

Interview with Evelyn McLean

November 3, 2005.

Conducted at the Kinsley Library

Interviewed by Joan Weaver

Present at the interview: Bill McLean, spouse

Evelyn begins with a general history.

Evelyn: I was born on a farm south of Centerview, the third of seven children. My mother died in 1929, at 43 years of age, from complications following childbirth. I and my sister, Dorothy, raised the baby while attending high school at Centerview. I graduated from high school in Centerview at the age of 16. I worked in the superintendent's office one year following graduation, and I applied for and got a NYA Scholarship, which would pay me \$15 a month to go to college. My father was in the process of losing the farm, these were the Dustbowl days, so my salary while working at the school helped out at home.

I was determined that I would go to college and become a teacher, so I went one day to the Home State Bank in Lewis and asked Jim Malin, who was then the president of the bank, for a loan of \$35. He laughed at me and said, as he pulled his billfold out of his pocket and gave me the \$35, "If you can go to college on \$35, I'll just give it to you." And he did. And I did. I worked as a secretary at the YMCA while attending Emporia State College. I lived on old bread and tea, but I earned a three year certificate. I made a handwritten application to a country school south of Kinsley called The Nursery School.

I taught there one year, then applied and taught at my old high school, grades one through four, in Centerview. I taught two years in Centerview and then went to the Lewis fourth grade. It was while I was teaching there that I met and married William McLean. I planted a garden, canned fruits and vegetables, cured meat, churned butter, made bread and laundry soap. Bill's mother took me aside and told me that there was no way we could afford to buy soap at the grocery store, so we needed to save grease to make soap.

My doctor lived in Larned, and the nearest hospital was Great Bend. My two girls were born in Great Bend and my son, because of complications, was born in Wichita. I remember the Dirty Thirties when clouds of dust rolled in, blocking our vision, and I remember praying for rain which didn't come. I remember when President Roosevelt felt the needs of the people and offered aid, although small, to the farmer. I remember planting the shelter belt he advocated and I remember the war. I kept a scrapbook of the war. I also remember when the farm got the first REA and the war brought the first prosperity we had on the farm.

The REA changed our lives. Up until REA, we hand milked 16 cows in a dairy. We had no indoor facilities. When we moved to the farm and until we got REA, we had no bathroom, no running water, no washing machine, no refrigerator, no sweeper, no dishwasher, none of the comforts of home that I now enjoy. I kept my certificate up because I thought that was an insurance policy for me in case something would happen to my husband. And when my son was in the first grade, I went back to teaching at Belpre/Trousdale Unified School District. I was hired to teach the fourth grade, but in years following I taught fifth, sixth and third grades. After five years at Belpre/Trousdale, I applied at the Macksville Grade School and finished my teaching career there. I retired in 1982. While teaching, I went back to college and graduated with a Master's Degree in Education from Fort Hays State College.

My first year teaching salary was \$50 a month. Centerview was paying me \$90 a month, but when I went to Lewis, I had to take a cut to \$85 a month. My ending salary in 1982 was in Macksville was \$18,500 a year. I had a master's degree plus 15 hours and was the highest paid teacher in the school system. No, the money didn't really buy more in those days, you just learned to get along without it.

Now my father's people, the Browns, came from Indiana in a covered wagon pulled by oxen and farmsteaded a quarter of land south of Fellsburg in a district called Red Mound School District. There was a Red Mound Church there. I don't think anything is left there now. He was from a family of six boys and one girl, and they lived in a dugout in the side of a hill the first year that they were here. There were no trees on the river at that time, so they had to go to Larned to get wood to build a house, and they built a house the next year. The first year was really hard on them because they all got Typhoid, which I presume they didn't have wells and was probably drinking river water, but I don't know that.

Joan: Did they all survive?

Evelyn: They all survived, yes. My mother's people were some of the Pennsylvania Dutch that came from Holland for religious freedom. I read in the Kinsley Mercury way back when that there were colonies of those people that came and lived in Edwards County all together and that they, kind of like we know the Vietnamese did in our country. I don't know that that's what happened, but her father was a big sheep rancher down in that Centerview neighborhood. She graduated from high school in Topeka, Kansas. They sent her to school to board out with somebody so she could get her education. I remember her certificate was about 12 x 18 inches, a big diploma. I don't have it. I don't know what happened to it. She was a school teacher and she taught school down in that Red Mound District. She was boarding with my uncle and his wife, so that's how my dad met her and married her. They had seven children. The last one was a little boy, and we raised him. He was a beautiful child. One year we entered him in the contest at the fair, when we were just girls taking care of him, and he won first prize.

Joan: So you said she died when she was how old?

Evelyn: 43.

Joan: Because of the last pregnancy.

Evelyn: Yes.

Joan: Education, I notice, was important in your family.

Evelyn: Very. Yes, our own children all have...well, our son has a doctorate in psychology and our daughter in Denver is a physical therapist and also has a rehabilitation degree. Our daughter in Oklahoma that is teaching has a college degree, so yes...

Joan: Your grandparents felt that education was important, because they sent her even away from home to get that.

Evelyn: Yes, that was very unusual in those days. And she, they had some kind of...what was it called? Where the teachers prepared for teaching. They had to take a six weeks course. I can't think what it was called now, but they had to take a six weeks course and then they were allowed to teach. But she was interested in education. I remember that in those days it was unusual for families to sit together and

read together. But we always had a session in the evenings where we either sat and read together or she told stories.

Joan: What kind of books did you read?

Evelyn: I don't remember now.

Joan: Were they just novels? Stories? Like the *Swiss Family Robinson* or something like that?

Evelyn: Yes, I don't remember anything specific right now, but she was very interested in... And I remember my oldest brother had to have a report for her, a book report, and she read the book to all of us. That's the way he got his book report, he wasn't very anxious to read! I think I would say that we both had a hard life. I mean it was awful hard to... Well, first of all, I was getting \$85 a month to teach school at Lewis and I had the fourth grade. When we were married, Esther Brumfield wrote it in our contract that if I got married that that was the end of my teaching. The reason for that was, those were hard times, and only one person in a family could have a job. If two people in a family had a job, one of them had to give it up to somebody that didn't have a job. So, his dad was paying him \$25 a month for hard labor on the farm. So when we were married that was a big come-down you know. Because I had been getting \$85. But my dad lost the farm and I remember the Dust Bowl. Oh, it was terrible, terrible. Everybody's fields were blowing away.

Joan: What was it like inside your house?

Evelyn: We had to hang wet sheets at the windows, you know, to keep the dust out. It was awful, it really was awful. You'd see that big cloud of dust coming and it was just like...what would describe it, Bill? What would describe it? The dust clouds? You couldn't even see your hand in front of your face.

Bill: A front would come from the north, like we have today. We'll have a front come out of the north, there'll be whirlwinds ahead of it like that. And it would be black, I mean black. You couldn't see your hand in front of your face, not for long, I'll put it that way. Then it would get dusty.

Joan: How often would those big clouds come?

Evelyn: Too often.

Joan: Every time you got the house clean?

Bill: How often did we get a front?

Evelyn: When I was at school at Emporia, that's in eastern Kansas, they didn't have... but these dust clouds would roll in from the west as far as that. So we would have dust storms in Emporia. It was unbelievable.

Joan: And you were taking care of your baby brother. How old were you?

Evelyn: I was 12.

Joan: You were 12, and your sister was...

Evelyn: 14.

Joan: And when you were gone to school? Who?

Evelyn: My dad had to stay in and take care of the baby while we were gone to school. But just as soon as we came home, he went out and did the farm work you know.

Joan: And this is before the REA.

Evelyn: Yes.

Joan: What year was the REA, do you remember?

Evelyn: I don't remember, but it would be probably in the '50's.

Joan: So you were putting bread to rise and doing all the wash and...

Evelyn: Yes, at 12 years old. Yes I learned how to make bread and how to cook. He says that I'm a good cook.

Joan: And your father had cattle you said? Or milk cows?

Evelyn: Yes.

Joan: So, would he milk before you went to school?

Evelyn: No, we all helped milk. I had a cow called Daisy that was my cow to milk. And the little boy would come out with his cup and drink a cup of warm milk every night. He loved the warm milk from the cow. He was quite a bit younger than I, ten years younger than I.

Joan: So did you remember your mother quite well?

Evelyn: No, I don't. I remember the punishments. But the good things I don't remember.

Joan: What were the punishments like back then?

Evelyn: A switch. They tore a switch off the tree and would switch your legs with it. It might be, I think that might be some of the reasons I'm having trouble now, you know, because of the...you couldn't switch anybody with damaging blood vessels and nerves and...I got a lot of them. I was pretty independent.

Joan: That's a nice way to say it! I asked Bill yesterday about your holidays, because we just had Halloween or Thanksgiving and Christmas. Do you have any...you were so poor, but...

Evelyn: We always...Bill's mother kind of kept the family together by having Christmas and Thanksgiving and Easter. When she got to the place where she couldn't do it anymore, we girls all pitched in. So up until they died, we had a big family get-together on those holidays. Now that we're older and we don't have those get-together anymore, when we celebrated our 50th wedding anniversary, I said to Bill, "I don't want to buy a suit and a new dress and a corsage and a boutonniere and a cake and punch and all of the fixings. I want our children to come and spend Christmas with us in Arizona. So that's what we did, and they've been doing it every year since. They already have their tickets bought to fly in this Christmas.

Joan: How about when you were a child on those holidays, without a mother in the home and that sort of thing.

Evelyn: I don't remember that we did anything special.

Joan: No Christmas tree or presents?

Evelyn: No, I don't remember that.

Joan: Or your birthday?

Evelyn: No, I don't remember anything like that. We were poor, very poor. Christmas could very easily be a new pair of shoes or some clothing that you needed, you know. I don't remember...I remember before my mother died that we, I and my sister got a doll. I remember that, but I don't remember anything after that. I don't think, well I'm sure my dad did the best he could, but I don't remember anything after that.

Joan: Bill said that he did some things with the church at Christmas time. Did you go to church? Or did your family when you were young?

Evelyn: Yes, they belonged to a sect called the Church of Christ. They were very strait laced and very religious. My dad was an elder in the church and I'm sure it was very important to him. He studied the Bible and quoted scripture. We were expected to go to church every Sunday. No excuses. I remember one year in the snow storm, he hitched up a sleigh. I don't know where he got the sleigh, but we all rode to church, which was in Bethel (*Methodist Episcopal Church*), no, yes the Bethel neighborhood. I remember that it was cold and we wrapped up, but that was a lot of fun.

Joan: It sounds like fun!

Evelyn: Yes.

Bill: Our church used to put on a kid program for Christmas, and my piece was, I had a bunch of pennies to put in a jar, and I was to get up and say, "One for the teacher, one for the preacher and one for the children's home." And of course when I got through with that piece, I would take the jar and dump it out for the next time I said it, see. Well, I did the same thing on the stage. They all had to wait until I got every penny out of that jar. Now I won't interrupt any more.

Joan: Let's see, I'm going to go back to the time of the grandparents coming in the covered wagon and all that. Did they come out here to get land?

Evelyn: Yes, they homesteaded a quarter of land.

Joan: Do you know what they did before they came out here? They may have homesteaded other land too...

Evelyn: No, I don't, but my grandfather after he got here was a freight driver for the government. His name is on a list of government drivers.

Joan: What is his name?

Evelyn: Ebenezer R. Brown.

Joan: So he would have been freighting for like the forts or...

Evelyn: I remember them telling that he had horses hooked to a freight wagon at one time, and he was hauling guns at that time, on the trail.

Joan: On the Santa Fe Trail?

Evelyn: Yes, and a bunch of Indians came out from behind Pawnee Rock and stopped him and looked at what he had in his wagon. But they didn't take anything, he said. But that's the only escapade that I know about that they told. But I suppose that that gave him extra money, besides what he could earn on the farm.

Joan: What year would that have been do you think?

Evelyn: You know, I don't have any idea.

Joan: Would he have been married?

Evelyn: Oh yes, you could probably find it in the government records, because I know his name is listed as a freight driver for the government.

Joan: Do you happen to know what year he was born?

Evelyn: No, I don't think I even have that record.

Joan: 1880's or something? Or earlier?

Evelyn: Well, when I was 12, my grandmother was probably 86.

Joan: So he would have been early...

Evelyn: In the 1880's, I can't tell you, I just don't know.

Joan: Well let's see, what else here. What did you do to have some fun when you were young?

Evelyn: First of all, we had neighbor kids that came over to play and we'd play hide and seek. That was a big game. We, like I say, I read lots. I used to love to read and when I had to do the dishes, I'd put the book up on the window sill.

Joan: Where did you get the books from?

Evelyn: You know, from the school library. My mother taught me how to read before I went to school. I went to school when I was five years old, and I knew how to read already. I was so bored with school, because she would give us a book and say read this story, and I'd read it, and then I'd go to her and say, "I've already read this story, what do I do now?" She'd say, "Well, read it again." So I'd go read it again. I obeyed her. Then sometimes I'd read the story three or four times before the slowest person in the class got it read once. So, this was in the second grade. The teacher came to see my mother and she said, "You've got to let me put her in the grade ahead, because she just isn't being challenged at all." She was smart enough to see that, I know that. So my mother said, "Well now look, I don't want her to miss the second grade. So we'll just have her do both of them." So we were in a class room with four grades, first, second, third and fourth. So I would go to second grade reading, and then I'd go back to

my desk and get the third grade reader. Well, you know what that did with the rest of the kids. They said, well, the reason why she's so smart is she takes her books home. Well, I did take books home, because I loved to read. I don't remember anything about how they, how she taught me to read but I did know how to read. And when they gave me my primer, I sat down and read the whole thing, from cover to cover. I never will forget the teacher. It came time for recess and I was so interested in reading I didn't get up and go to recess with the rest of them. So, my teacher came back and said, "What are you doing?" And I said, "I'm reading." And she said, "Well, you can't read that!" and pointed the page, and I said, "I can." So she said, "All right, read it." "Oh my gosh!" she said, and she went and got the teacher from the fifth, sixth, seventh and eighth grade and said, "Come here, I want you to see something." And she said, "Read that for her." And I did, and I just never had any trouble with school, at all.

Joan: And you graduated when you were sixteen.

Evelyn: Yes.

Joan: Did that make any difference in your life? Graduating early like that?

Evelyn: Yes, you know what it would do, because kids in high school were dating, a boyfriend/girlfriend sort of thing, and I wasn't ready. My folks wouldn't let me have a date until after I graduated from high school, because 16 was the age. You can have a date when you're 16, and that's it. But yes, it bothers. It bothers a lot. But also, I'm glad that they did challenge me, because it would have been awful if they hadn't have.

Joan: Did you notice when you went...because you went on to college then, right? And you would have been very young there too. Did that make a difference?

Evelyn: Oh yes, well when I started teaching... I was 16 when I graduated, 17 the year that I worked at the high school, 18 when I went to college, and I was teaching school at 18. My birthday wasn't until February when I was 19. And I remember, Miss DeLander was the county superintendent, and she came to visit the school, and she said to me, "You know you're not old enough to be teaching." And I said, "I didn't know that, nobody told me that." And she said, "Well, you're doing such a good job, I'm going to let it go. I'm not going to report it." But that's how young I was, and Gerald Belcher, who lives here in Kinsley, was one of my students. He was in the fifth grade. I had three fourth graders and one fifth grader in that country school. That was four students, and Curtis Belcher was on the board and he had two, well he had three children. Two in the lower grade and then one, Gerald, in the fifth grade. He would come and start the fire in the morning in the school building and pump a bucket of water for us. Then sometimes they brought an extra one, or quite often, a little extra one. She was a preschooler and they would send her along with the kids to the school, and I was supposed to take of her. So that was...

I don't think that the young kids nowadays realize what a difference it is between now getting married and having everything and getting married like we did with nothing. I mean, it was so hard; it was really awfully hard.

Joan: What was your first home like? Your first house?

Evelyn: We live in the same house that we moved to when we were married, so it was a five room house, but no bathroom, and no kitchen. Bill went out, and he's not a woodworker, he's a metal worker, but he made me some kitchen cupboards that were beautiful. And so it was...we lived in three rooms of the five and the kitchen had so many openings that I couldn't find a place to put a stove. There was nine

openings in a square kitchen about 12 x 12. And so in the process and through the years, we've closed up doors and windows and added on. So the house now isn't very much like it was when we first moved into it.

Joan: How were you able to move into the house?

Evelyn: Bill's dad bought the farm. When I started going with Bill, he was farming out west. What they called "suitcase farmers." His dad would send three boys out west with a truck and the farm equipment and they would do the farming out there. Bill was doing that when I started going with him, and then things were so bad out west. They weren't raising crops and he finally sold that land out west at Johnson, Kansas. He bought the quarter that we live on. We tried to fix the house up as best we could, and that's where we moved when we were first married.

Joan: Were your in-laws close then? Or how far apart were the farms?

Evelyn: About three miles. Bill's home place was on the Oil Road, that big two storey house south of Lewis. When we were first married, I would gather up my clothes and take them over there, she had a Maytag washer. It was a gasoline motor one. I remember we heated the water on the stove to use for the washing machine, and we made our own soap.

Joan: Did you have gasoline refrigerators?

Evelyn: I had no refrigerator. Let's see, we were married in '41, and it was probably '44 or '45 before I had a refrigerator, and it was propane. That's what my stove was too.

Joan: So when you had milk and things, did you drink it that day? Or did you keep it cool in water? Or....

Evelyn: You tried to keep it cool as best you could. It was hard, it was really hard. But his dad one day come in the yard with a fellow that was selling Servitech refrigerators, and they were gas. He bought us one and his brother one. And so we had refrigerators from then on, but oh yes. Bill ate dinner over at his parent's house. He went to work every morning. He had to be over there at 7:00 in the morning. So he would eater lunch, or dinner, over there. And then, of course, I had to fix something for him that evening. I don't know how we got along without refrigeration, but we did.

Joan: You had a lot of canned food, didn't take much refrigeration.

Evelyn: Probably so.

Joan: Did you grow gardens and

Evelyn: Oh yes, I had a big garden, yes. That was very necessary, it was the first thing we did, was plant a garden, even before we moved to the farm. We were staying with his folks for a few weeks until we could get our house ready to move into, and I had planted a garden and...cut worms! We went out to look at the garden, and it was gone. Cut worms had just devoured it. That was the first garden. And we raised chickens, I butchered chickens and have an interesting story about that. We had a nine inch rain one night, and Bill's dad hadn't fixed the chicken house roof, and it was leaking. We had torrents of rain, and we thought we'd better go out and look at the chickens. When we went out, they were all laying on the ground, and they looked like they were dead. Bill got the tub and so he got the tub and we put them in the wash tub and I took them in the house and turned the oven on to 300 degrees and I

would put two or three in a roaster in the oven until their heads came up, and then I'd take them out and put in another. And we never lost a chicken. That's quite a story.

Joan: Okay, we'll ask you, when you were dating and courting, what did you do?

Evelyn: We roller skated a lot. They had a skating rink in Lewis, and it was a nice one. Oh yes, we liked to roller skate. We ice skated in the winter time. They had a pond in Lewis that they froze over for ice skating, and we'd go to ice skating places out in the country. And we didn't go to too many shows, I don't remember that. What else did we do, Bill?

Joan: You mentioned golf...

Evelyn: That came later, though. Yes. Well, he liked to fish. We'd go fishing...

Joan: In the Arkansas River?

Bill: We'd stay overnight on the Arkansas.

Evelyn: Yes, and up on the Pawnee. But we liked to play pinochle, we had friends that played pinochle with us. We didn't have television. I remember when we got television, we debated about whether we should get the black and white or color. We chose the color, finally, but that took a lot of debating. And I remember when we bought a car, we debated about whether to get air conditioning or not. We finally decided that we should get air conditioning. But when the REA come in, they said that the minimum would be \$8 a month, and we debated about getting REA, because we didn't know whether we could afford \$8 a month every month or not. We decided to do it, and so Bill had devised a wind charger, and he spent more time up on top of that wind charger to keep it going than we enjoyed in the house, but he was bound and determined that he was going to have some form of electricity. So we bought a Delco motor finally to make electricity, and it didn't work. So when we got REA it was wonderful, just wonderful. I just can't imagine how we got along without it.

Joan: It's hard for me to imagine. Okay, what was the best day of your life?

Evelyn: Hmmm, the best day. I have several "best days."

Joan: That's alright, you can mention several then.

Evelyn: I think when we got married was probably the best day of my life. I think the highlight of our life was the trip that we took to New York City and Washington and Philadelphia. That was a lot of fun. We always liked to include our girls in anything we did, and our son, and I remember Brenda saying, "What are we going to do for our anniversary?" Since they planned on it too, but we have really enjoyed our children and doing things with them, and still do.

Joan: Then what was the worst day of your life?

Evelyn: Oh, when I discovered that I have this affliction, I guess.

Joan: What's it called?

Evelyn: Neuropathy. I was playing...I like to play golf, and I was playing 18 holes of golf in Mesa (Arizona), and we started on our trip home. We stopped at a restaurant for dinner and I fell, and I don't remember anything about it, and I don't know what happened. I know that I hit my head, and they took

me to the hospital and kept me the rest of the day. From then on, I have just had all kinds of trouble with balance. They think it is that I don't have feeling in my legs and feet. I have some feeling, but I don't have enough feeling to keep me from falling, so that's why I carry a cane. I think that is probably the worst day of my life.

Joan: Is there one person that stands out in your memory? I suppose it could be a neighbor, a relative...good or bad.

Evelyn: I would say Bill's mother. She was really good to me. I thought that I couldn't have loved her any more than I would my own mother. I would say that.

Joan: That's a wonderful thing to say about your mother-in-law. What is one thing from your life that everyone should know?

Evelyn: I really don't know.

Joan: I think you've told me several things in the course of the interview.

Evelyn: I suppose, you know, it took a lot of determination for me to go to school and get my education. I think all of the girls in high school were getting married, and for me to say, well to start out with \$35 in my pocket. How in the world could you...I mean I had to pay bus fare to get there, I had to rent a room. I rented a room with another girl for \$15 a month, so I slept with her. But imagine, I just can't imagine, and I know I went hungry lots of times. I worked at the 'Y,' and he was supposed to pay me my salary. One week he forgot to pay me and I went the whole week without anything to eat. I finally went to him and said, "Could you possibly pay me? I haven't had anything..." And he said, "Oh, I'm so sorry!" He'd just forgot, and it was in his desk drawer already to give me. But \$15 a month from the NYA, that was not enough to live on. And you know I had buy school books and so on...maybe what I'm saying is that education is probably very important.

Joan: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Evelyn: I think that's enough.

Joan: Thank you very much.