yes, but they were Marfa people; they weren't from Alpine. I knew James Gilete but he was just like all the other men to me. I did know his daughters. One of the brothers was in Alpine; he had a lumber yard.

How about Joe Evans?

Yes, they were from Marfa too.

You make quite a distinction between Marfa and Alpine, why is this?

I don't know, we did mix with the ranchers from Marfa country like the Brights from Bright Ranch, but you know two little towns like that, they never do get along. The kids always fight; they just seemed to be jealous of each other. But some of the loveliest people

I know are from Marfa.

What was James Gillett like?

He was a tall, slender man. His people were English. They were all musically inclined.

Why did you move to Alpine?

Mr. Benson made two trips out there and he just loved the country. He thought it was good ranch country. He went out there with a brother-in-law and two other men. The first year we were there we just looked at ranches before we bought one. I remember that we went in hacks to look at the ranches and my husband would point out things to me that he thought were beautiful in the land, the running water and everything. But I wasn't anymore looking at that land. But after I had been there a year, I wouldn't have gone back to Archer County at all. We homesteaded two sections of land outside of Alpine.

What was the procedure for homesteading land?

We had to go through Austin and we had to live on the land either one or three years. I don't remember which. There was a family named Kimble, a man and his wife and his mother and her mother who homesteaded next to us. They built their home right where four sections joined together and had a room on each section of land. That was one way of getting the land. My husband had nine sections of land down where Big Bend National Park is now. He sold seven sections and the two sections he had left, he gave to the park.

Joe Evans was quite a camp-meeting cowboy, wasn't he? How did they set that up?

The ranchers each have a camp and they donate all the food for the meeting. It's the nicest camp. This is Bloyse that I'm talking about. There was just one donation or collection and you didn't have to pay anything to go but most everybody did for the food. I don't think there is anything else like it in the United States. There were four demoninations that had the cowboy camp: the Baptists, the Methodists, the Presbyterians, and the Christian Church. The camp was named for Brother Bloyse; he was a Presbyterian preacher who came down to hold the meetings. He was a circuit rider who travelled all over the country. He was the most popular preacher then. They celebrated their 50th anniversary a couple of years ago. I believe that Jim Espy donated some of his land for the campsite. He is one of the Fort Davis ranchers. There was always a good turnout. The ranchers brought their whole families, children too. Now those children come and bring their children. When it first started some people had tents set up out there and others camped in wagons. The meeting lasted ten days and they had all day meetings and prayer meetings and study groups. W.L. Truett spoke up there several times. That time of year was camp meeting time and everything else was forgotten.

Did the ordinary cowboy strike you as being a religious person?

No, I don't think so.

Then how do you explain the success of these camp meetings?

Those boys just felt at home there. It was in the open air. I

think they probably felt closed up in churches and they were so much happier out there. They felt more at home; it was their kind of living, out in the open. I think that the way the churches are built now days that it keeps poorer people away because they don't feel like they have the clothes to wear but then it was for everybody. No one felt uncomfortable.

You said earlier that you didn't think cowboys were particularly religious, did you ever have any trouble with them?

No, I'll always take up for cowboys. Of course, they did go to town on the week-ends but I never had any trouble with cowboys.

Did the men still carry guns then?

Why yes, but it was mostly to kill things like snakes and varmints.

Was there ever any trouble?

Alpine used to have a lot of killings. They did their share of drinking I'm sure. Alpine had two saloons then. I was afraid to even walk by them. But I think an awful lot of cowboys; you'll never get me to run them down. I used to cook for all our ranch hands. I think they are mighty fine people. They're all I've ever known, just ranch people. We had several ranches then, we had one between Alpine and Fort Stockton. Then the one we had down in Big Bend, but I never lived out that far. I lived just 12 miles from town. Right up against the Davis Mountains was where I lived. The cowboys mostly carried their guns in scabbards on their saddles. But some did wear them on their hips. They wore them everywhere they went.

Who was sheriff then, do you remember?

I don't remember the first sheriff but Everett Townsend was one of

the first that I remember. The most trouble was when Marfa had the army over there. The cowboys never did like the soldiers. They used to have public dances at the courthouse and there was always a fight. The cowboys didn't like them mixing with the girls and the girls kind of liked it but those cowboys didn't like it one bit.

What were some of the hardships you encountered in ranching?

During the Depression it was very hard. We were ordered to kill all the cattle, healthy cattle. There wasn't anything the matter with them. This was when Roosevelt was president. That was when they plowed under all the cotton and the corn and killed the cattle, good cattle. It was during the drought and there wasn't any feed for them. My son, Gene, was about fifteen then and he was paid five dollars a day to shoot cattle. There were Mexican families that were starving to death right there. Gene could kill the cows but he hated to kill the calves. He would tell the Mexicans when he was going to kill the calves and they would come out and get them. But it was against the law to eat the cattle. I don't know what they would have done to Gene if they had known he was giving those calves to the Mexicans. It was the awfulest thing.

But they were killed under government order and they were privately owned cattle?

Yes, privately owned. I don't remember how many head were killed but it was a lot.

Your granddaughter was telling me that you were one of the first protestors, was this during sufferage for women?

Oh, yes, they were teasing me about that. I just think that these marchers are awful but then I remembered about the march we women

made to the courthouse to vote for the first time. We all met downtown and marched up to where we were going to vote. The men were lined up and down the streets; they didn't want us to vote, but we were going to vote and I guess we were trying to make a showing. I never cared that much about voting but I was in that march. I think about that sometimes when I hear about these marches today; I can just see us marching down that street.

I understand that you were a witness to the march of Villa's people from Presidio to Marfa, will you tell us about that?

That was during the revolution in México. All of Villa's men were captured and then marched from Presidio on foot to Marfa and there they were loaded into flat cars and brought to El Paso. But that was awful. I'll never forget those old generals riding horseback and using cattle prods on those poor people, the women and children too. They had their families with them and all they owned I guess, dogs and chickens, too. They all had dogs. Why, there were several babies born on that trip between Presidio and Marfa. When they got them to El Paso, they put them in pens like cattle and then I guess they shipped them back to México. But when my husband was travelling between the ranch at Big Bend and Alpine, he had to drive with his lights out. He was afraid to come out of there with his lights on. There were bandits just all over that place.