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## Interview no. 767

Ruth Norton

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UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT EL PASO

INSTITUTE OF ORAL HISTORY

INTERVIEWEE: Ruth Norton ( -1987)  
INTERVIEWER: Ruth Graham and Rosita Horwitz  
PROJECT:  
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TERMS OF USE: Unrestricted  
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BIOGRAPHICAL SYNOPSIS OF INTERVIEWEE:

Longtime El Paso resident and civic leader

SUMMARY OF INTERVIEW:

Arrival in El Paso in 1918, discussion of Woman's Club activities, girl scouting, Cloudcroft's Baby San, Camp Pioneer, cotton farming in El Paso.

Length of Interview: 45 minutes Length of Transcript 12 pages

Mrs. Ben Norton

by Ruth Graham and Rosita Horwitz

January 9, 1987

N: This is Mrs. Ben Norton. I came to El Paso the first day of May in 1918. World War I was still in full force, and El Paso was a town of about 60,000 and it was full of army people because we had gone into the war just the year before. And of course the war did finish that same year on the 11th of November. I came to El Paso because my father had come here to buy and sell cattle for J. H. Nations for the Nations Cattle Company. He had been over in Phoenix, and Mother and I had come out from Sedalia, Missouri, where I grew up, and joined him and then he came back to make headquarters in El Paso and leave us here because he was going to leave here and go up to Wyoming. But his business took him everywhere where there were cattle.

G: Your father's name was what?

N: My father's name was Ed Bosserman, a strange name for this part of the country. There aren't very many people by that name in the United States, but there had been at Ft. Bliss a young lieutenant by the name of Bosserman from the Southern branch of the family, and my father called him. And that young man played polo, and they named a polo field after him. But you know, I don't hear of anyone playing polo now. I don't think there are any horses. I rode some of those tough mouthed horses from the 5th Cavalry. I'll tell you, they were the roughest, toughest horses I ever rode in my life.

G: How did you meet your husband.

N: Well, I met my husband because I was employed in the Chamber of Commerce. I was the secretary to Roland Harwell, who was the first county agent in El

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Paso County. And we had a great time. We started a newspaper called the Farm Bureau News. The next year they decided that they must raise cotton in this country, lots of it. I have a picture of the first bale of cotton that was ginned in El Paso County. Here it is. [Shows photo] That is a picture of the first bale of cotton that was grown in El Paso County. And it was grown by Bills and Ford on the Wersham Ranch down near Clint, and it was ginned by the Webster-Bell Gin Company in Fabens. And I took that picture on the 19th of September in 1919. I took it with a #3 Brownie camera. And I was very interested in the cotton. But the man who was so very interested in the cotton: no one ever mentions the fact that Charlie Bassett was so interested in the growing of cotton, but he was. I think he must have been president of the Chamber of Commerce at that time, and he and Mr. Harwell were good friends. And down the valley, just below the Red Mill, there's a triangular piece of ground, and that's where they experimented with long staple cotton before they began to try to get the farmers in the valley to plant acreages of it. I wish I could tell you all the advantages of long staple cotton, but after this many years of wearing rayon and now polyester, cotton doesn't seem to be quite so important. [Chuckles] But it will come back, because they've found out that it's much more comfortable to wear cotton.

G: You were going to tell us about your husband.

N: Well, I met Mr. Norton because the old family doctor of all of us came to town and he had his daughter Ruth with him. Their name was Wood, Dr. Wood and his daughter Ruth. And she and I had gone to school together for many years. And he knew the Norton men were here, and he and his daughter were going out to California and he decided he wanted to meet these people from Sedalia who were here and get them all together. So he invited us to go to

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the old Modern Cafe which was down underneath the Mills Building. Really El Paso's never been right without the Modern Cafe. [Chuckles] It's too bad anything ever happened to it. I don't know why it had to close. I guess the Roberts Brothers who ran it, ... am I right, Rosita?

H: That's the name I remember.

N: Anyway, that's where we met. And Dr. Woods looked at Ben and said, "Now Ben, here's a girl from your own hometown and I want you all to get married." And you know, we really did get married that spring! [Laughs] Mr. Norton owned a ranch up the valley, not what we think of as a great ranch, but 33 acres. And his father was down here visiting him, and his father came into the county agent's office to find out something about some proper planting of something at the farm - This is before we ever met each other. I met his father, and of course I had known cousins and various members of the family back in Missouri.

H: [Where was the ranch located?]

N: It was over..., you crossed the river to get to it.

G: That was half a day's drive to get to it.

N: By that time we were all driving cars, and it wasn't too bad.

G: Did you stay at the farm at all?

N: No. No. The farm was rented to someone who wanted to plant cotton. And they did and they produced a very good crop of cotton. And Mr. Norton built a great, big adobe barn to store whatever was raised. The first crop that was raised was alfalfa. They used to raise two crops a year, and then they began to raise cotton. That was handled in a different way. The cotton had to be picked and taken to a gin someplace. Mr. Norton had come to El Paso from Mexico. He originally had his own assay office in Cananea, in the state of Sonora, and he had gone to Arizona straight from college. He graduated

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from Rolla School of Mines in 1902, and he went by train ... and at Douglas, Arizona, he changed trains and was pulled by that little engine that's down under glass over at the college. [UTEP] That little engine pulled the train from Douglas up to Bisbee, and he began working for the Clark Engineering Company in Bisbee. This was in 1902. You see, Mr. Norton was a good deal older than I was. Twenty years, to be exact. I didn't know him then because I was a little girl in Missouri when he left. But anyway, he decided to stay in Douglas for several years. He was also a civil engineer as well as a mining engineer, and he laid out the streets of Douglas before he went down into Mexico and built his own assay office in Cananea. Well, the revolution came in 1911 and he had to leave, as all the Americans did. Meantime Mr. Fred Norton had brought the old International Book and Stationery Company that was originally down on South Oregon. He bought it and moved it to where nextdoor to where the Plaza Theater would be. There's an eating establishment there now. I don't know what it is. And Albert's Jewelry Store was on the corner, and over on San Francisco Street, right across, was Mr. Lombardi, the old jeweler who made so many beautiful things for El Paso women. And he was really quite an authority.

When the revolution came, Ben came to El Paso and went into business with his brother. In a few years they changed the name of the store from the International Book and Stationery to Norton Brothers. They were there until they moved on the first day of January of 1929 from that location over to Texas Street where they had an entrance on Texas Street and one on San Antonio. They were there until 1962 when they moved into where Norton Brothers now is up on Yandell.

We lived at 1513 North Campbell for 35 years, and that was really close in and it was close to the Woman's Club, and I did a good many

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interesting things over at the Woman's Club. I was rather younger than a good many people that were there. One of the nicest things that we had was a woman's choral club, and Charles Andrews was the director. We had concerts, and we practiced. He was a very good director, and he was rather stern in his handling of a large group of people singing because he really expected the best. And he knew how to get it. So we did lots of things. Lots of precious oldtimers sang in that. Margaret Owen and Betty Jagoe, who lives here, sang in that choral club. Louise M<sup>V</sup>chison, who just died, sang in this choral club. We also started, while I was a young member, the Drama Study Club. And there was a very remarkable, energetic young woman here by the name of Mrs. Klutter, Helen Plutter, who was the head of the Drama Study Club, and then we started the Book Club. We really did lots of things. There was a Mrs. Barraga, Laura Barraga, who was a member of the Woman's Club, and she was full of energy. And it was really she who started the musical interest that was so strong. Not that she sang. She didn't sing or play any instrument, but she was an organizer, and she liked to get things going. In those days I sang some, and I was nearby, and we really did a good many things that were very interesting.

G: Tell us some others.

N: Ben and I were married in the Episcopal Church, St. Clements, on the 3rd of May, 1921. That was the beginning of my ... I was not working anymore at the Chamber of Commerce. I was a housewife and soon a member of the Woman's Club, and I think I'm the oldest living member of the Woman's Club now. I'm not sure about that. It doesn't make any difference. Fan Goodman and I were good friends, and she was a member of the Woman's Club, and your mother, Ruth, was a member of the Woman's Club, and Alice Berry. When Alice came to town, she was a remarkable program person. She understood it from beginning

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to end, and she was a great book reviewer.

And you see, I'm all mixed up with a lot of things. And after we had two daughters, I became interested in Girl Scouting. Early in the '30s I went on the board, and then in 1937 Ruth Zork was the Commissioner, and I became the Commissioner in 1938 and I made a deal with Mrs. Fletcher that if she would be the next Commissioner, I'd build the Girl Scout Camp, Pioneer, which I did. And it's still going strong, and it will be, when we get to '89, it will be 50 years old.

G: That's still in its present location?

N: It's still there, still going strong, up the valley, Camp Pioneer. We called it Camp Pioneer because the Pioneer Society let us build on their ground. And Mr. [Zach] White had given the ground to the Pioneer Society. Really the Girl Scouting is amazing how it has grown. It's grown up into I don't know how many thousands, and it covers not just El Paso, but it covers Dona Ana County, and El Paso County. And I should know for sure, but I believe it goes as far as Carlsbad over in New Mexico, but I'd have to verify that.

Pause

N: Yes, I was interested in the old Baby San. I think the very saddest story I could tell came about in the time of the Depression and the Baby San. I was thinking about it the other day. They would bring little, sick babies to Cloudcroft, and Mrs. Mabel Wheeler used to manage it. Mrs. Mabel Wheeler was the early one in El Paso to take care of people's children in a professional sort of way. And that year, and I think it was in 1932, a little baby died. And we can't realize today how really poverty stricken a



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lot of people were. I remember the two things that happened that impressed me along with the Depression: One day they drove cattle through Cloudcroft to get to water. And they were going to take them to Alamogordo and put them on trains and send them to someplace where they could be put in a place where they could be fed and watered. And they were the sorriest, saddest looking things. Well, it was just at that time that a little baby died. Well, what are you going to do with a little baby? Well, Elke Feather had a house up in Cloudcroft, and she too was interested in the Baby San. And Elke said, "Well, Ruth, my husband left his little Ford truck up here this week and I'll just drive you and the baby down to Alamogordo, and we will just have to go to the mortuary." Well, telephone connections weren't very good in Cloudcroft in 1931 and 32, but we waited until we reached the mortuary in Alamogordo, and I had to telephone the parents of this little baby, who lived in Deming, that their little baby had not lived. And I never in all of my life heard such a tragic, sad voice that answered me and they said, "You know, we do not have any money at all to come get this child. Would you please just see to it that this little baby is buried?" So the man who was in charge of the mortuary said he would take care of the little baby, and [he] did. And I think if I live to be way over 100, I'll never forget those two things of that time of life. I'd lived through the First World War and now, very soon, we started the Second. We didn't start it, but we managed to get into it, and it was a sad affair. But anyway we did stop that year having the Baby San because it had been a very, very difficult year. We used to have, those of us who had houses in Cloudcroft used to have a tea every Wednesday afternoon. Somebody would give one, and all the people that would be coming in from out of town, we would put up a notice in the post office and various places inviting them to come wherever the tea was being given.

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And I heard one lady from Oklahoma say to another, "Well, you know, if these women didn't have these teas, we'd never get to see inside these houses out here." Because they'd just come and go to the hotel or up to the Lodge or someplace, and they all wondered what those houses looked like inside. [Smiles in voice, then chuckles] And, of course, those houses had a lot of old furniture in them. [Laughs] And they are going through an oak period in furniture now, but I lived through oak in the old house that we bought in 1930. It was full of oak and brass beds and iron beds.

H: As I recall, you generally went to Cloudcroft the day after school and returned when the girls came back to school.

N: Yes, we stayed all summer. I never had a car in Cloudcroft. We walked or rode horseback. We just owned one car and it was in El Paso, and Mr. Norton came up every Friday evening. He would leave El Paso at 3 o'clock.

End of Side A

Begin Side B

G: I asked if you'd ever ridden the train up to Cloudcroft from El Paso?

N: Oh, yes. You mean from Alamogordo to Cloudcroft. Yes. Just once. In 1930. That's the only time we rode up, until about 6 or 7 years later. We did go on the train, that same train, the logging train, went up to little place where the men would bring the timber as they cut it. They would load it from the trucks onto these long train cars that carried it, and there was a caboose on the end of this little train. And we would fix picnic lunches and we would spend the day riding up to Russia and have a picnic and ride down to Cloudcroft, because Russia was higher than Cloudcroft.

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G: I didn't know that community existed. Did it take all day?

N: Well, it didn't take all day, but by the time you fixed your lunch, and got to the train and on it, and up there and back, it was ... .

H: I wonder if there was a community of Russia.

N: No, there wasn't a community. There was just really ... I can show you a picture of the station. It says Russia up above it. But there were no houses right around. It was just a logging station. Of course, we didn't usually ride that far on horseback because it would take too long and it was too far. I think the picnicing in Cloudcroft in the old days, when you really did walk a long while, were just delightful, and the young people all remembered them.

One year in Cloudcroft, the Girl Scout organization rented the old army camp and we had a camp for the Brownie age children, and a good many of those are now maybe grandmothers. And it was next door to real camping because those houses were just camping places.

H: We used to call them the Adirondacks.

N: I think you and Sarah McKnight, who was Sarah Stevens then, I think maybe you girls were part of the crew to run the camp or did you run the camp?

H: I had to take orders there. I did all the work.

N: You did all the work. I recall it would be so cold at night.

N: Oh, it was cold. It was always cold in Cloudcroft at night. We always dressed in in our house in front of a roaring fire in the fireplace. The Girl Scouts did rent the old Baby San building years ago. I think we did that, Rosita, before we rented the army camp that year. I think we had used the Baby San building the year before and took up some younger children because the Baby San building was equipped with 20 folding cots and could take care of a group of 20.

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G: Was there a nurse that lived at the sanitarium? How did that function? Was there a local doctor in charge or just you ladies who would drop in?

N: Well, we had a regular cook and we also had a professional in our Girl Scout office by that time, and I think it was a Mrs. Majors who was head of the Girl Scout camp up there that was a professional. We went from there... The Girl Scout camp now is south of Cloudcroft and it's very useful. They've built it up. When the men got interested in helping the Girl Scout Council, they really... I think Peter Deweter was the first gentleman member of the Girl Scout Council. I think he did a good deal, but I could be wrong about that but he was very interested.

In the early 30s we ran a camp for boys from 6 to 10 [years of age] for two weeks and then we'd bring them down by bus and we'd take up a camp for girls for two weeks, from 6 to 10 [years of age] The members of the Baby San board scoured through the school system to meet the parents and make arrangements for these children to go to camp.

G: How did one qualify for that?

N: Well, you qualified because the children were interested in going and their parents couldn't afford to send them to a professional camp. And I hadn't thought about it for a good many years, but we acquired the names of these children from their teachers and the schools. And then we would call on the parents and make arrangements, and we took the children up by bus. They stayed two weeks and then we brought them back.

H: Gave them the opportunity to be close to nature and study.

N: Well, they could see the mountain and they could enjoy the pines. Those days were really ... people who didn't live through the Depression don't really appreciate some of the things that were done to make life more interesting for a lot of children. I think now that you mention that we did

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that, that was during the time we had CCC camps, and the young boys were gathered up through the country and taught to work. And you know the rockwall building that they did in those canyons as you rode along the road, some of those are still there.

H: A very worthwhile function.

N: Of course, now those were done by older children. Now I think that when houses began to acquire electric refrigerators and the roads were better... it's hard to give up something that is as far-reaching really as the Baby San was, but living conditions began to be much easier in El Paso for babies, and sick babies, because of the just old-fashioned evaporating cooling as well as electric cooling and refrigerators. I remember I had my first electric refrigerator in 1928. We take electric refrigerators for granted today. You can get little ones, big ones, or all kinds. And also we have in El Paso some very good clinics for little children, and our own Thomason General Hospital has grown into being a tremendous hospital. And the town has certainly grown. And our school system. The population growth makes everything else grow. We are going to have this spring, in March, a great gathering of Girl Scout people in El Paso. The head of the office told me they expected 5,000 people. So we will see. Mr. [Bob] Cutler is the head of the Council, and he's done such a remarkable, wonderful job.

Slight interruption

I have one great-grandchild in Houston. Her father is Dale Dodds, the son of Sarah Jane and Ed Dodds. My younger daughter lives in Albuquerque. She is Mrs. Robert McCoy, and her children are grown. She has just finished building a remarkably modern and interesting house. They did

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live on the west side of the Rio Grande river at Connales, but now they have moved to the east side of the river into Albuquerque proper.

End of interview