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Interview no. 766

Helen O'Shea Keleher

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Helen O'Shea Keleher (1894-1986)
INTERVIEWER: Sarah E. John
PROJECT: _____
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 12, 1978
TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted
TAPE NO.: 766
TRANSCRIPT NO.: 766
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

El Paso pioneer and supervisor of Rio Vista farm of the
Child Welfare Department, El Paso County

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Describes El Paso at the turn of the century, Mexican Revolution,
attitudes toward Pancho Villa, World War I, the depression years
In San Antonio and El Paso. Recounts her 40 years of directing
the Rio Vista Farm for El Paso County's Child Welfare Department.

Length of Interview: 1 hour, 15 min Length of Transcript 28 pages

Helen O'Shea Keleher (1894-1986)
September 12, 1978
By Sarah E. John

J: This is an interview with Mrs. Helen Keleher on September 12, 1978. Interviewing is Sarah John of the Institute of Oral History at UTEP. First, Mrs. Keleher, could you tell us when and where you were born please?

K: I was born in Denver, Colorado, July 9, 1894. At three years old I moved to Alamogordo, New Mexico, where my father had built the first house in Alamogordo with the only indoor plumbing in town. The rest of it was tent city. My father was superintendent of the narrow gauge railroad going up to Cloudcroft, New Mexico. It took several years to build that road, however in 1894 I celebrated my fourth birthday in El Paso and at that time we lived at La Villita next door to the Crawford home which is still standing. The location is where the Branding Iron Restaurant is now.

It was a two story house in Colorado. They called them flats. There was six rooms upstairs and six rooms downstairs with an indoor stair, and we lived downstairs. Across the street from us was this burial ground, an old cemetery with a lot of Indians buried in there. I don't know if was the military one or just the Indian cemetery, but when they started building the first library and digging up the graves, why it was quite a thing for the children to go over and rob the Indian relics out of the Indian graves over there. They came out with all kinds of pottery and turquoise jewelry and everything, and my mother would always make me go in the house when they did things like that. She didn't want me to be out there.

Then after that, we built a house at 411 Boulevard, which is now

Yandell, between Kansas and Campbell. And my father was the first conductor to bring the Golden State Limited into El Paso. It was finished in 1906 after having taken two years to build it. And that was a gala event for all El Pasoans to have that lovely new depot. The former one was across from El Paso National Bank where the brokerage house is now.

J: For the sake of the tape, could you tell me that little story you told me about going to meet your father at the depot and

K: Well, I would run away and I remember my mother calling. We had one of the first telephones in El Paso. Our number was 1-4-6. I remember how she would call to find out if the Golden State Limited was on time and I soon got onto that. And when she was out of the room I would call to see what time the Golden State Limited would be here, and if it was on time why I would run away. And I would run down the street and at that time I was walking on two crutches and had a little chihuahua dog and I would run down Kansas Street and there was at least a block of tracks. There were eight railroads coming in and out of El Paso at that time and [there] was a block of tracks. And my mother used to have nervous headaches [chuckles] thinking about me running across those tracks with my crutches and my little dog. So the man at the gates would stop me and tell me when to go and I'd go down to meet my father. And half of the time my father wouldn't be coming home so his colored porter Johnson would carry me and the crutches and the dog and the grips back up the street. I can always remember what a happy time that was. That porter had followed my father from Illinois to Colorado and from Colorado to Texas.

J: So he knew all your family?

K: He knew the whole O'Shea family and he would often tell me that he had

been to every wedding and every death and he knew about every birth in the O'Shea family.

J: What kind of things do you remember about El Paso when you were growing up? As a little girl, what did El Paso look like?

K: Well, there was no paved streets and the wind was perfectly terrible. There was nothing there to stop it, you know. And we had caliche sidewalks, no cement, and there would be a board around the edge to hold the caliche. And after that was sprinkled down quite a bit, it would be hard. It would be just almost like cement, but when it rained it was tragic. You would fall on it, you know. And we did have a beautiful yard. It's where the El Paso Medical building is now on Yandell, the corner of Campbell and Yandell. [Yandell] was Boulevard then; 411 Boulevard was our number. Right across the alley, Chris Fox lived and Colonel Sol Bargeman and Henry Silverman, the jeweler. And the Krupps lived across from us and also Judge Burges and Judge Howell and then around the corner on Kansas, the Ponsfords who are still very dear friends of mine, the younger folks, the children; they're not young anymore. It was a very popular neighborhood. Mabel O'Conner Libscomb, who is my neighbor here, lived not far from me. Oh, I could mention so many people. Ethel Mayfield was my nextdoor neighbor when I lived at La Villita; she was just a little tot. General Frank Ross, affectionately known as "Fats Ross" because he was so tall and thin, used to be my father's call boy, and Ed Hind used to be our grocery boy and the minister at the Episcopal Church, what's his name?

J: Reverend Williams?

K: Yes, Reverend Williams delivered our bread. I have a lot of happy memories about all of those people.

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J: Did you go to school here?

K: Yes. I went to school first at Loretto Academy which at that time was on North El Paso Street. Then I went to the Mesa School, which was eventually called the Bailey School. And when I graduated from the Bailey School we had our graduation exercises at the Meyer Opera House.

J: Where was that located?

K: On South Oregon Street. It was where all the shows would come from out of town. How we happened to have it there, I don't know. I don't know if all the schools went together and had it or not, because surely our class wasn't large enough to have it on the stage there. I imagine all the different eighth grades had it. There was no such thing as junior high in those days. Then I went to high school on Arizona Street I believe it's where the nurses' home is now and I went there three years. Afterwards that was called the Morehead School. And the year I was supposed to enter the new high school, which is the old high school now between St. Vrain and Ange on California I believe, my father sold our home and we moved up the valley in New Mexico. So I finished my last year of high school at Loretto Academy in Las Cruces. That made me very unhappy because I had to leave all of my former classmates but there was no place for me to stay in El Paso. My father wouldn't let me board in town.

J: Do you remember any interesting events or incidents that happened while you were attending school that stand out in your mind, either teachers or pupils or funny things.

K: You mean in school?

J: Yeah. While you were in school, during that time.

K: Oh, yes, I remember a lot of things. We used to slide down the banisters

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which was very unladylike.

J: Was this at Loretto?

K: No, this was at El Paso High. There were plenty of stairs up there. And in the study hall I used to get very angry when I read it. It used to say: "Knowledge makes hard work easy." Well, that's just an aggravation because anybody knew that. [Laughter] And Mrs. Mackey was the study hall teacher and she was the sister-in-law of Reverend Williams, Reverend Williams wife's sister. And she lived with them on the corner of Florence and Boulevard. And I always liked to whisper and talk a lot and so she would make me stay in after school and write 100 times "Honor and shame from no condition rise. Act well thy part. There all the honor lies," with all the punctuation and everything. I used to write them in advance.

J: [Laughs] That's pretty smart.

K: If she'd ever changed!

J: You would have had all those stacks of sayings [written] and ...

K: Oh, yes. I can remember a lot of funny things that happened. A lot of prominent businessmen. In fact Mr. Henry Woolridge lives here in the building with me now. And Henry and Chris, I used to sit in front of them and I had long red curls way down to my waist. And they always put my curls in the inkwell, a little hole in the desk, you know, the inkwell. And always did that and got my clothes all full of ink. I have a picture of myself with my curls fastened up this way, hanging over the front of my face so they couldn't get at them. And Mr. Woolridge and I often laugh about it when we are waiting in the lobby waiting for the postman. Lots of funny things but a lot of interesting things during the time Pancho Villa was acting up on the border.

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J: Yes, what do you remember about that time, during the Revolution?

K: I remember all of it. That was the best war I was ever in. They dumped 100,000 men in El Paso, in a city less than 100,000, so you can imagine what a good time all the girls had.

J: What was the feeling? Did the people here in El Paso like Pancho Villa or did they not like Pancho Villa?

K: Oh, no, they didn't like him but I don't think they paid too much attention to him.

J: Were they for the revolutionaries?

K: No. They were not for them. But I don't think they were too much worried about them. But I don't know why they weren't; there were several people killed in El Paso. And the feeling was very high. We owned a lot of real estate below Overland Street and soldiers were stationed in the middle of the street, Overland Street. And no Anglo could go below Overland, and no Mexican could come above Overland.

J: Why did they do that?

K: Because they were killing each other, and a lot of our property was below Overland Street, tenement houses. And we couldn't collect rents for three or four months and afterwards a little girl was killed on the sidewalk in front of our property at the corner of Sixth and ?. Cute little girl about four or five years old. I remember her so well. And we didn't even know about it until months afterwards when we could go down there. And Rim Road, our beautiful Rim Road here, where I live on the corner of Rim and Stanton, that was where the artillery was stationed, and all the guns were focused toward Mexico.

J: You mentioned the girls all had a good time with all the soldiers coming in.

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K: Oh, my yes.

J: Did they have a lot of balls and things?

K: Oh, yes, there was something doing all the time. I met a lot of prominent men at that time. Pershing was here and Patton was here and so many. The Orndorffs were very good friends of mine and I used to go to their house. Alzina Orndorff married General Happy Gay and their place was very interesting. One of the interesting things was that one of the Guggenheim boys was stationed in El Paso and he was a buck private, but he had a suite of rooms at the Del Norte and he was allowed to wear civilian clothes because he entertained all the officers from Pershing on down. And they couldn't have gone with him had he had his uniform on. So that was an interesting thing that I remember that I hadn't heard for a long time. Hadn't even thought of it.

J: Did you get to see any actual fighting or could you just hear it?

K: Oh, we could hear it all night long and all day long. One time after a battle Dr. N.T. Moore, who lived in the next block from us when we lived on Rio Grande, took his daughter and I over. He was working for the Mexican government and he took us over to see how things were, and one of the generals came in and they fired the salute to him and he thought the battle had started again, so he had these beautiful white horses with black dots, two of them, and he whirled around and came back. [Laughs] I have a picture of myself in a motorcycle side car with some soldier that was there. My mother and father were parked in their car close by. Everyone went down to the bridge the time the colored soldiers had been captured by Villa and we had a lot of their prisoners and that was quite a gala event too. We'd go to the end of the bridge and they'd trade one Negro soldier for one Mexican soldier, one Negro soldier for one Mexican

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soldier, and one Negro soldier for one Mexican.

J: Was this after Pershing?

K: Yes, this was after the war was over. And of course they were full of lice and vermin and everything, filthy, so before they could come back on this side they dipped them over there. They fumigated them and gave them new coveralls, fatigue clothes I think they called them, and as they came over the bridge there was quite a famous Negro prostitute in El Paso. She was a very large woman and she had this uh, the driver sat up high and the buggy came down low. I've forgotten the name for that. The old back seat and then the driver was up high. And as those colored boys came across, she gave them each a long-stemmed, red American Beauty rose. She had the whole car full of roses. [Laughs] That was quite a sight.

J: And you were actually there to see that.

K: We saw that and it was quite an event. And they all came back, and of course, they all smelled from disinfectant that they had all been dipped in and their hair clipped and everything. They were terrible looking. But they were clean and glad to get back home.

J: I want to back up a little bit, before the Revolution. Do you remember the Diaz-Taft meeting here in El Paso?

K: Oh, yes. I have a picture of my father. I wish I could find it, but it's down in the storeroom. My father was one of the guards that guarded him. They picked out different El Pasoans to guard him, and I have a picture of my father in full dress with the tails and all and his gun around him, a big 45 on his hip. 'Course, all the men wore guns. I never saw a man that didn't have a gun on him.

J: Oh, just like the Westerns on television.

K: Well, it was. But it looked so funny with the full dress suit, you know.

And he stayed at the old St. Regis Hotel. That was brand new then. It was recently burned down. That's where he stayed, and I have a picture of him coming out of the hotel. My father and these men in their full dress guarding him, along with the soldiers. That was very interesting. And McKinley came to El Paso one time too.

J: Was it a special meeting?

K: I don't seem to recall.

J: Do you know what year it was more or less?

K: No. I don't remember what year it was. But I know that his wife was ill and she used to have seizures, and he carried a silk handkerchief in his pocket and if she had a seizure, why he would just put his arm around her and put this [handkerchief] over her face. And I remember that. I hadn't thought of that for many, many years.

J: Do you remember any special, well, at that time there wasn't dating as we know it today, but what kind of social customs? How did young people meet each other?

K: Sure we had dates. What do you mean we didn't have dates?

J: Well, not as we see it now. I know they had dances and what have you, but I know the young man couldn't just go to your house and take you and go to the movie or something.

K: Sure they came to our house. I didn't have a date in my life tat they didn't come to my house. My father had to look them all over first. [Chuckles]

J: Well, how did you meet the young men first usually?

K: Well, at dinner parties and through officers that we knew. And at church and different places like that. Oh, yes. I think they were much more particular about dates then than they are now. I don't think any of the

girls would have just picked up with somebody. We had to know them. Our parents were very strict in those days and I had to be home at 11 o'clock, dance or no dance. I had to be home at 11 o'clock. And if the men were in my home, my father would drop one shoe. That meant he had to go before the other shoe dropped. [Laughs]

J: What kind of things did you do on your dates?

K: Oh, we all went to dances and the first part of UTEP was El Paso Military Institute. That was out at Ft. Bliss, right behind where the little old replice of Ft. Bliss is and it was called El Paso Military Institute. And that burned to the ground. Then they started over here. And let's see it was called Texas A&M, I believe. No. Texas School of Mines. And then, it has had three or four names.

J: Let's see, Texas School of Mines and then Texas Western College wasn't it? Or was there another name?

K: Texas Western and then UTEP was the last thing that they named it. Anyhow, that was the beginning of it. El Paso Military Institute.

J: So you remember going to balls?

K: Oh, yes. We used to drive out there in a horse and buggy. Ted Bender said to me one time, "Well, that must have been a long drive out there." And I said, "Well, it depended upon whom you were with."

J: [Laughs] I'm sure that's true.

K: The White House Department Store had a hole in their window for many, many years. They didn't try to repair it. They just had a little sign typewritten on the inside that this bullet was caused by Pancho Villa. Oh, they used to ... There was lots of bullets that came over on this side.

J: Did you ever see any of the generals or leaders or anything. I know they

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used to come over.

K: They came over all the time. Uh, if I could think of this man's name. There was a German tailor in El Paso. He lived to be, oh, 97 or 98 and he was a very intelligent man and a wonderful tailor and his name He had his office in the Mills Building, and Pancho Villa used to come over and have his clothes tailored there. So he came over one time and picked out the material and they cut the things out. So then he came back for a fitting, and this old gentleman said, "Take off your gun." And he said, "I will not take off my gun," and this old man said, "Then I will not fit your pants. How can I fit your pants over your gun?" I wish I could think of that man's name. Not Zimmerman. He's only been dead a few years. Maybe it will come to me.

J: That's a real interesting story.

K: My father always had his clothes tailored at the same place.

J: It's possible that your father saw [Pancho Villa] in there one day.

K: Well, his brother had a farm close to ours down the valley. We had a farm down the valley and one up the valley. About that time I went to Colorado and met my husband who owned two shoe stores in Canyon City, Colorado. A man's shoe store and a woman's shoe store. His name was Edward C. Keleher. But he was about to go to war, and he gave me my engagement ring but my mother wouldn't let me marry him until he came back.

J: Was this the first world war?

K: World War I. And I wore his ring for three years, but I had a good time. I went out all the time. He knew I was going out, but I always wore his ring. Everybody knew I was engaged, but so many of my friends married and then their husbands went off, and my mother didn't approve of that. She

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didn't think that was right. And I think she was correct, 'cause some of them divorced afterwards.

J: I'm sure many got killed too.

K: Yes, some of them got killed too.

J: How did you meet your husband?

K: I met him when I was visiting my cousin in Colorado. All my family lived in Colorado. They were pioneers of Denver. My father's people and my mother's people were both pioneers, and that's where we knew Chris Fox's family before any of them were married.

J: You met your husband up there. And let's see, did you come back to El Paso then?

K: I was married in Colorado. Then we came back on visits. Then I lived in San Antonio

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K: At the Menger Hotel there for eleven years.

J: Why?

K: Because that was where his headquarters were at that time.

J: Oh, I see. You had a suite there.

K: Yes. And those were very happy years. I loved San Antonio. But my father became ill and died in 1929, so I came back here then to live. My husband was traveling and it was just as convenient to live here and then the depression came on.

J: What do you remember about those times? To me that is a very interesting period.

K: The depression came on and we had 36 pieces of property, all paid for, and we thought we would be all right. And we didn't lose any money in

the bank. We did business with the State National. But all our tenants did business with the other banks that failed, so for two years. I lost my father in 1929, and that's when I came home. And my mother told all the tenants that they could just stay in the houses and take care of them and protect them against tramps and thieves and everything and they didn't have to pay any rent. So for two years no one paid any rent. And things became very, very bad. And Mrs. DeGraff who was the former Mrs. Orndorff, owned the Orndorff Hotel, persuaded my mother and me to go down to Rio Vista Farm. It was an old folks home at that time. Then the WPA came in and they built a lot of buildings and the CCC boys built more buildings, and then as they moved on, why it was pitiful to see the wealthy men in El Paso working with pick and shovel out there. It would make your heart ache. No one can realize unless they've gone through a depression. There was a time when nothing that you had amounted to a thing. It was almost like bartering for things. And everything was frozen. You could get just so many shoes, and coupons for sugar and coupons for shoes, and coupons for everything. Of course, running this institution we had plenty for the old people. Then after the CCC boys moved out, there were so many starving children in El Paso that the county judge, Judge E.B. McClintock, and the commissioners court called me one day and asked me if I would take charge of the children.

J: Was this still during the depression years?

K: Oh, yes. And the starving little Spanish-American children. It was absolutely pitiful. You've seen pictures of children starving to death in other countries, little tiny legs and arms and distended tummies, head lice and body lice and eating out of garbage cans. Well, we had that in El Paso. And we had 19 buildings there and we had three buildings that we

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used for schools and I had 118 children at one time.

J: And you said this was located in the Lower Valley?

K: In the Lower Valley. It's where the Sheriff's Department is now. They have their headquarters out there. I was with the county for 40 years in the Child Welfare Department. I loved my work. I never had any children of my own and it was the biggest joy I ever had to look after those children. It was just like cultivating a weed and getting a beautiful flower.

J: What kind of things did you do there? What kind of activities?

K: Well, they all went to school, the younger ones up to about the sixth grade. We had three buildings there and we had three teachers, and they each had several grades. And then they went to the Socorro school. There were too many to put in any one school, and then for the seventh and eighth grade they went to the Socorro school and Mrs. Myrtle Cooper was the principal there. And then they all graduated from Isleta High. And I had a house mother for every building; all the small ones in one building, the next size in another building, and I had a house mother for each place. And I had two Negro men cooks. They had been army cooks and they were used to feeding large crowds of people. And that was very interesting. You see how fat I am now. I weighed 114 in those days. [Chuckles]

And we had one couple that came out there in those days. They were theatrical people. I think they had been on the stage, and they had all kinds of costumes and they had a large, large family and we gave them one building to live in and the man taught manual training. He taught them how to do hand carving and everything in the world and dancing and all kinds of costumes, and they made all kinds of pretty things and they

were wonderful people. And their son is manager of a big chain store in El Paso now, their older son. And they lived there for years. They had six or seven children. And they were really a big help from the time the school was over until it was time for studies.

Then we had all of our own gardens and the children loved to have their garden. They all worked in the garden. The little tiny ones would pull weeds and the other ones would chop weeds, and they were very proud of their garden. And during the depths of the depression Ascarate Park was all plowed up and turned into a vegetable garden, and they furnished vegetables for all the county institutions. And the newspaper came down and took pictures of our storeroom. We had hundreds and hundreds of half-gallon jars of things that we put up, and Mrs. Sealy was with the state and she taught us how to use pressure cookers and all that. And it was wonderful that we canned all of our stuff, put it in jars - corn and tomatoes and okra and carrots and beets and everything. We learned how to do all of that, and the girls would help. And they had sewing lessons, and really came out wonderful girls. I insisted that they all take typing and shorthand in school and we had a lot of valedictorians. I didn't want to spend my life just raising good maids; I wanted them all to be white collar girls which they were. And they worked in offices all over town and I hear from them all the time.

J: I was going to just ask you [about that].

K: Oh, yes. They call me and then I have some that live out of town and Christmas they'll come, some of them, and they always call me.

J: Were these orphans or just people who ...?

K: Well, a lot of them were orphans and a lot of them, when you take their history, they all knew who their mothers were but none of them had any

fathers, didn't know who their fathers were. And they stayed there years and years, from the time they entered until they finished school or until they went to the war. And we had three gold stars; three of our boys were killed.

J: What other interesting events stand out from that period? I mean you mentioned a couple of things.

K: One thing that I'm very, very proud of - one of our boys who was an anglo and I don't want to mention his name, but he is now a professor at Texas A&M. He was "Doctor" years ago and now he is professor of animal husbandry. Now his daughter is getting her doctorate there. Then I have another boy, a Spanish-American boy, who is foreman of the Texas Experimental Station and he celebrated his thirty-fifth anniversary there. He has eleven children and I have a lot of grandchildren. [Chuckles]

J: Sounds like it; with so many children I'm sure you had a lot of grandchildren.

K: And then another boy that I'm very, very proud of. He was in the war, in the service for twenty years, always in the front lines hospitals. He was in the hospital corps. And he was so good that they wanted him to study to be a nurse. So he's a registered nurse. And at the end of twenty years then he resigned and he has civil service. He's under civil service and he's still in the same hospital in Colorado Springs. And I hear from them and he married an anglo girl and she's also a registered nurse, and she was a couple of years older than he and her daughter is also a registered nurse. So there's three registered nurses in that family.

J: You've lived here almost all of your life and I was just wondering if you

could tell us more or less what kind of relations there were between the Mexican-Americans here in town and the anglo population.

K: Very, very close in the olden days. The first time I ever heard the word Chicano I had no idea what in the world it meant. And I had a friend who was a customs man, Marshall Higgins. He was one of the oldtime customs men on the bridge. He's dead now. I used to go to dinner with he and his wife, over in Juarez most every Friday night. We had a standing date. And one night I said, "Marshall, you are the only man that I know that I can ask what the word Chicano means." I began to hear this word and having lived here nearly all my life, I had never heard that word before. And he told me, and I can't understand it, I can't understand it. We never had that feeling before. We were sister cities and I yet don't feel a bit different in Juarez than I do in El Paso. It's just crossing over that little stream over there. That doesn't make a bit of difference to me. I have just as many friends over there as I have over here. And I've always enjoyed going over there. In fact, when I was a little girl, oh say seven, and Edith Silverman who is the older sister of Henry Silverman, the jeweler... . The better meat was in Juarez than we had in El Paso and we would get on the little mule car that went in front of our house on Boulevard, and we'd transfer to the little Juarez mule car, and we would go over there and the van would stop in front of the butcher shop and we would get filets and they were the same price as the cheapest cut and Mother and Mrs. Silverman would always get five or six filets and they'd be all wrapped and waiting for us and we'd give him the money and then he would give us a stick of sugarcane and then Jose, the driver, would come over and say, "Now don't you little girls eat that sugarcane until you get off my bus." [Laughs] He said, "I remember what

you did last week." We would chew it and spit it on the floor, you know. [Laughter] And you know you wouldn't think of sending a child over to Juarez now. We never thought a thing about it. So young. We didn't get off. They'd stop there and the man would bring them out to us. And when the man would go by our place on Yandell, Mother would run out in the middle of the street, and all of the other women did too, and she'd flag him down in the middle of the block and say, "Jose, when you get to the White House, go in and buy me some thread or buy me some of this or that. He'd shop for everybody in the block.

Another interesting thing in the early days of El Paso when they built the railroad into El Paso, 1881, there were lots of Chinamen that came down here. And it was a common sight to see Chinamen walking down the street with pigtails way down below their waists, you know. Many, many of them. They had all the laundries and they had all the vegetable wagons and the vegetable wagons would come in front of your house and deliver vegetables. And then Christmas they would always give us lots of Chinese nuts and oh, a lot of different [things], some kind of firecrackers, little sparklers or something. And I can always remember the old China town that we had around here.

J: And weren't there some restaurants too?

K: Yes. They had a lot of Chinese restaurants. And they were very good people. I never heard of any of them getting in trouble. One of the most tragic things that I ever remember was: I still own some property on South Stanton. We called it First and Stanton. It's where the railroad trains come right in to Stanton Street, between Overland and Do you know where that is? That was all warehouse property. Well, ours was on the right hand side, and we had three stores there. Incidentally

one night they forgot to stop and went right across Stanton Street and knocked all my buildings down. [Chuckles] Fortunately it happened at 2 o'clock in the morning. I have a picture of it on the front page. Fortunately it happened at 2 o'clock in the morning because in those days we had streetcars going to Juarez and people hanging off of them and cars all parked and lots of people, lots of traffic on Stanton. Oh, it could have killed a couple of hundred people maybe if it had hit a streetcar at a busy time of the day. It was the T&P Railroad that went over it and knocked everything down. That wasn't what I started out [to say]. I used to collect rent on all of our property on a Shetland pony. I collected all of the rent for my mother. Made a little sack and I wore it inside here with a big safety pin here, and I'd go to all the different places and I'd go, "Yoo hoo," and they'd come out and bring me the rent.

J: How old were you then?

K: Oh, eight or nine.

J: She let you do lots of things. You went to Juarez to pick up the meat, and you went to get the rent.

K: Oh, yes, I was always taught to do things.

J: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

K: No. I was an only child.

J: They put you to work, then. [Chuckles]

K: Well, my mother believed in it and my father used to say they were going to leave me the property and I would have to know how to take care of it. And at night we'd all sit around at the table, my father reading the paper maybe and my mother darning socks, and I would be working on my school books. And as soon as I'd get done with that, my mother would

bring out this big ledger and then, [sigh] I used to secretly hope that all of them would burn down some night. And the tenement houses maybe there'd be twenty or thirty different tenants, and each one had to have a page. And my mother had been a bookkeeper and an auditor before she was married. She was very smart. I'll show you a picture of her there very soon. It would have to be a net and a gross and what we made on each room and what we did on each room and that was even before income tax. That was just the bookkeeping she had me do. And I still did that until about two years ago when my eyesight started failing. I can't add or read or ... that's terrible when you can't read or write or add. You feel terrible. In fact I can't even see my face anymore. My friend says, "That's a blessing." So we let it go at that. [Laughter] I had a bad fall not long ago and had this hand in a cast for a long time. Let's see, I know I've left out so much.

J: Well, let's see. We've talked about the revolution and we've talked a little bit about the depression years. Were you here during the 1918 Spanish flu epidemic?

K: Oh, yes. Yes. You know, it was so common to see the bodies going down the street, we used to hum that tune. And Pete ? had a place on Texas Street and there was an alley behind it and I've seen as many as thirty and forty caskets in that alley, each one covered with an American flag. It was absolutely terrific and our friends would die and die, and every time we went to town we had to wear a mask. And my mother was very particular that everybody sprayed and gargled and we wouldn't let the inmates, the kids go to town. And we were very fortunate, but oh, so many of my girlfriends and boyfriends and people that we knew ... just, oh they were terrible. And I'm on the board of the American Heart

Association and have been for 14 years, and we know that the colored people, the black people have very poor hearts. We have two black officers from Beaumont, heart men, very brilliant heart doctors, and they always keep telling us what terrible hearts the black people have, and so many of them died during the flu epidemic. So many of them.

J: Was there a large black population here at that time?

K: Well, soldiers. We had a lot of black soldiers here. They had Southern white officers over them. They thought that worked out best. But that was how they happened to get caught over there in Mexico because Villa would take a bow and arrow and he would shoot notes over them that said, "You American dogs, come and get us." Well, I started to tell you this terrible thing about Stanton Street. My father and I were in our horse and buggy down at First and Stanton; that's the tracks. Well, the city jail was down on just two blocks Stanton, Kansas, and Campbell and the jail was on that corner. All of a sudden we heard this terrible, terrible explosion and the flames just shooting up. And they had gotten a bunch of Mexican prisoners over there. They all seemed to be from Mexico and they were delousing them with vinegar and coal oil, and they told them not to smoke. Well, someone lit a match and they burned up. They were locked in this place. The jailer was burned and they all. And that is when Villa retaliated by - what was the town up here that he raided?

J: Columbus.

K: Columbus. That was the beginning. That's what he did there. That was retaliation. He said that we burned them up on purpose so that he went over there and raided Columbus. And the astounding part is: the last time I was in Columbus, just went through there; it was off of the beaten

path but I wanted to see it again. Drove over there, and the main square like our San Jacinto Plaza downtown, the main square is now called the Pancho Villa Square. How they could ever have named a park after a man that mutilated all those Americans up there is more than I'll ever know. That's when he attacked Columbus. So my father and I ran down there and everybody in town ran down to help and they took them in buggies and wagons and ambulances and cars, anything that we had, taking them to the hospital, trying to save them. And my father was a big man and he kicked in this charred door and as he did the key fell out it. It was hot, you know, so he just kicked it off to one side and afterwards, after they had gotten all the bodies out and everything and the fire was out, my father went over there and picked up that key. And I have that, up until last year. I gave it to the young Philip Bargman whose family were lifelong friends of mine, so he has that key. And it was burned black. I left it; never tried to polish it or anything. Great big key to the jail and they couldn't get out. It was so hot that nobody could get there and let them out. That was I think the most tragic thing I ever remember happening in El Paso.

[Interruption]

Another thing I remember that was so interesting during the Villa time: we would go out, a bunch of us young folks would go out over by the smelter, the narrowest place over there, near to where the Mexican restaurant is, the narrowest part of the river over there, beyond the smelter. And there were a lot of Americans, soldiers of fortune, in the Mexican army and we girls would go out there and we would throw fruit and

soda pop and all kind of things and if it would go over half of the river, they could come and get it, you see. But some of us couldn't throw very well and they'd yell over at us, " Let the boys throw it." So we would bring them things and we would yell back and forth, you know. Very, very interesting. So many writers were here at that time. A notable one was the man who was head of the U.S. News and World Report. What was his name. He died just a few years ago. I've taken that magazine for years but now I can't get any but the blind books. There were so many prominent people here from all over.

Beginning of Tape 2, Side A

Newspaper people, from all over the world. So much was going on and the Del Norte used to be a wonderful place to go, for the girls, you know. We'd go to dances there and there'd be soldiers there from every army in the world. I remember one night a Scotch officer came after me and my father said to my mother, "Now that is the worst one. That is the very worst one." And he called them the "Ladies From Hell," I don't know if that's what they were known as or not. [Laughter] Said, "That's the worst one she's ever brought here." My father couldn't understand him, and he couldn't understand my father. And he certainly didn't approve of him. But they were very lovely people. They danced differently than we did, but it was very interesting to go with them. I couldn't get over seeing all the hairy legs! [Laughter] Girls in El Paso certainly had a wonderful time. We used to laugh and say we'd prayed for another war like that only it came too late because we all got married right afterwards, you know. [Laughs] But there were very interesting people

from all over the country.

J: Do you remember anything about the prohibition times here at all?

K: Oh, yes. Yes I do. I can remember when every other building downtown would be a saloon, a gambling house, a bank, and probably a Chinese restaurant. I remember when the State National Bank - I still do business with them - was on South El Paso Street. I remember when we had 15 or 16 banks in El Paso - which we have now - and I can remember when most all of them went broke, one after another.

And I remember that same time in San Antonio. They had to close the roof gardens in the hotel [because] so many people were jumping off the buildings. They wouldn't allow you on the roof gardens of any of the buildings. That was the most terrible time we went through. My husband was traveling and we all heard there'd been a run on this bank, on that bank, and I had a beautiful fur coat on. Why I wore it. I didn't dream it would be like it was. I got down there in this crowd and they were fighting and they tore my coat off and you had to know your balance or you couldn't get your money. We had a savings account and a checking account and you had to know your balance or they wouldn't give you any. So I didn't know exactly what it was but I just made a stab at it and got most of it out. And then I couldn't get it in my purse. I couldn't get my hands down. They were up in the air like this and the police were there and the fire department finally came and said they were going to turn the hose on everybody because they were fighting and pushing and knocking women down and everything. And I remember when I came out of that bank with my fur all torn, money in both hands like this. And I knew my husband was traveling and writing checks you know, and I lived at the Menger Hotel so I took half of it to the Menger Hotel and the other

half over to the Guarantee Shoe Company which was right across from that, the Menger in Alamo Plaza. They took half of the money from me, and the Menger Hotel took half of it. Then I had to phone my husband, try to get him to tell him to draw on the Menger or draw on the Guarantee. Oh, that day five of the biggest banks in San Antonio failed to open. The next day after that, but I lost my coat. Of course, now I think it was the prettiest fur coat I ever had [chuckles] because it was torn to shreds. I brought it back to El Paso and the Popular repaired it pretty well.

Then the same thing was happening in El Paso. I came down to El Paso. A friend of mine, a very prominent man, called me and he said, "I can't get Mother to take her money out of the First National Bank," right across from the State National, where the American Furniture is. We've done business there all of our life, Mother and Dad had; I'd done business across the street. And I kept begging Mother and we'd already lost so in the Mortgage Investment Company, which was part of that bank, and we'd gotten the last payment of our farm up the valley. So I came down and this doctor met me downtown and Mother said, "No, I'm not going to do it. I'm not going to do it." And so we all stood at the corner of the bank, and it had marble walls going up kind of high, high enough for you to stand up and write there. They all had marble fronts, but of course when the American Furniture came, they changed the whole thing. We argued with her and argued. Well, she wasn't going to do it, she wasn't going to do it. So I'd been helping her with her business all her life; I was trained to do that. My signature was good on anything, and so I went in first, went in to the box. I had a great big purse and I took everything out of the box. Didn't say anything, just took everything out, cleared the box. Then I came out and by that time the doctor had

told Mother, "You've got to do it, Mother, you've got to do it." So she said, "Well, all right." And she wrote out the check to me. Made it out [to] Helen Keleher and signed it and left it blank, so I went in and Shag Shay, who is a well-known banker in town, was a young teller at that time and I went in and said, "Shag, what's Mother's balance?" And he told me, and so right there in front of him I wrote out the entire amount. And he said, "Helen, what are you doing?" I said, "Not a thing." And so we went right across the street, and Mr. Bassett if he hadn't been a good friend of this doctor's, he would never have taken us, would never have taken Mother because he didn't want that bank to fail. But he did take our money, and all the way over, she crabbed, "I don't like this bank. I don't like that bank at all. There's nothing about that bank that I like." They made over her so much over at the other bank. When she got over there, you know, on different occasions nobody knew her, nobody spoke to her or anything, and she said, "There's nothing about this bank that I like. They're cold; they're distant." And Forrest Smith was the young teller over there and this all happened in front of Forrest. And she said, "I want you to know I didn't want to put my money in here and I don't like this bank." She had a beautiful long fur coat, and she said, "They don't even have a hook on the inside of the ladies' room where I can hang my coat." And he said, "They don't?" And she said, "No, and it's very inconvenient. No place to hang your coat when you're going to the ladies' restroom." And she said, "Besides," - Maury Kemp who was the attorney for the State National - "besides I'm going to tell Maury that I don't like the way his steps are and he doesn't have a railing and I think I'm going to get another lawyer." The steps were marble and they were like this: narrow here and then wide and nothing to

hang on to. It really was very dangerous. So I said, "Mother, I don't really care if they're nice or if they're not nice, all I want them to do is take care of my money. I'll do my loving on the outside." Well, that went all over El Paso. And if you would meet Forrest Smith today - he was president of a big bank in San Antonio - every time I'd see him, he'd say, "Well, Helen, are you still doing your loving on the outside?"[Laughter] He never got over that expression. I was so aggravated at her, you know. So the next day he told Maury Kemp and I have that letter in my files. Maury said, "Dear Agnes: I understand you are now a valued customer of the State National Bank. And I just wrote to tell you that we have now put up a great big hook on the inside of the ladies' restroom where you may hang your beautiful fur coat. And another thing, Agnes, don't come this week but come next week to see me and you will find rails all up. How smart you are to tell me that because we could have had a big law suit if you hadn't told me." [Laughter]

J: Great.

K: So many little things like that. But that was such a sad time to see people who were wealthy, wealthy in beautiful big homes. I can remember when what we call the Hoover House. Bob Hoover bought that house for taxes. Do you know the history of that house?

J: No, I sure don't.

K: Well, that was built by Thomas Fortune Ryan III. You know who they are? Multi-millionaires from New York. His wife had TB and they came down here for their health like most all of the doctors and the prominent people of El Paso. And they thought it was a wonderful place for TB. 'Course now everything is different and they don't treat it that way. They came down here for the climate and they all drank goat milk and

stuff like that. And Highland Park was nothing but little shacks of people with TB and a lot of TB sans. Southwestern used to be a TB san and ? and so many of them. Well, Thomas Fortune Ryan III came here, and they had the top floor of the Del Norte until that beautiful house was completed. And that is one of the best built houses in El Paso. And it's perfectly beautiful and having traveled in Europe so much, you look at the ceilings the first thing, you know. And around the edge it's perfectly beautiful. You don't have square edges like that. They're round and painted. And that was a gorgeous place and I think she lived about two years afterwards. Then he sold it to the mayor of El Paso, mayor Dudley and he lived there for about ten years and then the depression came on. And he couldn't ... the grass all died and the plants all died. Nobody could afford to water the places. So he lost the house, and we had a chance to buy it, but Mother said, "No we couldn't buy that. We couldn't take care of the yard. It was too big a house for us." We let that pass. Then Bob Hoover took it over. And I was very glad that they finally left it to the University and that Josephine Clardy Fox left mostly all her beautiful things for that. In those days she was property poor just like we were. You can be property poor, you know. You can't just eat the houses when you're not getting any rent out of them. You still have to pay taxes.

Phone rings. End of interview.