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# Oral history interview transcript with Virginia White

Virginia L. White

Janet Anderson

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**VIRGINIA WHITE**  
**INTERVIEWED BY JANET ANDERSON**  
**EWU Women's Oral History Project**  
**EWU 984-0094 #94/95**  
**JULY 14, 1982**

**J. ANDERSON:** This is Janet Anderson interviewing Virginia White for the Cheney Women's Oral History Project. Her topics include the Cheney City Council and the Cheney Community Service Council. The date is July 14, 1982.

**J. ANDERSON:** Okay, I'd like for you to tell me a little bit about yourself. When you were born and where you grew up.

**V. WHITE:** Okay, I was born in Portland Oregon at the beginning of World War II and I then grew up in Milwaukie, Oregon, a small town south of Portland where my parents moved when I was about 4 years old. I was educated there and lived there until I left for college.

**J. ANDERSON:** Where did you go to school?

**V. WHITE:** Oregon State University. I majored in Biological Science, double majored in Biological Science and in English.

**J. ANDERSON:** Wow

**V. WHITE:** Then I did a partial masters degree in Biological Oceanography at Oregon State. That was terminated when my husband got a job in Cheney teaching and we had to move 300 miles from the ocean. End of Oceanography career.

**J. ANDERSON:** [laughs] You are ...you served on the city council and I would like for you to tell me how and when you got on the city council.

**V. WHITE:** Okay. I was asked to fill ten months of an unexpired term for Ken Kennedy when he resigned to take a position in Olympia and so the men at that time there had never been a woman on the city council and women entering public office in the public spotlight were very 'in' at that time and they thought that it was time a woman be on the council, and so they asked me to fill Ken's unexpired term of 10 months and I did that and then chose to run for the position in November.

**J. ANDERSON:** When was this?

**V. WHITE:** 19... about 1971, '72.

**J. ANDERSON:** How did you... why were you asked?

**V. WHITE:** That's rather interesting. I had been chairman of the welfare arm of the Community Service Council for several years, and this was a group composed of various service and social agencies, and clubs in the community and my job on that board was to take care of emergency welfare needs for various citizens. Emergency care after house fires, Christmas toys, Christmas food baskets, these kinds of things. I did that work for about 8 years. Now I think I had served about 5 years on the service council at the time they asked me to be on the city council. The comment made by the man who brought up my name, the council member who brought up my name was, "We thought you needed a reward for all this work you've done on the community service council, and so to get a reward of recognition, and that sort of thing, we're going to ask you to be on the city council." I often wondered later if he was my friend or not. [both laugh]

**J. ANDERSON:** Not your idea of a reward?

**V. WHITE:** Not my idea of a reward, always. But anyway, that's how it came about, kind of a funny way.

**J. ANDERSON:** What were some of the people's reaction when you were appointed?

**V. WHITE:** Well, it was interesting because the reaction was very positive, and I did have one man on the council who had been on there for several years who came up to me afterwards and said, "Boy, I'm really glad you're on the council, but don't get any ideas." He said, "You'll probably do pretty well there if you don't rock the boat." Oh, gosh and he said, you know, "You wouldn't want to do anything to stir up anything?" and I just kind of laughed. I also was very well known in the business community and was the first person on the council who really represented the academic side of the faculty, as well as was very well known downtown. So there was really an interesting kind of an influence thing going on because I often drank coffee with the downtown businessmen and this sort of thing and I think some of them thought that I would represent their side. You see? But they also were leery of me because they said and they. . . and I had one person say this, "Obviously you will do exactly what the University. . ." or at that time, ". . . the college wants you to do when it comes to a vote because your husband's job depends on it." They didn't understand about tenure, they didn't understand that, you know, influence peddling was not a part of my role in city council in any way and so that I was not there to push the cause of the university but at that time there was a great deal of controversy going on with the 6th street arterial. The city wanted to make an arterial on 6th street, the townspeople that were in the vicinity saw that as a very scary thing because they saw the long range plan of the university which was going to extend the college down to this arterial on 6th street. They did see a lot of vacation of property or not condemnation, but the university buying up property at that time and turning it into parking lots and new building sites and this sort of thing. I think the downtown people felt very threatened by the university so I was in this very strange position of knowing all those downtown people well, by first names this sort of thing and feeling that they thought I was their advocate, and yet being connected with the university too. It was a strange fence to walk for quite a while.

**J. ANDERSON:** That's sort of unusual situation to be both town and gown. How did you get to know the downtown people?

**V. WHITE:** Well, it was kind of interesting. I, very very early, after, you know in my life, after really before I even went away to college, had decided I wanted to be a writer, and I wanted to do research writing. While I was in college, I took the double major intending to blend possibly scientific research and writing. When I got out of school I knew that when I no longer had a husband and family to support which at that time I was also helping to put a sister through college. I had to teach school, I mean I had no choice, and so I decided I would go into historic writing. As soon as we got to Cheney I thought there was a need to do some sort of historical writing project on the town and so I just started getting to meet people and getting their stories and this sort of thing. That meant most of the older downtown element. They became the leads that I needed to, you know, meet early timers and this sort of thing. That's really where my connection was with them and how it started.

**J. ANDERSON:** At that time downtown Cheney included almost all of the businesses.

**V. WHITE:** Yes it did. It was very close-knit business community at that time.

**J. ANDERSON:** Yes, right.

**V. WHITE:** I also did a little work for the Chamber of Commerce and some other things for them during the years, and kind of got in with them that way.

**J. ANDERSON:** So you're pretty well known in Cheney then?

**V. WHITE:** Well, I used to be. Since I've gotten off of the council, since I've really gotten serious about the writing, I don't spend as much time down doing PR work as I used to, you know.

**J. ANDERSON:** Right, right.

**V. WHITE:** So you know there are a lot of the newer people that probably don't know me.

**J. ANDERSON:** So, you were appointed to the council and for 10 months, right, and then there was an election? You decided to run?

**V. WHITE:** Yes, I ran unopposed, and polled of course all the votes and so started then a four year term and that was really a tough thing to do. I did not care for being a part of a political office at that time because I felt it was going to jeopardize my writing and my research, and that was an interesting thing because also at that time, the downtown area was considering doing, I mean the council was considering rejuvenating the downtown area with new streets and sidewalks. There was quite a contingent of older people who did not want the expense or the change of landscaping, putting partial walkways and removing parking from both F Street and College Avenue, mainly because some of the lodges used that for parking and they were very upset about this, putting the island in beside Safeway there on G Street, this sort of thing. There was. . . I still go downtown and there are people, old people who tell me when I ask them how they are, they say, well we're fine, but we're very lonely because none of our friends from the country can come in to see us because they can't find any place to park because you planted those trees and narrowed the streets downtown. I've been off the council for six years.

**J. ANDERSON:** You still hear it?

**V. WHITE:** Still hear it. They will not forget. Well anyway, I actually had some of those people tell me that if I did not vote their way, I would never get another interview, historic interview with them.

**J. ANDERSON:** Is that right? Has that proven to be true?

**V. WHITE:** No, I told them, I don't need those that badly then.

**J. ANDERSON:** [laughs]

**V. WHITE:** I was very blunt about that. I said that doesn't go with me at all. What had happened was there was a real grand swell for environmental concerns, in the town. You know, people being concerned with energy, and with water conservation, and all kinds of things and so the Environmental Action Group came to me and said, "Would you please run. If we put up some people to run with you who will be good, (you know), councilmen for you to work with so we can get some sound environmental policies pushed in this town, because the town was all for growing big. You know, let's just get Spokane out here, you know, and bring water in and do all these things, bring in industry all these kinds of things to make money. You know, we want to make money. . . and who cares about quality of life," and so I said, "okay, I will hold that seat until you find a candidate to run for my position," and when the election came, they hadn't found anybody, but they'd found someone to run with me. I said, "Okay, as a team, we'll run

together.” and that was Ray Harnell. Ray did get on the council and gradually we began to see more and more concerned people take positions and that sort of thing and the support from people who were environmentally aware was very good. We began to see some real good policy changes. One of the biggest things we did the first year I was on the council was get agreement from the council to put a brick in everybody’s toilet. You would have thought that we had built a new city hall or something.

**J. ANDERSON:** [laughing] Put a brick in everybody’s toilet?! [still laughing]

**V. WHITE:** Exactly. I still remember the first night I went down to the council meeting and I remember that I really set people on their ear. . .they swore me in, I sat down, and the first issue that came up was an issue where we were told that we had to vote in a certain way because we had promised the chamber of commerce over coffee at the malt shop that we would do so.

**J. ANDERSON:** We had?

**V. WHITE:** We had. I said, “I wasn’t here last week when this all got started.” I said, “Don’t you dare,” I said this to an individual in the audience who said, “But you have to vote the way they want you to vote, we kind of promised them. We got together over coffee and we promised them that the council was wrapped up.” I said, “Don’t you ever presume how I will vote. Don’t you ever give away my vote,” I defeated the issue. It really was. . .I had to sit there and bawl this man out, you know, in front of the whole place. I said, “that’s un-American”.

**J. ANDERSON:** You didn’t not make waves?

**V. WHITE:** Oh, no. The man who had set up the promise, the councilman was the one who told me not to make waves. Then I went in there and made waves.

**J. ANDERSON:** First night.

**V. WHITE:** First night. The other thing they did the first night, and I really feel this is part of history, I love it. The first night that I was there, they were negotiating a contract with Bonneville Power to build a nuclear power plant, but the contract didn’t say how much the power plant was going to cost. It just said, “Sign on the Dotted Line.” I said to the city attorney, “What will happen if we don’t? Here we don’t even know how much it’s going to cost,” and he said, “You’re right, it’s blackmail.” But he said, “They have told you if you, (you know), read between the lines that they will turn your power off. They will not guarantee you power and after all you as a councilman, you know Bonneville was saying, you wouldn’t want to be responsible for the lights going out in Cheney in 1985 because you didn’t vote on this power plant today. What they were doing was they were going then to the old AEC with letters of intent or these ‘contracts’ so-called that the city could sign saying, “See!? All these little towns out in Washington State want this power and to give it to them, you have to give us a permit for this power plant in Hanford because we can’t guarantee them the power they are going to need. Okay? So that was the second wave I made that night. Well, the next time those contracts came around, Ray Hormel was on the council, and this was really interesting. This started when I got in the council. . . I, and the mayor, and one other councilman would go drink beer afterwards and a lot of policy was set over beer. [laughs] Anyway, pretty soon the whole council wanted to go drink beer with us and it was really good because it settled a lot of ruffled feelings that could go on in council chambers, but a lot of good constructive smoothing of the waters and explanations went on afterwards. Anyway and so one night

over beer, the council had passed one of these contracts, and Ray Hormel was new on the council and he and I got our beer and went off and we sat by ourselves and I said, "I hate it. Those contracts are crooked. They are wrong." By this time WHOOPS was formed and I said, "Those guys are going to get rich off of us little people." So we talked Charlie Roll, the city administrator, into polling the council by telephone to ask them if they would be willing to reconsider their vote if we could get Bonneville's power there. We were saying, "Who says we need this power?"

**J. ANDERSON:** Right.

**V. WHITE:** "Who says!?" We told Charlie, "We'll pack the chamber if you'll get Bonneville there to explain themselves. "Why did they write this? What are they doing about waste? What are they doing to keep costs down? We hear they're high rollers in Hanford making money hand over fist and we can't pay our electric bills. The city can't pay their bills. Well, Bonneville came, and we packed the courtroom and one man I remember well was very, very good: Jeremy Anderson. Bonneville could not answer those people's questions. Their thing was and they really were. . . had themselves made fools of in front of that group of Cheney citizens and they were people of all ages. We had Junior High and High School kids there who could speak to this issue, we had senior citizens there, and then every age in between. The thing was then that the councilmen, some of them, changed their vote enough that we voted down entering into the contract for WHOOPS four and five and we were the only municipality in the state that did so except for Seattle, and Seattle had Skaget Valley Nuclear and so they didn't need this one. As it turned out, we were right.

**J. ANDERSON:** You bet.

**V. WHITE:** WHOOPS was not the way to go. Was not the way to go, and that just really made me excited because it showed that small government does work. You know, we really did make it work. We went out to the people and in five days they came and they ran rings around the Bonneville people, and so Cheney isn't gonna have to pay for those. . . we hope. Chances are they'll be saddled with the bill through 1, 2, and 3.

**J. ANDERSON:** Right, I see.

**V. WHITE:** We'll have to pay. Anyway, high point of my career.

**J. ANDERSON:** Let's get back to how you were. . . as you came on the council, you were the first woman?. . . tell me how you were treated by the other councilmen. How many people are there on the council anyway?

**V. WHITE:** Seven.

**J. ANDERSON:** Seven. So, six men and one woman and a male mayor. How did they treat you and how did you, as a woman, feel?

**V. WHITE:** Okay I was very lucky, Jerry Blakely was the mayor at the time, as he wanted me on the council badly, and he really. . .

**J. ANDERSON:** Why?

**V. WHITE:** Pushed for that. Because at the time, I knew him personally, we agreed on a lot of issues, and he needed help. He really needed help. He needed someone who would address, and Jerry and I didn't always agree, but a lot of things that he did were extremely farsighted and very good things for the city. He knew that I thought the same way and really pushed me. His wife pushed me, and said, "You know, Jerry needs help out there," and he did. He really needed that. Cheney was on the threshold. She had had

unprecedented growth. She had doubled in size in just a few years. She needed some new kinds of policy, and Jerry knew that I knew, you know, had some real ideas on that and I had been real active in the community up to that time. I had done a lot of other miscellaneous community service things besides the community service council. The business community trusted me and the academics. You know, it was nice having a foot in both camps, sort of thing, and I was a woman, which again was a very popular thing right then. It was new. There were very few elected women in the United States at that time.

**J. ANDERSON:** So you went with one friend, Jerry Blakely, who was glad you were there and he was the mayor. Now, how were you treated by some of the others? How did they make you feel?

**V. WHITE:** Very good. They were really on ... many of them I served with on the committees, I will say other committees, so they knew me and that sort of thing. I found it was very easy to get them to acquiesce. I did not open my mouth unless I really had something to say. I generally spoke out on issues that affected public service, social service issues, elderly, children, health, welfare, kinds of things and they knew I knew more about than they did because that was not an area that they had addressed. I had worked with the police department on a youth council they set up. I worked several years on that so I knew the police department pretty well, this kind of thing anyway, and so I found that they were very respectful and they listened well and often times in committees, I was asked to chair, which is not unusual. When women get in a group of men, if you don't antagonize them, I think it's the mother complex. They're still afraid of their mothers. You know, it really came through. Every committee that I was on it would be, "Well, what do you think? Well, would you like to present this to the council?" Part of this is that I think women have a great deal more of that kind of organizational experience than men. Women as young women even and I had done a lot of things in high school and college both, like girls' state and student body officers and these kinds of things where and then women go on doing those things in clubs. These are kinds of things where you learn to do an agenda, you learn to run a committee. Men are very busy making livings and they don't have that opportunity, and so, I think, they perceive that and I found that wherever I sat on some federal boards that you know, for in my council capacity and I was always ending up being chairman or a spokesperson. I was often the only woman. The other thing is, and I have to say this, is that I was used to being the only woman because when I was at Oregon State, the men outnumbered the women four to one. I was also in a curriculum where I was often the only woman in class. In Biology, and it meant field assignments and things like this and you just kind of sat back and kept your mouth shut, and when you had something to say you said it, and you weren't pushy. You . . . it didn't matter and pretty soon they treated you like and you go anyway. I just kind of carried that through the council and it was never a problem.

**J. ANDERSON:** So they did. . .they did look to you for leadership?

**V. WHITE:** In some areas, right, right.

**J. ANDERSON:** What about those areas that were not human service, social service? You spoke out on the Bonneville . .

**V. WHITE:** They absolutely didn't say a word. I really was vocal. You know, I really took Bonneville on, but the problem was that was an area where they were informed and they knew it and they left it alone.

**J. ANDERSON:** They weren't informed, either.

**V. WHITE:** They left it alone, right, right. Things like negotiating electrical rates and things like that where I did not have the expertise. I didn't pretend to know. I just left them alone.

**J. ANDERSON:** Did you feel like you faced any kind of sexist opposition?

**V. WHITE:** Oh yes. Oh yes, there were staff members who I felt were very sexist. Not more than probably one or so. That person was very difficult to deal with and I found he dealt with the whole council at a very improper level, and they all had trouble with him.

**J. ANDERSON:** Heavy handed?

**V. WHITE:** Intimidated them, terribly. He was the source of a lot of contention. I told the mayor, "If you don't fire him, I'm gonna open him up and let him bleed right in front of everybody." The mayor said, "I'm afraid of him, you go ahead and do it," and so I found that, you know, I had to sometimes stick up for myself that way.

**J. ANDERSON:** So. . . but what kind of sexist things did. . .

**V. WHITE:** Well, the most blatant example. . .they were all little innuendoes and they were supposed to be cute and all this and you know any opportunity he could take to show my lack of knowledge or whatever, you know, was fine and I would catch myself playing the school marm and shaking my pencil at him and saying, you know, "You are out of order and you either keep your mouth shut or else." You see? He would be fine and the mayor would let me do it. That was very difficult for me because I felt it wasn't my place as a councilman to do that. I told the mayor that and I said, you know, "He is. . .he knows he's out of order and he's enjoying this as if it was okay." Now I will say this man and I would go drink beer afterwards and all would be forgotten. But that's politics. I had been in politics in other ways in other kinds of things. . . not elected politics. . . but I'd been in politics long enough to know there are ways to get things done and there are ways not to get things done. You might as well not beat your head against a brick wall. I found that the way around this man was to be just as nice as I can be and boy when I entered council chambers, and he wanted to go around again, then we did it and we kept it confined to there. Anyway, but the worst thing he did was towards the end of my term on the council. He spoke up and . . . out of order, he was always out of order. . . and said that he did not feel. . . and because of that, he shaped council policy. He intimidated the councilmen and the audience on to the point where he shaped policy, which I said, is wrong. It is unconstitutionally wrong. This man does not have this power designated by his position. There were people who said they wouldn't even come to the council meetings to speak up on an issue anymore because they . . . he was allowed to make them look foolish and so forth. So anyway, I spoke up on an issue and it was one that he was trying to kinda throw his weight around on and he said. . .and I said, "Well, the vibes I'm getting from the public is this. . ." and he said, "Oh, and where Miss White, do you get these vibes from your public? Sitting round with other housewives over coffee, I presume."

**J. ANDERSON:** Gosh!





mayor pro-tem as the senior councilman on the council. So I was in that capacity for about 3 and a half years. So whenever the mayor was out of town or whatever and I took the meetings and there was a great deal I think of status among the other council members that went with that. That, you know, was kind of nice and so they, you know . . .and they accepted that, that was fine. I did not. . .I had been a school teacher, high school English teacher, and I really found that there were times when I had to deal with them . .

**J. ANDERSON:** [laughs] As a high school teacher would?

**V. WHITE:** As a high school teacher would and so you know, if they started cracking sexist jokes, which were common, I was Cheney's favorite street walker, Cheney's favorite mother, you know, they went on and on and on and I would say "fine", I still remember the Cheney Christmas party the council Christmas party, where I was the only woman and I don't know what happened but, they had this Christmas party every year and they decided that I could stand under the mistletoe, and I said, "Forget it boys, I'm really tired." I found that. . . and I found this always. . . if you could joke about these sexist things that they would say to try to be kind of funny in an awkward way, but I had worked with men in my job and my educational setting for so long where often times you were out in the field and you were in rough situations, you'd just handed it right back to them. They left you alone, it was no problem. You know. .

**J. ANDERSON:** The point gets there.

**V. WHITE:** I never considered it harassment. You know, I could harass them in the very same way by saying, you know, "Don't flatter yourself. I wouldn't look twice at you if I didn't happen to know that you were such a sweet person underneath that ugly exterior." [both laugh] So, we got along okay. That was good.

**J. ANDERSON:** Now . . switching gears here, before you were on the Council, you'd said you'd spent what . . . five, seven years. . .

**V. WHITE:** Yeah, I'd spent a total of eight years.

**J. ANDERSON:** On the community service council?

**V. WHITE:** Right, right.

**J. ANDERSON:** Now can you tell us. . . tell us about the community service council? What you know about it historically, and what you did on it? Can you do that?

**V. WHITE:** I really don't know how long it had been in existence before I came to Cheney. But I had been here about a year and a half the person who was in charge of the welfare services arm of the community service council asked me to fill her position and that was my first experience and I gathered that this welfare part of the service council had been fairly new. Up 'til then it had been a committee, which acted as a coalition to coordinate social service activities . . . Among all of the social service groups in town the churches, the clubs, this sort of thing, and, because at that time when I came to town was barely 3000 people or a little over 3000 people, it was still easy to. . .and this was before food stamps and so forth. . . and it was easy to locate people in need, and if people had a temporary need, their children needed dental work or glasses or you had a house fire where everyone's belongings were left or lost, this sort of thing, there was a need to coordinate efforts because there were so many groups, everybody was out doing their thing and you had nothing that was unified. The biggest thing was the Christmas thing. I started . . .

**J. ANDERSON:** So you don't have all these different groups giving out Christmas wrap and . .

**V. WHITE:** Yeah. Duplications, right.

**J. ANDERSON:** With other people being left out.

**V. WHITE:** Right, exactly. That was going on and so they coordinated this under one arm of the service council and that was my job. [sounds like: "Althema"] White Hill helped me throughout all of it and really, she was, almost, my partner in a lot of it. I had to do anything of the initiating work, but she really was another person who was really a help. She was the treasurer for the service council. Without the money that was donated by each of these groups, . . I couldn't do much work. Now, the big thing that I started was the food bank. That started in my garage. Yeah, and that started first in my basement, then in my garage. That started right during the same time food stamps started. There was a need for some sort of emergency food help before food stamps and agency welfare and this sort of thing could take over. Then, pretty soon, we became more of an advocacy board in that we would see. . . I would see that the people got to the proper agency.

**J. ANDERSON:** Right.

**V. WHITE:** For help. As the town grew it began to take on, you know, a little more of an organized, big town thing. So that now the food bank is quite large and they have a clothing bank and this sort of thing.

**J. ANDERSON:** Would you just get calls from people? How would they know your number?

**V. WHITE:** Okay, generally I would get referrals from the ministers and from the schools. I might have. . . it was a horrendous job. I, at Christmas time. . .on Christmas Eve while other people were, you know, enjoying Christmas Eve, I was out, still getting stuff to families and often times it was just Althema and I, you know, just delivering until we had it all done. Many times Christmas day, I was, you know, people have terrible emergencies on holidays and . . . often times Christmas day you would get a call and one Christmas day we ended up with a house full of children. The mother had been called. . .or had been taken to the hospital it was an emergency and the children were ill, very ill, and no place to take them and you know, that sort of thing. During the early seventies and late sixties particularly, we had a lot of people on the road, so-called 'hippies' that were moving through and that was very difficult because some of those people were in tremendous need. They were transients. They didn't intend to stay in the community. Some of them stayed because we gave such good service, you know, we really had to, many times I had a lot of judgment thing going on where I had to refuse service because we would get hobos that would come through and they would go to jail. The police would call me and they would go to the police department, and the police wouldn't put them in jail and give them a meal, but they would call me and I would have to go down and deal with these men. Sometimes I had to be really tough. Another person who was my. . . I shouldn't say that . . . Althelma was the only one, Dede Gammon was my absolute savior during that entire time. I mean that woman just. . . and she knew more ways to feed people or get fuel. That was the other big thing we always needed every winter was fuel.

**J. ANDERSON:** Gas to get out of town?

**V. WHITE:** No, oil.

**J. ANDERSON:** Oil?

**V. WHITE:** Yes, we had a lot of families that were . . . that were stranded. Fewer families after the freeway went through because the main highway didn't come through town.

**J. ANDERSON:** Oh, okay.

**V. WHITE:** That made a difference. But as fuel oil prices began to go up, we ended up getting a lot of fuel calls that would kind of exhaust our entire year's budget in a month or two. Dee was just wonderful, and she was out always on Christmas Eve too. You know, we really had a big job. She had done that work up until the service council and myself took it over, she had done it single-handedly herself.

**J. ANDERSON:** Was the community service council mainly women?

**V. WHITE:** Not always. Many times the chairman was a man. Many times the... because of course it was represented by all the ministers, you see? Many times I would say it was a good half-and-half representation. The ministers were a wonderful help too. For both referrals and then checking out families to be sure they were truly needy. Many of these families that I personally dealt with, I still see. They tell me how they're doing and. . . my thing when I was in the service council, I had. . . my husband and I had been through some very bad years ourselves and we ...with... illness and no money and these kinds of things, so I could really relate to what these people were going through. Often times, their indigenous was caused by illness, chronic illness, and they were just laid low by doctor bills.

**J. ANDERSON:** And exhaustion.

**V. WHITE:** Well exhaustion mentally and physically exhausted as well as loss of job and because maybe the breadwinner became disabled and these kinds of things. So anyway, the one thing that I remember the most was, you know, the gratefulness you feel and the helplessness you feel in not being able to reciprocate when this help is offered and it's a pretty rough thing not to be able to do something. So whenever I went to a home, invariably, I was offered some sort of hospitality. One family it was Christmas eve and they had, he worked for a dairy, and so they had a half a gallon of milk and a quart of dill pickles . . . part of a quart, and nothing else in the house to eat, four little children and of course, no Christmas gifts, no nothing. I sat down in her kitchen and someone had given them enough sugar and she had a little flour that she was making some Christmas cookies with the last of their ingredients, and they made me sit while they made these cookies for me. They were the kind that they made with an iron so they just take like an egg and some flour and some milk or something, and rolled the powdered sugar and that was their last thing. I still remember going to the store then, and I did buy the food for them, mainly because they didn't know how to shop. So I would buy the food for them and this sort of thing and then share with them whatever they had. One time it was dried fruit on the floor of a van, was all the mother had and the welfare was going to take away her children, and I intercepted her out on a country road and said I, you know, "Don't leave, I think. . ." and her children needed very great health care, they had terrific health care needs. She was a good mother. She was a Buddhist, and they were taking away the children because she was a non-Christian mother. I had stopped her on the road to tell her that we had stopped this court action and you know, I was following her in my car, and the only thing she had to give me were these dried figs that had been rolling around in

the bottom of her van, and I ate them, and it was a ritual. It was a very interesting thing that had to go on. I went in homes and ate off of plates that I know had not been washed. I'm sure they didn't have water. I was in one home where the social workers had just cringed. You couldn't even drive to the door, and the floor in the house was so rotten, you had to watch where you stepped so you didn't go down through the floor, and they just picked up a coffee cup and poured me a cup of coffee and I drank it down. Anyway, and those people, I would put to work helping me with families the next year, and they were wonderful.

**J. ANDERSON:** That's great.

**V. WHITE:** Yeah they were the best people and they knew how to do it so there was no awkwardness, so that there was no. . . I had groups who said, "We'll give money for a family if we can go watch them receive the gifts and the food of our club." I refused things. I said no. I said, "dignity" you know, is important here.

**J. ANDERSON:** No "lady bountiful"?

**V. WHITE:** No way. No way. I went in blue jeans, I had an old '54 Chevrolet, which was the only car we had which, was falling apart, and we related to each other immediately, you know, that was the way it was. I just said, "I've been here, don't be ashamed, you know, and we'll do what we can," and it was great work, but it was really demanding. The council, after I got on the council, I just could no longer do it.

**J. ANDERSON:** You were considered quite successful at that job, and considered in the community as though you did a superb job doing that kind of thing. Do you think the fact that you're a woman . . .

**V. WHITE:** Yes.

**J. ANDERSON:** . . . influence the way you were able to do. . . why? How?

**V. WHITE:** Again, I think everybody is afraid of their mothers. They also look to their mothers for comfort you know and I found that, okay it was hard for the men. It was hard for the men you know to have me go to their house and know that they could not take care of their families and you just say, "It's okay. I understand," and then you deal with the wives. The other thing is I invented ways to make it look like the fathers had provided. I would go at night with the food after the children were in bed. So then the children would get up and there would be the food. Or I would take the men with me to the store, or let the men carry the food in from the car to, you know, "Gee, we don't know how dad did it, but look what he did." You see? These were mostly all homes with men in them. Not like today where there are single parent homes. The other thing, you know, that was kind of interesting, toys were given to me for the Christmas thing. I also asked for money from the city council for wrapping paper. I would then make an appointment with the parents to come to my house. I would then leave them alone in my garage or in my basement. I said, "All I ask you is to not take more than your share. But you choose what you want for your children." It's just like this was a store. "Then *you* take paper home and *you* wrap them and *you* put them under the tree for *your* children. I don't bring toys. . . *you* bring toys to *your* children." Many times there would be a little something there for the wife. A little knick-knack or something pretty and this was a real good thing to do. As I said, you know, having been there I remember it's a terrible trip to be. . . you know, absolutely unable to provide, you know and so anyway that was one thing I

remember. You could tell the men were very grateful that you just understood. The other thing is I never allowed my husband to be part of this.

**J. ANDERSON:** Why?

**V. WHITE:** They could interact with a woman, but it was hard to have a man who has a job see them come.

**J. ANDERSON:** Fearing judgment that they'd be in a judgmental way?

**V. WHITE:** No, I think it was just hard for them. I think it was just hard for them and because these men had this pride thing about work and about the work they do and in most cases, these men were unemployed. One had been electrocuted and very badly injured. They were not . . . they were victims. They were not lazy, unemployed people. They were victims of some sort of thing. Nervous breakdowns, injuries, whatever. You know, and so consequently I kept him out of the picture, which was okay because he was taking care of my children who were small.

**J. ANDERSON:** [laughs] While you're out doing this.

**V. WHITE:** Yes, yes.

**J. ANDERSON:** Okay, in considering past, present, and Cheney, who do you think is one of the most influential women in Cheney? Woman? Whatever.

**V. WHITE:** Well. . . there are several that stand out in my head. Certainly Woody Johnson would have been one of the women that I think did so much and really in ways went largely unrecognized. Marrit Johnson's wife, and she helped get the library started and she was a real mover. She also got the county health clinic here, and she had time to do all kinds of other things too. Another one that, you know, is tops in my book was, and is, Dede Gammon, Doctor Wilfred Gammon's wife. The problem is these women did it all when the town was small. I mean, they did so much. They galvanized other women to action. They took the reigns, so to speak, and then now the town is larger plus I think people have more of a public conscience in an anonymous way, I mean, people just kind of do things now, and they don't necessarily know everyone on their committee, or whatever. They're not even neighbors and friends with, maybe, of the people you work with. So these people don't stand out like they once did. So those are two women. One of the really delightful women that was my friend, my very close friend was Cecil Dryden. As an academic woman, she was a wonderful person but I don't know that she was active in community affairs. I mean, she really didn't play that role, she stayed in the academic role. Another one that that old timers will always remember, is Lulu Cunning. She has been gone, died several years ago, but she was the mover and shaker of the entire community. She was very active in the American Federation of Women's club and she and her friends, many of whom I did not know that well, you know, many of them are still alive and they really have done lots of things in the community. But anyway, Lulu had everybody afraid of her, and she could be caustic and difficult and tough but she was well meaning and she worked very, very hard. A lot of things, like the Tillicum Museum, exist because of her inexhaustible effort. Then we had little Alice Haig, and somebody should get her story.

**J. ANDERSON:** Who's Alice Haig?

**V. WHITE:** Alice Haig (or maybe Hague) is a woman who used to be kind of the town character downtown in Cheney, who, very tiny little lady, still alive. All the downtown people knew her and took care of her. She had had a very kind of tragic upbringing. She

was apparently in the hospital at Eastern, and a man met her, fell in love with her, an older man, and took her out and married her and when he died, there was no-one to really look after her. She came into money apparently of his and some bouncer who was a cook at the [sounds like: "beehive"], got a hold of her, married her for her money, and then left on a bus with her money, cleaned her out and for years, and in fact until she just. . . maybe she still tries to do it. . . she would periodically go and meet the bus from Seattle . .

**J. ANDERSON:** Oh!

**V. WHITE:** . . . and wait. Wait for him to come. I mean for years and years, and she wasn't influential in the traditional source, but she is exemplary, but she is you know, not quite right. Wears very strange clothing, very frail, very feeble. But everyone downtown has always. . . everyone has taken care of her. She used to sweep out the stores and. . . swept the streets and swept the stores, pick up leaves and pick up chestnuts and kept the boulevards clean, and you know, wonderful, wonderful things. She's only influential in the way in which she brought out all the good things in people who, all of us who took care of her. Everybody, everybody took care of her.

**J. ANDERSON:** Cheney. . . what do you think the general reaction of men in Cheney has been to projects that we normally consider women's projects?

**V. WHITE:** Well, I think overall, they're positive. I look back at women like Lulu Cuning and I remember the senior citizens, the men absolutely would not go against what she said, and the women dominate the senior citizen groups. I think we're getting right back to the phenomenon that I saw on the council. In fact, one of the councilmen even said this to me, "We expect you to do more, because women have more time for these things." Part of it is that their work does not allow them or give them opportunities to develop some of those same organizational skills. These women in the church clubs and all these things really are organizers and I think the men realize that. I think that now in this day and age, you go to the church bazaars and you see men enjoying sharing you know the work of the day and whatever. I think. . . it's really appreciated. . . being a historian and having done the history of Cheney, I've spent a lot of time looking back on the research, you know, researching earlier times. I researched only pre-1900s period. But the men did not fool around with the women and their clubs and organizations. All the libraries and these kinds of . . . fire departments. . . all these kinds of things that had to be organized by volunteer help were done by women and the men knew it.

**J. ANDERSON:** That was their thing.

**V. WHITE:** Yeah. Right. I think to a large extent they still, down deep, know this and they acquiesce to women and having served on so many kinds of committees and things here in town, I've always felt this coming through. They're always saying, "Well, what do you think?" and they mean it. They really want help, and part of it is they are just too busy.

**J. ANDERSON:** So you really feel that women were important historically in Cheney?

**V. WHITE:** Oh yes. Oh yes. Yes, right. Women were very quick to so-call civilize the frontier, and in a rural area, such as Cheney the frontier is always threatening to encroach again. So in that many of these women were farm women and they need this contact and they were very anxious to organize grange societies and that sort of thing, so I think we're looking at a phenomenon that is very old and is very intact. If anything will drive it underground or maybe democratize it and also drive more men into it, is the

phenomenon of more women working. More men, I think, are willing to do this too. I think they're realizing that this isn't women's work anymore. They feel good about it.

**J. ANDERSON:** Ginny you were a child of the time. . .what do you remember about World War II? Anything that stands out in your mind? Blackouts or. . .

**V. WHITE:** I don't remember blackouts. I was in Portland growing up at the time of the war. I do remember my father didn't have to go to war which was very unusual because he was in a vital occupation in the food service industry which the grocery business was. So I can remember going to school in 1945-'46 when I started school, with many children whose fathers did not have work. Many of my friends were in bad straits because they were living in post-war housing and their fathers were coming back and trying to find work and that sort of thing. So I remember that. I also remember going to the beaches off the coast of Oregon and seeing the barbed wire. I kind of vaguely about the barbed wire but I remember the armed patrol, very definitely. I also remember my relatives, my younger relatives who were in the service and they would come home on leave, many of them were in the air force, and they would bring men with them who were also young, and some of them would never come back. You know, I mean it would be the kind of thing. . . I remember being the flower girl in two different military weddings. You know, with the swords and the military escorts and you know that sort of thing and many of those men. . .and I was a little girl and I really you know, these guys. . . one would play the accordion, and he would come to our house all the time. He did not come back and of course I can remember my parents dealing with this as a little child it didn't really mean much to me because of course, I was a preschooler at that stage. So, I remember that, I remember my relatives would also talk about the shipyards. My aunts went away up in the shipyards and those kinds of things. You see because we were close enough to Bremerton and then we'd go up to the Seattle, Spokane and Bremerton and work in the shipyards up there, so being on the coast of Oregon and then one of the big things I remember is that I was taught to hate the Japs and the Germans. I mean, you know, that was the big thing, you hated the Japs and the Germans.

**J. ANDERSON:** They had green blood or something.

**V. WHITE:** Yes! Oh, yes, and they were going to knife you, they had knives under their fingernails, you know. The year I started school, there was no kindergarten, I started first grade, and one of the little girl was a Japanese girl right out of an internment camp. I grew up in a Japanese/American community. Milwaukee was a truck guarding community which had lots of Italians. . .no Germans. . . and many Japanese. These were all Japanese who had to start again after the war. My parents and as soon as the war was over, those Japanese kids were okay. One Japanese girl I went all the way through college. I mean, from first grade all the way through she was at every birthday party and every event in my life and I've always kind of wondered how my parents looked on that. You know. . .

**J. ANDERSON:** Probably how the switch could be made.

**V. WHITE:** Yeah, so quickly. My mother. . . is possibly of Chinese extraction. We don't know, but she looks very Chinese, and so I grew up with people thinking my mother was Chinese and maybe my. . .I mean, she really looks Chinese. There's a reason to believe in looking back in the family genealogy was done . . . and there probably is a Chinese relative somewhere . . . anyway, and so [tape ends]



>>>>>>End of Side 2<<<<<<<<<

>>>>>>Beginning of Side 3<<<<<<<<<

**J. ANDERSON:** I'm interviewing Virginia White for the Cheney Women's Oral History Project. This is tape number 2. [laughs] Continuing. . . her topics have concerned government and politics and the community service council. The date is June 2nd, 1982.

**J. ANDERSON:** Ginnie we're talking a little bit about World War II, and why don't you continue on that subject.

**V. WHITE:** Well, I just . . . I, I deal with women's history in my work, and so now I've had the opportunity to do some research, and looking back, I remember as a child growing up that even into high school, most of my teachers were women, and they were very well respected. They were science teachers, math teachers. . . I had wonderful role models. In fact, when I entered Junior High, I went right to the library and I said, "I want anything you have on forest rangers, because I'm going to be a woman forest ranger," and that was it. I was going to do this, and so you know I don't know but I think in that era, there are many women who are left alone by the war. . . losing people in the war or whatever. Plus, they had the good role models of the '20s and '30s to follow. These wonderful women who were very career oriented during the '20s and '30s, and it's very interesting because those women probably had very profound effects on my life and my thinking and how many of them there were. You know, that education up through even through secondary education was still dominated by women when I went to high school and junior high and so forth, so I think that's an interesting, interesting thing, and they were very un-self-conscious about the fact that many of them were mathematicians. All of my math teachers were women. I never had. . . and I did go all the way into higher math. I never had a man math teacher.

**J. ANDERSON:** Till college.

**V. WHITE:** Till college.

**J. ANDERSON:** What else stands about the '50s, I mean, you were in high school in the 50s. Is that a dead like time for you?

**V. WHITE:** No. It sure wasn't Happy Days. It was not. . . it was a very socially rigid time. My parent's expectations and the parents of my friends, their expectations were very, very high. You were going to be the Partridge family or else. I mean there was just . . . it was so unrealistic, we really walked right into the Kennedy years and the Vietnam War with our eyes wide open. I can still remember saying, "Kennedy," you know, we all had this party of mourning because. . . Kennedy had been elected president, and he had come to Oregon State so I'd gotten to see him which was a wonderful thing. We just knew that we were going to hell in a hand basket because this liberal democrat had gotten in. What we did not know, I can remember the first professor when I was a freshman, in '57 in my English class saying, "You will go read 'Das Capital' and 'Communist Manifesto'." I was so excited because I knew my parents would freak. I can still remember my father coming to visit me and . . . I was a foreign student counselor in college. I mean, I'd had these Japanese kids at home, but I hadn't met anybody else. I loved it so, and how upset my father was that I was involved with all these. . . kids. . . mostly south American kids. Mostly men too, some of them were very nice looking men. Yes, but anyway, the 50s were. . . they were really a strange time to be alive. I feel very sorry

for my mother who was a very talented woman, but very frustrated by my father's expectations, that she stayed at home, cook, clean, raise children, and be beautiful, and nothing else. Don't handle money. . . to this day she can't balance the checkbook. As the only. . . there were no boys in my family and I was the oldest girl, and they say oldest girls who are. . .who have a good thing with their fathers generally. . .you know, the son that wasn't born kind of thing. My father kind of transferred to me, the history. He drug me through more forts and historical sites when I was a child, and he never did that for my mother or my younger sister. But you know he was grooming me for this something somewhere I think. It's kind of fun now to see it all come true. He kind of watches me run around, you know, doing my research and I think thinks he's created a monster. But the 50s were tough on women. The mothers and wives at that time. . . very tough. You know. . .

**J. ANDERSON:** The 60s changed all that?

**V. WHITE:** It did, it just made those poor women frustrated, I'm sure. Because women at my mother's age, it was too late for them to get out of the house. All they knew was how to play bridge or whatever. I mean they only perceived themselves in this role, and the struggle of the mothers of my friends and my own mother included is very, very sad. You know, you see now these women getting old looking at their daughters and as my mother said to me one day, "You know, I think I needed a women's center," you know, she said, "I think I need that." You know?

**J. ANDERSON:** Yeah.

**V. WHITE:** Very sad because it's too late and they know that.

**J. ANDERSON:** They didn't really talk to other women about those kinds of things?

**V. WHITE:** No! Those things were not something, I mean, you did not share your troubles, you did not tell how much money your husband made. . . There were certain things that were taboo, you know, and these poor women went into. . . headlong into the 1960s. They had daughters that lived with people, they had you know, I mean, daughters who'd say, "Hey, I don't want to live in a split level" and were pulling out of their pants suits. "I want to wear blue jeans and go to Africa. . . and do my thing." or whatever. That was really hard for women of my mother's generation. That was very hard and I was not. . .I was always a renegade, and my mother never approved of any of the things I did. But, I was a little too young to get caught in that, you know, like the Vietnam War thing. . .by that, I was home with babies of my own and could not be active in that. . .I would have made a great hippie, I'm sure. [both laugh]

**J. ANDERSON:** What. . . has the women's liberation movement affected you?

**V. WHITE:** Very definitely. Very definitely. I lost my first teaching opportunity going into an interview with a superintendent who said, "You're just the person we want for our accelerated science program which we want someone to build. But because you're a woman, I assume you're going to get pregnant and leave in a year or so, so therefore, I'm going to hire a man." Deadly.

**J. ANDERSON:** Now, when was that? Give me a date for that.

**V. WHITE:** '61

**J. ANDERSON:** Okay.

**V. WHITE:** 1961. I . . . there was no such thing as job discrimination in those days. You had to like it or lump it. That was when the pill was brand new. We all knew that

we got pregnant and couldn't help it. You know, somewhat. . . so anyway, I went on then to another teaching job and they offered me the head of their science department after one year, but then their science person. . . I was teaching English. . . then their science person decided to stay and not leave, and so I said, "No. I'm going back and do my master's" and I had a good research job offered to me that would have paid my way through school, plus my husband's tuition, in graduate school, plus my sister's tuition in undergraduate school, and I was supporting those people. My father expected that of me, and he just told me, he said, "I know you want to go on and do something else, but you have to support the family and you know I can't do it alone and you have to help me with your sisters." So I did that and that was another thing that was very hard in that it was expected that I didn't need this, you see, I mean my father then when I got married and had babies said, "Okay, no masters degree. You are going to stay home and not work." You know, "You're really spending too much time in school," and at that time I was working. . . I was tutoring remedial reading students for a school district five nights a week plus I had my own newborn baby, plus I had a four year old ten hours a day and was in graduate school in biological oceanography, and I did it. I just wanted that degree so badly, and I had enough sense to know that if I didn't get it then, I probably wouldn't get back, and that's what happened. You know, in that field, there's no dropping out for a couple of years. I was at the time where the interface of hand calculations versus computers. By the time I got ready to go back in about three years, it had all gone computers and there was no way. You know, so anyway, but the interesting thing was, was that the entire expectation that I then, with this education, with all these goals stay home and not work. That was very hard, but what really got hard was when I said, "Okay, you always wanted to write. Turn this mess into an opportunity. Start doing research on your own. Forget about the advanced degree, you don't need it to do what you want to do. Go on, do your research, start your historic research. . ." which I did when my . . . second son was a baby, and we had come to Cheney by that time, okay. But the rough thing was that all the other women went to work. I took the worst flack from other women who said, "Gee, wouldn't it be nice to stay home all day so a man could take care of you? I would sure love to do that." They didn't realize that you traded the nice clothes, the nice house, the nice furniture, because you didn't have money. You know, you didn't have money for daycare, you didn't have money for nights out. . . you know, there were a lot of things you were giving up to pay this price to be self-employed, and that you were indeed, self-employed. You were not a parasite of the system, and that was the hardest thing, and the movement has been very hard on women, and I now work in an advocacy position with other private artists, most of whom are women. I helped start a coalition in Spokane which is gradually becoming regional, for. . . fiber artists who are self-employed who want to raise their professional stature, this kind of thing. Because I'm interested in women's history, through their folk art forms and that sort of things, I got into this. I'm also working with refugee women in starting up a group to help them market their work and that sort of thing. The thing I always have to deal with with these women with the thing that I went through is that your work, whatever it is, has dignity. Whether you're getting a paycheck or not, it has dignity. If it is meaningful to you, if it gives meaning to your life and. . . and does not parasitize a husband or whatever. Which mine did not. I earned the money for all my materials: my books, everything that I

needed to do my work from the teaching and things I've gotten in conjunction and being on the council and the other things I've done. Anyway, it has been hard, and those women are saying the same thing. They are saying, "I have chosen to be an artist, but there is no respectability because people say, 'Oh, aren't you lucky you have a husband to take care of you?'" Now, many of those women are working harder in many ways than the women in the 9 to 5 jobs, because they have given up so much to do what they must do, you know.

**J. ANDERSON:** So you think the women's movement has really been hard on women?

**V. WHITE:** In some aspects. In some ways. I mean, there are good things and there are bad things. But, that has been a very hard thing. Because I see it with the women now in economic hard times that are losing their jobs. My friends who have gotten jobs who have gone out who. . . because our society identifies you by your work and by it. . . whatever it generates, you see. Alright, those women are losing their jobs, and they're now saying, "What am I going to do? What meaning is left for me, because my identity is going to be taken away from me." I feel so sorry for them, you know, because I know how they feel. I know how hard I worked to achieve my goal to become a researcher in, not necessarily in science, but I wanted to be a researcher and I wanted to write about my research, and I have had dreadful things said to me by both men and women about. . . how lucky I was to have a husband who would put up with my . . . my idleness. . . or whatever. Not realizing that I baked all our bread I did not have enough money for a dishwasher or. . . all these things that I had to do without to pursue that and my husband, fortunately, said, "This is what you want to do. Why do you want to be somebody else's research technician? Why not do this thing you wanted to do?" and he said, "I'll give up a camper and a color TV and things. . . we don't have a lot of things that other people have.

**J. ANDERSON:** For a happy life.

**V. WHITE:** For a happy. . . happy for both of us. He wanted me to raise our children and that was something we agreed that I would not work till those children were out of school. Well, now they're coming to that point and there was no way I could stop working. I'm not made that way, so I . . . figured we'll, I'm stuck with a bad deal but. . . when life hands you lemons, make lemonade.

**J. ANDERSON:** Oh, wow. [laughs]

**V. WHITE:** That is what I live by. There's no other way to look at it. So my goal has now become to help other women achieve that. I can only do it in the fine arts because I frankly don't have. . . there are so many out there. So now I look for women who are working in a vacuum, producing in a vacuum, who need support networks, and we've got something really big going, I think, here.

**J. ANDERSON:** I have one last question for you, and that's: What your thoughts are on the. . . now defunct equal rights movement? [both laugh] Would you like to comment briefly on that?

**V. WHITE:** Let me tell ya... I was coming to Spokane through one of the skywalks just before the final vote was taken and here was this cute young girl working for one of the radio stations. She had the mic in her hand and was taping me. . . it may have even been filmed, I don't know. She said, "Do you mind if I ask you what you think of, some things about the ERA?" I said, "No, not at all." She. . . her question was, "Do you think it's

really necessary for the ERA, for women to get job equality?" I said, "You bet your sweet bippy." I said, "I lost a job because there was no ERA, and I needed that job." I said, I tell you, "It's never going to happen until you put some teeth in the law. It isn't going to happen." She absolutely, the smile went off her face, I mean, she was stunned. I don't think she ever thought about it. Well, I mean, she was young enough to be my daughter and I wanted to say, "Sweetheart, you'd better hope the ERA passes." You know?

**J. ANDERSON:** Yeah. Yeah.

**V. WHITE:** Because these gals now have grown up expecting what the rest of us have worked hard to achieve for them you know, I just feel sorry for them. I don't know what'll happen to them, poor things. Anyway. . .

**J. ANDERSON:** Thank you for the interview.

**V. WHITE:** Thank you. [tape cuts out]

>>>>>>>>>End of Interview<<<<<<<<<<<