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Interview no. 659

Helen O'Shea Keleher

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Helen O'Shea Keleher
INTERVIEWER: Rosemary C. Stoelzel
PROJECT: Class Project
DATE OF INTERVIEW: July 31, 1984
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted

TAPE NO.: 659
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 659

BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Born in 1894 in Denver, Colorado; came to El Paso with her family in 1898; attended Mesa School (later Bailey School), El Paso High, and graduated from Loretto Academy in Las Cruces, New Mexico; administrator for Rio Vista Farm.

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Life history of Mrs. Keleher's father, John L. O'Shea, superintendent of railroad building in the Alamogordo area; recollections of Alamogordo and Cloudcroft in the early days; recollections of early El Paso; recollections of the Depression years; work with Rio Vista Farm, home for neglected children.

Length of interview: 1 1/2 hours Length of transcript: 28 pages

Interview with Helen Keleher

July 31, 1984

Rosemary Stoelzel, Interviewer

(Begins with R. Stoelzel reading an article written by Mrs. Keleher, at Mrs. Keleher's request.)

S: This is an article that Mrs. Keleher wrote to win first prize of \$100 in an historical memories contest sponsored by the El Paso County Historical Society. I'm going to read the article so that we have it on tape.

John L. O'Shea - Recollections of Incidents in
the Life of a Railroad Pioneer

"In 1893 my father, John L. O'Shea, came to the Southwest from Denver, Colorado. Specifically, he came to Alamagordo, New Mexico. At that time he was associated with the Eddy Brothers, who were builders and owners of railroads. Eddy County is named after them, as was the city of Eddy, which was eventually changed to Carlsbad. The Eddys moved into Alamagordo, New Mexico, and their objective was the building of a narrow-guage railroad from Alamagordo to Cloudcroft, New Mexico. My father, John L. O'Shea, superintended the building of this picturesque and extremely scenic railway.

Our family had the first house in Alamagordo, and it was the only house with indoor plumbing. It was located on the corner of Tenth and Virginia. The rest of Alamagordo at that time was a typical tent city of the Old West. The family pictures of this era in the life of Alamagordo have been donated to the Historical Society of Alamagordo, the Museum, and the Lodge.

With the population increase due to the influx of railway workers, it became necessary to build a school and a church, and since my father had

S: actively promoted both projects, it was quite natural for him to be a member of the first Alamagordo School Board. The church, incidentally, was attended by all denominations. Also, during that period a large frame hotel was built, which later furnished the scene for a spectacular fire. The hotel burned to the ground. There also existed a huge lumberyard, which accomodated the demand for more sized lumber from the original inhabitants of Alamagordo. The freshly cut trees came from the abundant forests in the mountains.

Governor Mecham of New Mexico, the uncle of the last Mechum to hold that post, and my father bought up a good deal of the land in and around Cloudcroft, knowing that the inherant beauty of Cloudcroft would prove overwhelmingly attractive to people trying to escape the oppressive heat of the lowlands. Between them they built 100 3-room houses, complete with Chik Sales outhouses. And yes, the doors were all decorated with the classical crescent moon cutout! Wild deer and their fawns would come up to the screen doors to be fed, and would often knock the screens in if not attended to immediately. Bears would usually be found scavaging around the garbage dumps. Tiny wild roses and tiny wild strawberries covered the ground. Cloudcroft was the most beautiful place I've ever seen.

It soon became fashionable for El Paso families to take their children up to Cloudcroft during the hottest part of the summer. In a more serious vein, a children's sanitarium was founded in Cloudcroft, due to serious illnesses suffered by El Paso children who were too weak to resist the heat extremes in El Paso. The Lodge, built completely of logs, was a beautiful structure, with wide verandas on three sides, and it, too, became a famous summer resort for El Pasoans weary of continuing hot weather.

S: When the Alamagordo-Cloudcroft railroad was completed, my father moved to El Paso in 1898, and became a conductor on the El Paso and Northeastern Railroad, as he was still associated with the Eddy Brothers, who were the owners. Our first home in El Paso was on the site of La Villita, next door to the Crawford house which is still standing. My father sold this flat, and he bought a house on 411 Boulevard, now called Yandell."

K: Named after Dr. Yandell.

S: "Mr. Ponsford, Sr., was putting the finishing [touches] to our new home as we moved in.

We were only a few blocks from Kansas Street and the old shabby depot, and as a little girl I would go down to the depot followed by my little chihuahua dog. My object in going was to meet my father, coming in on the passenger train. This was all happening in 1902, and my parents were somewhat worried by the large number of tracks I had to cross before reaching the station. They needn't have worried, because there was always a gateman in the tower who would yell at me in Spanish not to cross in case there was any danger. As soon as there wasn't any danger, he would signal a go-ahead, and he would yell, "Corre! Corre!"

K: That means, "Run! Run!"

S: "And I would. That was a long time ago.

In the summer of 1906 there was great excitement running through the town of El Paso, for the new Union Station, which took two years to build, was about to receive its first train, the Golden State Limited. The old, small and shabby depot which had faithfully served eight railroads into El Paso, was about to be superceded by its young and handsome rival. The old station was situated more or less on the same spot occupied by E. F. Hutton [today]. This station had served the El Paso and Northeastern,

S: which was later changed to the El Paso and Southwestern. Much, much later this same railroad was changed to the Southern Pacific. The offices were where the ABC Bank Building now stands.

So it was the El Paso and Northeastern's Golden State Limited that was going to inaugurate the shiny new station, and it was my father who was bringing the train in. All El Paso and I were eagerly taking advantage of this momentous occasion to welcome the first train in, and I in particular to welcome my father. It was a gala event, and although the heat was suffocating, all the ladies of El Paso were there in all their finery - big picture hats, tight waists, long dresses, puffed sleeves, parasols, and a few gloves here and there. There was also a boisterous and enthusiastic crowd of several thousand people, and as the train rolled into the depot, the famous McGinty band struck up a lively tune.

My father's friends who were all on hand started yelling and cheering as my father stepped down from the motionless train. They enthusiastically handed him a McGinty, which was a huge stein containing a quart of beer."

K: It was shaped like this. (Makes heart shape with hands.)

S: "The stein was colorfully decorated with a variety of beautiful vegetables instead of flowers..."

K: All [around the sides] hanging off there was vegetables.

S: "Amid the cheering my father accepted the McGinty and proceeded to drink it down."

K: Well, first let me tell you that my mother was a Carrie Nation. She didn't believe in liquor.

S: All right. "My mother who was present was deeply embarrassed, and the incident continued to be a disgrace in the family for many years - not because my father drank a stein of beer, but because my father drank a stein of beer in front of all El Paso!"

K: She never got over giving him the devil about that! (laughing)

S: I'll bet! "Eventually we moved to 908 E. Rio Grande. It was a narrow street with wide parkways on each side of the street, and it was completely lined with petunias."

K: Oh, it was a beautiful street! It was new, and [now] they've taken away the parking to make it wide enough. The parking was as wide as this room. It made a very narrow street, you see, and there were petunias all [along]. The city put them in.

S: "It was the prettiest street in town and one of the newest. During World War I the soldiers would march down the street. Since my father couldn't contribute a son to the war effort, he naturally became interested in the welfare of the young soldiers and always went out of his way to make their path less dreary. Since he possessed a farm up in the valley between Camutillo and Anthony, he hit on the idea of bringing bushels of grapes, peaches, apples and pears from the farm down to Rio Grande Street. He also bought a large galvanized tin tub and a large amount of cups. He would get a hundred pound block of ice, put it in the tub, fill the tub with water, and he was ready to make welcome the tired and sweaty boys marching past. The soldiers would always find an excuse to halt nearby, and as soon as they heard, "Fall out!" they would make a dash down the street to where the fruit and ice water were awaiting their arrival. They enjoyed their respite and many of them came to be fast friends of my father's. This casual association was enjoyed by all except for some of the neighbors who complained bitterly about a few trampled petunias! These protests were routinely ignored, and the boys were evidently touched by my father's solicitude, because my father received a great many cards from Europe addressed as, "Dear Dad,"

S: commenting on his earthy hospitality, and many of them wishing they were back in El Paso.

My father had a soft place in his heart for these boys going off to war, and he had a real compulsion to do everything possible for them. As a further example, we would be standing in line to see a movie and he would notice several of the soldiers waiting in the line ahead of him. He would quietly count them, buy tickets for all of them, and come back to his place in the line. His little acts of kindness to the soldiers made him a well-known figure both in the Army world and the civilian world.

The fact that he always went around town in a large Buick touring car was also notable, but the most notable object in sight was his dog, a big airedale, who would hang onto the lights of the car with his front paws securely gripping the lights."

K: It had a running board.

S: "No amount of speed or swerving could shake Jiggs loose from his paw-hold. Jiggs would always guard the car when my father had to leave it.

Yes, everybody in town knew John L. O'Shea, adopted son of El Paso, and none can deny that his many facets as a railroad man, as a real estate broker, and as a very popular citizen of El Paso made him an extraordinarily memorable citizen of this fair city." (Looking at book cover) Spring of 1979. Password.

K: It's too late to get that, I think. That's why I thought if you'd take it down you'd get some idea.

S: Yes. Well, were you born here, then?

K: I was born in Denver, Colorado, in 1894, in that house. See that house up there?

S: The picture of the house up there on the wall?

K: It's not a picture. It's an ink sketching. It was a 3-story house with a basement and was very large and beautiful. There were three of them built by the same architect, and they have all been restored. This one has a plaque on it.

S: What's the address of that house?

K: 133 1 Downing.

S: Now you were born in Denver. Do you remember anything about your grandparents?

K: Oh, yes. My grandfather died before I was born. There were 7 boys, (Buzzer sounds, and nurse arrives to take blood pressure and blood samples. After about a 15-minute delay, the interview continues.)

S: When did you come to El Paso?

K: I was two years old when I left Alamogordo, and I had my 3rd birthday in 1894. We lived at the Orndorff Hotel until our house was completed, and then we lived at 411 Boulevard. It was called Boulevard then, and not Yandell. We had a half a block there. Do you know that pink building, right across from the Episcopal Church? Well, that was where our home was. We had a house there and everything. The corner was all grass and trees and flowers. Even though my mother was a Catholic, she used to let the Episcopal ladies use the yard. They all had card tables, and they would put the tables all over the yard. They helped pay for the Episcopal Church that way, by having ice cream socials every Saturday night. Our kitchen opened out onto the lawn, and they'd take the screen off. The ice cream and stuff would be in our kitchen and they'd hand them out the window. Oh, it was just wonderful! They always gave me a free dish of ice cream! (laughing) We had many trees, and my father would string colored lights all around. Being on the railroad, he had a

K: lot of fusees. He would stick them into our fenceposts so the whole place was lighted up. Mother helped. She was very charitable and very lovely, and in those days everyone helped everyone else.

Henry Wooldridge lives next door to me here, and he was 90 in June. I was 90 in July, July the 9th. When we were 6 years old we lived next to each other, and now that [we are] 90 years old we still live next door to each other! (laughing)

S: What do you remember from your childhood? What are some things that stand out in your mind?

K: Well, so many things. There wasn't a paved street in El Paso. The streets were caliche, and the sidewalks were all caliche, with a board around it making a sidewalk. You could sweep them like a cement sidewalk, but they were very slippery when they got wet. The little mule car went right in front of our house. They have it downtown some place [now]. I think it sat about six on each side. Jose was the driver. In those days things were so different in Mexico than they are now. [El Paso and Juarez] were really twin sisters then, twin cities. There was no disturbance between us at all. So, if Mother'd want something from the store, she'd go out and wave at Jose as he'd come by. She'd give him some money and say, "Stop at the White House and bring me some thread," or something. All the neighbors did that, and everybody helped everybody else.

My mother was not a nurse, but she was very very handy. Old Dr. Race was one of the first doctors in El Paso. He brought a lot of early El Pasoans into the world, and he'd always call my mother to assist him. Typhoid fever was rampant here, and we had to boil water. Mother was used to that because Denver was that way when a lot of the O'Shea family died. Big, strong, healthy men - three in one week. My

K: grandfather and two [of his] sons. People didn't know how to do things then, but they still learned to boil the water.

We lived there for a long time before we moved. We sold it to the K. C's, Knights of Columbus. My father always said that the reason they sold it to the Knights of Columbus was cause they were jealous because the Episcopalians used to use it all the time!

Going back to Denver, I fell on my knee when I was about 3 years old, and I have a 3-year-old knee cap here (pointing just above knee), just about as big as a quarter. That's why I'm so interested in research. I've left all my money to research and education, things like that. Now a broken kneecap is nothing, but it crippled me for life. They put me to bed for one year, with the sandbags on my leg to straighten it, and then they ankylosed it. I went by myself to Chicago when I was about 13 to see what they could do for me there. In fact, I went twice to Dr. J. B. Murphy. He was at that time the best surgeon for joints in the United States. I was there 3 months and he operated on me. The treatment that they gave me was ankylosis.

I used to always run away, and I'd hang on the back of ice wagons and fire trucks. They had horses, you know. I had a Shetland pony, and I had a little fawn, a deer. The train killed the mother, and my father stopped the train and took the fawn in the baggage car and brought it home to me. We had this big lot, you know, with grass and everything. All the kids used to love to come over. I had croquet sets and everything to attract children. Fourth of July was always a gala event at our house because it was close to my birthday. My father would buy all the fireworks and I'd always have a big, big party out there. These galvanized tubs were quite the thing then. He'd get a

K: new one, fill it full of water, and bring apples in from our farm, and the kids ducked for apples. I had all kinds of games - Putting the Tail on the Donkey, and a lot of different games, and all the fireworks. [There was] always plenty of ice cream and cake and everything that children like. They always did everything to draw the children over, cause I ran away from home all the time.

S: Were you an only child?

K: Yes. No wonder my mother had a headache all the time! She never knew where I was, and she'd get out and she'd yell, "Hel - en!" My father didn't like that, for her to be yelling, "Hel - en! HEL - EN!" so he bought her a police whistle! There it is, on the head of my bed. It says El Paso Police Department. She'd whistle and you could hear it for blocks. The kids'd always say, "Helen, your mother's whistlin for you!" and so I'd come home. I walked on crutches - two crutches and then one crutch - for a long time, and I would race the kids on my two crutches! And I could beat em!

S: You were a real tomboy!

K: Yes! I think I was supposed to be a boy! My father reared me like a boy. I could shoot, later on, very well, and kill rattlesnakes. I had a whole string of the rattles. You know, anyone can shoot a rattlesnake. Did you know that? You'd think I was a very good shot, but that isn't the idea. All you do is this. (demonstrating) They rare up, you know. We had thousands of em then. There were so many, and all kinds of coyotes and everything else on the farm. I would do this (pointing, weaving motion as with a gun) and they'd do the aiming! All you have to do is pull the trigger and off comes their head! They do the aiming.

S: Did you go to school here in El Paso, then?

K: Yes. My first school was called the Mesa School, and then it was called the Bailey School. It's right here where the Baptist Church is, on Montana. I graduated from the old Meyers Opera House. All the graduation classes used to be at the Opera House. Isn't that strange?

S: It is strange. Was it the largest place at the time?

K: I guess it was the largest place. Then I was to be in the first class going into El Paso High, the NEW school. You can see the top of it [from here]. And I can even hear the music over there. We lived on Rio Grande between St. Vrain and Angie, in the 900 block. I sold it to the Baptist Church, and it's a parking lot now. We even went up to see which street was the best for me to go, cause there were a lot of stairs going up to El Paso High. We decided that St. Vrain was the best street because you'd go up a few steps and then there was a landing. Then you'd turn, and another landing, and then go on up. But if you went up on the other street it was just a straight shoot up there, and that was too much for me. I don't believe they have railings or anything. The kids just shoot up there. I was very happy, with Chris Fox and all that bunch who I went to school with, in the same class.

Marguerite Bennett was my best friend, and her house was on Montana, faced that little park. There used to be a beautiful little park there, you know. It's still there only they've got all kinds of stuff now. They used to have a pergola and it was a beautiful, beautiful place. Now I think they have a playground for children or something, in the 900 block of Montana. Marguerite lived right behind me. The alleys weren't paved, though by that time the streets were paved, but Mother said she thought there was a tunnel going across there because Marguerite and I were always going across the alley, wearing it out!

K: So, she came over crying one day. I have a picture of Dick White and I, Congressman White? He came from Washington for my party. [Mrs. Keldner celebrated her 90th birthday with a huge party for 250 people.] His father was in the real estate business, and Dick was just a little boy, about 4 or 5 or 6, into everything. There were no paved roads down in the valley, and my father had cleared this land. It was full of mesquite bush, and it sells for \$25,000 an acre now! (laughing) That's all right. I can't eat any more and I can't drink any more, and I've been every place that I want to go!

So, anyhow, Marguerite came over crying and she said, "Oh! My father just traded our home for 640 acres up the valley near Camutillo!" Oh, we had a cry! And about a week afterwards my father came home and told my mother, "We'ra gonna leave. I've just bought 640 acres up the valley!" Mr. White had some sort of a deal about 640 acres. That's the way he sold it! But I could not go to school with Marguerite because my place was about 5 miles further on. So she went to a one-room school in Camutillo, and there was no place for me to go to school. I said, "Well, I just won't graduate then. I just won't graduate." My father would not let me stay in town with anybody. He was very particular about me. So I went to Las Cruces. I graduated from Loretto Academy in Las Cruces. They've taken it down now. There's a highway through there. That was before [Loretto Academy in El Paso] was built.

S: So after you graduated, then ...?

K: After I graduated I came back home. The war was on, and we moved. We sold the farm, and moved on Rio Grande Street. My father had a lot of property and died in 1929 thinking he was a millionaire. Everything he had was paid for, and he left Mother and me 58 pieces of property. We

K: thought, well, the Depression won't hurt US very much. But that's where we were mistaken. It didn't get us, but we did lose in the Mortgage Investment Company, which is the same one our mayor had charge of. Nobody had any rent money. We had a horse and buggy, and I took my mother all around in it and saw them. If they would stay in there for two years and just take care of the grass and the lawn, and protect the place, [they wouldn't have to pay rent.] Because in one of the places the people moved out without telling us, owing us a lot of rent, and all the plumbing was taken! The houses were all on good streets.

After we came back to El Paso [in town] my uncle came out from Denver to be with my father. He was the youngest one, a twin. He was killed on the railroad, and after that every time my father would leave we'd all start cryin! Grandma O'Shea would start cryin, and Mom would start cryin, and I'd start cryin, and my father said, "Well, it's not worth it! I can't take it any longer!"

S: So he stopped working for the railroad then?

K: He did in about 6 months or a year after that. But we just howled and cried everytime he left. He had holdings in Gaylesburg, Illinois, where he was from, and he would go back. We had a one-story house on Rio Grande (and on Yandell, too) and Mother had never slept in a one-story house. She'd look out and see the grass right outside her window, and it scared her to death because my father was on the road. She was scared to death of Mexicans. They'd never seen any Mexicans until they came here.

Mrs. DeGraf, who was Mrs. Orndorff first, built the Orndorff Hotel. We lived there once. She finally tore it down and built the Cortez. Rio Vista Farm was a home for elderly people, and Mrs. DeGraf begged

K: Mama and me [to take this place over.] My father had bought 640 acres down the valley, and by then we lived there, just a very short distance from Rio Vista Farm. I named it Rio Vista Farm. It was called the County Poor Farm, but I wouldn't stand that for a minute! I was living in San Antonio, so when my father died in 1929 and then the Depression came on, I left and came home to help my mother. That's when Mrs. DeGraf begged us to take this place over. We were there fifty years. It turned out to be a blessing. We loved it so much. I would go back and forth to San Antonio.

S: What were you doing in San Antonio?

K: My husband was there. We had a home in San Antonio. He was traveling and was superintendent of the Guarantee Shoe Company. I was there in 1930 when the census was changed. The shoe company used to advertise that it was the largest shoe store in the largest city in the largest state in the United States, and when that census was taken that year we were thrown off to the third! They couldn't use that advertisement any more! We lived at the old Mangor Hotel, next to the Alamo.

S: How did you meet your husband?

K: He was my cousin's beau.

S: Oh, ho! You took him away!

K: But my mother wouldn't let me marry him until he came back from World War I.

S: Did he court you?

K: Oh, yes. I have my, his ring on. It wasn't this big [at first], but every so often he would take it back and have it enlarged. We were very very happy. We lived in San Antonio eleven years.

S: Tell me about your wedding. You mentioned it when Kim (the nurse) was

- S: here just briefly, and I was intrigued by that. (Mrs. Keleher had mentioned her father's comment that she was marrying a "white man." All of her other beaus had been "striped men." They were cowboys who always wore cowboy hats, and their faces would appear "striped," with a dark tan around the mouth and chin, a lighter colored face, and a white forehead.)
- K: We were married in Colorado. I didn't want to be married here, cause I did not want a big wedding. Some of the most important things in my life happened in Colorado. I was born in Colorado, I was married in Colorado, and my family are all pioneers of Canyon City, Colorado. There's a lot of them still.
- S: This is the O'Sheas?
- K: No, my mother's family.
- S: What was that name?
- K: Hammerly. They came from Alsace-Lorraine. She was half French and half German. I remade my will last week, and they put down Helen O'Shea Keleher, and the attorney said, "Well, you always want to keep that O'Shea." Then he said, "Reminds me of when your mother passed away." She had given me half of her estate, and they said, "There'll be a man here from Austin and what are you going to tell him? Why did you give half of your estate away?" And Mother said, "Well, Helen is my only child. She's always taken care of the real estate, so I just want to give it to her." And the attorney said, "Oh, that will be salary." She asked, "Well, what'll I tell him?" In those days you had to live two years after you made your will, or it wasn't legal. Now you have to live five years, but you can just give a certain amount then, and the rest of it you pay gift tax on. It was much more reasonable then.

K: So my mother said, "Well, what will I tell him?" and the attorney said, "Just tell him you want to exercise your right to do so." Don't forget that. That's a good thing to learn.

S: I'll remember that.

K: It was her right to do it. She just wanted to exercise her right to do so. She gave it to me in 1944, and she didn't die until 1959. Mother had a heart attack, and I got her into the hospital. I still have the same doctor, Dr. Appel. He took care of my husband for eleven years. He is a heart specialist, but I don't have heart trouble.

S: So going back to your wedding in Denver. You said it was a small wedding,...

K: I was married in Pueblo. I just had my family there. I think there were just twelve of us. We lived in the Congress Hotel there.

S: And was your husband from Colorado?

K: No, he was originally from Boone, Iowa. He graduated from Iowa State in Ames. Every time we'd go back to Iowa he would take my by to hear the bells that used to ring at noon [from the campanile on the Iowa State campus]. He loved that school.

S: So how did you, a Coloradoan, meet him, an Iowan?

K: He had two shoe stores in Canyon City. He left Iowa. He said it was too cold. He had some friends in Canyon City, so he came down there, invested his money, and had two shoe stores - a man's shoe store and a lady's shoe store. Canyon City has a wide main street. My grandmother laid it out. She owned all of it. That was, they started the town. My grandfather was German, and my grandmother was a Fisher, of Fisher Body Works. That was spelled F I S C H E R, and she always got angry at them because they came to America, as they always say over there. They never

K: say the United States. When you go to Europe it's always, "Oh, you're from Americal" Anyway, they changed the spelling to F I S H E R, and left out the German spelling.

(Tape ran out. Next subject had to do with living on the farm.)

K: My father had so much equipment and everything, and the county had this large place. They wanted him to run their farm in connection with his own. He had balers and all kind of things. It was before cotton.

S: What did they raise?

K: Alfalfa and corn and different things - mailo maize - but no cotton.

The Ivy's introduced cotton to El Paso County.

S: Did your father raise cotton then?

K: Yes, long staple. There's just certain parts of the valley where you can raise long staple cotton. That's the good cotton. There's very few places in Texas where you can raise it, but El Paso is one of the places.

S: So he hired a lot of people, then, to work the fields, didn't he?

K: Yes, oh yes, lots of em. Then when he passed away, we had to do something to pay our taxes or we would have lost all of our real estate, because our tenants had no money. Things can change overnight, and I'm very worried about what could happen in the future. After you've lived through one depression, you'll never forget it.

S: I'm sure. But you made it through all right. You sold some of the land?

K: We saved the real estate. When my mother gave me half of it, I persuaded her to let me start selling some of it and investing it in other things. She didn't want to - she didn't want to sell anything. But help was getting very hard to get. Everything we needed was hard to get on account of the war. The men had all gone off to war. You couldn't get anybody to do any painting or lawn work. We always took care of

K: our own lawns. We had one man employed to do that. My father wanted all of his property to look well. He always kept it up. He said he didn't want anybody to say, 'Well John O'Shea owns that place!' My father used to always say you could tell by the way the house looks on the outside what it looks like on the inside. In those days we always kept our windows open so you could see in, see the inside of the house. And we had beautiful beautiful furniture that I had to get rid of. I couldn't bring a baby grand piano up the side of the wall here, and couldn't get it in the elevator.

S: Did you have any children?

K: No.

S: How did you develop your interest in UTEP?

K: Well, I guess when I went to Rio Vista Farm. It was a home for elderly, and then the WPA came in and all the different organizations that the government started to get people work - the CCC's, and the WPA's. They built 19 dormitories on the county ground. They were full of those people, who would come and go all the time. It was very interesting, if you're interested in social service work, which I am. Then after they left, the county called me in. I was visiting Mother, and they said, 'Helen, we want you to have charge of the children's part of it.' So I had 118 children. I've handled over 4000 children.

S: Tell me more about that. That sounds interesting.

K: Very. How I wish we had it now.

S: Where did these children come from?

K: Well, there's just a hair-line's difference between a dependent and neglected child, and a delinquent child. I would go down to the court house every Monday morning to the Juvenile Court, and Judge Mulcahey

K: was the juvenile judge. The police would come in with a child and his mother, if they had a mother, and then I'd listen to the case. I would know that if that child was sent to the Reform School, what he didn't already know he would be getting ten times worse. And the judge, before sentencing them, would look at me. Then he'd say, "Now I'm taking you away from your mother." The mothers were almost all prostitutes. In taking the children's history I used to write down United States Army! (laughing) There was no [father]. One time the probation officer called me in and said, "Helen, I've been goin over your books. What do you mean, United States Army?" I said, "What do you think I mean? I come here every Monday morning, don't I? All right. Every Monday morning the M. P.'s come in with all these young soldiers and they bring the girls down from the jail. Maybe one girl would have infected 14 or 15 soldiers!"

We were about to lose Fort Bliss, venereal disease was so prevalent. They sent in a doctor, Col. Vinnikof. He died recently. And that man cleaned up El Paso!

So all of a sudden I had 118 children - that was all I could take - of all sizes and all ages. Sometimes we'd take the mother. They were in just pitiful condition - tummies out, you know. They all had distended tummies, they all had rickets, and they all had lice. I bet you don't know what a lice bag is?

S: No.

K: We had to clip the boys' hair, every bit, and some of em would have big bald spots, about that big (indicates the size of a quarter) all over their heads. I was taking the adults down to be treated for venereal disease. They were blind and crazy - terrible disease. Thank God that's

K: one of the things that they know how to cure now. So, I told a little white story. They had a venereal clinic in Ysleta. It was a [regular] clinic, but was mostly for venereal disease. I told them, I'm sorry, but I have orders from the judge to have all these children examined." And you know, I got so good at it that I could look at a child and tell whether he had [venereal disease] or not. They have saw teeth and big nostrils - congenital, you know, inherited. We found so much of it in the children.

They were giving shots for it back in those days, and I'd take the kids down there, and the younger ones would start crying. Dr. Vinnikof knew how scared I was of it, cause I'd never been around anything like that. He said, "If it was as easy to catch as you think it is, everybody in the world would have it!" But I was just afraid to even have these children with the other children, much less with me. Well, they'd cry. He'd say, "If I do that to Helen, then will you let me do that to you?" And they said they would. I've had 80,000 blood tests, I guess!

So, anyhow, when I took these children down, the boys had those bald spots. I never did see a girl like that, but they had lots of lice. I would cut their hair off - would cut it short. I said, "Doctor, what in the world? Look how many of these boys are losing their hair. What causes that?" And he said, "Well, I was just going to tell you what I was goin to do. I have time today." So he'd take the child in and I'd go with him. They'd hang on to me. He would very carefully run a real sharp knife over that bald spot, and it would bleed a little. Then he would take a forceps and very carefully he'd lift out a bag and throw it in the toilet. Then he would just put on some Mercurochrome and squeeze that hair back together again, and put a tape

K: or something over it. That was the condition that they were in. Some of them were so starved that we couldn't feed them just three times a day. We had to feed them five and six times a day, every few hours, a little bit at a time.

It was in the summer and I had the county build a square thing about as big as this room, and bring me in some good white sand.. I planted vines all around and had it blocked off. They wanted the little girls and boys to get as much sun as possible, the ones who didn't go to school. All they had on was little white panties, which were made by the sewing room. Hundreds of women worked in the sewing room during the Depression. The children had beautiful clothes made there, and they were furnished by the county. So, the girls and the boys both had all this bare (pointing to upper body). I would take the firls first. I had a chair in there and I'd sit down and take my watch. I'd have them lay on their little tummies, and we began at about a half a minute, or not quite a minute, and then turn over. Get the sun on both sides. The sand was warm, and they enjoyed that. Then they could go to the kitchen and get a glass of milk or juice, whatever. We had everything for them. The county was [generous]. I worked under twelve county judges and they and the commissioners never turned me down for anything. But I was very careful what I asked for, cause I never went over my budget. You know, it was like cultivating a weed and getting a beautiful flower out of it. You never saw anything like it in your life.

S: Do you hear from any of those children?

K: Oh, yes. From all over the world. We had three gold stars during the war. Three of them were killed in action in World War II.

S: So the war did touch your life, then, through these children...

K: Oh, yes. My husband was overseas, too, but he was more fortunate.

They're from all over the world. I had two doorstep babies that were brought [to the farm]. They have no idea what their names are or anything. [In South El Paso] there was a big tenement house. I've been in every tenement in El Paso! I don't know how people could allow their real estate to get like that! So, we got a call to go there. Of course I had to wear a star. The assistant probation officer and I went down there, and this woman was dying of cancer. She had this little boy. He'd never gone to school. He was about six, I guess - five, maybe - and he had a bunch of goats on the river. When he would get hungry he would just nurse the goats! She was dying upstairs there, and we sent for the ambulance and had her taken to the hospital. I got the little boy. She only lived two or three days after that, and she sent for me to come. She told me how smart he was and what a lovely boy he was, and she said, "I'll tell you the history. He doesn't even know it himself, but you need to know. Promise me you'll send him to school."

"Oh," I said, "certainly I'll send him to school! Of course he'll go to school!" She didn't know! You bet he went to school! He was a brilliant boy, and I love him to death. Now her name was Martinez, so that's the name he goes by. He doesn't know what his name is, but he comes from very good blood. He has a wonderful voice. Mother gave him voice lessons for about ten years, and Mother sent him to UTEP. We've been sending kids to UTEP for a hundred years! My mother, I guess, has sent a dozen there.

So he had four years at and graduated from UTEP. We talk about once a week, and the other day he said, "Oh, Mom, I wanted to ask you. Is Miss Ponsford, Dr. Pearl Ponsford, still alive?" I said, "Yes, Tony, she's

K: still alive, but she's in a rest home." And he said, "Oh, she was the smartest woman I ever knew, but I was scared to death of her! She'd say, 'Mr. Martinez!'" (laughing)

S: What does he do now?

K: He was in the service for 20 years, and then when it was time to reenlist, that would have made the third war he'd been in, so he retired. He's under Civil Service, and he's still in the hospital. He's a registered nurse. He was in the front line all the time, always in the front line of every war that he was ever in. He would write me and say, "Only God could make a doctor." He had so much respect for the doctors, and he would help them. They'd bring them right direct from the field in there. He's a wonderful, wonderful boy, and he still works in the government hospital in Colorado Springs.

S: Was he the first one that you sent to UTEP, then?

K: Oh, no. The first one we sent to UTEP was a red-headed boy, an Anglo. There was an instance, one of those kidnappers. I'll never forget the day she came in. They brought her into court and I could tell she wasn't right. They had pictures in the paper and everything, of all these children. She stole every red-headed child she could find! They were all there, and the younger one - I just loved him. They found the homes of some of them. She finally ended up in jail, and then she died in an asylum. There was something wrong with her, because she couldn't feed them, she couldn't feed herself. The children were starved to death.

So we took this little red-headed boy. Mother just fell in love with him. And you know where he is now?

S: Where?

K: Well, he graduated from UTEP, got all the honors. He was a straight A

K: student. Then he wanted to get in the Navy. So I went down with him into the Navy recruiting office. The man was very much impressed with him. He was handsome, very handsome - strong shoulders and small waist - a very handsome man. He had such a wonderful record. I took all of his [papers], everything, to help him get in. The man said, "Oh, boy, indeed we want you, young man. We'd love to have you!" when he saw all of his grades and his credentials and everything. He called me Mom, and thought he was my child. They were all legally mine. They were made legally mine.

S: How many?

K: Oh, over 4000 all together. But when they grew older and could leave and support themselves, then a lot of them went in the Army.

So he said, "You have to take this test," and he brought out this great big book divided in the middle. He said, "What do you see on this page, son? Can you see something on this page? Don't tell us what, but can you see something on this page?" Stewart said he could, and then the man looked at him and asked, "Can you see anything on this page (pointing to the other side)?" "No." "Can you see anything on this page?" "Yes." "What do you see there?" "Nothing." And he turned to me and said, "This boy is color blind."

I said, "He couldn't be color blind. No, he's not color blind! He paints for me all the time!" I taught every boy to paint, because they had their dormitories, and they'd say, "May we change the color of our room? It's green and now we'd like to have it be blue," or something else. I'd buy the stuff and they'd do the work, cause I taught them all how to paint. Several of them in Los Angeles have big paint places now. They're well to do. They all had good educations. I wanted them to be

K: white collar workers, not blue collar workers. So I said, "I can't believe it!" He said, "All right. You take the test with him." So I looked at Stewart (He has great big blue eyes), and the tears were in his eyes, and I said, "I'll take it with you, Son."

The man said, "Can you see anything here?" There were just a lot of dots, and I said, "No, I can't see anything." He said, "Can you see anything on this (pointing)?" I said, "Why, yes!" and Stewart looked at me. He said, "What do you see?" and I said, "Now, Stewart, I'll put my hand on it. It's a seven." I did my hand this way, and brought it down (demonstrating). It was real big, the seven was. "Can't you see that seven?" He said, "No, I can't see it. No, I can't see anything on there." We turned the page and there was a great big A. He said, "Do you see something on there?" and I said, "Yes. Give me your finger. This is an A. It goes from here to here, and across here." (Tracing on lap) He said, "I can't see it!" and the tears were just dropping. "I'm no good. I'm just no good! I don't amount to anything! I wish I was dead! I'm so unhappy I don't know what to do! I'm just not any part of a man!"

And the man looked at him and said, "Wait a minute, young man. I know somebody that's gonna grab you so quick! Are your clothes packed?" Stewart said, "No, but I can pack em! What can I do? I'd like to go in the Navy, but what can I do?" He said, "Wait a minute," and he went to the phone and called this other man, and he was there in two seconds. It was upstairs over the old post office. And he said, "Come here. Look at this young man," and he introduced Stewart.

The fellow looked at him and his eyes just opened. He said, "Why can't you take him in the Navy?" "Well, test his eyes." And when he

K: tested Stewart's eyes he said, "Young man, will you go in the Air Corps? You'll go or I'll draft you! You are valuable to me!" Stewart asked, "How come?" He said, "Because you can see through a camouflage!" He could look right through a camouflage and see the guns, and he became a gunner. The man said, "With your education, you'll begin as a gunner, but you are going to learn to be a pilot, a co-pilot, an engineer, and all the different things."

I can't tell you how many trips Stewart made over Germany and over different places where the wars were. Finally their plane was shot down and the pilot was killed, the co-pilot was killed, the engineer was killed, and he had to run up and land the ship. He brought this ship in in a terrible condition, and he had been hit in the face. He got a Purple Heart.

So then he came back home and mother sent him back to UTEP, and he got a Master's. He was entitled to five years of college, so a friend of mine, named Mr. Barnes, was head of the animal husbandry part of Baylor. That's where Haskell Monroe comes from. He and Jo graduated from there. The first day I ever met him, I just fell in love with both of them. He told me where he was from, and I said, "Do you Stewart McConnell?" And Dr. Monroe looked at me and said, "You mean Dr. McConnell?" I said, "Well, Stewart hasn't written to me for a long time." He said, "Why, he's head of the college! Heaven's above. His daughter just got her Master's this year!" So I'm gonna write to him. But he came to El Paso and didn't look me up! He's a UTEP man. They said he walked all over UTEP while he was here, looking it over. I've remembered all of them in my will except Stewart, because he hasn't done right by me. After Mother died, he never wrote to me again.

S: How many in all did you send to UTEP?

K: Well, at present I have a very darling little girl who received the [Presidential Scholarship for four years, sponsored by Mrs. Keleher.] I have a foundation there, and I have left half of my estate to UTEP. Her name is Kathy Baylock, and she's taking the hardest courses you have ever known in your life - math and all that.

S: What does she want to be?

K: She inherited this from her father. Her father is very wealthy. I didn't put in for poverty! I put in for grey matter! And they're not to pay me back. No my banker, my lawyer, and my auditor all went to school on scholarships, and all of them paid it back. I said no. I'll not. This is a different world now, and if somebody gave me that kind of a scholarship I wouldn't take it, cause I'd be in debt for years! Do you think I want that smart little girl to be in debt? No! They're going to handle it, and they have the way that they're going to invest it and everything.

S: Well, we've been talking for a long time and I've got two more questions that I'd like to ask. First, of all the things you've done in your life, what are you the most proud of?

K: My fifty years taking care of those children. That was the happiest time. I felt like I did more good then than anything. That was something that nobody else wanted to do.

S: And then: If you were 16 again and were going to relive your entire life, is there anything that you would do differently?

K: Well, I've never had children, and I've always been interested in them. I inherited the [interest]. Do you know who Father Damien was - who went over to take care of the lepers? My great aunt - my father's mother's

K: sister, was one of the eight Irish nurses who went to Molokai with Father Damien. She stayed there all the rest of her life taking care of the lepers. Her job was taking care of the children of the lepers. She never got the disease and lived to be way in her late 80's. She's buried on Maui. I tried to find her grave over there, but it was close to the ocean and the stones were cheap, and I couldn't read it. Sister Mary Renetta was her name.

And then my first cousin who lived in Denver became a nun. She was a sister of the House of Good Shepherd, the Mother Superior. She took care of wayward girls. So it just seemed to run in the family. And like I told you, Mother used to help everybody in the neighborhood. She was always making chicken soup for somebody. That seemed to be the thing to do!

S: So, if you ...

K: I think I would do more or less the same thing.

S: It sounds like you've had a very productive and fruitful life.

K: Well, I just love to do things for other people. Now, I gave a third of the Heart [Association] building here. We're going to have an Opening the 15th, but I don't think we can get into it by the 15th! I've been on the Board for twenty years. And I belong to 21 clubs.

S: How do you keep track of them all?

K: I'm a life member of most of them.

S: You must be on the go all the time, then.

K: Well, I love it. That's what busted down my old leg, cause I go all the time. I started the Democratic Women in El Paso. I'm a registered Democrat, but I vote for the man. I'm an Independent now,

(End of tape.)