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Interview no. 556

E. Nicky Cunningham

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Cunningham, E. N. (Nicky) Mrs. (1889 - 1983)
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: May 8, 1979
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born on November 12, 1889 near Toledo, Illinois. Family moved to Oklahoma in 1902. Moved to Oklahoma Panhandle in 1905. First teaching experiences in the 1910's. Started first grade school library in El Paso in 1923.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Artist and retired school teacher. Born on November 12, 1889 near Toledo, Illinois. Family moved to Oklahoma in 1902; started school at 4 years of age and later was mostly self-taught; met Quanah Parker while she was a child in Oklahoma. Moved to Oklahoma Panhandle in 1905; finished four years worth of high school and three years worth of college between 1909-12 at Goodwill Oklahoma Agricultural College, while she worked her way through school to support herself; first teaching experiences in the 1910's; teaching in El Paso, especially in the South El Paso area; started the first grade school library in El Paso in 1923; the Depression years; WWII years; her paintings; recreation; her retirement years; donates much of her work to charitable causes; recollections of early El Paso.

Length of Interview: 1-1/4 hours Length of Transcript: 40 pages

E. N. (NICKY) CUNNINGHAM

by Sarah E. John

May 8, 1979

J: The first thing I'd like to ask you is when and where you were born.

C: I was born November the 12th, 1889, near Toledo, Illinois.

J: Can you tell me a little bit about your parents' background, your dad and what he did for a living and what have you?

C: My father, Silas Niccum, was born in 1850. When the Civil War started, his father Isaac Niccum, and his elder brother joined the Northern Army. Father ran away from home, claimed he was 16 years old, joined the Union Army and was given the position of drummer boy. His enlistment was short. His father was in the same battalion and sent his 12 year old son back home. Grandfather Isaac was trained as a lawyer but decided to become a farmer. His wife, one of three Frederick sisters, descendants of Frederick the Great, died, leaving two children. The two spinster sisters refused to speak to her family. For 12 years we passed within 20 feet of their front gate on our way to town. Their faces were always turned the other way.

I was a twin. My sister was blue-eyed, the only blue-eyed child in our family [and] had beautiful blond curls. At 18 months she passed away. The neighbors would look at me sadly and say, "Isn't it too bad the prettiest and the smartest one had to die." I didn't know what I had done, but felt so guilty. They were right about the smartest. We decided to follow the older children who

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left with their lunch buckets for school. Ethel took her little sand bucket but I took my mother's old shoe. Mother found us almost a quarter of a mile from home, sitting on a bridge with our feet dangling over a rushing four-foot deep stream. I was supposed to start school at five, but since I could already read my brother's primer from cover to cover, they let me start before I was five.

My father decided to go West. We had a sale. The first treadle sewing machine that had a copper plaque of Jefferson and Howe was sold, while we kept the new Sears Roebuck machine. A tall six-foot spinning wheel and a small one, a reeler, that caught the thread as it was spun, went on sale. My mother took a goody print that said "Martha" on it. I said, "You will not sell my father's first wife's picture." (My father's first wife was named Martha.) She replied, "This is only a print." I got out in time to grab my little red rocker from the auctioneer. We left many things in the house including my grandfather's law books, which were left in a shelf upstairs. When the chartered freight car was filled there was space for all these things.

My father ended up with two hotels and a restaurant in Snyder, Oklahoma. There I met Quanah Parker, a tall, handsome man that I took for one of the ranchers until he took off his hat. I saw long braids coiled on top of his head. He had impeccable manners. He would not talk to a 12-year-old girl without removing his hat.

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He had six wives, but one only be brought with him. He had a handsome son, Baldwin, that I had quite a crush on.

In 1905 a cyclone leveled two of the buildings. My father fed 2,000 people for three days.

J: Can I interrupt you for a minute and ask you what year this was when you moved to Oklahoma? Do you recall?

C: 1902. 1905 is when that cyclone [hit]. When his money ran out, the Red Cross had set up headquarters by this time and took over. Twenty-one merchants decided to go North to No-Man's Land and file on claim. No-Man's Land, so called because for so long it belonged to no one. Kansas wouldn't have it because it was below the Mason-Dixon line. Oklahoma Territoy wouldn't have it because it was above the Mason-Dixon line. Kansas was with the North and Oklahoma was with the South during the war. No-Man's Land, or the Panhandle, was a land of rattlesnakes, prairie dogs, herds of wild horses and antelopes, coyotes, and occasionally a wolf. At first the prairie was covered with green grass. They even cut what they called prairie hay in the swales. Wild geese and prairie chicken were plentiful.

There were no schools. I remember standing on one side of a wire fence and telling a neighbor, "I think I'll die if I can't go to college. I think I'll just die." She said, "You can go. I worked my way through college."

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I went to the nearby town and got a job in a restaurant.

J: How old were you then?

C: Oh, probably almost 16, or may have been 16.

J: And you hadn't attended school at all during these years, or had you?

C: Well, there were no schools out there to attend.

J: So you learned from your parents?

C: No, I read all the time, you know, and it was classics that I read. Not that I wanted to read them, but that's all that was available.

J: I see. So you're self-taught, more or less.

C: I got a job in a restaurant. Rooms were almost impossible to find but I found a cot in a home that rented rooms. The cubbyhole was across the hall from the bath. One of the roomers was a woman who went downtown for about an hour and came back, went to the bathroom. This occurred four or five times before she settled in. I wondered why her problem lasted so long.

In going into the restaurant one morning, I found a hundred dollar bill on the sidewalk. How I longed for enough money for carfare across the state where I could stay with my friend and go to school. I showed it to the restaurant owner and he said, "I know who has lost it. The new contractor is the only one who would have this kind of money. I'll give it to him." I wondered why the contractor, when I waited on him, didn't thank me for returning his bill. Of course the restaurant man kept it.

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I lasted two weeks and wrote Dad to come home and get me. We stopped at a post office and I had a letter from my friend, urging me to come down and go to school.

J: Where was your friend?

C: Snyder, Oklahoma. I didn't know my father saw the tears dropping on my letter as I read it aloud. When we got home, Dad went down to my brother's, a quarter of a mile away. When he came back he dropped 15 dollars in my lap--my carefare to school. What my father didn't know, I had to buy my own books. I had only a dollar left after I bout my books and still didn't have a History. The History was a dollar fifty. One of my classmates needed help in Arithmetic. There were two play periods--one free, the other calisthenics. I helped her with her Arithmetic the first period and used her History the second period. I barely passed.

When school was out I had to have a job. First I went to summer school and got my third grade certificate to teach, but it was so late no schools were available. I borrowed money from my uncle, who was County Superintendent of Lincoln County, Washington, to go to summer school, but only had enough left to go home and pay carefare to Dalhart, Texas, where I had to have a job. Dad asked if I had enough money and I said I did, but I only had carefare, no money to spend the night. The train got in at four. I had asked a woman on the train which was the best hotel in town. I went into the hotel. A woman was sitting on a high stool behind the desk. I went up to her and said, "I'm looking for work." She looked down

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at me and said, "Honey, we have all the waitresses we need."

I spoke up quickly, "I can do anything." (A friend who had worked told me to say that.) "You couldn't make pies and cakes.

We need a pastry cook." "Oh, yes, I can make pies and cakes."

I only knew how to make one cake. About that time the head waitress came through the office. And she said, "Carrie, does this child look to you like she could cook?" Carrie looked up and down and said disdainfully, "She does look to me like she could do anything." That was the wrong thing to say to Swannie Redding, a retired schoolteacher. She said, "I'll give you a room and after supper we will talk to the pastry cook. She wants to leave on the three o'clock train for her claim in New Mexico." At eight o'clock Miss Redding and I went back to the kitchen. I knew biscuits were served for breakfast and asked how many she made. She said, "I make a ten pound mix." I said, "I always measure things." She then went into detail about how much of each ingredient she used including the hot cakes. That fixed me for breakfast. I served 220 for breakfast and over 300 for lunch and dinner. The next morning Miss Redding brought the menu back for lunch. For me it said pies, cornbread and sweet entrée. I had never heard of such a thing as an entrée. The cook had left a White House cookbook on the shelf. I had a kitchen to myself. I kept turning pages with my left hand and scrubbing the counter top with my right. I finally found the entrée. I made corn fritters. The dough dropped into deep fat came out all shapes,

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were served with hot maple syrup. That was my sweet entrée. I had to make seven open faced and 14 covered pies. I had seen my mother make fruit pies, but I hadn't watched her make cream pies. She evidently had my number. [She said], "You are not on the farm now. You don't use cream for cream pies. I'll tell you what my sister does. See that big pan there? Fill it with milk, put four cups of sugar in it. Don't stir it or it will burn. Now beat the yolks of 14 eggs, put one cup cornstarch, eight teaspoons vanilla, beat into the hot milk. And if you want chocolate cream, there is one-pound bars of chocolate on your shelf. Cut it up in the hot mixture. If you want banana cream, slice bananas in the crust. Beat the whites of eggs and add sugar and flavoring, and you have cream pies." My first big job was on its way.

The next summer I got a job as first cook at another hotel. The sign on the kitchen wall said, "Waiters, kitchen help and yard men under direct orders of first cook." Several people came to the kitchen door and looked through the glass at the 18-year-old first cook, an unheard of thing. I was attending an agricultural college. I was always late getting back to school but the teacher sent me lesson assignments and I mailed them in.

[At] one hotel I waited tables until a job as pastry cook was open. One night the other waitresses left their unoccupied tables, as the dining room door was already closed. Four businessmen that had a light supper still sat at their table talking. A young man and his companion were at a nearby table. The young man muttered something and I said, "What?" Again the mutter. I said, "I can't hear you." Louder he said, "Do you come upstairs at night?" I was so shocked I said, "No, sir." The four men at the next table laughed until the table rattled the dishes. The young man and his companion rushed out. Wasn't that something?

I was captain of the girls' basketball team. I lived with the President's family, supposedly working for my board. Anything the faculty wanted organized they told me, and I got it on its way. Of course, the students didn't know it was something the faculty wanted done. We had a broom factory in connection with the school. At study periods we were allowed to work. We got 12 and a half cents an hour. The year I graduated I wanted a scholarship in an eastern art school. We were to sell subscriptions to three well-known magazines. I sold brooms to different stores. I had to

get through the Texas panhandle because it had /already/ been canvassed by a music student.

The president was away for the summer and left a man teacher in charge who wanted his job. Since I was the president's protégé, he waited two weeks instead of two days to ship my brooms. I ran out of money. I had not eaten in two days. I took my last 35 cents to a restaurant and ordered bacon and eggs. It made me sick to look at them. I got up to leave and they tried to give me back my 35 cents. I wouldn't take it. I walked down the block, went into another restaurant and got a job. They knew I was a scaredy-cat and made life miserable for me, the male cooks especially. One of them got me cornered, and I put my hand behind me and touched a meat cleaver. When I came out with that, he got out of my way. I took off my apron, got my purse and walked out. The boss found out what had happened and caught up with me and told me he would fire the next person that bothered me if I would come back. I wouldn't go back, but had another job in 30 minutes.

A friend of my family was in real estate near Cliff, New Mexico. He told me if I could file on a claim it would pay my way through school. I left for New Mexico. My first school was in a sort of tent--wooden floor and sides, but canvas top. Desks, a couch that opened into a bed at night, and chairs was the furniture. Some nights it got so cold that the small girl that stayed with me and I got up and set a sotol weed on fire to get warm. There was no toilet on the place. I wrote a poem entitled "When the Leaves Begin to Fall", 'cause we had no coverage after the leaves fell.

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From there I went to a school where the Mangus River ran into the Gila. The little flame school house was so hot we took a bunch of old desks and set up a room under two large trees. The older boys had started to dig a well. A bird had built a nest on the side where a big rock had fallen out. The bird would first fly to her nest then overhead in the trees wildly chattering. I said, "Something is wrong." The older boys went to see, and there was a large snake with four large humps along it's body crawling on the bottom of the well. It had swallowed the birds whole. Lucy McCauley, one of my larger girls, and I slit the snake from head to tail, but the little birds were dead.

/PAUSE/

I was teaching in Mogollon during World War I. I had wanted to go to France as an ambulance driver. I practiced on International Harvester solid rubber oil trucks, Stanley Steamer, and any other that I could borrow. I was almost ready to go when the Armistice was signed.

During the flu epidemic I was teaching in Glennwood, New Mexico. The mail hack from Mogollon came at 2:30 a.m. The woman in whose house I stayed ran the store and post office, but got scared and went to Silver City, leaving me alone. I had to get up, go to the store, pull the mail bags off the coffins and take the mail into the post office.

I went into Silver City when school was out to visit a friend. I went to Fort Bayard and applied for a job, occupational therapy,

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teaching the hospitalized soldiers arts and crafts. When I took the flu I was ill for some time after and never took my government job, although I was accepted. I started teaching Art in El Paso at Lamar School in 1920.

El Paso schools were really not interested in art so they gave me 30-minute periods, about 12 during the day. In that time paint boxes, paper and a small can of water had to be passed out and in 25 minutes collected again. This kept up all day. I got sick and quit. They gave my job to two teachers.

J: When you were going to high school, the high school you were attending wasn't in your home town, right? It was quite far away from there.

C: No, it wasn't too far, 30 miles. But that meant an all-day drive.

J: Well, at that time, sure.

C: They didn't have cars at that time and it was 30 miles away, and that took all day to get there in a wagon.

J: And so you stayed. You were working and going to high school at the same time. When you went to the agriculture college, was that in Texas then?

C: No, that was Oklahoma.

J: And where was that exactly? Where was the located?

C: Goodwell, Oklahoma Agricultural College.

J: Okay. And what years did you attend?

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- C: Oh, let me see. '09, '10, '11, and part of '12. And in that time I finished four years of high school and three years of college. I'd get to bed about 2:30 in the morning, get up at six 'cause they opened the main building at six so the students could come over and study, and I'd grab a few crackers or cookies or something and take off, six o'clock in the morning, and work all day long.
- J: So you were rooming with someone all the time you were there?
- C: Well, I was staying in the dormitory. But they didn't have meals that year in the dormitory.
- J: Are there any specific incidents that you can recall, besides the one at work, that were interesting? Anything in your school experiences that stick out in your mind in those days?
- C: Oh, let me see. Well, I was always trying to help everybody. And someone said to me, "There's a boy and he's failing. And he has to have a short story written and he doesn't know how." And I said, "Well, what time does he go to class?" "Well, ten o'clock." I said, "All right, at ten o'clock tell him to meet me at the bottom of the stairs in the main building," and I had his story all written, folded, ready for him to hand in. I never saw him before and I never saw him afterward.
- J: But you helped him pass at class.
- C: I helped him pass the class. But I was always helping someone.
- J: Did they have any social or recreational activities at the time you were there in that school?

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- C: Well, I was captain of the basketball team. And we had literary societies and I won a gold medal, too, believe it or not. And what else did they have? Oh, Shakespeare Society I belonged to, and I even enjoyed it, believe it or not.
- J: Did you put on plays or anything like that, or would you just read within the society itself?
- C: I just don't remember what we did hardly. But when I went to England there were only three of us...I went on a painting tour, and there were only three of us that really wanted to go Stratford-on-Avon to see Shakespeare's home, Anne Hathaway Cottage, and those things.
- J: When did you go? When were you in England?
- C: Oh, it's been about 10 or 12 years ago.
- J: But you kept all that interest since those days in your old school.
- C: Oh, yes. It meant so much to me. And while the rest of 'em went inside Anne Hathaway Cottage, you know, I sat outside and painted it.
- J: That's really something. Were there any type of dances or anything like that at the college while you were there?
- C: Yes, yes.
- J: What occasions were those?
- C: I don't remember especially what occasions, but they did have them.
- J: Was it a mixed college, men and women?
- C: Yes.

J: Oh, that's right, it was an agricultural college.

C: Yes. And I took everything in agriculture except Breeding, which they wouldn't let a girl take. I took Soils and Moisture and anything you can think of, because I wanted to be a farmer.

J: I bet you could've done it too, after all that. And then you went into art.

C: I was a farmer, see, when I had my claim. And then I had a farm down here where Gibson's* is, and the El Patio Trailer Court, and oh, I don't know what all buildings are there. That was my farm.

J: So you did put it to use.

C: But see, I was out of town. The town grew out and grew around me. One year I lost three dollars on the farm and another year I lost three hundred, and people'd keep saying, "Why don't you sell that? That's never gonna be any good." And I said, "The town's gonna move out this way some way." Because I saw El Paso do that to UTEP, you know. UTEP was way out in the country when it was first organized.

J: When you were a teenager, let's say, how did you spend a typical weekend? I know you were working at that time, but on a Saturday or a Sunday, was there anything in particular that you all would do?

C: Well, when I was going to school quite often we had our basketball games on Saturdays, and we would go into Texas and up into Kansas, you know, to play different teams. And I was also on an advertising team. I gave recitals and I played the slide trombone in the band. And we'd get programs, and that was advertising our college.

Gibson's store in Las Cruces, N.M.

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J: That's interesting. The first school that you mentioned that you taught at, that was in New Mexico, right?

C: The very first school, I was 15 years old and that was in the Panhandle.

J: Oh, well tell me about that. That was in Oklahoma?

C: Yes.

J: Tell me what you remember. How did you get the job?

C: Oh, we went five miles to school. We walked five miles and /would/ start out at daylight and get there by the time school opened up. Well, a district that was nearer us, in fact two and a half miles, could not find a teacher. And if they didn't have a teacher for that year and had school, they would lose the district. So they thought they'd take the largest girl out of the eighth grade class, which I was in at that time. So they picked me--see, I'd been out of school for four years, there were no schools where we were--and /I was/ given this job. I had 15 pupils. The oldest was also 15, and someone asked me, "Didn't you have trouble with deportment with those children?" I said, "Well, I don't think I even knew what the word was." And I never had to say anything to anybody. They were so glad to go to school, 'cause you see, they hadn't been in school, either, for a long time.

In the morning, quite a few children came barefoot. It was in the early fall when they started. And I'd have to sit with a pair of tweezers and pick the cactus...whatever you call them, out of their feet. And then the rattlesnakes would come in. The door

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was down low, you know, very low step. And I had told the children, "Now if I say get up on your seats, don't ask a word, you just jump up on your seats. And the other two boys get your club, because it's going to be a rattlesnake." So one day I shouted, "Get up on your seats!" A rattlesnake was trying to get out the window and it would get up almost to where the window was, you know, the window was down low and fall back down. So the boys got their club and killed it, and then they went outside and hunted the mate, because they always traveled in pairs. And so they went out and killed the mate.

And we'd look out and in this hot weather and we'd see birds spiraling down to the ground. And the children would go out and pick them up, and I'd lay them on my handkerchief on my desk. I had boric acid water handy with cotton and I'd put it over their heads, and in an hour or two the swelling would go down. And we'd give 'em a little drop of water on our fingertips, you know, we didn't dare give them too much or it'd drown them. And when they got, you know, able to start fluttering around, why then we could take them out and let them fly away.

J: I guess it was so hot.

C: It was hot. See, there was no water except windmills and they were very far apart. And that's how come they had these cow paths. A cow path was about 18 inches wide and about four inches deep. And all of the cows went in that same path and they would go for miles to a windmill where they could get water. Because there was no water around there, it was just flat prairie. In fact, you could see the

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headlights of a train 60 miles away and it'd take it an hour to get there. And sometimes I'd want to go to a nearby town to skate, they had a skating rink. And when I'd see the train I'd get ready. It'd take me about an hour to get ready to go. And go out for an hour and skate and then come back home.

J: Isn't that something. My gosh.

C: The train just happened to be that way.

J: But you could see it an hour away.

C: An hour away. It was the levellest road the Santa Fe had in all of its /routes/.

J: Well, I can believe that. So that was the very first school you taught at. Then you finished college right?

C: Yeah.

J: And then after you got out you got a job in New Mexico?

C: No, it's in Dalhart. That's where I got this job.

J: Oh, it was in Dalhart.

C: That's when I got the job in the hotel, the cook job.

J: Making the cream pies and all of that. And then when you went to file on the claim in New Mexico, near Cliff, New Mexico, did you teach there or around there?

C: That was when I was teaching on the Mangus.

J: And what year was that when you went to teach there?

C: When I went out there...I'm trying to think. 1912.

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J: 1912. Are there any incidents that you recall from that job?

C: Well, the school I had on the Mangus was 20 miles from my claim, and it took me about six hours to ride horseback. We'd go out at four o'clock and try to catch my horse. And we'd get it all lined up in a corner, the children and I, we'd get it in the corner of the fence and it would leap over the heads of the little children. Take off, you know, just playing. Finally, it would just trot up to me and let me put the bridle on him. Well, usually that was about four-thirty or five. And I wouldn't get in until, oh, eight or ten o'clock at night.

One night, I was riding along and some boys had given me a soldier's coat and I also had riding pants. In those days, riding pants had a little skirt over them, you know; it wasn't decent to be wearing pants. And so I would wrap my little skirt under my jacket so it would look like I was a man on the horse. And the first thing I knew there was a man on either side of my horse. There was at least six miles from any house, alone, at eleven o'clock at night. And I didn't know if they were gonna hold me up or not, but it frightened me so that I thought I'd lope my horse away. But to lope a horse you have to kind of stand up in the stirrups. Well, I was so weak that I couldn't. I couldn't even stand up in the stirrups I was so scared.

J: Did they do anything?

C: No, not a thing. What they were I'm sure, was...from México, 'cause they'd walk all the way to Mogollon to get a job in the mines. And they never asked them if they were citizens or anything, they were just

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so glad to get workers in the mine, that they just took anybody they could get.

J: What children were you teaching there? Were they people who owned farms?

C: Yes, ranches.

J: When you were working up there, had your farm up there, it was the time of the Mexican Revolution. Did you ever hear anything about that or see anything?

C: Oh, yes. Well, we went to El Paso, I think it was in 1912, and the shots came so close to us over in El Paso that we got out of South El Paso.

J: Were you shopping?

C: No, we were just down there in a car at night. And they were still shooting there. And my father-in-law went over to Juárez, and it made him so sick he came back. They were just lining people up and shooting them.

J: But you never saw any of the battles yourself?

C: No.

J: You did marry then, in New Mexico?

C: No, I married in El Paso, in 1920.

J: How did you meet your husband?

C: I met him at Cliff, New Mexico.

J: You did meet him up there.

C: He was driving a truck up into Mogollon, and that's how I met him.

J: How long did you stay teaching up there, near Mogollon?

C: In Mogollon? I think from 1916 to 1918, two years.

J: And then from there where did you go?

C: I went back to my hometown where this agricultural college was and was there three or four months, and then went to El Paso.

J: And that's when you started teaching in El Paso?

C: Yes. In 1920.

J: And the first place was at Lamar school?

C: Yes.

J: How did you get that job in El Paso in the first place?

C: Oh, my, I went to summer school. And they were having a summer school. See, it was under the...UTEP. It was College of Mines at that time. And women didn't go to that school. We got credit from the Mines, but they didn't have the school there, they had it in one of the school buildings.

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J: Was that finishing your education degree?

C: No, I just had to take so much more in Texas in order to teach there.

J: Oh, I see, get certified from that state. What interesting things do you recall from teaching there at Lamar School? Anything that stands out in you mind about those days?

C: Oh, nothing, except that I just worked myself to pieces. And they kind of gave two teachers my job when I left.

J: After you left Lamar School, where did you teach?

C: Oh, for heaven's sake, I just don't remember. Rusk probably.

J: Do you remember anything about the days there at Rusk?

C: Not especially.

J: Were you in El Paso during the Prohibition era?

C: [Yes.]

J: Do you recall anything about those days there?

C: No, I don't think so. I don't think my family was very interested in drinking anyway.

J: I just wondered. Supposedly there was a lot smuggling across the border and things like that. I wondered if you had ever heard of it/ .

C: No, I hand't. I started the first library in a grade school in Burleson.

J: When was that?

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C: Oh, I don't remember the year. But I think it was '23 or something like that. And Mrs. Kelly in the public library, do you know who she was? Mrs. Kelly gave me 40 books that were damaged enough that she was gonna have to throw them away soon anyway. And then the janitor had a lovely set of encyclopedias and a real large dictionary. And our desk was just one of those chairs that has an arm to write on. And we had a, oh, I think it was one of those little file things that you usually use for recipes.

J: And that was your card catalog.

C: Yes. And that was where we put our cards when somebody took a book out. And I took girls out of study periods and that's when our library was open. Usually it was in the afternoons. But it was the first one in a grade school in El Paso.

J: Now, were you teaching at Burleson at that time?

C: [Yes.]

J: And when you taught, did you teach Art or did you teaching everything?

C: No, I quit teaching art.

J: So you were teaching elementary, all levels.

C: Well, mostly Arithmetic.

J: What was the reaction to having this library started?

I mean, were the children interested?

C: Oh, yes. See, when they would have their play period is when they'd come in to get their books.

J: Were they storybooks, novels, or...?

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C: Well, whatever children would like. It came from the public library and they were children's books.

J: I see. Oh, isn't that interesting.

C: And the, of course, I took every book that anybody else had that would be good for children.

During the Depression they were gonna let all the married teachers go. And, of course, that meant me, that I was going to go. And I already had a job with an advertising company that made all of the posters that the White House and Popular used. So that was gonna be my job.

But my job didn't open till the first of September, but school opened, I don't remember, about the 25th. I think. So I went down to help the teachers enroll the pupils. You know, just to help them. And while I was down there, in comes on of the supervisors and hunts out 15 problem girls in the seventh and eighth grades and give them to me for a class. And later I found out that when they were having a meeting and they were letting me go, of course, they were letting everybody go that didn't correspond to a class. And I was teaching Home Ec, and of course, I didn't correspond to a class, and that ook our Art teachers, Home Ec teachers, Music teachers and, well, anything that wasn't, you know, corresponding to a class. And he says, "You mean to tell me you're letting Mrs. Cunningham go after all the extra work she has done for this school?" So that's how I got the job. But the extra work was this. One time they wanted capes, red capes, for carol singers. We had probably 20 or 30 from our school that would have needed the red

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capas. Instead of them letting the different schools make their own red capas, they sent down material for me to make 300 red capas.

J: What school was this?

C: In San Jacinto. And also, we had a mchine that made maps. Well, I had to draw the maps. Let's say they wanted a map of Taiwan or something like that. All they had to do was call in and I had to make the original map and then run off all those maps for the school. So I had that job to do.

They decided they wanted to give me delinquent boys. They picked 20 out of South El Paso. One of them had never gone to school except when a truant officer had gone and had taken him to school. Another one of the boys was the leader of Junior Dan Dukes. To get into the Dan Dukes you had to stab somebody. And what the Junior Dan Dukes did, they would put them over a transom into a room and then they would open the door for the boys to get in an rob. And they also carried papers. And they would be the lookouts, so if they saw a police car coming or police coming, they'd start calling something about their paper that would give these other boys notice that the police were near. And he was a problem.

And in the morning we had regular classes and in the afternoons we painted. And I had to furnish the money for all of this. You know, they didn't give me the money to do these extra things. So, we'd go downtown to the stores where they'd throw out apple boxes. And they would have three boards about, oh, probably 12 inch square, I don't know just how big the crates were. But the end and then in

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the middle and the other end were solid board. And they used that instead of canvas. And we took rope, I think we paid four or five cents a foot for it, and tacked around the edge of it and then made a bow on top. And it looked, you know, sort of like a frame. And we chose nursery rhymes to illustrate. And they would sell those paintings, wet and all, the minute they got them painted, the teachers would buy them. And the boys just loved it. And believe it or not every one of those boys came every day. But I was so worn out with them and my chin would just tremble at night, you know, from nerves.

Bowie needed a Home Ec teacher that had had experienced like I had had, you know, in these hotels, but also to teach Home Ec. And I had a degree in Home Ec that I got from this agricultural college. So I took the job to get away from the boys. But then I didn't know I had to teach 10 months instead of nine months. And I had to be out at USC the middle of June, you know, to enroll. Otherwise I'd only take the post session and I just got half credits for the post session which was August. So, I went into Art there. So I could, you know, get out of school on time. And it was so tough, oh, you would never believe it.

There was a boy...they were all...they were supposed to take out of classes children that were talented so they could take Art. Next door to me was a six-foot man with girls in his class. Next door here I was with all those big, old problem boys. And instead of sending me those that were talented and could do good in Art, the teachers just got rid of their problem boys. So this one boy had a

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switch blade and he was throwing it around the table just like he was gonna cut their heads off. And I got hold of him and got him up to the office. And I asked the man if he would paddle him for doing that. No he wouldn't. And I said, "Well, you mind lending me your paddle?" "No." He handed me the paddle and every time I caught up with him I gave him a swat. Probably didn't hurt him very much except he was... (Laughter)

J: Those were, I guess, those were mostly Mexican American schools at that time, right?

C: Yes, they were.

J: Were there any special problems that you found there? I mean, considering it was a depressed neighborhood and what have you. Were the children any different, let's say from any other children that you had taught?

C: I don't think so. Except we did have, you know, several boys that were a problem. In fact, the woman that took my place, the Art class, only lasted a month. And she said to me, "Why didn't you tell me it was that kind of classes?" And I said, "Well, I just thought you were the type that might be able to handle them." And then a woman up here went down there. This woman that I had paid her tuition and her husband's tuition out here at our college, went down there and she lasted two months in that same job that I had as Art teacher, before she was so sick she had to quit. It was really a problem, mostly with the boys. Of course, I had trouble with some of the girls. Some things were kind of funny. I had to ask what they did over the weekend, and one of'em, I asked her

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what she did, and she said, "Well, I guess you could call me a streetwalker. I come home and I throw my books down and I go downtown and I just walk the streets." (Laughter)

J: So, how long were you teaching at Bowie?

C: Until I went to visit my old principal who was sick. I went to see her on Saturday night and I said, "Oh, I wish I were back at San Jacinto." And she said, "Why don't you come back?" And I said, "When?" And she says, "Monday." That was Saturday. She said, "Monday." But I was back there Wednesday. And I stayed there until I retired.

J: So, let's see, during the Depression years, you were at San Jacinto and Bowie.

C: Oh, during the Depression years I fed 72 children their lunch. That was beside all of my extra work. And some of the children told me that it was the only meal they had during the day. We had quite a few from Juárez, and we just shut our eyes to the fact that they'd come from Juárez, you know. They weren't supposed to be in our schools, you know, but poor little things were half starved. And I had quite a few from there. And my husband bought the bread, 150 loaves a month. But we only paid ten cents a loaf because there was a day old bread place near there. And then there was a vegetable place downtown that didn't have any refrigeration. And on Saturday evenings, you know, late, when the store, just before it closed, you could get any amount of vegetables for practically nothing, just almost for carrying them home. So we'd go down and get a large, large sack for a quarter. Well, it doesn't

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make any difference when you're making soup if your vegetables are dry or what, they'll still make the same kind of soup. And so we would go down and get three or four big sacks of vegetables. And the school furnished the soup bones, which didn't cost more than about three or four dollars a week.

But all the rest of that I had to see that we got the money. And we made cakes and sold to the teachers for 50 cents a cake. A layer cake now, for 50 cents. One teacher came down gave me 35 cents. She said, "That's all it's worth." So she gave me 35 cents. You won't believe this, some of the teachers would come in and have our stew--we called it stew because it was half stew and half soup--would come in and eat our soup and bread and walk out and not give us the dime that we were supposed to charge them. You wouldn't believe that would you?

J: Where did you live during the time you were teaching?

C: 3600 Fort Boulevard. A little two-story house.

J: Yes. There was a full front page on the paper about that house when it was built. It was the first one built of native stone in El Paso. The living room was faced stone. You could see it now, it's still there. But instead of putting the garage on like we were to have it, why they put a different kind, you know, it didn't match the house. And we had all their plans for duplex in front and it was all to be of that stone. And we finally just sold the house. In fact, the people that had the mortgage on it kept coming. 'Cause you see my husband lost his business and there was no income there.

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J: What kind of business had he been in?

C: Garage. And they had cut the teachers' salary down to 100 dollars a month. I had payment on a car, payment on the house, groceries to buy and everything on a hundred dollars a month. So you can imagine how I got in debt. I happened to have a friend in Congress and so I wrote to them to see if there was anything could be done. And the man's wife wrote me that they were goint to, oh, what did they call that? Not WPA, what did they call that when the government took over the houses, we paid the government?

J: FHA?

C: I think that must have been it. Well, anyway she told me the man in Texas who was gonna be appointed, and she said, "He doesn't even know himself he's gonna be appointed. But you write to him."

J: You knew before he knew.

C: Yeah. And so he wrote to this company to lay off of me. So they did.

J: At least you had that help there.

[PAUSE] End of side one.

J: You said you were having rouble getting along with your hundred dollars a month at that time. Well, at least you had a job. From what I understand, the times were very hard and not many people had jobs. Can you recall any people that didn't have jobs and what they did, how they got along at that time?

C: Well, I just don't know. There's a woman that taught in the same

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building I did. And her girl was graduating from Austin High and she had no money to buy a graduating dress, she had no money for anything. And, of course, all of us were trying to help everybody else in that time 'cause all of us were having trouble. And I had bout about, oh, 10 or 12 yards of white silk. And I said, "Well, I'll give it to you." And all that family had to eat was bread, because he ran a bread truck. But she had her salary of a hundred dollars. But how far does that go with children in the family, too? So I gave this material and she dyed it different pale colors and make her daughter underwear and slips and dresses out of it. And one time I met her, and I'd forgotten all about doing that and she said, "You know, every time I see you I think about you being my Benefactress that time that my daughter was graduating."

J: Isn't that nice.

C: It makes you so happy to do something that makes other people happy. For instance, donating pictures for different things. Now one year, I gave one to the Cystic Fibrosis in El Paso. I don't know how much money they made, the never told me. One to the Women's Club in Silver City 'cause they needed new steps and they wanted the money to buy new steps. One to the hospital auxiliary in Ruidoso. They bought three wheelchairs with theirs. And one to the Cancer Society here. They made \$820 on their picture. And yesterday I gave two, I don't know if I told you or not. Two women came up from El Paso, they got two paintings. And they will be raffled off and the money will be used for tuition for different people.

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J: What kinds of things do you like to paint the most?

C: Ruidoso. I love trees, I've always loved trees.

J: I guess you've been painting ever since you were a very young girl.

C: Well, when I was in the eighth grade, one of the children said to me, "Would you draw me a picture of..." Oh, what was this Dutch woman with the two little boys? Course you're too young to have seen that, but it's still in the papers now. But anyway, "Would you draw me a picture of her?" So I drew the picture of her and I didn't think anything, I just thought he wanted a picture and handed it to him. And so somebody wrote "teacher" under it and passed it around and the teacher got hold of it. She didn't ask anybody, "Did you do this?" She knew who did it. She came down and jumped on me for doing it. And I remember just crying my eyes out because I hadn't meant it to be her, you know, it was some of the other children that'd done that.

J: Is it a comic strip character?

C: Yes. What in the world was the name of it? She had two little boys. I've forgotten what the name was, but has run for 50 or 60 years.

J: Those Katzenjammer Kids?

C: Yes, I believe it was. I believe that's what it was.

J: Isn't that something. Do you recall the World War II era while you were living in El Paso? Do you recall anything special about those times in El Paso? I think the base grew at that time, they brought a lot of people from the Army in there?

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C: Yes, they did. I don't think anything special.

J: Did you know any students or anything that you had had before that had gone into the war.

C: Oh, yes. The teachers had to sign up people. You know, boys and things like that. One boy came to me, Isaac somebody. I said, "You're not 18 years old." "Yes, I am." The teachers did the work extra, you know, signing up everybody that was of the age to go to war. In fact, the teachers always had to do everything. When they sugar rationing we had to make out the cards for everybody for the rationing.

J: During that time, did a lot of people go to Juárez to shop?

C: Oh, yes.

J: What kinds of things did you buy?

C: Well, I had a girl work for me, Carmen, and in fact, she worked for me 33 years and I loved her just like she was one of my family. And she had diabetes and I tried to get her to come up here to live with me and she didn't want to. But if she had, that girl would still be alive today because I wouldn't have let her eat what she ate, you know. Because she was supposed have had vegetables, no sugar and stuff like that.

J: Was she from Juárez?

C: Originally yes, but she was living in El Paso then. But she would go across to Juárez and get things for me.

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In fact, somebody...I had gone to the depot to see, my nephew [who] was leaving, and I thought maybe I'd get to see him. Somebody was sitting out there and I asked him what battalion was leaving and so forth. He said, "I'm from New York and I understand the people in Texas invite you out to dinner. Would you invite us out?" And I said, "Sure." I gave him my telephone number, and I guess it was about two weeks and here I got a call. They had been in quarantine but they were now out. So the Eastern Star was having a picnic in the park, up in Highland Park or somewhere, and I called the woman up to ask her--he said they'd be eight of them--if I could bring eight soldiers and she said yes. And I had a lot of grape vines and I picked a whole bushel of grapes in a bushel basket, killed an extra chicken and I don't know what else I took, but anyway, I took enough for the eight boys.

And they started coming out to breakfast. Every Sunday they'd come to breakfast. And it was the funniest thing, every one of those boys were Catholics. And they'd go to Mass and then after Mass they would get a taxi and come out. At first I thought they were just gonna be there for breakfast but they kept staying later, and later and later and finally we'd get 'em in just before they closed the gates at Fort Bliss. And so Carmen would go over and finally, well, they were supposed to be for breakfast so I'd give 'em breakfast. And they'd keep staying so I had to give 'em dinner, had to give 'em supper. So Carmen would get the meat in Juárez and we made tamales and canned them, canned tamales. And that was our main dish for one of those meals. But I had them every Sunday as

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long as they stayed there. And I got a beautiful letter from one of the man that he said good-bye to his sweetheart and he thought that everything had just gone go calamity, that he'd be killed the first minute he got over there and all of that, you know. And I got a letter from him, telling me how me having them all those Sundays had changed his point of view and now he was going to marry this girl because he'd been transferred to a place out in California where they could have a home close to where he was in the Army. Wasn't that nice? It makes you feel so good when you can do something for somebody. And then I got another letter from a woman that I had had the soldiers and their girlfriends out for a party at night. And she wrote me that she didn't even know where her husband had gone, that they had taken 'em out early that norning and she didn't even know where they were gone. And thanking me for the party. I had a big house and I'd always, you know, serve different things. And I put up 1000 pints of jams and jellies off of that farm to give to the soldiers that were married, you know.

J: Where was it? Where did you have that?

C: It was on Montoya. A two-story house /in the/ upper valley. In fact, I left word, there were so many of the soldiers' wives would come and they'd spend the night in the depot. They'd go down there and lie on one of those benches all night long. And I left word that I had two or three bedrooms that were not in use that they were welcome to stay there. Of course, they'd have to take the bus out there and back. But I didn't have any of 'em come to stay. I guess

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they thought it was too far.

And I also taught Art to the men's YMCA. It was down, not too far from the depot, the old depot. And I had a class in that in Art that I taught on Saturdays.

J: During the years you lived in El Paso, were there any special things that you and your husband liked to do for recreation, let's say after you got married in the early days?

C: Well, we built a cabin in Ruidoso and I had some friends, Velma and C.W. Lyons. She was also a teacher. And I'd call up and I'd say, "How long would it take you to get ready to go to Ruidoso?" "Thirty minutes?" "Make it twenty." And we wouldn't even go by the house because we kept our toothbrushes and all of our clothes there and they did too. And we'd pick them up and off we'd go to Ruidoso. And sometimes we had so much company we'd have to go to a hotel to spend the night so people'd have room to stay in our cabin.

J: Isn't that something?

C: Yeah, it is.

J: So that was what you liked to do the best?

C: Oh, yes. Play cards and so forth.

J: And you did a lot of painting when you were up there, too?

C: Well, not too much then because you don't have much time when you've got company, you've got to take care of them. But then finally I built a duplex up there. I'd intended to retire up there but I couldn't get anybody to go anywhere with me at night. The women

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say, "I never go out at night." And I'd want to go to the picture show or something like that. And I just got so bored I decided not to retire up there.

J: What brought you down here to Las Cruces? What made you come here?

C: Oh, in '42, when I retired from teaching I wanted a place in a small town and that time Las Cruces was a very small town, about seven thousand. And so I came up and bought this farm. That is the one that I was telling you about that had the government houses on it and everything. Paid \$7,250 for the farm and I sold one lot for \$30,000, and I spent all the money. (Laughter) I'm one of these that, you know, gives to charity. Dr. Peter Knell I sent a \$1,000, another place I sent \$13,500 and so forth. First thing you don't have money enough to buy crackers.

J: So you came and started your farm down here.

C: [Yes.]

J: What did you grow on your farm? What kinds of things?

C: Oh, cotton of course, and alfalfa. And one year I had beautiful lettuce and the man that was farming it didn't get picked in time and I lost every bit of the whole thing, probably five or six thousand dollars worth.

J: Was it usually a good business for you?

C: No, I think I told you that I lost \$3 one year and \$300 the next. No, I didn't always make money on it. In fact, one time I lost onions. It was a very peculiar thing. See, I had a well that

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I irrigated with. And the man that owned the trailer court wanted the land to take in the well. And I said I would do that provided that I had the use of the well as long as I had the farm. And one day I went out and I noticed the gate was locked into this pump. And I drove down to where my onions were and there they were all flat on the ground, wilted. He had locked the gate for some reason, I don't know what. And the man that was farming it didn't tell me. If he had told me why then I would have seen that it was opened. But, oh, a woman, they just do everything. For instance, I had a little addition north of town, Tierra del Sol. And I called up a company here to see how much they would charge me for paving the street. He said, "Oh, it'll be under \$5,000." It was \$4999.50, 50 cents under five thousand. But they do that with women, you know.

J: That's terrible. So now that you're retired you have more time to paint?

C: Yeah.

J: Do you have any activities?

C: I am busy every day of the week, every week.

J: What kinds of things do you do?

C: I belong to a lot of different clubs. I play cards and I paint and different things like that. I'm very active in the Woman's Club in the Art Department. I got Best of Show once this year and a Blue Ribbon once, and two second places this year.

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J: Great. Do you ever paint anything out in the desert? Do you like the desert at all?

C: Yes, sure. I have a show up in T or C now that has some desert pictures and one of the Organs.* And the one that I, one of 'em I gave away yesterday, was of the reservation up north of Ruidoso. You know, keep on going on Main Street in Ruidoso and you hit the reservation, Indian reservation. It was painted up there. And the other was a Kachina picture.

J: And those are gonna be raffled off. And the money used for a scholarship did you say?

C: That's what they said.

J: Well, is there anything else you'd like to add? Any of your experiences that you've left out that you want to tell us about?

C: No doubt I've left out plenty. After living to be nearly 90 years old you know, you go through quite a bit. [The] twelfth of November. I'm thankful for one thing, that I can still paint. A lot of people 90 years old are not able to do things like that.

J: Do you recall what your first impressions of El Paso were? When you first saw the city and what you thought about it?

C: You'd never believe this, but I dreamed of that town before I ever saw it. I knw exactly these things would be out in front of the store. Isn't that funny.

J: That's amazing.

C: It is, yeah. But that was just so natural to me.

* Organ Mountains near Las Cruces, N.M.

J: What was the city like when you first got there? I mean, did anything impress you in particular about the place?

C: Oh, I can't remember anything special. I remember going into a bank and wanting to cash a check and the man that run the bank asked if I had anything to prove, you know, that I was who I was. And I said, "You just tell him I know more about his family than he does, out on the Gila." And the fellow come back smiling and I said, "What'd he say?" And he said, "To give you the money."

J: Was it someone whose family you had known over there?

C: Yeah, I knew his family very well. He was president of the bank down here.

J: Do you recall what the city looked like at that time? Or how big the city was or anything like that when you first moved here?

C: No, not much. Of course the American Furniture company was down on...oh, what's the next street down from Texas? San Antonio?

J: Yes, I believe so.

C: Well, that furniture store was down there. Course that was before they moved up. They weren't so large [a] store. And the Popular and White House were in existence.

J: But nothing that really impressed you when you first moved out there.

C: I can't think of anything.

J: How do you feel about living all that time in El Paso?

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C: Well, I did an awful lot of work, I remember that. They always gave me the problem children. In fact, that's why I retired. I had told a friend of mine that taught there, I said, "If I get one of those classes again, I'm just gonna retire."

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