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Oral history interview transcript with Helen Boots

Helen Boots

Paul Shumaker

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HELEN BOOTS
INTERVIEWED BY PAUL SHUMAKER
EWU Women's Oral History Project
EWU 984-0094 #8
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SHUMAKER: This is Paul Shumaker interviewing Helen Boots for the Cheney Women's Oral History Project. Her topics concern early education in Cheney. The date is February 23rd, 1983.

SHUMAKER: Helen, when and where were you born?

BOOTS: On January the 26th, 1921 on the farm, my father's farm which is 8 miles west of Plaza. I was born in the same house, the same room, in the same bed as my father.

SHUMAKER: What brought your family to the Cheney area, just your father?

BOOTS: His dad came to the area first from all the way down the Mississippi River across Panama Canal area on a train up to Riverside, California, and then from horseback they rode up to two different places in Oregon. Then they came on up to the Tekoa area in 1875 and so to this area in 1877 and the farm has been in the family since then.

SHUMAKER: And it still is?

Boots: Still is, yeah.

SHUMAKER: What did your parents do for a living?

BOOTS: Farmed.

SHUMAKER: I'm going to ask about your education, too. Where did you go to school?

BOOTS: I went to a little school, for official names it was Sander's branch on Sanders Creek out about 15 miles out of Cheney and for everybody's information, it was called Brush College. I went there from grades one through eight. And then we had to come in to Cheney for high school.

SHUMAKER: Is that building still there?

BOOTS: The building is, it's been moved a little but the building is still there. It was built in 1904-05, my father was one of them that helped build it.

SHUMAKER: So, how many students going there?

BOOTS: Well, it varied from about 20 and it got down to the last year I was there, there were 4 students in the school.

SHUMAKER: When did you graduate from high school?

BOOTS: In 1938 from Cheney High School.

SHUMAKER: Now that is that pretty much the same area as it is now? Where was the Cheney High School located at?

BOOTS: Down on 4th which is the administration building today, It's down on 4th and College.

SHUMAKER: How many were in your graduating class ?

BOOTS: Oh, maybe it was about 50 some kids from high school. Most people I've ever seen in one group up to that time.

SHUMAKER: During these years, what local events or issues most stand out in your mind nationally or locally?

BOOTS: Nationally I think probably the most...well it wouldn't be national, it was the education problem and the consolidation problem of schools at about that time was the

big issue in our communities. Because they were the larger school like Cheney were reaching out and taking in the little school districts, and the communities were losing their school. And that's what made a community at the time.

SHUMAKER: So in other words, you had to establish there and ...

BOOTS: You had to, they were closing up the schools and started bussing.

SHUMAKER: And then you went on to Eastern?

BOOTS: I started at Eastern in the fall of '38.

SHUMAKER: Did you go right on to...you said you started, did you.

BOOTS: I took what was, at that time, a two year course in it had to do with secretarial sciences. Mostly, typing, shorthand, bookkeeping and speech, and then following my two years there, I got this job down in Yakima as a secretary at the radio station and did commercials.

SHUMAKER: You did?

BOOTS: Which was quite a move.

SHUMAKER: I understand you did some post-graduate work after Eastern there?

BOOTS: I came back after I got out of the service and went back and finished my four year degree at Eastern and then I have done a lot of post-graduate work with special-ed.

SHUMAKER: You ...

BOOTS: Went in, in 42... '43, excuse me, 1943 and in February of '43 and was discharged in December of '45.

SHUMAKER: What was your job? What did you do in the service?

BOOTS: I was most of the time I was in recruiting and introduction. Even in there I was teaching other secretarial skills. But most of the time I was doing recruiting, we were going out recruiting all over night service command, and we were, oh for a while I was on train duty, going between Portland and Des Moines, Iowa taking troops back, new recruits.

SHUMAKER: There're some stories you might want to share?

BOOTS: Oh, it was probably the thing that stands out most, well, maybe two things. One of them was the first time that I had to get up and talk to a group. They said there'd probably be about 20 people at a meeting in Bell College, California, and so they sent me back to talk to that big... it seemed like there was better than 500 people and I walked in, If anyone had asked me my name, I know I couldn't have told them, and then we made training films in Hollywood, and what a thrill that was. We could go through the brown derby and all those places. We just walked in and they were tickled to see you and you were served the most wonderful meals. It was so exciting and then I think probably the most exciting and most thrilling thing was when I was selected for the March Service Command marching unit, and we were in the parade when General MacArthur was doing some marching and me... I thought he was a wonderful, wonderful person. To be able to lead that group in marching I was extremely thrilled.

SHUMAKER: When and where did you meet your husband?

BOOTS: Well, I met him when... on the farm out here. We had known each other about fourteen years or so, and we both got out of the service about the same time, and then we got married the next year.

SHUMAKER: Besides being a housewife and a mother too, what occupations have you pursued? I know you said something about that.

BOOTS: Just before I went in the service, I was a secretary to the then Governor to the state of Washington, Clancy Martin, who was from Cheney. Very good friends of my mothers and I presumed that's why I got the job. I'm not real sure, but I would imagine that would have a lot to do with it, but it was quite a thrill to be one of his secretaries. I was in an office down here at the transit, and since then I've mostly taught school. I was with the preschool up here at the college for three years and since 1960 I've been with the Medical Lake school district for special-ed.

SHUMAKER: And Lakeland?

BOOTS: No, I have not been with Lakeland. When I was first hired I was with a juvenile program at Eastern State Hospital, which started out great and one of our teachers passed away and I had to fulfill his shoes which was teaching behind the bars, the security building, and I had 17 young men that had either committed or attempted murder and I was right behind the 7 locked gates and was locked in the room with them. I really enjoyed it although it.

SHUMAKER: Were there any incidents or sort of.

BOOTS: None. About the...well, probably the very first day I was there, there were two boys, rather large boys, that moved their seats right up front, one on each side of my desk and there they sat all that time, and I don't think there was another young man in that room that dared to come near that desk. But I really felt well-protected but kids policed themselves, and they were really a delightful group and it was hard for me to ever believe, the youngest boy was eleven and it was hard for me to believe that a youngster that age could be in that situation. Then I went down to Oakland and I taught down there.

SHUMAKER: Did you always want to work with the retarded and for the crim...people that become crim... with criminal problems, was that something you always wanted to do?

BOOTS: That was the last thing I would ever have thought of doing. When I graduated after...well before I graduated from Eastern, Ray Giles called me in the placement office, said they had a request for someone who had attended or taught in a Weddingham school, and he said it's in a local area, would you be interested? And I didn't really think I would be and they insisted I should go for the interview, which I did. I liked the superintendent of the district. I thought he was...he made a tremendous impression on me. So then I went out to visit their situation and visit the principal who was probably one of the more outstanding principals that I have ever had the privilege of working for. The program just sounded exciting, so I did accept it and I had no idea that when I was going to school I would ever go into special-ed.

SHUMAKER: This is along the line of what we've been talking about and a summary of what your outside work, like you've done a lot of training manuals, recipe books, worked for other programs.

BOOTS: Right.

SHUMAKER: Can you tell me a little bit about them? Just ...we'll start with when you were in the training programs and stuff like that. Did you find that the programs weren't satisfactory?

BOOTS: There were no programs. There just were no programs for the youngsters, and we had kids that needed something on their level, and I was selected from the western states to be on the President's council for the mentally retarded, for the homework and vocational skills.

SHUMAKER: When was this?

BOOTS: It was in 1970, I think, I was supposed to come back in 1970 or '72. Then it was first started, when it very first started, and then I received a scholarship to Ohio State University, and there we worked. I was one of the 25 in the United States selected for the United States Department of Education. There was one gal from Puerto Rico in that group and we worked on what programs the retarded kids needed in, you know, the vocational... what they needed. As far as economics, we would get by and that sort of thing on what was overall needed, like designing clothes so the youngsters could dress themselves, because the types of clothes that are available for kids are too difficult for these younger kids to be able to dress themselves, and I got really interested in doing that type of work.

SHUMAKER: I find that interesting because I've never even thought about that aspect.

BOOTS: Very difficult for them to get into the average clothes that are available. And so I design clothes that the women in the sewing room make and make up for their kids and they see how they work and they work very well. It was really then, I would teach my sewing class as we would sew for the younger kids and we'd try different methods of clothing that they could get themselves out of easy, and I found that many times we would have classes in home economics, kids that were just hopelessly retarded... when we actually did it again, and they often were youngsters that were discipline problems, severe discipline problems. That was one area we didn't have a policy, so it became a real challenge to make it a program that was used with us. At the present time some of the manuals and programs I wrote are used throughout the United States and some are used in Canada.

SHUMAKER: That was my next question. I understand that some of these had been given to the...

BOOTS: Yes I was, I went to Regina, Saskatchewan in 1975, I think it was. I couldn't tell you exactly, to a convention, an international convention and had the honor of presenting many of the programs, slides and what-not. What we were using. Where then many were picked up immediately to be tried and I had quite a number of letters from places where they were tried and how successful they were and that makes me feel good.

SHUMAKER: I know you were involved with a lot of organizations here in Cheney. Could you give me a list of them?

BOOTS: Well, probably the one I've been involved in the longest is the East Cheney Grange, which I've been a member 49 years. I've been in the Grange, I've been at the county level and also state level as you... where you're in the committee for the state. Then there's the American Legion. I'd been the first woman commander in Cheney, the most which I thought was a great honor that they elected me for that position, and I've been with the American Legion out at the 1840 which is on the South Hill out here.

SHUMAKER: Actually it was Cheney Grange who I understand that you ... that they don't usually let you in that young?

BOOTS: I was a year younger than what was legal.

SHUMAKER: So you had a special or...

BOOTS: In fact, the Washington State Grange Master decided since I had been learning the Grange from my folks for about four years and had been attending all the meetings and everything we might as well make it legal, and so I was initiated in Grange a year before it was legal for me to be.

SHUMAKER: You're now involved in the genealogy project or you just completed it?

BOOTS: I have been, I have been working on the family genealogy research for quite some time. My cousin started it and when he died, his books were turned over to me and I was asked to continue it and so I have and, just this year, happily, I found one of my great-grandfather's brother's family that we had no idea where in the world they were or anything so it was very exciting. I have been doing this historical research project on the Rural Sander's Branch School, which has been extremely interesting and which I have just about completed. Going back to the day it was built and following through on it and the activities.

SHUMAKER: Now you obviously, you went to Sanders School.

BOOTS: Yes.

SHUMAKER: So you kind of were...would be parallel these two projects, or was it one?

BOOTS: Well, they parallel, because in going back on the genealogy, I traced back on our family, back at the time they came to the United States and had I enough time when we were in Germany, I would have liked to have gone and researched there because I know where they came from, from Bavaria, and it would have been very interesting to have had time to research that area, and that...no, I have followed the family research and the school wasn't too much of a project. I was stationed at Fort Wright college and I got so interested in it that I couldn't just drop it at the end of the program, I had to continue that research.

SHUMAKER: Well, how has your family been when it comes to this project? Are they feeling good?

BOOTS: Well, I think they think I'm a little nuts. Then when I find something and get real excited and they see, oh gee how it affects them. My daughter has gotten interested in it and she is following her father's line back and we went to Seattle's Winford College and took classes in genealogy and...

SHUMAKER: Were these summer school classes, or...

BOOTS: They were summer school classes.

SHUMAKER: That's a ...what do you consider the most frustrating thing about genealogy?

BOOTS: Well...

SHUMAKER: Well if you could...

BOOTS: If you could just find legal documents, but back in the 1700s, there's not much to follow, and I think I have learned a lot about United States history and in as much as where the early states were. You think of Pennsylvania, you do not think of Virginia being up there and things like that. I did learn a lot of early history that I'd never read about, never bothered with.

SHUMAKER: What did you find to be the most fulfilling part of your...?

BOOTS: Oh, I think like living in around Cheney, the early stories of ...on my father's side, being here in 1875. My aunt had told me about the funny white dust. The funny white dust, you know...Talk about the dust is different nowadays. And it really didn't make sense to me until Mount Saint Helens blew up. I know what she means by the funny white dust because it hadn't been that long, you know, when it had blown before, so now I think, oh dear, did you have all those years are we gonna have this awful dust? Then my mother's family came here when Cheney was just beginning. And it was very

interesting to... Grandpa had a diary and had kept a diary of what happened in the early days of the beginning of Cheney, and they came out to Spokane Falls on the train and my aunt has often told me about the old Indians. Came in and told them how to make their first beds because they had no furniture in the house, and they went out and, you know, helped the girls, they were scared to death of Indians but they would have to get pine boughs and how you would lay them and my aunt said it was the best bed I ever slept on.

SHUMAKER: Oh, really?

BOOTS: So things like that are very, very interesting and you know, and they all add up, to, when you do research.

SHUMAKER: I don't suppose you could cover general questions about living in Cheney? How are women important historically in the development of Cheney?

BOOTS: That's a rather hard one to answer because in the development of Cheney, actually the women you might say were the ones that provided the food and clothing for the whole situation. When you think of my grandmother cooked for the students at what is now Eastern Washington University, and that was done on 2nd street. They had a little...it was for the kids like Tawanka Commons is today, and they did well, they had to do a lot of the early work that on my dad's side, they had to go clear to Walla Walla to get food and so, you know, it was up to them to provide ways of preserving the small crops that they had. You know, to feed them and to make do with anything and being able to sew clothing, and they made clothing for the whole family and to raise the family and even worse to be doctor as well as the mother and of course until they did get the schools, it was their job to teach the family, to teach the kids.

SHUMAKER: Did things change when the schools...you sort of stated earlier that the university.

BOOTS: Oh, yes.

SHUMAKER: Because the women were teaching those kids before, right?

BOOTS: In the early days, yes. My aunt was my mother's sister graduated in 1902 from Cheney Normal School and all the girls' schools here, and then when it just kept expanding and expanding and even when I graduated from Eastern it was mostly core teachers at that time. It was beginning to move out into other areas, but not like it has today. That was just the beginning of the move.

SHUMAKER: So basically there were more women doing school then. Were there any men?

BOOTS: There were some men, but they were going into teaching.

SHUMAKER: What women or women do you consider most influential in Cheney today?

BOOTS: Today? That's a hard question to answer.

BOOTS: It's a very hard one for you to ask me because I can...am more inclined to say some of the older women, well Klein's and there's Dryden. Women of that sort had more influence as far as the life of the kids in town. Then it's just hard for me to give you a real good answer to that. I think I'm thinking of a lot of them. I think some of them quite frankly were church women's groups. They had a great influence on the young people of Cheney. But maybe even...there is after all in Cheney a lot of sorority teachers, sorority women. They used to have quite a big influence here in Cheney. Not as many more and isn't quite so influential anymore in Cheney because.

SHUMAKER: Well, Helen, I'd like to thank you for your time and cooperation for this project. We appreciate it very much.

BOOTS: Thank you.