

Interview with Mary Johnston Fox

September 28, 2011

Conducted at the Kinsley Library, Kinsley, Kansas

Interviewers: Joan Weaver and Rosetta Graff, Kinsley Library

Joan: What is your full name?

Mary: Mary Alice Fox

Joan: Where do you currently reside?

Mary: In Kinsley in Oak Manor, 210 W. 9th.

Joan: When and where were you born?

Mary: In Lewis, Kansas in 1932.

Joan: What were the names of your parents?

Mary: Mary Katherine Bear and William (Bill) Johnston.

Joan: Who were your grandparents on both sides?

Mary: On my mother's side, Emma Alice Bear and Edgar Bear. Solomon Edgar Bear actually. And on my paternal side, I never knew. I have a picture of them, but I never knew them. They were originally Arkansas people and died rather young, I think. I know very little about them, but I know about the aunts and other relatives. (*Many aunts and cousins were residents of the Garfield, Kansas area.*)

Joan: Do you know their names?

Mary: No I don't. (*Minnie Wilson and her family. Bud Johnston, an uncle and the Arthur and Russell Taylor families.*)

Joan: What was your grandmother Bear's maiden name? Do you know that?

Mary: Grunder. She had family living around Kinsley and Macksville

Joan: What brought your grandparents to the area?

Mary: My grandmother came when people lived in sod houses out on the prairie and picked up cow chips for the cooking fuel. That was over in the Macksville area and they probably had a homestead, certainly they had land there anyway. The kids were raised there. Then my grandfather came out from Pennsylvania. I think he was born in the United States, but I do not really know for sure. He was called Pennsylvania Dutch. He was Solomon Edgar bear. He came out here and was an early entrepreneur and had a home in the back of the store they ran in Hopewell, Kansas. That's where the three girls they had were born because my grandmother would say she would go back in the back of the store and have the baby and then come out front and wait on people. I doubt that, but anyway. Then they moved to Kinsley and were established here in business. They still owned land in Illinois from where my grandfather came. And they

bought land in early Colorado, but they didn't really own land right around Kinsley. They were in the eggs, chickens, hide business -- The Bear Produce Company.

Joan: So they bought eggs and chickens from the local farmers?

Mary: Yes, and shipped them to Chicago by the train load. The train car, on a side rail, pulled up to the back of the Bear Produce, and they would roll these tall, tall cages of chickens on. In this train car was a little cook stove, probably wood or coal, and a bunk. Allie Bockhorst or one of the other employees would ride with those chickens to Chicago and keep them fed and watered on the way. I can remember getting in that train car and thinking, "Oh if I could just go along with them." I can still see it. And they shipped cowhides to the tanneries back east. And then, of course, they shipped eggs in refrigerated cars when they became available.

Joan: They used ice before that.

Mary: I don't know how far they shipped eggs before they had refrigerator cars. I know how they shipped chickens because they could take care of them.

Joan: That is interesting today you would butcher the chicken and freeze it.

Mary: They weren't frozen in that day.

Mary: We lived in Hopewell and Trousdale. My dad worked at or ran the grain elevator. My mother ran a restaurant in Trousdale. And we lived there when I was very young.

Joan: Do you remember Trousdale at all?

Mary: Oh yes. Trousdale was like Kinsley is now, just a little bit smaller. The restaurant was on Main Street. It was a brick building a storefront building. I can remember that and I was young. I don't remember what it was called. Then we moved to Hutchinson, and he was a guard at the reformatory, it was called at that time. We lived there a few years. Then we moved back to Kinsley. Then their marriage was dissolved, my two sisters and I went to live with our grandparents the Bears.

Joan: Was your father moving at this time because of the Depression?

Mary: I really don't know why. I think the job. Almost all of his life he was in the grain buying and selling business and the running of elevators that was done by an individual. He worked for Collingwood out of Hutchinson. He was hired by them to run the elevators. In fact he ended up in Big Bow, Kansas. That was his last place where he grew old and retired, in Big Bow. He ran Collingwood elevator there.

Joan: When you were in Trousdale were you in school yet?

Mary: Oh no, I was little-bitty. I think I can remember it because I can remember wet sheets being tacked up over the windows because of the dust. I can remember walking down the dirt road, and we were barefooted, my older sister and I. Some kind of a migrating beetle was walking across the road in droves. I can still see that too and I don't have to be asleep or drunk to see it. It's there.

Joan: So you do remember the dust storms, a little bit.

Mary: I do, that much. I always was a puny kid and I coughed and sneezed. Today it is allergies but then it was blamed on the dustbowl.

Joan: When did you come to Kinsley to live with your grandparents? What year about or how old were you?

Mary: I was about 5, probably. We had been living in Kinsley, but my grandparents assumed us when my dad moved east and my mother moved west. We stayed here, the three girls.

Joan: So we are talking about '37 probably. You were an elementary school-aged kid when World War II started. Any memories there?

Mary: I remember the day that Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. My grandfather was sitting by the kind of a fancy radio with the cabinet, and the cloth speaker in the front, and the little dials and things. I can remember standing there beside him and I was 9 years old. The Japanese had bombed Pearl Harbor. Yes, I can still see that too.

Joan: Do you have any other memories of World War II, the rationing? How the war affected you?

Mary: Oh sure. The gasoline was rationed. For a while, I lived in California with my mother. It was very obvious out there. She stood in line to buy cigarettes, and my step dad too. She traded sugar stamps for gasoline stamps which were most important to her, so we could go places. Yes, I remember the Second World War.

Joan: Where were you in California?

Mary: We were in Los Angeles at that time.

Joan: Because people's experience were a little bit different there than here, being closer to Japan

Mary: I was visiting my aunt and uncle out there during World War II. *(At the age of 9, I got on the train [El Capitan] by myself and traveled all the way to Las Angeles.)* They were great party goers. They both worked in airplane plants. One worked the swing shift. One worked the graveyard shift. Then we would go places in the car. The lights were hooded. The headlight was covered on the top with black so there was just the lower part. *(Or the top of the headlights were painted black.)*

Joan: I have not heard that story. There was a little hood that stood out.

Mary: Yes, I can still see that too,

Joan: Any other memories from there? Were you in school there or just visiting?

Mary: I was just visiting them. I can remember they had oil heat in the furnace which I thought was very unusual. It was pretty elegant to have even a floor furnace then. That was a big deal. I can remember the unusual food. It was the first time I had seen avocados. For small town people they were adventuresome and we went a lot of places. I can even

remember going to night clubs with them, and the entertainment that was there and the people dancing. But I don't have any names or exactly where. I wish I did have. I wish I knew exactly, particularly one night club. It was exciting. And I got to order a pink lady, it was really a big deal.

Joan: were some of war years here in Kinsley also, from '41 to '45, or were they all in California?

Mary: Well, they weren't all in California. I went back and forth. Later, my step dad worked in Long Beach, at that time. That was at the end of the war, and he was working for the Naval Shipyard. I can remember going through that on Family Day, but I can't tell you any of the particulars, except how overwhelmingly huge everything was. I can remember the day the war with Japan was over. I was downtown with my little sister, right in Long Beach, California. That was pretty exciting.

Joan: Why what happened?

Mary: Lots of people gathered and I can remember sailors, but also, I'm influenced by living in Long Beach which always had lots of sailors, and by seeing the movies and the pictures I've seen since. So I can't really (*know*); it is just there in my mind. Diana and I were downtown. We went lots of places. We went clear across Long Beach and Los Angeles to go ice skating all by ourselves. We'd get on a street car and go across Los Angeles to the ice skating rink. I was in junior high school, the one year that I lived in Long Beach.

Joan: Maybe we should mention what your step-father's name was.

Mary: His name was Buell Reeves. They had a child, George, which was my younger half-brother. My older sister was my half-sister. My mother was married three times in her short life.

Joan: It was short?

Mary: Yes, she died at the age of 42.

Joan: Do you know how the war affected your grandfather's business here? Did it in any way or was it basically the same?

Mary: I don't remember it affecting anything. I can remember still going to Hutchinson to the Bisonte Hotel for conventions of people who were in the same business as he was. I can remember the Bisonte dining room quite well. I was very impressionable. I loved that fancy going on and going out to eat and doing a lot of things that not many people did then. He died (*May 15, 1942*) rather suddenly quite young. He was 62. They were at work one day My Aunt (*Frances Bear*) did the bookwork. And my grandmother worked. And he worked. Everybody worked at their produce and took care of business. He stepped up to answer the telephone on the wall and dropped dead.

Joan: Where was the Bear Produce located?

Mary: It was located on the railroad (*on the highway across from the Dupree home*) which was very important at that time, diagonally across from the railroad station. I believe the building is still there, or maybe it has been torn down.

Rosetta: It was torn down a few years ago.

Mary: Also it had a cooling, when refrigeration came in, they had a train car parked on the foundation at the end that was used to store eggs when they started shipping them to Chicago. And Allie Bockhorst and both of his sons were the main employees. And a lot of ladies that I remember so well that candled the eggs in the back. Held the eggs up, you know. They could hold 4 or 6 in each hand. Hold them up to the candlelight, what was called the candlelight but it was electric. Back in the dark room, and they were just chattering and candling those eggs.

Joan: What does it mean to candle an egg?

Mary: Shine a light through the shell to see if there's a flaw in them. If there's a big blood spot or a bad egg. They all had to be candled. I don't think there was any government requirement then. It was just a business (decision) because you were packing those eggs into cases, in wood boxes that the Bockhorst boys had built in the other room to send on to Chicago by train.

Joan: Do you remember any of the names of the ladies?

Mary: One was a Kirkbride lady. One was... I know exactly where they lived... McFarren family, Bertha McFarren. Lots of other happy faces that I can remember. They were glad to have a job and it was not an unpleasant job because there wasn't a nicer man in the world, than my grandfather who walked around with his nail apron on carrying cats and kittens in the pockets. Yes! But you know cats were their great friends because they had so many mice and rats around. Boy, the cats kept the place clean. You didn't use poison and things then. And they had an insect dip for the chickens built into the dock outside. They'd back the truck up there and these chicken pens were about 12 feet high at least, as I look back on it. It looks big to me because I was only so tall. And they'd raise that pen on the lift and drop it down in the dip so if the chickens had any lice or whatever. Why then they would quick yank them out, and the chickens would shake their heads and quick shake their feathers and everybody was happy. They were taken inside.

Joan: So the chickens didn't stay very long

Mary: No. They were fed and watered there. They were brought in, as I recall, it seems rather common that they were shipping out in a railroad train car the chickens.

Joan: It is pretty fascinating.

Mary: I can just see it. I spent a lot of time there. It didn't bother them.

Joan: Did you start working or candling eggs?

Mary: No, I was too little. I was under foot.

Joan: What was it like living with your grandparents.

Mary: Well, I thought it was heaven. I felt that it was the luckiest thing that ever happened to me when they came over and said, "Hit the road, Good-bye, we are taking these kids." It happened. You see, my older sister was a half-sister and then Diana and I were the other two full sisters. We were raised to adulthood really there except one time I threw a fit wanting to go and be with my mother. And my grandmother argued with me a little bit and pretty soon she says

“Pack your suitcase. You are on your way to California.” And I was sent to California I didn’t stay very long. I didn’t want to, and they came and got me. But one time when I was 9 years old I went out there to visit and I went on the train by myself from Dodge City to Los Angeles. I can still remember it. It was just fantastic. It was around Thanksgiving, and the dining car service was great.

Joan: Did you have a sleeper.

Mary: No, I am sure they had Pullman cars then and probably some fancy roomettes because it was like the *El Capitan*, probably because it stopped in Kinsley. As I recall it stopped in Kinsley, but it may have been Dodge. I’m not sure about that. Anyway, that was an adventure.

Joan: And you were nine. Did the conductor look after you.

Mary: I don’t think so.

Joan: Did you have a note pinned on?

Mary: No, and I probably had a purse full of money too, who knows. I remember meeting a lovely lady who was traveling with her children. They were going someplace for Thanksgiving. I can kind of remember them. I was very independent.

Joan: Did you basically stay on the train? Could you get off at stops?

Mary: No, I don’t remember getting off. I don’t think that the streamliners really stopped (often). When they stopped, the people got on and they hit the rails.

Joan: Then it may have been Dodge where you got on.

Mary: I think it probably was because the *Chief* use to stop here because we took it to Kansas City in later years. But I believe we had to go to Dodge to get the *El Capitan*.

Joan: It took a day? or two?

Mary: Oh, golly, more than that, probably a day and a half at least.

Joan: And your mother did meet you at the station?

Mary: No, that is when I went to visit my uncle and aunt. Yes, I can remember that. He was waiting there at the big, old Los Angeles station. I came running down the walkway.

Joan: That is amazing. But people did it then.

Mary: Yes, it was then, but neither of my sisters would have done that. That’s who I was. When I got rescued from the home I was living in, there were a lot of alcohol problems in my family. I just felt that somebody had opened the gate and let me out, dragged me out.

Joan: What do you remember about Christmas in your grandparent’s home?

Mary: I remember Christmas at that house where my parents were. Always a lot of alcohol, always. A lot of gifts. We were not poor people. My grandparents saw to that for everybody.

Holidays were always a big meal. I can remember that whether we were at my grandparents or not.

Joan: Chicken?

Mary: No, turkey. They did turkey too! I went to grade school here. I was very, very happy in grade school. Then, of course, my grandfather died, and that was a terrible blow to all of us. It was so unexpected. And he was the heart of the family; he held everybody together. That was a bad blow.

Joan: What happened to the business at that point.

Mary: My grandmother and aunt tried to continue with it, but it didn't last. And of course, the other two girls, my mother and my aunt, (There were 3 girls in the Bear family: my mother and two sisters) and they wanted money. I don't know if you want to include that, but you can if you want to. So they had to settle the estate. Because all although...

Joan: Even though your grandmother was alive?

Mary: I'm not even sure he had a will. He was the kind of person who thought he would live forever. He had a zest for life. You know, he thought, "Well, I'll do that tomorrow." I don't remember anybody ever talking about a will or mentioning it.

Joan: How old were you when he passed away?

Mary: I was nine when I went to California. He was alive then. I don't remember. I was in fifth grade, I believe. I can remember them coming to school to get me. I think I was in the fifth grade.

Joan: And you were at Southside.

Mary: Yes, and Gale Graff, oh my goodness, yes. (*This is Rosetta's father-in-law*). I have lots of good memories of that. I remember him very well. He was a real down-to-earth teacher, principal, caretaker, whatever, as I recall, whatever needed to be done. He, oh what do they call it when they taught writing, that book, remember having to move your whole arm trying to learn to write and didn't work with me at all. They even had a little archaic name for it. (*Palmer Method*) Then I can remember the individual kids. I was very happy there.

Joan: Did you life change monetarily after your grandfather passed?

Mary: I didn't notice. My grandmother was kind of a magician keeping the balls in the air. I started high school here, my freshman year of high school, and I was so much trouble, and so ornery. I am sure that my grandmother saw the writing on the wall. Diana was 3 years behind me in school, so they sent us to Wichita to boarding school, to Mount Carmel Academy, my last 3 years of high school and Diana was there six years. And that was good too. That was a really good thing. At the time I was furious. But that was a good thing, and it didn't take me very long to realize that is was a good thing.

Joan: Was that a Catholic?

Mary: Yes, that was a Catholic school run by the sisters of Charity, BVM out of Chicago. It's no longer there. The area in west Wichita is there. It's an apartment complex, and even the building (I had a private room in a separate building) and even that building is still there. That had been built later, but the original school building was old. It was there, I can't tell you how many years.

Joan: That would have cost money to be sent to a boarding school.

Mary: Yes, but also it gave them, my grandmother and my aunt lived with her (she had been married several times and came home and thank God, never had any children) it gave them freedom to travel. It was a good thing.

Joan: What was it like going to boarding school? Were they strict?

Mary: Yes, they were strict. And it was a religious school, but we were not Catholic and we didn't have to take religion. We were requested to come to Mass on Sunday, which was fine. We participated in the retreats. They had 3 day retreats when you didn't speak. You just walked around and went to school and did your studies. They were religious retreats for the Catholic girls, but we were all under a rule of no talking.

Joan: Even during class? You would go a read your textbooks?

Mary: Yes,

Joan: How did you feel about being quiet for three days?

Mary: Everybody, of course, didn't think they could do it, but we did. The rules were not that hard to follow. I had a couple of nuns that were absolutely influential in the way I've lived my life. One of them went on. They had Clark College in Dubuque, Iowa. Jill, my daughter, went up there and went to college in the '70s. That nun was there at that college, so she got to be an influence in Jill's life also.

Joan: Were there kids who did not board but just attended there.

Mary: Yes, there were day students from Wichita. There were students from, all over. I remember one girl whose parents were in Venezuela; he was an oil man. There was a girl from the reservation in Oklahoma who went to school there. There were people from western Kansas. There was a girl from Spearville (*and girls from north of Kinsley, St. Mary's*).

Joan: So there was a cross-section socio-economically? It wasn't just rich kids?

Mary: No, No, it wasn't. There was a tuition, and there was no such thing that I know of as any kind of assistance. You came up with the money, but of course that was in a different day. I graduated in 1950. And the food was horrible. There was plenty of it, but it was awful. We use to think if we could just get into the nun's dining room and see what they were eating. I said to my favorite dramatic teacher one day, "I bet you had a better dinner than I did." And she said, "I probably did."

I made friends there that I would never have made otherwise. One girl from Colorado had gone there since she was in seventh grade. She had lived there. I think Dr. Schnoebelen's sister may have gone there. Of course, she was older than I, so I didn't know her. But it was a very well known school. There were 2 schools in Wichita: Sacred Heart was the other. Some

other people from Kinsley went there. The BVM nuns from Chicago were a little sophisticated. We had a tremendous musical program there. That was one of the things that drew a lot of city girls. They had harp lessons and vocal lessons and musicals performed. We did plays in the Wichita U. auditorium. I was in a couple of those. That was my love. We went to St. Louis to the theater convention. We went to Washington, D.C. on the train, through Chicago to Washington, D.C. and spent a week there. Every place we'd go, we'd dress up and wear hats, gloves, and suits.

Joan: Did you wear uniforms?

Mary: Yes, oh yes. That's another good thing.

Joan: What was the uniform like?

Mary: The uniform was horrible. It was wool serge, navy blue wool serge, really rough. And a white, short-sleeved cotton blouse with a collar pulled out over this cardigan jacket. You had to wash the blouses and iron them. We did our own laundry, personal laundry. The suits had to be dry cleaned, of course. And they had a dry cleaning pick up there. They took them in. I don't know how often, probably not very often, oh gosh.

Joan: Well, navy blue wouldn't show anything.

Mary: And serge was so rough it didn't show anything either. Yes, that was a good thing, wearing uniforms. The jackets were lined, thank God, or your arms would have bled. We had a gym teacher. Our gym teacher was a woman, not a nun. And she use to go outside and smoke which really made us jealous because we couldn't smoke. When we went to town, we would go on the city bus, of course. We had to dress up and I can still see that nun saying, "And no smoking. Trust me, we'll know when you get back." And I believe it. Rebel that I might have been, I did no smoking while I was in school there.

Joan: Now this was high school, was there a boys' academy you got together with?

Mary: No, boys were not a big part of it. When we were seniors we got to have a big dance and invite boys to that. That was downtown at the Broadview Hotel. Boys could come and visit. There was a military academy at Hays (*St. Joseph's College and Military Academy*) at the time and seems to me that some of them came down or some of the girls went up there. I didn't go.

Joan: You graduated in what year?

Mary: 1950

Joan: Anything else we want to know about this? It is fascinating.

Rosetta: Did you take the train to Wichita?

Mary: No, they drove me down, my grandmother and aunt. We would go on the back road, the parallel, and by the Pratt airport and take the main highway and go in. Or I'd take the bus. I remember, one time when I hadn't been there very long, my older sister was living here with her children. So I came home on the bus to visit her. I called my grandmother in Oregon and said, "I'm not going back." She said, "Oh yes, you are! You get on that bus, and you go back. I don't

want to hear any more about it.” And this was from Oregon I got this message. I said, “OK.” And that is the only time I can really remember being mad when I got back to school. That is the only time I was ever unhappy there.

Joan: “And you came home for Thanksgiving and Christmas?”

Mary: And for weekends. I don’t think they had spring breaks then.

Joan: Maybe for Easter.

Mary: Possibly, but we came home. There was no restraint. You could go home on the weekend if you could get there and back in time.

Joan: Summers you weren’t there?

Mary: No, I came back and lived here in the summers and got into as much trouble as I possibly could before school started. I made everybody as miserable as I could before school started.

Joan: So what was your entertainment in the summer time?

Mary: Swimming, a lot of swimming. And of course for years the wonderful pool was north. I remember that very well. I took lifeguard lessons there from Vern and Rosemary Rehmert.

Joan: So you were a lifeguard?

Mary: No, No. I never even learned to swim. I don’t know how I took those lessons. Why didn’t I learn to swim. I don’t know what they were teaching, but I had a wonderful time.

Joan: They must have taught you resuscitation.

Mary: They did teach that, and then they taught jumping in the water with your shirt on and getting your shirt off. I can remember almost drowning in that. I can remember being pulled out of the water. I don’t know what we were doing. The life guards sat up on the roof of the building of the dressing room. They were so wonderful and so nice to the kids. They were so handsome and nice. We had a good time. Even when my kids were little, we still used that swimming pool. And the Palace Theatre, oh yes, we were great movie goers. We got to go to the movies when we wanted to. (*It was open every night.*)

Joan: And roller skating?

Mary: Some.

Joan: You don’t remember when the Pink building became pink?

Mary: No I’d don’t. I tried to help you with that the other day, but I was one of those who thought it was still pink. Is it pink now?

Joan: it’s sort of a weird color.

Mary: Yeh, the Pink Building was a big deal. Dances. Big community dances. Bands came through. Probably some of them we would recognize the name of. I can remember the college boys, the Shaffers, the Weyrichs and all those boys would come, and we would go to the dances. Oh yea, we had a good time. That was really fun, real serious dancing,

Joan: It was more of an art form.

Mary: We thought it was.

Joan: Bon fires out by the river?

Mary: I can remember some beer parties out by the river.

Joan: Fishing?

Mary: No. I can remember going to the sand pit, which we weren't supposed to swim in, but we did. But I didn't swim, not in the water. There were lots of young people living here then. We had lots of good times, lots of parties, lots of driving around in the car. Bert Heinz would get her car. Her dad was a car dealer which was wonderful. She always had a car available. We had a good time.

Joan: You graduated probably in June of '50.

Mary: In May.

Joan: In May, of '50. So when did Tom come in?

Mary: I've known him from the summer before my senior year. He'd come down to the academy see me or I would come home to see him. Then we got married in October of '50.

Joan: Do you remember when you got your ring? Were you engaged? Any romance?

Mary: Yes. I remember losing it.

Joan: So did I.

Mary: I never found mine again. Did you?

Joan: Yes.

Mary: Lucky you. I never had pleasant memories of this?

Joan: Did you get married in the church?

Mary: Oh my goodness, yes. We sure did. We had lots of bridesmaids and a really big wedding. Oh yeh. Lots of bridesmaids and folderol, a big family dinner at the house and a big reception.

Joan: Where was the reception?

Mary: At my grandmother's house. She was tickled to death I was getting married.

Joan: And what was Tom doing then? He's older than you.

Mary: Yes. He had been to a year or year and a half of college. And His dad had started the J. I. Case Agency. His dad always had a machine shop down here. A farm machinery dealership was started, and he and his brother Jerome were running that. Later, he sold Oldsmobile cars. They had the dealership for that.

Joan: So he was a businessman?

Mary: Yes, a businessman and farmer. He farmed some ground.

Joan: A pretty good catch.

Mary: Yes, that was a big deal then, you know. I was supposed to be a good catch. And he was supposed to be a good catch. We each thought the other had money. Did we get fooled. That's the way things were then. For my group anyway.

Joan: Where did you live when you were first married?

Mary: We lived in a house on Niles behind the Handy Shop there, two houses. We lived there. My grandmother owned the house, and we rented from her. Then we went to Dodge City and had the Case dealership there for a year and a half, maybe. Then we sold it and came back here. I think the Case Company bought it and had a company store in Dodge City. We came back here and bought the house on Seventh Street. It was the former Church of Christ, Church of God. The one that Al Akers redid.

Rosetta: The Nazarene Church?

Mary: No not the Nazarene, that is here. Where Gartungs live now. (*Church of God , 801 Briggs*)

Rosetta: Oh, OK, sure.

Mary: We bought that and lived in the upstairs while we did the downstairs. You know, everybody has to do one house in their lifetimes. We completely repaired that house, and raised the kids there. I bought the store in 1964. My youngest child was nine. I had done a lot of the bookwork at the farm business, the machinery business, up until that time.

Joan; Now how did you do the bookwork with these little kids running around?

Mary: Rosetta, Betty Ackerman Ryan.

Joan: They took care of the kids during the day.

Mary: Yes. Aunt Lena Rapp. Remember Aunt Lena Rapp? She was wonderful. She was so nice. She was Agnes Ploger's mother, I believe. If I am not mistaken. We had that business and the car business for years. Tom did farming.

Joan: Where was the farm?

Mary: North of town was the farm, the original farm. We didn't ever live there, but that's where the farm was. But he early on bought sand hill ground and was one of the first irrigators.

Joan: When did he start irrigating? Can you think how old the kids were?

Mary: That was such a jumble. I really can't remember. He may have been one of the first persons to buy. The lady, that was one of the heirs that he bought this land from, use to work for the library here (*Betty Williamson*). Anyway, that was the first irrigated land that he bought, down there. Very early circle irrigator, maybe not flood, but one of the first circle irrigators.

Joan: We said earlier that Mary was busy, but we don't have this on the tape. She had four children, 1951 to 1955. Four children in four and a half years. And that is why she was busy, and we were laughing.

Mary: Tom's mother used to come down to the house. She lived just down the alley from us. She and George lived down the alley from us. She would come in the evening and we would bathe the children in the down stair's bathroom. Tom would wash them, she would put them in and take them out of the tub, and I would ride herd on the other children in the meantime. But one night I wasn't riding herd very well. Jill got the baby aspirin bottle and Bodie was just barely walking. I walked in the kitchen and I said, "What are you doing?" She said, "We're eating candy." And I thought, oh-h-h, you know what I thought. So I scooped them up, took the bottle, and took them to the hospital. Dr. Unruh was still alive, and he was the one on call or whatever they had in those days. They had to pump Jill's stomach. If that wasn't a nightmare! Because they wrapped her in a sheet, and the nurse stood behind him and held the sheet while he put the tube down and pumped her stomach. It was like torture. Only it didn't really hurt. She was so frightened. He said to me, "You get over here and help us." And I said, "I can't." "You get over here and help us. You are the one responsible for this." And I said, "I can't." And I stood in the corner, my face in the corner, and I cried the whole time., From that time, every time I went in to see him (which was not very often as he was not our family physician) he'd say, "You'll put this medicine up, won't you?" He was a man who had no children. He and his wife had each other. That is all he had.

Rosetta: Jill was born with a heart defect?

Mary: Yes, a hole in her heart. Yes. She was the third one repaired in Wichita. It was a brand new procedure. They had a team there. They had this huge heart-lung machine that would practically fill this room. We had to have 43 pints of blood used in that surgery to prime that machine to use it while they had her heart out. They had to circulate blood through her body. They got the blood, at that time, I believe it was from the Red Cross. Bill and Ima Jean Werner had a child in the hospital at that time and he went down and donated blood. But she was an AB+ like I am which is not rare, but very uncommon. This lady in the Red Cross said to me (because Tom had gone in afterwards to give his blood) and I was too thin. They wouldn't take mine. She said, "It is your blood we would really like to have. Do you know how many people we had to go through to get that blood?" She told me, but I don't remember what it was. It was a lot to find that type of blood. It was a successful surgery. At that time, they took a rib out, took the heart out, and operated on it. Dr. Shellito was the surgeon; his family still is in medicine in Wichita. He was the specialist.

Joan: And how old was she?

Mary: She was 6, first grade. She had some problems before. You could tell that she was not altogether a healthy child. She was a vibrant child. She was full of piss and vinegar as they use to say.

Joan: So we are talking 1959, here about.

Mary: I guess. Yes. It was quite a big deal then. She was the third one in Wichita that they did. One of those children lived; I don't know how long. The other one didn't. It was a situation... Tom's nephew was born, Jerome's boy, with the same thing in a day when there was nothing they could do. He lived to be 22. Well, when he was 18 years old, they took him to Mayo's because they were doing some there. They checked him out, and they said that there was too much damage to the heart, and the liver, and the kidneys. He died when he was about 22. But Jill is still going. Later in life, much later, when Ceil was in her thirties, we discovered that she had the same defect. The doctor in Dodge discovered that. She had strange panic attacks and strange things happening to her, and low on energy. And she had the same thing. Of course Dr. Shellito was no longer there in Wichita. It was not an uncommon repair job them. Her cardiologist she was sent to is the one that comes to Kinsley now, Dr. Steckley. She said, "What are my chances?" And he said, "I don't know. I don't know anybody who has lived as long as you have with such a dire thing wrong with her heart. We'll do the best we can." But she donated her own blood. That was the start of the Aids epidemic, She drove to Wichita regularly and donated every 6 weeks. She had to drink a lot of water and juice in between. But she donated, and they banked her blood. So when they did her surgery, the surgeon came out to talk to us. (Of course, she was married; Laverne was there.) He said that she did not have a wall; she had a piece of Swiss cheese dividing those chambers of her heart. I don't know how.

Joan: About what year was this?

Mary: I don't know. We'd have to find out from Ceil. They did the breastbone split then, split her open, and repaired the heart. She got better immediately.

Joan: Going back to Jill. Was there such a thing as health insurance at that time?

Mary: Yes, there was. There was Blue Cross Blue Shield, and fortunately, we had it. Because I think that whole thing cost maybe \$1800. Surgeons and, you name it, they were there. There was a surgeon brought in from out of town. There was a cardiologist. There was a pediatrician. And that was days in the hospital.

Joan: That was the total cost or what you had to pay?

Mary: We had to pay like \$400. Of course, that was a lot of money then. But I think our Blue Cross Blue Shield premium was \$4 or \$5 a month when it first started which would have been six years before that. Isn't that something. Isn't that just something. There have been great strides since then, I will admit that. The heart and lung machine is about this big (30"). Before it was huge because we took Ceil into see it. It was in a separate room and the pumped the blood through the wall.

Joan: One of questions deals with the medical care here in Kinsley and the hospitals. Now when you had the aspirin incident that was in the old hospital?

Mary: Yes, the old, old hospital on Fifth Street.

Joan: Do you remember the controversy when they built new hospital or anything about that?

Mary: Yes, I kind of remember it being a controversy. I don't remember having any real strong opinion of it. I really don't.

Joan: Anything else about the medical stuff. That was very interesting.

Rosetta: All of your children were born at the old hospital?

Mary: Yes.

Joan: And you did mention about laying in for 10 days?

Mary: Yes, we did, and it was wonderful. Betty Olsen and I one time shared a room and we had a good time. You couldn't smoke in the hospital then because of the head nurse. There wasn't any kind of a state law or anything. She wouldn't let you. So we use to stand by the window and blow smoke out the window.

Rosetta: Was that Miss Moore?

Mary: No, Miss Moore was a nurse. It was the lady who had the rest home up north. Esther Smith, was head nurse. Miss Moore worked there. Mrs. Bell worked there. Lupe Roch was there.

Joan: We didn't talk about that with anybody on the tape. But I remember those days. Just about everybody smoked in those days?

Mary: Well, everybody I knew then did. But my husband didn't smoke, and none of my children smoke except Jill and she only smoked a few short years. And none of my children were drinkers either. And all my sisters, my brother, all dead from the effects of alcohol. My mother at age 42. It is a very deadly disease.

Joan: Let's go back to the business. You bought Ehler's (*Department Store*)?

Mary: Yes, from Rosemary & Vern Rehmert. Rosemary is Earl Ehler's daughter. I bought it.

Joan: And that was in?

Mary: That was in 1964. I scoured town finding the money to buy that thing. I really had to dig deep. I got loans, and Tom's dad (*George Fox*) signed a note. (*Tom had to sign also.*) And I got the money by myself.

Joan: Was it unusual at this time for a woman to be buying? Because Tom wasn't really involved?

Mary: No he really wasn't. No.

Joan: Was it unusual for a woman to own a business?

Mary: Clarice Stutzman already owned the dress shop. Across the street. She had it for year. Margarite Coover had always been involved in the business. She was an owner in Ehlers. Not that store, but they shared a building. I never thought about that. I think that is something has been in a way twisted. And if you watch the video Susan B. Anthony and Mrs. Catton I think that should be required viewing everybody from kindergarten up, men and women, children. Absolutely. To see what women early on – I wasn't going through anything. It was just what I did. I had no education. I couldn't be a nurse. What could I be? You know. I couldn't be a teacher.

Joan: Did you every have thoughts about going to college.

Mary: Yes, oh my goodness, yes. They were great on college, of course, the high school I went to. Everybody in the class, I think, but I went. I was going to go to Webster Groves in St. Louis. That was a ladies' college. I thought I was. I thought about it. But I didn't go. I wasn't a very good student. I had an awfully good time, but I wasn't a good student. I was good in drama but that doesn't earn you a living. You really got to be lucky to do that.

Joan: What did you sell in Fox's?

Mary: At the start, we sold everything. We sold ladies, children's and babies shoes and clothes; yard goods, extensive yard goods department; patterns (those things were a big deal the) buttons and notions; coats from Betty Rose Coat Factory in Kansas City Missouri. We sold everything except men's wear. And we didn't, at that time, sell any gifts because Vern and Rosemary had put in a gift shop at the back of the store. It was connected. We had a walk through area there. We didn't sell gifts until later when they sold that store.

Joan: I wasn't here. Did you sell bedding and sheets?

Mary: Oh my gosh, yes. Fieldcrest blankets. Everything was made in the United States. It was fantastic. If you had anything in our software line or clothing line or home things (that are called software or were then), it was all made in the United States. I can remember when the first sweaters came on the market that were made in China. We use to go to Kansas City to market four times a year. And the salesman said, "Have I got a deal for you." I can still see that. He rolled out these really gorgeous, at that time, sweaters. And then the price. Wow! We got it made.

Joan: What year was that?

Mary: It was the year we all wore our hair in afros.

Joan: How long did you have the store?

Mary: I had it twenty-five years. It must have been in the early seventies. Of course in the early seventies it was kind of booming here. Our business was with the local economy. Our customers were local. When I started that store, there was no Wal-Mart. Well, Mr. Wal-Mart had a store where he came from, but he didn't have his chain of stores. Gibson's went in while we were there. Of course, it was a draw for people. And in those days people dressed differently. I can remember when the first ladies jean line came on the market. That was a big deal. They didn't have to have a zipper in the front. They made them in all sizes. We just sold those like crazy. Today they would wear them to the bank; the girls who work in the bank. Mary But in those days, you didn't.

Joan: Ladies had to have gloves and hats.

Mary: Yes, it was in the sixties when that was going out. When the fifties came in we had girdles. We had corsets when we first started. We had slips, nylon lingerie. We had everything: high-heeled shoes and low-heeled shoes, and Dr. Scholl's were not made in China. They were made in the United States. And they were a big deal for the nurses and all of the ladies that cooked at the school. They were a good shoe. We even carried some of those really old lace-up oxfords that the ladies use to wear.

Joan: The store, itself, had two floors?

Mary: Originally, but we had storage and junk up above. It hadn't been used for a long time. It had a mezzanine, but that was not used either. It was just there.

Joan: I am going in my memory. I should have Rosetta ask these questions. Did you use the little things that shot money.

Mary: No, the store in Larned did. We had cash registers.

Joan: Did you have charge?

Mary: Oh my goodness, yes. That was really kind of a big backbone of a small business person, whether it was a grocery store or other type of business. I remember I charged my groceries, and we paid after harvest, to Dean Weidenheimer after harvest. We hoped to goodness that the harvest was a good one, so we could pay the grocery bill.

Joan: He hoped too.

Mary: Yes, but you would never know he hoped that. Every place had charge accounts. You wrote out the ticket, and you signed the ticket, at that time.

Joan: In one of our interviews, I think it was Boyd Mundhenke, he talked about getting his first charge card.

Mary: Yes, I remember, we were one of the first businesses, and maybe the only one in Kinsley, to accept Bank America or MasterCard, whichever one it was then. But not very many people used it and it was a big cost. It cost the store a lot of money. We were there with it. And we had a children's play area in there, close to the register, so we could keep an eye on them. It was a good store; it was a good, sound store.

We kept decreasing the size. We closed off the front where the old bank vault still is and where we had the baby department. We moved the baby department to a different area and made it smaller. But still a nice gift area, diapers then. Then we lowered the ceiling. Then eventually we put a wall across the back. Let's see that was 75' wide and 100' deep. So there was a lot of floor space there. We just kind of decreased it as business declined. Wal-Mart really took the heart out of everybody. There is no doubt about it. What can I say? That is what happened. I guess it was progress, but I don't know. That is what happened. When it got so bad, (*we closed*).

Joan: School consolidation. What do you remember when Offerle and Kinsley went together?

Mary: I remember I may have gone to one meeting. Of course I had lots of customers from Offerle and from Kinsley and heard pros and cons about it.

Joan: Your kids were still in school?

Mary: Yes, in fact, I can't think what year consolidation took place. Do you remember?

Joan: It was 1969, 1970.

Mary: They graduated in '69, '71, '72, '73.

Joan: So it was that time period

Rosetta: I remember Galen (*Rosetta's husband*) had Bodie. Maybe it was Tim.

Mary: I think he had all three of them because they were all three in high school at the same time. People in Offerle, as I recall, didn't really think they wanted to consolidate. What were they going to do? Like when Lavern (*Wetzel*) graduated there were 3 in the graduating class over there. It's just a sign of those times, and the only reason we don't have that sign now because we have schools consolidated, I guess. There were some hard feelings. I certainly didn't get any repercussions or threats or anything.

Joan: Looking back over all how do you think living in Edwards County affected your life?

Mary: It's been as good a place to live as any, I suppose. I have been able to kind of do the things I've wanted to. The kids went to school here and survived it and got out of school and went on with their lives. I'm sorry that it didn't continue to grow. But it is evolution. It's a continuum. It is the way life is. It doesn't seem right, or it doesn't seem fair, but it is the way life is.

When our kids were little, gosh they started helping in the field when they could get up on a tractor. Well, that day is gone forever. It is a high tech industry now for most people. And irrigation. It's been very good to us. It was hard work too, but it was very good to us. The store was very good to us. Then it saw its time, you know, and time marches on.

Joan: What do you see for the future of Edwards County

Mary: I see, well, I hate to say "stagnation". I see kind of a leveling off. I don't see any ups; I don't see any real downs. We have a lot of progressive farmers around. We are fortunate to have what we have. We have a manufacturing plant here that has been very successful. And Lewis has a manufacturing plant. A lot of small towns don't have those. We have oil work. But farming, you know, doesn't employ that many people any more. It employs two or three specialists for a big farm, and that is all.