



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Bertha Toney

DATE OF BIRTH: May 7, 1907 GENDER: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: October 17, 2005

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Consultant's home in Good Samaritan Village, Las Cruces, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Donna M. Wojcik

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes

NUMBER OF TAPES: One

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: December 12, 2007

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Rural living as a schoolteacher and mother through hard times in Indiana. [An active volunteer at the Museum until she "retired" at age 99, this interview was conducted as an assignment for an oral history class at New Mexico State University.]

DATE RANGE: 1907-2005

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

The interview begins with personal information and family genealogy. Toney grew up in Terre Haute, Indiana. Her mother's maiden name was Millie McNutt, and her father was William Moseley. Her relatives farmed beans and corn. Toney and her brother were the only grandchildren on her mother's side of the family, and she recalls that they were a little spoiled. "We were special, and we knew we were," she laughs. Toney recalls spending the summers with her aunt. Her father had one of the first cars around. The family enjoyed going on picnics and other excursions in the car.

Toney began teaching when she was nineteen years old. Her first class had forty-two students in a combined class of first and second grades. Reading, writing, and arithmetic were taught, and teachers were expected to teach music as well. Toney taught for three years before she married her husband, George, in 1929. They moved to Akron, Ohio, where George worked at Goodyear. Their son, Bill, was born within a year. They moved back to Terre Haute to help Toney's father run a service station during the Great Depression.

After George's death in 1992, Toney moved to Deming to be near her daughter, Sue Ann. Toney says that she has always had a good relationship with her children. They have been very supportive and call on a weekly basis.

As a child, her immediate family did not have a garden, but Toney recalls that her grandparents had a truck garden, cows, and chickens. The family did not have other sources of income. Toney does not recall any household help as a child, but she did have help when her son Bill was a toddler and she went to work as a teacher.

Toney's parents expected for her to attend college, and she did not find it difficult. All told she taught for twenty-seven years. During World War II, her husband served on the School Board. The Superintendent visited one day and said that many of the schools would not open unless teachers were found. With nearly all male teachers off to war, qualified teachers were needed to open the schools. Toney recalls, "I got drafted." Going back to teaching created some problems for Toney; she needed to find someone to care for her eighteen month-old daughter.

The school where Toney taught was a one-room schoolhouse made up of five grade levels. When the rural schools consolidated, Toney taught third and fourth grades. This was difficult for her because some students had weak teachers in English and Mathematics, and she had to bring all the students up to the same level of learning. She recalls that there were eighth grade students who did not even know what diacritical markings [accents added either above or below a letter that alters the pronunciation or distinguishes between similar words] were. It was definitely a challenge. Toney's own children knew better than to expect special treatment from their teacher-mother.

A neighbor came each morning during the cold months to light the stove so that it would be hot when the children arrived. Toney used to keep a pot of hot water on top of the stove. The children would place their lunch meals (in pint jars) into the water when they arrived at school; by noon they would be hot. The classroom also had a sink. Toney recalls one child who liked to play in the sink, so an older student was assigned to watch over him. There was one outhouse for boys and one for girls outside. In 1955 the students were moved into a new school building.

Teachers were expected to put on programs during the Christmas season, and often several schools were combined for programs if they were located close to one another.

During the war there was a lot of rationing, but the Toney's were not affected much by that because they were able to get meat, milk, cream, and lard from the family farm. People often traded coupons, but each family generally had the basic staples.

Toney attended Sunday school at the United Brethren Church up until she was high school age. There were several old-time residents in the community whose opinions were respected, but Toney does not recall any individuals who were considered pillars of the community. Her father had purchased an old school house building on acreage, and square dances were held there in her junior high years.

Toney first met her husband in a swimming hole where the area children went to swim. She met him again when she was in college. He had belonged to a young men's club, and she attended dances there with him. When asked what the difference is between courting and dating as we know it today, Toney stated that nothing was done in secret. Young men were brought to the house to meet the parents. Outings were generally a movie and a soda, or dancing. She recalls that she learned to do ballroom dancing.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

The town Toney grew up in was a coal mining town located across the river from Terre Haute, Indiana. The town store was a regular grocery store, which also carried carbide for miners' lanterns and other mining supplies. Toney recalls the large dill pickle barrels and remembers that she knew more about World War I than she did about World War II because she would hear talk in the store about people who had died. The town had its own post office, bank, and drug store.

She earned \$100 a month when she was teaching in the eight-month school. Since she was living at home she did not have many expenses and managed on that salary. As a working mother, Toney did not find it hard because her children were born far apart, and that made it easier.

Toney recalls the flu epidemic of 1918. Her mother would load groceries in red wagons for Toney and her brother to pull for delivery to homes. They were instructed "Don't go in. Just set them on the porch and get out of there." Schools were closed, and houses were tagged with quarantine signs indicating that there was flu in the house. The signs were removed after the families were out of quarantine. She recalls that the epidemic lasted a long time "probably about a year." Families in the area stayed away from public gatherings whenever possible, and none of Toney's family got sick.

Inventions and technological advances in Toney's lifetime include the car, radio, and television. She recalls that when she was teaching she took her students to her home to watch the Presidential inauguration. Toney has been able to vote since 1928 and recalls all the presidents since Woodrow Wilson.

Toney feels sorry for society in general. She had a good life and her parents were strict, but there was a code of ethics to abide by when she was growing up. Talking back to your elders was unheard of. Children today do not have that, and Toney says that what she sees now is disturbing and downright disgusting.

When asked if she would want to be a teacher today, she replies that she quit teaching because they would not let her “paddle” a kid. The paddle was the Board of Education’s “instrument of choice.” She does recall that she would sometimes have to isolate a student in the corner. “Train the teachers properly and turn them loose to do their job” is the advice she has for educators today.

Toney recalls that more girls went on to high school than boys. Common vocations for girls were teaching, nursing, typist, and stenography. The Pledge of Allegiance was said in the classroom every day. Every school house had a flag and a picture of George Washington.

How does she keep young and active today? She replies, “Eat and sleep.” Toney is a volunteer at the Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum and active in Good Samaritan Village, where she lives. She has traveled to different countries in the world, but enjoyed her trips to Egypt and the Holy Land, Greece, and the European river tours the best.

There were often supply shortages when she was teaching, and many teachers purchased items that they particularly wanted themselves. When students could not afford to purchase books, they would go to the County Superintendent for a voucher. Aid of this type was not considered a disgrace. In later years, the schools furnished supplies. Toney’s children used Elson Readers [*“Dick and Jane” readers by Elson-Gray*] rather than the McGuffey reader. Toney loved to read as a child and did well in school.

Times were hard and not always easy. She wore clothes that were “made over,” and her mother was good at sewing. It was not until she was a teenager that she realized that the bloomers she had been wearing were made out of dyed feed sacks. Despite everything, though, she says that they always had what they needed.

Toney says that what is lacking in classrooms today is real teaching without governmental interference. She is against the “no child left behind” policy, and all the testing being done and feels that all the bureaucracy does not leave much time for teaching.

As she reflects on her past, Toney says that she has had a good life and the opportunities to do well in life. She feels that she has been a success as a mother, wife, and teacher, and her children have all turned out well. She is concerned about schools today, especially the morals and ethics of today’s youth. She has always lived by the motto “deal with the hand you are dealt,” and says that ninety percent of it is attitude. “If people would realize that, they’d quit bemoaning their fate and get with it.”

Her advice to people growing up now is to “get all the education you can,” “abide by the rules,” “have some kind of central faith,” “respect the laws of decency,” and “respect each other.”