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Interview no. 657

Elouise Phelan

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Elouise Phelan
INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Craver
PROJECT: History of the University
DATE OF INTERVIEW: February 29, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
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TRANSCRIPT NO.: 657

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Resident of the College of Mines Vet Village in the
1940s with her husband, John, and their children.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

How Vet Village and the Vet Set club began; everyday life
in Vet Village.

Length of interview: 20 minutes Length of transcript: 15 pages

Elouise Phelan
by Rebecca Craver
February 29, 1984

C: Well, I'm real curious to hear the women's angle of Vet Village, so just begin.

P: Well, on about October of 1946 Margaret Fugate, who worked in one of the offices at the College, sent invitations to all the veterans wives asking them to a meeting. I think we had about ten people there at that meeting and we named it the Vet Set Club and we elected Margaret the president. This was a few months before we moved into Vet Village. We met once a month and after about February we started moving into Vet Village and then most of the women did join, as they moved into Vet Village they would join the Vet Set Club. The next year, then I was president. Many wives worked and some of us went to college, so we decided we needed a nursery because about half of us had children at that time. There was a small building on the campus, and I think it belonged to the contractor who had put up those vet housing. Now you remember those vet housing was really old barracks. Each building had four apartments. The end apartments had two bedrooms which those of us with children were able to rent, I think for like \$37, bills paid, and the ones in the middle were one bedroom, of course which were for the couples. We decided then to ask for this building. So, of course, I was appointed to go ask Marshall Pennington, who was the business manager who owned the building. He told me to get in touch with Dean Thomas. Well, the girls said, "Oh Dean Thomas is hard to get along with." He was of course the head of the engineering department. But I went in to see him and I want you to know that before I left his office I not only had that building but he had agreed to move the building to the Vet Village location

where we wanted the building. So, he really turned out to be such a help to us. Our husbands worked in their spare time installing the plumbing and electricity and putting partitions in. We had a big playroom and a bedroom and a kitchen and a bath because they did feed the children their noon meal. We ran an ad for someone to operate the nursery and the first lady we hired actually couldn't handle the job. It was just more children than she really could handle so we ran another ad and we were most fortunate in that we hired Mrs. Shaumloffel. Her husband was retired so we really got two for one because he came with her every day and the children adored Mr. Shaumloffel.

C: How many children were in there?

P: I would say, I was trying to remember those of us who used it. Now we had regulars, or the people who worked, and I would say we probably had twelve regulars and then those of us who were just drop-ins. We probably had another ten or twelve who would use it maybe once a week or maybe twice a week. But we, of course, were not open at night. When we could afford to go out at night, of course, we had to hire babysitters. I don't even remember where we got the beds and the linens and the stove and all the things, but I'm sure they were given to us because we really didn't have any money. I don't even know what we paid to be a member of the Vet Set Club but probably two dollars a month or something, but it wasn't much. We wives helped the husbands paint the building and the husbands built a fence around so the children could get out and play in the yard. Of course, there was no grass. It was just a dirt yard that the children had to play in. We had, unfortunately I think, decided to have an open house and we invited

somebody from the city. Of course, they sent the person that was in charge of licensing nurseries. We had never heard of a nursery having to have a license so we had not gotten a license, but there were certain things we had to do to get the nursery up to standards which we did, and we did get a license. However, a little bit later, oh, maybe six or eight months later, the wiring to the electric wall stove caught on fire, shorted out and caught...a little bit of the wall burned, but Mr. Shaumlöffel actually put it out. I remember the children were brought to our apartment to wait until the parents came and picked them up at the end of the work day. So, actually, then we had to close the nursery, but later, I'm not sure whether it was open again as a nursery, but I do know in driving through there that it was eventually, maybe within two years, was turned into another apartment for veterans to live in. I think it's something that our son, who at the time was about four when we moved out there, he moved back into Vet Village as a married student, later. Of course, at that time, later on it was not for veterans because he certainly was not a veteran, but the people who lived in Vet Village in those old apartments were given first choice to move into the new apartments on the campus and I think another couple moved in who had lived there as a child.

C: Well that's something, isn't it.

P: The community was very conscious of the vet families living out there and at the time, because of the story that was in the newspaper and the pictures of some of us with our children. At the time I was attending college, taking two courses and one day, soon after the story ran my English teacher asked me if I would wait and see her after class. I thought, "My goodness, what have

I done?" You know, at that age in life I was not doing those things that I would have to stay after school, but anyway she told that a lively lady intown, a Mrs. Jess Gilmer had called her and said would she get in touch with me and offer us some living room furniture because we were one of the couples that had no living room furniture. So I remember going over to her house over across the street from Crockett School and she gave us a lovely five piece rattan set, and I used that for many, many years afterwards. I remember I used it in my den in my first house after we graduated. But one thing about us, we were all in the same boat, poor. Most of the husbands worked and we wives would get together and play bridge or just visit in the evenings. On the weekends we would have covered dish suppers and have lots of fun. We always took the children and we'd gather in somebody's yard. Sugar Evans and John did go down to the river and get grass and we had a yard with a picket fence around it. John even put up the picket fence, and the Sugar Evanses had a yard with a picket fence around it because I think we probably had the oldest two children out there. Except the Evans had Mrs. Evan's brother lived with them and in the evenings, the few evenings that John and I could go out, we'd get him to babysit for us. And once a month, just after payday, John and I would go out to dinner. I can remember going out to the old Westerner out here. And that was a treat, you know, and then occasionally all of us would get together, many of us as a group would go out on a Saturday night, but other than that, John actually worked six nights a week. He went to school in the mornings and went to work at four and worked till midnight. He closed the station for those two years that we were out on the campus. The

Last week of the month many of us would run out of certain staples, but we could always go to our neighbor. We did a lot of borrowing; we'd go to the neighbor and say, "Well, I've got the meat, do you have spaghetti?" And we'd get together and we'd come up with a pretty good meal, but we thought nothing of borrowing from each other and we always returned what we borrowed and I remember Henry _____ opened a laundry. Now we didn't have dryers in the laundry, but I remember saving dimes to put in the washing machines, so actually we all had to buy our clotheslines to put at the back of our apartments. But that was a wonderful thing for us because otherwise we would have had to put the kids in and gone to a washeteria so that was a great thing. We had a couple of girls, Mrs. Jim Elliott, Doris, and Rachel di Zavala, I remember lived out...Doris and Jim even had a house! I remember we were reminiscing just recently about the first time that they invited us over for dinner. We had the one child and she said she felt so sorry for Johnny because we had just told him, "Now don't touch anything in this house." So she said he went all over her house with his hands behind his back. But it's amazing that those friends we made are still our best friends in El Paso. Jane and Tom Rush and of course Tom was out at Beaumont with John and they had become friends and then when Jane had finished her year of teaching down in Waco, she moved to El Paso and I was already living out here and we went to the same church and we had children of the same age and we became friends and to this day they are still among our very best friends in town. Our friends, as I say, that we made out there, are lasting friends. We still keep up with the ones out of town, and when they come to Homecoming

we're always so glad to see them and we really try to keep up with each other. I think that this experience has been such a great blessing because we were all so happy. Our husbands had been to war and had come back and we didn't realize that we were doing without anything. We were just happy people all in the same boat, very thankful that we had a place to live and very thankful that our husbands had the G.I. Bill to complete their education.

C: Now, that is great. Tell me some more about the living quarters, just a physical description.

P: They were wooden and the floors were wooden and I do not know who came up with the idea of putting this, I think it was linseed oil, on the floors and of course my children, no carpeting or anything, they didn't have any kind of a rug at the beginning, but my children's pajamas, I remember this oil was black, and their pajamas just would get so dirty. Well, finally we bought a linoleum and put it on the living room, and I believe we put one in the children's room. When we moved out there our Jimmy was seven months old and Johnny was a little bit over four.

C: The little one was crawling then.

P: The little one was crawling. We had no doors on the closets, on the clothes closets. We did have a door on the bathroom and we had a door on the storage closet which was off the living room and I remember the windows. It snowed when we lived out there and I woke up in the morning and there was snow all over the window ledge inside of the house. (Laughs)

C: Must have been cold.

P: It was a little cold but we had one heater. It was a, looked like a steam heater to me, but apparently it was just a gas heater in

the living room and that had to heat the whole house. So actually the bedrooms and the bathroom were rather chilly. We had just a shower of course and it's a little hard to bathe a seven-month-old in the shower so I bathed him in the kitchen sink I remember. And of course we had iceboxes in the beginning but I guess the second year we bought a refrigerator and many of them out there did buy a refrigerator.

C: But the ice man would come.

P: The ice man would come, uh huh, and we'd have our quarter ready to pay for our ice, and I guess at the time, milkmen delivered milk. You know I don't even think there are milkmen anymore but they did at that time. We had a little grocery store that I think the man's name was Bustamante, open between Vet Village and Paisano, which was walking distance if we needed milk or bread or whatever. We could just run down there and get what we needed if we had the money to buy it, but the last week of the month, most of us got paid once a month, and the last week of the month we probably didn't have the money to go down there and buy what we needed because we had limited income.

C: Well, did you have a car?

P: Oh yes, we had a car. When John was in the service we had bought a, I don't remember the year, but a fairly new Oldsmobile, and I had that when he was overseas and we still had that car and I remember something bad happened to it. I guess the engine burned out or something, but I remember so well, he had a friend in the 20-30 Club with him and he talked to him, he said "Well, you bring it to me and I'll get it done as cheaply as possible." Now I remember it cost us \$450 and that was a problem coming up with \$450.

I'm sure we paid it out by the month.

C: Oh my. Well, it sure sounds like fun even though....

P: Well, like I say, we had been in the service, all of us with our husbands, and had lived, I lived at one time in an area in Orange, California that was an old Boy Scout camp, and many of the couples with children lived in tents with dirt floors. We were fortunate in that John had rented me a little two-bedroom shack. It was out there but it was right by the Army base and it was nice because he could run home for lunch and could enjoy Johnny, our oldest son was born out in California, and he could enjoy him. Then when we were sent back to central Texas, I was able to find an apartment, but I could not find a place to live in El Paso when I first came here. It was just something. I got up at 4 o'clock one morning when I first came here with one child and was first in line for an apartment that was available on Savannah Street and people parked behind me, you know, and then when we saw the lights come on in the house, I made everybody wait till I got up there first because I wasn't about to let anybody get ahead of me and they rented it to me. We rented a bedroom with a little built-on, they had enclosed the back porch, and that was the kitchen and the sitting room and everything, but we were just so lucky to get that because really we were living in one room with having to eat out, and we were just thrilled to get that apartment, and then John kept checking, "When are these Vet apartments going to be available," and then in the meantime we were expecting Jimmy and we had found a dirty old apartment down on Noble Street, which is close to town, and I really was scared living there. It was just a dump but at least had two bedrooms that I could give one to the children and we

could have one because the other one was just one bedroom and that little kitchen-living room. I didn't have a place for another bed with this baby that's coming along, so we lived in that apartment until the Veteran's apartments were...

C: Well, I bet you were just delighted with the Veteran's apartments.

P: Oh, listen, that was a mansion to me because I had a bedroom for the boys and our bedroom and a kitchen, and the kitchens were quite nice. They did put new sinks in for us and the stoves I think were new when we moved there and the iceboxes were adequate. I was not above using an icebox. I've used it in California moving around.

C: Um hm. Now this Vet Set, was that a social group more than...

P: Just a social group, yes. I'm sure that Margaret working in the office up there, I'm not sure whose office, but maybe the Registrar's Office, she realized how many veterans there were on the campus and that perhaps the wives would like to get together, and I thought it was a great idea for her, something for her to do.

C: Well, did you have parties then that the Vet Set sponsored?

P: Yes. We would have get togethers with the husbands usually, and then of course we met once a month, just the women, and I guess we got together and hired a babysitter to keep the children so we could enjoy the meeting, and as a result of the meeting we found out who played bridge and we would have our bridge parties, and usually we just took the children with us. I can remember putting Johnny in the closet off the living room at my friend's house and playing bridge and he never would wake up. He'd be sound asleep. (Chuckles) But then, as I say, we'd get together with the other couples and we really were a congenial group out there. Was John

the first mayor or was Sugar Evans?

C: Well, I think he...

P: I think John was the first mayor because I think the picture that we couldn't find was with him giving the keys to Sugar Evans.

C: He couldn't remember how the election went.

P: But I remember when Sugar Evans ran for president of the student body. We wives went up and passed out sugar cubes. We really got involved in that election that year. We'd go up between classes, those kids were passing by, we'd give them out these sugar cubes that we had attached the little streamer to, "Vote for Sugar Evans," and that was an unusual election because someone other than the fraternity was elected, and even though John was in the S.A.E. fraternity, he was Sug's campaign manager, I believe.

C: Well now, he didn't remember how he got to be mayor. Do you remember any part of...

P: I don't know but I really think that when Dr. Wiggins up there at the time, Dr. Wiggins and Marshall Pennington I think got together and appointed John mayor. John was already working at KTSM at the time and being on the radio they knew of him, and I think he had been in that office so many times to see when is it going to be finished, that they knew him well before we moved in there and they simply appointed him, I believe. And then, I believe then next year the group got together and elected. We had the Mayor and Aldermen; we had the Council people and we made sure that we had a female on that Council and from then on I guess John had appointed some and he made sure that he had a woman on it, and then we elected them I believe. When we elected Sugar mayor, I believe we elected the council people, too.

C: About how many of these four apartment buildings were there?

P: I have tried to remember. I think there were probably twelve, so there must have been 48 couples out there. I tried to figure, to imagine in my mind where they were placed and I believe that there were twelve there.

C: Well, John told me about the view from the front yard.

P: Oh yes. We would sit out on this very small, little porch and in the yard. We enjoyed that view of the mountains and the area very much, and I could remember when he was working, Frances Humphrey lived across the road, because they were not streets, they were not paved, and we did have the sandstorms but with our husbands both working at night, we would put her little boy to bed and because my yard had grass, I can remember sitting out and lying out there on that grass many an evening just visiting until the husbands would get off from work, or one of us, I usually had to go pick John up because I don't know why I thought I always had to have the car, but often, and then I would leave because my children would be asleep she would watch out for them while I'd run down to the station and pick John up.

C: So a lot of cooperation....

P: Lot's of cooperation, yes.

C: Now, you were taking two classes?

P: Yes. I had taught school and I needed to renew my teachers' certificate so I took a course in English and a course in History, and besides I liked to stay involved. I mean with John in school I felt that I wanted to also go back to school, and he would come home. When we were, before we moved to Vet Village, I would drop him off in the mornings, go back and get the kids bathed and fed

and then I had a 10 o'clock class, so I'd meet him and he had a class at Kelly Hall. I remember so well, I'd pick him up, he'd scoot over in the driver's [side] and I'd scoot over and he'd take the kids and I would go to my class and then we would exchange roles again after my two classes, they were one right after the other. So by twelve I was out of class and then it would be time for him to go to class again. I don't remember when he ever ate at noontime. I know he ate before he went to work at four probably and then when he'd come home after midnight. He'd close the station at midnight, then I'd feed him then. Well, I can't even say we really usually had breakfast together because often the kids, particularly the older one, would get up and he and the Evans' little girl, I said, "My goodness these kids." I said, "Mary, do you have butter and jelly and mustard out on your table in the morning?" She says, "Yes, do you?" and I said, "Yes." I said, "You know what happens, Johnny gets up and fixes himself some toast, puts jelly and mustard on it, and sometime peanut butter," and then [he'd] go up to play with Sherry Evans and they'd fix her a sandwich just like that with the mustard and the jelly. (Laughter) But the kids all just had lots of fun, but our children have never been fighters and Johnny wasn't at all, and he'd come home and he'd said this certain little boy, whose name I do not recall, but I can see him today, a little blond-headed boy bigger than Johnny and he said he was always beating up on Johnny, so John took Johnny aside and he said, "You, the next time he does," and showed him how to get his fists together and to fight that boy and do you know that he did it and the child never picked on him again. So he learned at an early age that you've got to

take up for yourself.

C: And a lot of the wives worked then?

P: Yes.

C: And so a lot of the purpose of this day nursery was to provide child care so they could work.

P: That's right. I remember Mary Evans worked at the Bank. Jane Rush taught school. We had several school teachers out there who had gotten their degrees and had taught when their husbands were overseas. And then, as I say, occasionally, even then I became active in the S.A.E. women's group so I would need a sitter so I could go to my meetings. In fact, I guess I was the first recording secretary of the Minerva Club, it was called. The S.A.E. was made up of the mother or wives or even girlfriends of the active S.A.E.'s.

C: Well, I bet you were a little bit sad to have to leave.

P: Yes. We regretted it when we had to get out because, in fact, John had to register, after he graduated he had to register for a couple of courses because we couldn't find a house in El Paso. And we checked other cities and housing was available that we checked only in Amarillo, Texas and Tuscon, Arizona. And he said, "Well, where shall we go, to Tuscon or Amarillo?" And I said, "Wherever you get a job, my friend." But he really didn't want to leave KTSM. He had been working there for those two years and he loved it and he had gotten his degree in Mass Communications, which then I think was just radio, and of course that was what he was doing. So there again, thanks to our friends that we made through the Vet Set Club, Jim Elliott's, daddy was in real estate and he found a house that was for sale. That, and John had become

a member of the civic club, the 20-30 Club, and a friend in the 20-30 Club was the estimator for the Veteran's Administration for us to get a G.I. loan, and the house was in good shape so, fortunately, we were able to buy our first house with a hundred percent G.I. loan.

C: You didn't have to put anything down?

P: No, just \$250 to pay for some paving that had been done in the front, was still a lien against the house so we paid that off, and of course they let us, the county or city or whatever, let us pay it off by the month. In fact, I think it was to Jack Vowell.

C: Is that right.

P: He was a contractor and John talked to him and told that we would make a payment every month until we got it paid off and that's what we did. So, there again it was through friendship made through the Veteran's group and the Vet Set Club because Doris was a member of the Vet Set Club and then John and Jim became friends and they're still just best of friends and Doris and I are, too.

C: Well, I was telling your husband I think that there should be a reunion of the Vet Village people.

P: There should be, you know.

C: So I'm going to say something to Dr. Monroe when I see him.

P: It would be nice, yeah.

C: Wouldn't it be fun?

P: And bring all the children that would be possible, wouldn't that be, because our son now is forty-one.

C: Does he live here?

P: No, he lives in Colorado. He has a son, twenty and eighteen Troy is now. I guess twenty-one the older one is. And then a second

family started with a little girl, four and a little boy, two, lives in Colorado. And then Jimmy, of course who uh... John graduated in 1948 and was active on the campus. Our son, Jim, was a drum major for three years and then became the student body president his second year and he graduated exactly twenty years later in 1968, and he went on to Yale Law School and is practicing law in Denver and has two adorable children, a little girl, four and a little boy, two.

C: Well, I'm not going to take up your whole morning. That's just wonderful. I appreciate it.