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Oral history interview transcript with Prudence Dickson

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Norma Smith

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PRUDENCE DICKSON
INTERVIEWED BY NORMA SMITH
EWU Women's Oral History Project
EWU 984-0094 #22
JANUARY 27, 1983

N. SMITH: This is Norma Smith and I am going to be interviewing Prudence Dickson, who is a business woman who began her own travel agency. The date is January 27, 1983. We are sitting now in her present place of business and she is putting on a nice favorite album so that we feel comfortable in going ahead with this. [Music begins playing] So, I think what I'd like to do now is just to have you Prudence, tell a little bit about your background, where you were born, raised, schooled to let us know something about you before we begin about your business.

P. DICKSON: Well, I was raised in Indianapolis Indiana where my family had lived for several generations. I came from a fairly wealthy family, my mother's side of the family particularly. My father is very hard working and managed his own . . . owned and managed his own advertising agency. I had three brothers; I'm the only girl in the family. I think that right from the very beginning I was preened for management even though at that time there were not very many people working that were women. Still at the table every evening and every morning, the type of discussion that was at the dinner table and the breakfast table was a lot about how to run a business. That's what my father was totally engrossed with and that's the kind of conversation that went across the table. So while I expected that I would grow up, go to college, marry somebody, and become a housewife, I nevertheless listened to and was aware of all these management tricks that were constantly batted around, that I'm sure my father hoped that my brothers were picking up on. But I heard it and absorbed it and when I didn't quickly marry, found I had to go to work, it was pretty obvious that some of this sort of filtered through. But that was not what I expected to do at all. I really expected to get married.

N. SMITH: Now you were talking about how your father was influential . . . did your mother. . .

P. DICKSON: Definitely. She definitely was a really interesting woman. She always had some project that was gonna make her a million dollars and she designed all kinds of different things and would think of something and turn to my father to help merchandise it. Well, there never was enough money thrown towards any of those projects to make a success but she really did have some very good ideas. I can remember even as a very young little girl that the new thing was when Velcro first came out. She was going to take your standard satin high heel shoes and attach a piece of Velcro to them and then you could put little designs on them, little flowers, appliques.

N. SMITH: Oh, change the form.

P. DICKSON: Also change the appliques to go with your ensemble. So we tried that in the living room and she had boxes, she decided boxes were something that nobody ever had for Christmas, so she would do boxes that were pre-cut and you could buy a whole kit of boxes of all different sizes that had the labels already on them, so all you had to do was wrap your Christmas presents and put them in the boxes. So she always had a million different ideas, none of which ever made us any money but they were all grand

projects that we were all involved in and we all thought at some time or another that we were going to make a million dollars from one of her projects. So she was definitely influential although unsuccessful in a lot of her ideas.

N. SMITH: Well, she was a thinker in her own right, and apparently, she instilled these kinds of things in you as well as your father. Who do you think may have been one of the most influential people in what you're doing now or even to back up to say who was most influential, if anyone?

P. DICKSON: It's really hard to say. Here in Cheney it was definitely my older brother John who was a professor at Eastern Washington University when I first moved to town and he was very encouraging to say that yes I could probably go into my own business and do just fine. But, historically, my parents were very supportive and always said that anybody in the family could do anything they wanted if they would just put their nose to it. That we all had the innate intelligence to do whatever we wanted to do so they were very encouraging in that respect and my older brother John was equally supportive.

N. SMITH: Then let's talk a little bit about why in the world you did come to Cheney having been raised in the east, living in the Midwest and. . .

P. DICKSON: Well, I was raised in the Midwest, went to public schools there. I was pretty uncomfortable with public schools during my puberty I suppose. I felt a lot of competition among my friends. I had two different groups of friends. I had some ugly girlfriends that were really fun and friendly to be with and some pretty girlfriends that were all socially oriented towards chasing men. I was terribly split up over this decision over which group to run with and at that time things were very cliquish back in the early 60s and you had to more or less choose one clique or the other. So I was fortunate enough to be able to go away to private boarding school on the East Coast and private college as well. It was all women, which is already archaic; there are not very many women's schools left.

N. SMITH: That's right.

P. DICKSON: Where upon I could really concentrate on my studies and I really enjoyed the east coast and got a lot out of it and I spent a lot of time visiting New York and really liked it but I knew I didn't want to live there.

N. SMITH: When you went to your school in college, were you looking towards business kinds of things in your education?

P. DICKSON: No, I was strictly a Fine Arts major. I really liked drawing and again I had no idea that I wouldn't simply get married. It really is true that at the college I went to, Barcliffe College, the motto was: A Ring By Spring Or Your Money Back. The concept was that it was a very good college, educationally very aggressive and no problems with that. But on the weekends, Barcliffe dated Yale and Harvard and all the top men's colleges. So the idea was that you would get your education so you could converse with these very intelligent men that we were dating and I did not expect to get out of college without being married. Really by a fluke I was engaged at the end of my second year of college and planned to quit college and marry this man and move to Colorado and raise a family. Something came up and he broke the engagement off and all of a sudden I was back having to make a decision, now what?

P. DICKSON: So I went to Indiana University and took some business courses with the idea that yes, I might have to go to work for a while. But I really wasn't expecting it

and I enjoyed my stay at Indiana University and took some summer courses in Architecture at University of Colorado and eventually traveled on out to California to try and find a job, a career.

N. SMITH: Okay. Did any of the things you did then prepare you for the kind of work that you got into?

P. DICKSON: Oh, definitely. Ironically, my fine arts helped me get several jobs, including this job in really primitive ways and I never would have expected it. I had thought of actually pursuing the fine arts career, but I realized that there were no famous women painters. In all my art history courses there just weren't any. Nobody could name a famous woman painter.

N. SMITH: True, true.

P. DICKSON: So I decided that my chances of making a success in that were zero to none, and I really wasn't interested in becoming a fashion model designer drawing type person. I also realized that as far as architecture went I'd have to take six more years of school and after that I could probably design a bathroom for the next three years and maybe a kitchen if I was a good girl. But before I was actually able to design a house it would be many, many years down the road. So I dropped that career and actually just by the luck of . . . well, good luck and some training did land a very good job out in California as a research director for an advertising agency. I had had training in research and had had a job in doing some research for a short job and had training in that field and my fine arts helped me to in that job too.

N. SMITH: All right, getting back to Cheney . . . why Cheney? What happened?

P. DICKSON: Well, my older brother John and I had traveled at different times and different places but in a similar pattern. He'd spent some time back east and he had gone to school in Colorado and he had spent some time, 18 months in New Zealand and he had migrated all around the country and had ended up in Cheney and I was living in Colorado at the time selling balloons in Cripple Creek. I had a small business in Curpole Creek that had failed miserably. I was at . . . when I was at Curpole Creek, I moved to Curpole Creek from Aspen to try and make my fortune in designing wood furniture and modular wall units, and I was not knowledgeable enough to do a good job at them. I did get married there and had a miserable marriage and was selling balloons and not having much luck. When I mentioned to my brother that I was thinking of leaving my marriage, he suggested Cheney and he sent me a postcard and said, "I went skiing on Saturday and sailing on Sunday. I think you'll find that the climate here will really agree with you. It's a combination of all the best parts of Colorado and the four seasons and mild four seasons climate", and he said, "I know you don't like giant cities. You've lived in Los Angeles and New York, but on the other hand I don't think you want to live at the top of a mountain in a small town anymore. Cheney is really a good combination of a small town, a university town, a farm community and very close to really a beautiful cosmopolitan city, Spokane that has all the offerings and more of a big city as far as . . ." I'm still concerned. It really is . . . Spokane is just wonderful. There aren't very many cities in the world where you could actually show up the night of the ballet and still get tickets.

P. DICKSON: You know even at the last minute without any months of advanced planning and writing away for tickets. So . . .

N. SMITH: Okay. . .

P. DICKSON: He tempted me and I fell for it and moved up here.

N. SMITH: So you arrived in Cheney. Now, here you are in Cheney, you're not working so then, tell us where. . .

P. DICKSON: I didn't have much money at that point. I had some savings and things but I figured that I would just go out and look for a job as opposed to a career until I could get some money until I decided what I wanted to do. I did in fact apply for a couple of jobs as a waitress where I had been trained as a waitress before, and tried to think what would I like to do and I couldn't really think of anything that I really was sure that I wanted to do and I knew that no matter what I decided that I probably would have to go back to school. Well, my brother again encouraged me that he knew Marilee Nined had a travel agency on campus and knew that she was having a breakdown every third day. . . a mental breakdown because she was so overloaded and was in fact looking for somebody else to help her out and she was by herself.

N. SMITH: She was by herself?

P. DICKSON: She was by herself and she was just miserable. She was working for a branch office of a Spokane agency and the branch office management; the main office management felt that the Cheney office wasn't doing very well. Marilee said yes it is doing well. It's doing so well that I can't stand it and I really can't run it anymore by myself. I'm exhausted and there's more business here than you know. The main management felt that . . . since they didn't keep very good separate records on the branch agency and the main agency they didn't know how much Cheney was making, nor did they understand how much it was capable of making. They looked at it as a small town operation and without much hope. Well, Marilee finally convinced the owner of House of Travel that she needed to move and that she would find a [unsure of pronunciation sounds like: Seeta] client to work for her. A Seeta client is of course funded by the government. Half their wages are funded by the government. So I was hired at minimum wage, 3.75 an hour, of which the owner only had to pay half. So they had a really good deal, at that point.

N. SMITH: When was this? Do you remember?

P. DICKSON: Yeah, this was in August of 1967... '77, 1977.

N. SMITH: Yeah, 1977.

P. DICKSON: Right.

N. SMITH: You were then an employee of Marilee at that time.

P. DICKSON: Right. She was my manager. The owner of course wrote my paychecks. Marilee and I moved the original House of Travel office out of a very small closet in the PUB to a location in the Felina Apartment buildings. It was the old Governor Martin's office in fact.

N. SMITH: That's right, down in the basement.

P. DICKSON: That's right. It was a beautiful office. We were really thrilled and everybody was happy. We were just half a block from Showalter Hall so it was it was no affront to the campus to lose us from campus. We were so close, it was not a problem. But the owner kept complaining that I shouldn't be working so many hours. Marilee kept pointing out that he was only paying me approximately a dollar 75 cents an hour, he ought to make me work 60 hours a week. He couldn't believe that Cheney was going to

make it, you know, he just didn't think that our branch office was gonna make it at all and we felt very strong about it and so we offered to buy the branch from him. He said, "Fine, I'll be happy to sell the branch to you." So we got with our accountants and talked to some other people to try and come up with a fair offer to buy that branch office from him, and came back with . . . obviously we'd start with a low offer and he'd start with a high request and he asked some 25 thousand dollars and we offered him 5 thousand dollars and . . . knowing that we weren't expecting to steal it for 5 thousand dollars. Well, he was so insulted by our offer that he fired us on the spot and as of December 20th, or so, that day we were packed up and out of the office. He just simply restaffed the office with some Spokane people and we were at a complete loss, we didn't know what to do. We knew that we couldn't get it for 5 thousand dollars. We were figuring a fair amount was somewhere between 5 and 25, but he wouldn't listen to us, he didn't like me very well, so we were out of a job and consequently took a temporary job out in Spokane with some friends at another agency and decided to collect our money so that we could open our own Cheney Travel, and that's what we did.

N. SMITH: Now, did you need to have funds in order to open Cheney travel? Your own business?

P. DICKSON: Yes. To open a travel agency, you have to have a couple of fairly obvious requirements that A, one person to run the agency must have at least two years ongoing managerial experience which my partner Marilee had; and B, a decent location with a visible sign that people could see and easy access; and C, a certain amount of money to flow your accounts receivable. In other words, if we were going to do our business with EWU, they don't normally pay for their tickets in cash. They pay by purchase order and it takes a certain amount of time between when I pay for the ticket, when Cheney Travel pays for the ticket and between when EWU pays Cheney Travel for the ticket. So you had to have enough cash to float that. Both of us went to our parents and our families to raise cash. I had a certain amount of savings and my father loaned me some money and my brother John loaned me some money and Marilee's father loaned her some money.

N. SMITH: Okay, this is interesting because one of the things that many women I've heard, have had difficulty in doing is if they did not have family, say or friends to get their money from and have gone directly to an agency such as a bank or somebody else to float them, it's been very difficult for a woman starting out in business to get the support.

P. DICKSON: Well, we did go to small business administration and they said something quite the contrary. They said that . . . recently . . . this was, mind you, in 1977, that there had been a lot of money appropriated specifically for women and other minorities. Now not that women are a minority, we all know that there are more women than men, but there are fewer women working.

N. SMITH: Right.

P. DICKSON: They had actually quite a bit of money for women who wanted to start their own businesses. I believe the format was that they . . . that you had to go to a bank and apply for money on the basis of your research that you are proposing to develop a business and be turned down by three banks. After you've been turned down by three banks, they could guarantee through federal funds a small business loan and that it was much looser for women. It entailed a fair amount of paperwork, but on the other hand, it

seemed to be quite available. We didn't need it, but we kept on file as if we needed more money than we got from our families. We could do that. . . we did incidentally, both of us, pay interest to our families. This was not an interest free loan in either case. So the avenue was there, we just didn't pursue it.

N. SMITH: Your location when you were fired then, you went back up into the Pub?

P. DICKSON: Right.

N. SMITH: Company . . . do you want to talk a little bit about how a business like yours . . . got in. It's a private business right?

P. DICKSON: Right.

N. SMITH: How does a private business than get into a location such as the PUB?

P. DICKSON: Well, the PUB is managed by Kurt Hough who is hired by the students. It's a student union building and the students have the final say really on who uses their space. So we decided to go back on the student . . . into the student union building because our competition was now out and we decided that this was a good place to go back to. We simply drew up a proposal and asked for a meeting with the students. It was the [unsure of pronunciation sounds like: Subauch] committee which is the student union building code committee or something to that effect and presented them with the idea. They can lease any space in that building and we showed them. . .we took an existing space in the building that was very bland and had nothing happening in it and was essentially wasted space, created an idea on how to close it off so it could become a viable retail space and promised them a certain amount of rent every year. They were really for it. They really liked the idea and they liked our designs and could visualize what we wanted to do and said, "Fine." and so we did sign a lease with the students.

N. SMITH: Now this business between the two of you actually came through for in 1979, together you and Marilee. She had worked before you quit and then you started in.

P. DICKSON: Right.

N. SMITH: Again your own business just the two of you in . . . was that '79?

P. DICKSON: Yeah, I think that was '79.

N. SMITH: There was an article that was done on you. I think we might mention it for people who are interested. In the Spokesman Review on June 24 of 1979 and uh. . . here they do talk a little bit about what happened to you so this would be something that would be interesting for those who would like to read further into the background to go to and read and it's available of course to anyone. Would you encourage women to go into business on their own?

P. DICKSON: Oh, definitely. I think the thing that stops most women is that they just simply have never perceived themselves as business people. It's really a lot easier than you think to go into business and somebody could probably make a lot of money helping women go into business. My sister in law has thought about that. Helping putting seminars together to help women go into business because it just isn't as hard as you think. You just simply take things one step at a time. You can't know everything from the beginning, but the problems come up and you just simply make a decision and implement it and if it doesn't work out, you change it. It's really a lot easier than most people think and it's fear that stops most people.

N. SMITH: Fear of what?

P. DICKSON: Fear of failure. Probably much more financial failure than any other kind of failure. But it seems like such a big project. Well, it really isn't really. You go out and buy a three ring binder and start writing down notes, oh I need stationary and I need phones and I need this and I need that and just start making a list of the kind of things you need and go to people to get help. You can't know all the legal implications. You need to go to the lawyer to say, should I be a partnership or sole proprietor. You really don't do everything yourself, you simply make phone calls to call people and talk about your problems because you aren't expected to know all the facets of your business. If you don't know the bookkeeping end, you hire a bookkeeper. If you don't know the accounting, you hire an accountant or you speak with an accountant or a lawyer or your banker. You don't know all of these things. You can't know before you start. You can't know how complicated it will get. You just simply make a checklist and call.

N. SMITH: Did you make use of the Small Business Bureau in the setting up your. . . ?

P. DICKSON: Oh, somewhat. We did get some pamphlets from them but we really didn't. I had the advantage of having a brother, my brother John, who was in business. So he helped with a lot of the questions. It was really interesting and I'm still just thrilled to be in a university town because there is unlimited free help in a university town. If I had a question I could simply look up in the EWU staff directory what professor dealt with that problem and call them up and ask them. They were more than happy to help me with a little advice and I'd just simply look up somebody's specialty and call and ask. They loved helping you in any area. So it doesn't matter what area. . . still today, any problem that I have I can go to a professor on campus and say, "I'm having this problem, this is your specialty" and they're more than happy to chat with me a little bit about what to do. I now am using. . . just finished using the business school management program Dr. Leo Simpson sent a class of three students who came down and did a small business administration survey on my business and they analyzed my personnel, they analyzed my bookkeeping policies. They analyzed my marketing problems, and they gave me a complete report on all of the existing things that I was doing and the proposals and how to improve all those. It was free; it just simply took time. They interviewed me and looked at my books and talked about my marketing goals and prepared a statement for me and another person on campus, Sue Solomon, who does Computer Sciences here on campus has got a class now studying which computer I should put in my office. It's a huge expense, and she'll tell me whether to go with the deluxe edition that I order from United Airlines or whether to piece it together and buy an Apple computer and buy the software and can help me do all those things.

N. SMITH: Okay, I'm going to stop this for just a minute.

P. DICKSON: Okay.

N. SMITH: Because of the music. Oh, it's going on... I'm sorry... I thought you wanted to change and keep it there. Now, you have now come to a new location. You have now moved out of the PUB and are now in downtown Cheney. Talk a little bit about your move and why this location as a businesswoman?

P. DICKSON: Well I suppose the first thing that has to be approached is why we want to leave the womb in the first place. The student union building was very good to us. It was really a fine location. Not only for dealing with students but faculty as well. As it worked out, they put a faculty lounge right around the corner from our office . . . so many

of the faculty on campus did stop in daily. We had a lot of walk in traffic from the faculty, either planning their own private vacations or their work business travel, and they would stop in just to tell us the joke of the day or whatever. It was really a great location in that respect. The basic problem is we simply outgrew it. I had to hire a fifth person and there was only room for four desks. So while during the summer we were able to work a program to use 4 desks and 5 people by giving each person in the office a day off, a Tuesday or a Wednesday and the fifth person, my newest seeded employee, experienced all of our desks. It worked for a while, but eventually we just simply outgrew it so we had to think where else to move and our first choice was somewhere else in the student union building. The only location that we could see as a viable location was not available. It was a student area, and the students didn't want any retail business in it. We could not find another place in that building where we could fit and grow. There were places that we could fit, but no places that we could grow, and there was no place else for us on campus either. So we had to move downtown, and I was thrilled when this location came up. It's been a great location, we could see already that it was still close to campus and had good parking and was easily accessible to the downtown people. There were a couple of other reasons we decided to move. First of all our old office was drafty and cold and had sound problems. It was very loud with all the students floating around.

N. SMITH: Well, it hadn't originally been designed for the kind of thing you were using it for.

P. DICKSON: Right. So it had that problem. As far as the townspeople were concerned it was a rotten location. There was no parking at the student union building. The meter parking was always full and people complained of having to walk two and three and four blocks and this was really hard on the seniors, and a lot of those people didn't like very well coming into a student union building. They weren't affiliated with the university in any way and they were a little nervous walking through the student land. So we thought well, if we want to expand our horizons and hopefully keep the Eastern Washington University business but try and get to more seniors and more townspeople, downtown's the place to move. So we moved downtown.

N. SMITH: How long have you been here now?

P. DICKSON: Since November 15th of 1982.

N. SMITH: Okay, so it's been two months.

P. DICKSON: Just two months.

N. SMITH: Two months. What kind of support have you seen or noticed now that you have moved downtown and from what sources?

P. DICKSON: Well, one thing I was real surprised at was that the move to downtown Cheney was actually a political problem on campus. There were definitely some people in the administration . . . the administrative end of campus that didn't like the idea of losing their travel agency off campus. This was a problem. We irritated them. They liked having a travel agency on campus. However, a lot of those people have since come down to see our office and are very pleased. We've tripled our size, created a lot more privacy for the customer. As they sit at the desk, they have actual privacy and it's comfortable and warm. We have coffee and all kinds of nice things and they found out that we're not very far from campus. So as far as losing and gaining some of the Ewu [whenever the word, "Ewu" shows up, she means EWU, but pronounces it "ee-woo"]

business, that's been a little bit of a rough ride and it isn't over yet. The reception from the local people in Cheney who didn't like us up there in the first place has been very warm. The downtown merchants of course are really happy to have another live business in downtown Cheney. The seniors are very happy to have someplace they can walk to and park at and that kind of a thing. So we've had very good reception from the non-Ewu people and a good reception from the Ewu people. A lot of them have been saying, "I don't care where you move, we'll follow you. We like you, you do good work."

N. SMITH: I guess right now what I'd like to talk about is maybe getting into local kinds of things. Local issues or are there any kinds of local political issues or local business issues that stand out in your mind, primarily maybe concerning the women of the community as you see it or know it?

P. DICKSON: That's hard to say with the women in the community. I think the big issue that's been happening ever since I moved to Cheney is what is going to happen to this downtown central business district. Very recently there's been a change from an original plan that used this central business district was original. . . has been planned since apparently around 1978 to become a very vital area with pedestrian malls and perhaps changing it to two one-way streets or bricking over certain areas and re-developing the downtown core area. Well, since the out of town towards Spokane area, the Farmers and Merchants area has been developing strongly, now nobody wants to call this the central business district and they're thinking of calling this old town which is fine with me. Doesn't matter. I don't see why there should be a conflict. I think that both of them can exist and that there's no reason that they should be mutually exclusive. Downtown obviously does have problems. We have some vacant places around us now, the depot. The beautiful old depot building is now vacant and I think that's a shame. But I don't see any reason that both areas can't be strong. The new area out by Farmers and Merchant's area has really done a nice job with the new building out there. They have pedestrian problems with the intersections and such that maybe a stoplight could help. So they have their set of problems. Well, people downtown here have their problems too and there's no reason why the two of them can't do well. All it would take is for somebody to come in with about half a million dollars and turn [end of tape]

>>>>>End of Side One<<<<<

>>>>Beginning of Side Two<<<<<

N. SMITH: Okay, I think we were cut off when you were talking about businesses in Cheney being in two different parts of the town and uh. . .

P. DICKSON: All right, I was just saying that I think that there is no reason that Cheney can't be big enough to support a downtown area and shopping centers. There's no reason not to be able to do both those things, and there's no reason to suspect that just because Cheney's downtown or old town area right now is having a hard time that it wouldn't succeed if a certain amount of money weren't poured into it. It is walking distance from the campus and a lot of seniors and other people like the downtown area and a little bit of money could really put it right back on the map. So. . .

N. SMITH: Okay, let's talk a little bit about how you feel women have been or are now important in the development of Cheney, and maybe in what way.

P. DICKSON: Well, it seems to me that actually quite a few women in this town really are running their own businesses. Either owning them or running them and doing a really good job. Ones that I know that was one of the first women I came into contact with was Pat Merlin who sold me the house I'm living in. She has a really strong business still, has made it through the real estate slump and is doing really well. Amy Jo Sooy took over what used to be Janet Richardson's location in downtown Cheney selling clothes and has a nice little boutique and Amy Jo's business is doing just fine. Diane Roskowski is another person who moved out of the PUB location to the downtown location. She has a little music store right inside Gary's Furniture and she's holding her own and it is her business. Pam Saltero, I think Pam Saltero actually had a business downtown very briefly before she moved it out to the Cheney Plaza. Her little calico store is just darling. It's really nice. She's done a good job with it, and it's doing real well. One of the people that obviously helped very well is Ellen Jones, used to be Ellen Blake running the Book n' Brush and I think she's answered the needs of a downtown store and has done very well at keeping her business together.

N. SMITH: Okay. I was thinking too a couple of other things down there. There's that jeans shop . . .

P. DICKSON: The yes. . . Jean's Jeans. . . Jane's Jeans . . . Jane. . . I can't think of Jane's last name, but she's doing well. She opened it up all by herself and it's her business and she's doing really well.

N. SMITH: Then there's the beauty parlor. There's a diet center. .these are all. . . women's. . .

P. DICKSON: Sally Tibbits Real Estate store.

N. SMITH: Well. . .

P. DICKSON: Sally Tibbits Liquor Store. Ethel Helm took over the licensing little shop here in downtown Cheney next to her husband's automobile place. She wasn't satisfied with it just being a licensing outlet so she's added in a used bookstore, and done a very nice job at renovating that little shop and it's doing very nicely. So it seems to me that we actually have quite a few women in business that are holding their own and doing nice things for Cheney in both the shopping plaza area and the downtown area.

N. SMITH: All right now, what manner do you believe maybe you personally may be influential in Cheney?

P. DICKSON: Okay.

N. SMITH: Or what goals have you set for your business if that will help you on that.

P. DICKSON: Well now that we moved downtown. . . we did move downtown with the intention of drawing the campus and the downtown a little closer together. This has been a constant war in Cheney between the campus and the downtown people and since we got our start by being on campus and that is our bread and butter trade right now, we're hoping to get the campus people to come down to our office and find out that you can come down and do your business at Cheney travel during your lunch hour, have a nice lunch in one of several good eateries in town. . . . do your banking, your post office and that kind of a thing to draw the Ewu people downtown. So we're really hoping to make a link in that area to some extent. I think it's an important link , and I think that this war that's been going on between these two people has got to end. We're not that far geographically apart and there's no reason we should be psychologically either. So that's

one of the things we planned to do. Another reason we chose to move downtown Cheney as opposed to the plaza is simply to help revitalize the downtown area. I hope to show that yes people can go into business in downtown Cheney and not necessarily have to move to the plaza or move out of town or go out of business. I think the downtown area is very viable and there's no reason we can't do good work down here. So I'm really hoping to see that. I personally have some feelers out to try and help get some money to redevelop the depot. Because I feel, it is a magnificent building, it is historically preserved. I'd love to see some women pull some money together to turn that into something really nice like the flourmill or the old second city or something like that. It's a great building. It's on the national historical register. It has tax release and tax benefits to help. With that and the small business administration that is trying to help women get into business, there's no reason that that little building couldn't turn into a dynamite little shopping area. It would help everybody. Cafe Adercio (spelled as sounds) is still in business, barely holding on, but it's trying very hard and were that one building to fill up and be gutted and cleaned up and fixed into a nice little shopping arcade, it would help downtown tremendously. I'm going to try and help raise some money. I've already spent 2000 dollars towards architectural plans to turn that into a first class restaurant. The surveys already been done shows that the Cheney residents would like to see a first class restaurant in downtown Cheney, and the Willow Springs has been working hard to bring their image up and two good restaurants don't detract from each other they add to each other. So I think if we could add one or two more really good businesses to downtown Cheney I think you would see a significant change.

N. SMITH: Are there any other women involved in this venture that you know of?

P. DICKSON: Not yet. But I have some women in mind who I'd like to approach who I know have money ... they happen to be seniors and would maybe like to see their money do something permanently good for what they remember. I mean, Virginia's book that just came out. . .

N. SMITH: Yes.

P. DICKSON: That showed just how beautiful downtown Cheney was many years ago, perhaps.

N. SMITH: This is Virginia White that you're talking about, yes?

P. DICKSON: Yes, Virginia White who just did the great book on how pretty Cheney was. Well maybe some of the seniors that have lived here when it was like that would like to see it come back to that, and maybe they'd be willing to pool some of their money to do this. If they were convinced that it might make them some money, they be convinced to take over the old depot building and do something nice with it. Therefore feel really good about their contribution to downtown Cheney and I am speaking of going after the women. I really would like to see that. The young women too. It could be a women's Cheney investment club that would turn it over. We just need some money. We've already got a lot of money spent on plans and architectural designs and surveys to prove that there is a want for something like that. So I would like to get involved with some other women that would like to throw in some money towards that end.

N. SMITH: That's a marvelous idea. Oh, I hope you're successful at it.

P. DICKSON: I hope that myself.

N. SMITH: Because if there's anything we need, I think it's to get back to one of the reasons that many people moved to Cheney to begin with. Because it was a small town, people knew one another cared about one another, wanted to help one another and the whole small town idea being brought back to life.

P. DICKSON: That's really fun. It's great living in a small town.

N. SMITH: Okay.

P. DICKSON: I'm gonna be a big duck in a small town in Cheney.

N. SMITH: All right now, is there anything else that you care to talk about concerning say, Cheney, it's local issues, goals or have we touched on most of it.

P. DICKSON: Oh I think we've really touched upon most of it.

N. SMITH: One of the things that we wanted to ask all of our interviewees . . . is in what manner I mean. . . about the minority influence that you have seen in Cheney in what way or. . . have you noticed any minority influence in Cheney? If so, where?

P. DICKSON: Of course the whole Pacific Northwest is extremely WASP. Probably the most WASP state in the union. . . White Anglo-Saxon Protestants. I've never seen an area as such. Because we have a university here, we have an exception to that. If the university weren't here we would be also strictly a farm community. But with the university we have some great international students, and when I was up at the PUB, one of the nicest things to do was to walk down to the post office and listen to little groups of Japanese and little groups of Nigerians speaking their native language, mailing their letters with Japanese characters on their postcards and their letters. They are definitely having their own little community here. They are really lovely people and talking to them through my business and association at the student union building was wonderful. They really do have an interesting vision of the United States and a small town like Cheney. I mean it's really interesting to find out why they would come all the way from Korea to Cheney or from Japan to Cheney or from Nigeria to Cheney, and really they'd come here through word of mouth. Obviously, if they could afford to come to Eastern Washington University, they could have picked anyplace almost in the whole country, but essentially what's happened is these kids have gone back home for their vacations or their graduation and said that they really enjoyed Cheney and that they did see the small town concept of America. Also during their stay here in Cheney, many of these foreign students still come to Cheney Travel to buy a vacation to some big city like San Francisco or Los Angeles. So they've seen the big cities too. But they've gone back and brought more friends. So I think it's obvious that they like what's going on in Cheney and it's really interesting to talk to them. They are a good influence. I'm sorry that a lot of the local people don't get a chance to mix with them and maybe some format ought to be set up uh. . . to appreciate them and to mix some of the people up so they could meet a student and talk to them. What are their women's problems? What is it like to be a woman from India or from Japan and what are your expectations when you graduate from Eastern? What will happen to you when you go back to your country? Will you get a job and that kind of a thing. I think there's a tremendous amount of valuable information there that uh. . . would be nice to see them be able to share in a better way somehow.

N. SMITH: Have the community come to them rather than. . .

P. DICKSON: To listen to them, to listen to their analysis of America and business what their home life

N. SMITH: I was thinking about your building over here and maybe something like that would find a way to have some merit in your building.

P. DICKSON: Right. We could have some international students get involved in one international meal a week and simply have the Japanese students advise and put on the international dinner. The kinds of things that would be available to that restaurant through the resources at university would be amazing. Obviously the music school has all these music students that could be playing music there. They could have their own live audience if the restaurants were set up right and the international students could contribute with all kinds of information and contribute their holidays. They each have different holidays from all around the world, and the restaurant could focus on the different holidays. It's Japanese New Year? Well then let's do it like the Japanese do it for New Years and that kind of a thing. There is a good way for a restaurant or something to use that connection with the international people and of their holiday. I do know that the daycare center is pretty good about that ironically. Linda Mitty told me that if she has a student from a different country in her class, she will ask the student to show the other students how she dresses and what the celebration is and what are their birthday rites? You know, what kind of thing do they do for a birthday there? What kind of uh. . . how they celebrate. So even at the daycare level, some of the locals are aware of the fact that these international people have a really different set of experiences and are trying to share them. I think that's a great place to start with the kids.

N. SMITH: Foreign languages should start here too.

P. DICKSON: Yeah.

N. SMITH: That's one of my contentions. This has been great. It's fun to talk to you. I thought maybe we would look to some national issues and the final program presentation of the Women's Oral History Project, we want to look at the National Issues and try to determine how these may or maybe have not affected happenings or people here in Cheney, and not only in Cheney but yourself. Because at that time in the 60s, you were not even in Cheney but we're still interested in what happened and your remembrances about the 60s and how it affected you and maybe you could just pick up and I'll just say: Kent State.

P. DICKSON: Oh, Kent State. Well, when Kent State was going on, I was living in New York and it was kind of a social event to go to the park, Central Park, and get involved in a protest every weekend. It was kind of a social phenomenon to do that. There were a lot of feelings about Vietnam and Kent State. I can remember very distinctly when they had the first lottery, and they . . . you sat around in your dormitory and watched TV as they drew little dingle balls out of a . . . with your birthdate on it. They drew my birth date out, and I realized that, had I been a male, I would have been in the top percentage that would be drafted at that point. We were all women watching TV, but our boyfriends' birthdays dates were being pulled out and our own, and my birth date, if I had been a male, I would have gone to Vietnam at that time when they had the lottery or whatever it was called... the draw. So everybody in the women were real sympathetic, not just because of their boyfriends being involved with it or their brothers or whatever, but the fact that were they a different sex, it would be they. I think that we were first awareness why the women got really involved is that they were really sympathetic with these men that were going off to a war that nobody liked and could really put themselves

in the men's place. Saying it could be me going over there except for one chromosome, and I think that a lot of people really felt that the tail end of the 60s and especially after the Vietnam War was closed down ... was the hippiedom era. I know a lot of people that came from money at that time decided that they didn't want anything to do with their parents' money and would live with as little of their parents' money as possible, and in fact avoid working, so I think there was a whole shift of people who had plenty of intelligence, plenty of training, plenty of family background, plenty of education, who could have gone into business right away like our parents did, you know? Out of school, into business. They simply said, "No, I'm not going to do that" and that's ... I moved to Aspen, at that point, and sluffed off all of my education and thought, "Oh, I'll just be a hippie for a few years." I think a lot of people did that were of this post baby boom era that just sort of copped out for a few years. Then essentially a lot of them became bored, got tired of being poor and decided to go to work. Now we're the middle class now at age 35 that are working and, perhaps late, but starting our own businesses and getting into things. I think a lot of people that are my age don't realize that they really are the majority. They aren't aware of the fact that they really are the majority and how many people have been through this similar upbringing where they were trained one way and then pulled away from it to ... against business and big business was bad and business was bad and money was bad and now, we're saying, "Well gee, maybe not. Maybe I should go back into business and see if I can create some jobs."

N. SMITH: Well, this is what I think too. They got to thinking about doing their very own thing and not being pressured.

P. DICKSON: Right.

N. SMITH: Which is just not true.

P. DICKSON: Right. "I want to do my own thing and the money isn't important. It's only important that I like what I'm doing." I think that that has been a very healthy shift, not just to go to work for work's sake alone but like your work. Your work occupies such a huge amount of your time. I mean, generally for most people, it's from 6 AM in the morning when you wake up and start thinking about what you're going to wear until about 7 at night when you're halfway wound down from a busy day at work. I think that people decided that they really wanted to find a job that they would like so that that big amount of time was something pleasant, and shifted the focus maybe from just money to trying to find a career they enjoyed. I think this has been a very healthy thing and I do think that it is the ... is what came out of all those years when people were in the self. . . I wanna do what's right for me. People have come into some good diversification because of it.

N. SMITH: Would you say that they were then thinking about maybe themselves and how they could relate to the community or were they thinking about themselves, how they could relate to themselves? Then looking towards what they could do for others? Or has it come to that?

P. DICKSON: I think it's been a very selfish thing personally. I think everybody really tried to analyze what they wanted for themselves and design their own lifestyle. I think then they realized as I did, "Fine, I've decided what I want to do, now I have to realize that I am a part of the community and have to play with the community's rules." Our generation I feel was so mobile that we found a community to fit our personalities.

Everybody just simply moved around until they found a geography or an urban situation that fits them. We obviously have moved a lot. Now we found the communities we like living in. The second part of it was that now we've decided a career or a job that we like. Now I think people are getting in to realize that they have a community responsibility but I think that came second for a lot of people. I don't think that a lot of people really set out to help the world, ironically. Even after all of our supposedly, "Oh, let's help the world and be good to each other" and all the things that were supposedly were part of the hippie era. I really think that people finally decided that. I wanna do what I wanna do. I'm going to find a place I want to do that and then I'm going to try and help the community through my efforts.

N. SMITH: Are there any other things of, say, National significance that affected you or that ...

P. DICKSON: Well, of course the ERA movement has been a big movement and I think that ERA is pretty obvious what they've been trying to do. I think they made the mistake of calling it the Women's Movement and should have called it the People's Movement. In Cheney and everywhere we found a lot of families now that have both people working and right now with unemployment being a problem, we're finding a lot of women are working. . . perhaps because they'll work for lesser amounts of money and a lot of men are laid off. So the men are getting into the homemaker roles. But they're bitter about it and I think that if they would become comfortable that this could work. The women's working has supposedly changed the whole family structure. Well it has, and obviously it's thrown a lot of the statistics off too. The statistics for unemployment may be high, but perhaps they're not considering that there are more people willing to work than ever before, so that there are consequently more people unemployed. If you counted the number of families that were unemployed as opposed to the number of people who are unemployed, it might tip the statistics. In other words, maybe a lot of people are unemployed, but of the people unemployed, maybe the wife is working. Somebody had an article in the paper that suggested that if management had a new position open to work and they had two people of equal ability that were ready for the job, they should choose the one where nobody in that family was working instead of saying, "Okay, two people are eligible for the same job. Try not to choose the person whose spouse is already working, but to choose the person for the job whose spouse is not working." That it would even out the unemployment problem. Because I think the ERA has done a good job of letting women into the industry in general, honestly. Women are still underpaid, but at least women are working and being more appreciated and all these men that aren't working are appreciating what women have been doing for years and keeping a home and how big of a job that really is, and it really is a big job!

N. SMITH: [laughs] I know it is. Are there any other kinds of national concerns that you'd like to remark about or talk about?

P. DICKSON: Well, of course everybody's really discouraged by the economy and the unemployment, which I've just mentioned. I think there's . . . in the America where we really have a democracy, and it's really going to be the people that keep working and keep plugging away at it are going to stay in business and they will change their businesses around to where they can stay working. Cheney needs to write out some of these problems about the contest between the campus and the downtown area, the plaza and the

downtown area, and realize that these are three different factions that can work together. I think this is a big problem and there's no reason that all three of them can't be working really strongly together in supporting each other. It shouldn't be direct competition. I'd like to see them working a little harder together and allow all three to survive.

N. SMITH: I think so too. I agree. Well I think we've touched on many many things and I'm going to ask you a question now. Is there anything that you can think of. . .? You talked about the living in the 60s and the 70s and the hippie dome, and people going for self to community. Is there anything about your life that you would do differently now after having looked back on some of these things?

P. DICKSON: Oh boy that's a tough one.

N. SMITH: Do you want to stop the tape and think for a moment?

P. DICKSON: Yeah.

N. SMITH: Okay.

[tape is stopped and then started again]

N. SMITH: Now what was that you were saying?

P. DICKSON: Oh, I guess I was going to say that each person has a whole bunch of things that happen to them in their lives, a series of opportunities and a series of problems. The final analysis of what happens to you in life is how you deal with these opportunities and these problems. If a problem comes up then you're all of a sudden just dealt a problem. It seems to come out of nowhere and what do you do with that? It's how you react to the problem that develops your personality in the final outcome. A lot of bad things happen to you and you just simply have to look at these bad things as a lesson learned. Hopefully the second time it comes up you will go, "Ah, I've dealt with that problem before. I know better." The same is true with opportunities. A lot of people see a lot of opportunities all the time and don't go after them. They simply are afraid. I think that if they would put their fears aside and go talk to some people and take advantage of the opportunities. I really think that most people have a lot more opportunities that are batted about than they even can possibly recognize. Constantly, somebody has come up with an idea, "Well, gee if I'm unemployed I can make a business. I can go sell wind socks or kites or cookies or something like that." There are always opportunities, it just takes the determination of a decision to go after these. I feel like I have had a really varied life and I expect I will probably get into a lot of different kinds of things before my life is over if I'm lucky. I think it's the decision to go after the opportunities and the decision that if something bad is happening, ride it out and that bad thing may be leading you to something else. Marilee and our getting fired from our job led me to opening my own business. So a terrible thing that happens to you, you can't just wallow in it. You have to look at it as, "This is a bad thing but I won't dwell on it, I'll see what it's trying to tell me." Sometimes a terrible thing that happens to you ... losing a job is really an open door to a new avenue of thought, and if you'll just take a look at a situation that happens to you as perhaps not a terrible thing but as rather a threshold to realigning yourself and looking at, "Well, what would I like to do next?", and pursue it rather than just accepting that this is terrible, all I have is unemployment now. Go after it. Try and do something different. Go to all the people. Talk to people. They can help you.

N. SMITH: I was going to close by asking what advice you have to other women and I think you pretty much summed it up. . .

P. DICKSON: Yeah.

N. SMITH: In just that last statement that you made.

P. DICKSON: Go after it, you know. You really don't usually have much to lose, especially if you're up against the wall because something terrible happened that you've lost your job. You really don't have that much to lose.

N. SMITH: Being a woman in business in a small community is. . . ?

P. DICKSON: Very accepted. People like that. They really admire you. You really can get a lot of help if you ask for help if you. . . Asking for help is the most flattering thing you can do. If you ask somebody for their information and their help, you are saying that they have an expertise that you're interested in. It's always flattering and 99 percent of the time those people would love to give you an idea or a tip on how to do what it is that you want to do. The more you ask, the more flattered they are, the more information you'll get. It just seems to work that way.

N. SMITH: Well, it's been fun talking to you and I really want to thank you for taking time out of your busy day.

P. DICKSON: Well thanks Norma. I enjoyed it too. I hope I can help somebody.

N. SMITH: Okay, thank you very much. [tape is stopped]

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