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Oral history interview with Altamae Whitehill

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Joanne Daugherty

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ALTAMAE WHITEHILL
INTERVIEWED BY JOANNE DAUGHERTY
EWU Women's Oral History Project
EWU 984-0094 # 96
OCTOBER 5, 1982

J. DAUGHERTY: This is Joanne Daugherty interviewing Altamae Whitehill for the Women's Oral History Project. Her experience falls within four categories: EWU student, EWU faculty wife, community service and teacher/administrator for Cheney schools. We are here in the Fisher Building in Altamae's office. The date is October 5th, 1982. Altamae, you've participated in several aspects of Cheney's history and are much respectable in many areas. We would like you to speak to those reasons or experiences that pushed you, or caused you to want to achieve a bit more than the average. We want you to speak to those things that happened in your childhood, then as a young adult and finally the actual experiences here in Cheney. First as to your childhood: What made you want to achieve?

A. WHITEHILL: I was raised on a cattle ranch that was fairly isolated. There were no other children besides my brother for me to play with and, at an early age, I discovered books. Through books I could travel to other countries, I could learn about different cultures, I could find out about subjects and it was so fascinating I could hardly wait to start school each day. I went to a small school and there were twelve grades in the building. My mother had a college education and that was quite rare in the area where I lived, in the Okanogan County. She was always on the school board; often she was chairman of the school board and encouraged my interest in education. I can't ever remember being allowed to make up my own mind of what I was going to do, but then in those days, the only choices were to be a teacher, a nurse or a secretary and since my mother and my grandfather had been teachers, it was always the thing that I would be too. But it was at school, each time there was some kind of competition, whether that was physical or intellectual, I found that it was enjoyable to participate and I suppose I discovered early that you get a lot of warm fuzzies when you do well. I supposed that all those together I .When I was a freshman, we moved to Okanogan and there were only 46 in our graduating class, but I thought that was an enormous school and yet it gave me more opportunities than I would have had at the small school that I attended.

J. DAUGHERTY: As a young, as a child, your mother, obviously, was quite an influence and role model. Were there other people that you might remember?

A. WHITEHILL: There were specific teachers. I became involved in band and music played a great part in my life. In fact, I went on to major in music at college. I would say, not individually maybe, just that the excitement or the stimulation that school provided over where I lived—where life was a lot of physical labor. But I think that you need a lot of mental stimulation too and I could get that in school.

J. DAUGHERTY: Then, when did you go to college and where?

A. WHITEHILL: I came to Eastern in 1947 and graduated in '51. I found the world opening up again at Eastern and I tried a great many things, extracurricular activities and I found that I enjoyed, I did enjoy education. I'm not sorry I made that choice.

J. DAUGHERTY: In school at that time, were you encouraged to peruse almost any subject that you might have thought of?

A. WHITEHILL: No and in fact, you know, I'm sorry today that I couldn't have the same opportunities today that young women have. I would have pursued some other things. But it was expected that usually you became an elementary teacher and I should add that ... my music may have steered me into education. Not necessarily music education because when I was in high school at Okanogan and I played the piano quite well. I went to the elementary school and assisted the teachers with music and I remember, particularly music and PE so this all opened up some doors for me.

J. DAUGHERTY: At that time at Eastern, what was the proportion of women faculty?

A. WHITEHILL: [laughs] I don't know about Eastern itself, but I know when I went out to teach, it was all women in the elementary schools and in fact my husband received more money than I did because he was at the secondary level and I was at the elementary level. I didn't know of any women principals and I have never really taught under a woman principal. They've all been men. If I had known what was in the future for women, I think, probably, I might have prepared myself to become a principal because my administration duties are directly related to a specific program versus being a principal of the school.

J. DAUGHERTY: As a teacher, you've found success, but were you encouraged to become a principal?

A. WHITEHILL: Well, in my later years of teaching, I was asked to consider some positions that would have put me, for example, I was offered the Vice Principal's job at the junior high and I realized that was at the time when they desperately needed a woman to count as part of their title 9 commitment I guess. But it was, in a sense, too late to start that role I felt. Well, I've gone on to start new roles since then, but I was not comfortable at that time. Going into gifted education and at one time, remedial reading and that kind of stuff.

J. DAUGHERTY: Then you came back to Cheney.

A. WHITEHILL: As a faculty wife.

J. DAUGHERTY: What was your expected role at that time would you say?

A. WHITEHILL: I think I was expected to participate in faculty wives, which I did and I held offices and that and I was to support my husband I felt. There were faculty dinners and we participated in all those and I know today that many faculty do not feel a pressure to participate. I enjoyed participation so I didn't look at it as a negative pressure but I don't think that, you were expected. You were expected.

J. DAUGHERTY: At that time, do you recall any women who were influential, who were important in Cheney?

A. WHITEHILL: Well, the person most influential in my education in Cheney was Miss Kessler in English. Having come from a very small girls' school, where more people spoke incorrect English than correct and growing up in that environment, I was always very self conscious of my own English and I needed improvement and she allowed no imperfect English to be spoken and I'm grateful for that today. I guess I would

have to say, though, most of my professional growth came because of encouragement from different men in my life.

J. DAUGHERTY: That's interesting. There weren't role models then, for you ... necessarily as ...

A. WHITEHILL: I'm afraid I'd take most of them for men. I'm trying to think of some other women at Eastern at that time. There was Dean of Women, Mrs. Schmidt. I was very impressed with the manner in which she treated people and maybe I incorporated some of that.

J. DAUGHERTY: Well, in addition to the faculty wives and women, what were some other activities that you became involved with?

A. WHITEHILL: I belonged to PEO which has education as its major emphasis. I enjoyed meeting and growing with these women and thinking beyond the local college because we have Cotty College which is a women's college that we helped support. But then as a mother of three sons, I found that most of my things are back in the male realm again. That I spent a lot of time with cub scouts and boy scouts. So much of my time was there and then of course, being a teacher at the same time.

J. DAUGHERTY: But at that same time, weren't you involved with the community service?

A. WHITEHILL: Yes.

J. DAUGHERTY: You held an office position with them. . .

A. WHITEHILL: I was treasurer for ten years with the community service council and I enjoyed that because it helped me to see and maybe have empathy for the segment of life that has not the financial or the educational sometimes means and I felt that it was a very worthwhile service and I'm very proud of Cheney for providing that service to people.

J. DAUGHERTY: In the course of those ten years, did you notice differences as far as the equipment?

A. WHITEHILL: It depended on the time. There were times when most of our recipients were, we'd say transient. They were coming through. But at other times, depending on the winter, when it was a very cold winter there would be more local and there would be a need for oil or even a need for food help because the winter was more expensive and they didn't have money.

J. DAUGHERTY: Then there were just events that happened to certain people that ?

A. WHITEHILL: Yes, like fires and that kind of thing.

J. DAUGHERTY: Did you see that Cheney grew and had to make more precise regulations in your time?

A. WHITEHILL: I think one of the nice things was that we didn't have to have a lot of hard fixed regulations and we sort of met each event as it came up or each need. What did please me though was to see a growing concern in Cheney. We at one time had no clothing bank. At one time we had no food bank and I as treasurer dealt mainly with the money aspect and I guess I was very proud of Cheney because usually just an article, an item in the paper once a year was enough and would bring in enough contributions to meet the needs of the community service council. Private people, churches and organizations money came in all those different forms.

J. DAUGHERTY: For the benefit of those who might not know that, service consists of what?

A. WHITEHILL: Financially provided emergency needs. Whether that be clothing or even money itself, food, transportation, basically it was that and then as they added the food bank and the clothing bank, then the money was larger amounts could be given to the financial emergency needs that were there. Community service council has never been intended for a long-time support of a person or family. It's more in the line of emergency service.

J. DAUGHERTY: Who were some of the women who were influential or active in the?

A. WHITEHILL: Well, Ella Frost, when I first began. Dede Gammon, certainly. In later years there were so many women becoming involved, but for the first few years that I was there I would say that both Ella and Dede paved the major way.

J. DAUGHERTY: That's interesting. All right,

A. WHITEHILL: I should add that another important part in my life was my church, the United Church of Christ. It not only provided me spiritually, but for its own support of the community and even the world. There were things that I was able to do within my church with them. I was very proud to be in that church

J. DAUGHERTY: Thank you. Well, this leads us to your becoming a teacher. If you'd like to tell us in general, what are as grades?

A. WHITEHILL: My college undergraduate major is primary education and general music excuse me, instrumental music. But when we went out to teach in '51, we signed contracts where my husband got his coaching job and I had to take what was left. What was left was half-day sixth grade and half-day general music all grades. They never had a music program so I was not a music education major. This was asking quite a bit of a person and I'd had no intermediate training. All my work had been primary. Two years later, then, when a first grade job opened in Chewelah, I became a first grade teacher and that's where I'd done my training and my student teaching first grade. When we moved from Chewelah to Cheney, I began substituting for the Cheney district. I substituted in all grades for several years. Then in the early 1960s, we went to the University of Oregon at Eugene where Pat got his doctorate and I taught first grade in Eugene. When we returned in October the following year, the Betz School needed another seventh grade teacher and I started in my work there. That was a very long year because they divided the seventh graders by ability from their achievement test scores and I got the lower third. But I guess it taught me a lot about junior high students and I've remained in Junior High teaching. In the Junior high, I have taught self contained seventh grade, I've taught departmentalized English, Math, Social Studies and American History and now and gifted ed. and music of course.

J. DAUGHERTY: You were active in the teachers association?

A. WHITEHILL: Yes. I've always felt that if you're going to participate in something you should really be an active member and so often I have found myself on many occasions holding offices and the Cheney education association, it expanded my knowledge and possibly skill into the area of negotiation and concern about women and women's rights and teachers and student's rights and of course in since '51, I've seen a lot of change in both of those areas.

J. DAUGHERTY: Now as the present time you are an administrator with the responsibility if not with position and what are the activities for that?

A. WHITEHILL: I do, my contract does read administrator/teacher. I administrate the K through 12 programs and along with many people in the community who are teachers and students. I did help organize and implement the first program and we have pulled out programs in the elementary school with a full time teacher and I assist him by doing administrative things that go along with that and at the high school level, the librarian coordinates the mentor program there and I assist her administratively and then at the junior high, I am my own boss and then I carry out what I decide. That's where I do my teaching duty.

J. DAUGHERTY: You are speaking of the gifted.

A. WHITEHILL: The gifted program primarily of Cheney school district.

J. DAUGHERTY: Right. I think we've spoken before that you weren't necessarily encouraged to become an administrator perhaps because you were a woman, but how about as the president of the teachers association, how did you feel that being a woman affected that job?

A. WHITEHILL: I felt that it was very acceptable to be president and I think that maybe because it was an education organization and those of us in education have had a longer time to accept and work toward the rights of minority and women and to be more aware of this, so I don't think it bothered anyone that I was a woman, although come to think of it, were there any other women presidents ahead of me? There have been woman presidents since then how does far does she.

J. DAUGHERTY: Follows you.

A. WHITEHILL: She follows me.

J. DAUGHERTY: Follows you.

A. WHITEHILL: I never gave it any thought, because a former student of mine preceded me as president, he was male.

J. DAUGHERTY: I was going to suggest that being a woman might have a rather mediating effect.

A. WHITEHILL: I think mainly it wasn't mediation between sexes.

J. DAUGHERTY: No.

A. WHITEHILL: It was mediation, it was a very mediating job at that time, but that was when we were, negotiation did not have as caustic connotation as they do today.

J. DAUGHERTY: All right, to put the Cheney history into perspective with the national events, I will ask about certain times, events or issues and let you respond to them as they affected your experience. For instance you went to school in the post war era, to the university. Is that right?

A. WHITEHILL: Yes.

J. DAUGHERTY: What were some of the experiences that were a result of that?

A. WHITEHILL: First of all, there were many veterans at school because the GI bill encouraged their return and I'm glad to see that many of them used it. Probably the greatest effect on me personally was the fact that one of my roommates was a German foreign student who had been a member of the Nazi party during World War II and it was exactly what our government wanted when they deliberately brought foreign students from Germany to the United States and put them on campuses. It made me become

aware of the fact that no one culture or country is all right and the other one is all wrong and that actually each country or person has a reason for doing what they do and I think that was that aspect or that idea has affected me more than anything to my whole life that I've enjoyed since then. Many relationships with people from other countries or folk or do things differently or think differently than I and finding myself being able to respect the part that is the good part in their lives.

J. DAUGHERTY: To realize they are thrown into a situation like the Nazi thing.

A. WHITEHILL: Yeah, Mmmhmm. Fascinating. We had great discussions, just as we are having great discussions today with Tina who's from Singapore and is trying hard to understand why our country was so torn by Vietnam while her country was so grateful that we came and she thinks we should all be very proud and pleased that we did go to Vietnam.

J. DAUGHERTY: That's interesting and that probably has contributed to your world travel and what did you see about the 60s or the 70s, the rebound of areas as far as your education experience?

A. WHITEHILL: Let's see, I was teaching, well, I think, probably I have a personal response to that in the fact that I was raising my own children in the 60s and the fact that I was a teacher and was able to read and listen to where the hippies and the other people were coming from made me deal with my own children in such a way that we communicated during that time. I've always felt that had an advantage as a parent being an educator because I could understand better where young people were coming from because I worked with them and they taught me many things. It made it easier for my own children in that way. In the '70s, I've often been, I'm always affected by the stages we were in; didn't finish my masters degree when I started it in the late 50s and in the late 70s when I got around to finishing it. I had to retake some subjects like America, backgrounds of American, backgrounds of American History and American Education, only to discover when I thought I was being innovative and creative in my teachings in the 50s, 60s and 70s. To find that I was being manipulated because all this was coming from, you know, sputnik said we will emphasize science and I thought that I was emphasizing science because I felt it was important. So I know that the changes that I saw, such in the 70s where we were trying to correct or remediate the fact that we had said to young people in the 60s, "You have rights." Suddenly we discovered that we had forgotten to tell them that you need responsibility with those rights. Now we were trying in the 70s to apply that or instill that in young people.

J. DAUGHERTY: What do you, what about civil rights and how that affected the school?

A. WHITEHILL: Well I'm so pleased that we have come as far as we have. I'm glad that we did this. I was, where I was raised, there were no, the minority groups were Indian but because probably of my mother's education, there was no racism in our home and it wasn't until I came to college that I found out there was such a thing as a Jewish issue or a black issue. By that time, I had not had many built-in biases. I've always been glad to see that the community, Cheney and our state and our country are moving toward an understanding of other people. I really feel that being a teacher has affected so many of my values because I was, any children that I've had or had of any culture or a different race to me were always just people.

J. DAUGHERTY: True in Cheney or even elsewhere in the state, did you know people of minority who might have been influential?

A. WHITEHILL: I can't remember her name. There was a wife of a black teacher at Eastern who came as a resource person to my social studies classes that I had great respect for and enjoyed talking with her. I've always found that was more what if another person and I enjoyed each other's company; it never had anything to do with the color of their skin. I find so many people fascinating that I been thinking, it's hard to say because I've often had people from Oriental race, the black as friends, or at least people to visit with—handicapped people are good friends of mine.

J. DAUGHERTY: That certainly is true and I think it does come down to being open to anybody. What about women rights? We've spoken of this briefly.

A. WHITEHILL: I think, I never was, what's the word I'm looking for where you take a strong stand?

J. DAUGHERTY: Radical?

A. WHITEHILL: I was never radical, I know that within my own family, within my own marriage that we have, my husband and I have grown and are more acceptive to each other. I think it was not just that he's always been very supportive and encouraging of the activities that I take part in and my own profession. But, today for example, he usually does the dishes and always assists with them and says, "You're tired. If you got dinner, I should do the dishes." Now this was not true when I probably really needed the help many years ago when we were raising four children, but so he has grown and I have grown, but by the same token, then I am more accepting of his outside activities and I know that he has grown because he has had the freedom to do that kind of thing too.

J. DAUGHERTY: In school, what do you see and think that girls have a different view. . ?

A. WHITEHILL: Oh yes, you know, because I recall when first of all when we were told when we went out, when we went to teach, we were not ever to be seen in a tavern or drinking in public. We were not encouraged to go dancing in public. We knew that women teachers wore dresses to school and I like the emancipation of today of the fact that what I wear doesn't make me a worse teacher or a better teacher. I like the same thing for students. I am not, if a student is clean, what they wear doesn't particularly bother me and never has bothered me or the length of their hair doesn't seem to make too much difference in how easily they learn. So I think we're finding out that those rules and regulations cause more friction and got in the way than any of the good they ever did.

J. DAUGHERTY: Right. What about the girls seeing themselves in various roles?

A. WHITEHILL: I still think we have a long ways to go there and I'm coming off the fact that that I don't keep a lot of the girls from mentor studies in a science/math program. At the high school, they still tend to go the humanities route. When I know that they have the ability to go the other and they are closing some doors to themselves and I think we have ways to go. I am delighted with physical education. Break through and having enjoyed activities when,

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J. DAUGHERTY: What about the extension of the rights for the handicapped?

A. WHITEHILL: To me it's great. As a class, when I was a classroom teacher, I've always tried to look at a student individually. I have not received an education on how to deal with them or how to give them a better education. I always was concerned for them, not knowing really what to do. So when we began to mainstream them into the classroom, I think we were fortunate here in the Cheney district that the staff that was hired to work with the handicapped and then with us as we had their students in our regular programs, would give us ideas and what to do with them and tell us what the student could or couldn't do. How we could support and reinforce their education goals and I see so much good coming for the handicapped student and for the regular student who now does not find that handicapped student funny or different, but can work toward an understanding and to me that's well worth it. We're doing this; we're going through the same kind of struggles with gifted Ed. Learning that people who are intellectually or talented are not different but that they have a skill. They are just like someone else but they happen to have a specific aptitude and the handicapped child is just the person with a specific handicap.

J. DAUGHERTY: True. What about the shrinking public money?

A. WHITEHILL: Well, as having been in education for 31 years, I guess that's what it is, something like that, I know that you can teach without overhead projectors and film projectors and colored pens, but I think it's, I think education today has improved and grown and when we're criticized that the students aren't doing as well score wise, I just know that at high school level 30 years ago, most of those students who were struggling were not in high school, so therefore schools would be better than they are today as, but I think today we're having to compete with so much media, the mobility of our students, the ability to communicate with many different people. I think you need all these things to make education something they even want to participate in because they can be educated in so many ways outside the school. In fact I think today we really need to be helping them somehow be prepared for the adult work world and how we can do that when we don't even know the occupations are going to be 5 years from now; it's a problem for the schools. But I have great faith in people and schools and country and we all, we have the ability to work it out and I'm glad there are problems there to be worked on.

J. DAUGHERTY: Good for you! Now how has your family, your husband particularly, reacted to your career? The question was, how has your husband and family reacted to your, what's your career and your outside activities?

A. WHITEHILL: Well, as I stated earlier, I've had excellent support from my husband, although, here's where, before women's rights came along, he did expect me to maintain both roles with a minimum amount of help from him because he also to implement or supplement our income officiated ball games and he was gone a lot and so maybe he didn't expect me to, but it I was the only one, we needed the money so I was the one left, then to be sure that the children were taken care of.

J. DAUGHERTY: You have three boys who now have an active mother and?

A. WHITEHILL: I'd like to say that we raised a foster daughter so there were four of them. I think first of all I taught all three boys social studies and they all say that it was a good experience and they enjoyed it, but I was fortunate because my love of geography

and history, they had been, they had a lot of education before they got to the class so I didn't have to worry about what kind of student they were going to be. I think they've all profited. I tend to be highly structured and have a lot of work ethic and need to be kept busy and my family says that they probably couldn't stand me if I was home all the time.

J. DAUGHERTY: Do they like active women?

A. WHITEHILL: Yes and I think all three have been married and they have been supportive of their wives having different both recreation and occupation.

J. DAUGHERTY: All right, not just concerned with your own work, but are there any other local issues or events that you'd like to speak to?

A. WHITEHILL: I think the issue that I feel the strongest about is that somehow we've got to do something in our state to give young people an education and that leads toward being a better parent and dealing with problems that come with marriage. I see the problems that have risen of one parent families, broken homes, child abuse and I think that if we just stop and look at our education system, we really are not helping, I know personally, nobody helped me learn how to be a parent and you know, I think if I could do it over again I think I could do a much better job. I was fortunate because, you know, there was no divorce in our family and there was no abuse of our children and they are fine citizens today and we fortunately didn't have to deal with a lot of problems. But I feel that, you know, we are developing great crisis centers and drug treatment centers and I think our juvenile centers are doing a good job, but if somehow we could get to the problem before it develops and I don't know whether, I used to think that you could mandate that everybody had to have a course in parenting and marriage before they could get a marriage license, but that went out the window when people stopped getting marriage licenses so I haven't solved that problem yet and to me that's a major problem that we need to support.

J. DAUGHERTY: What woman or women do you consider influential to Cheney? We ask this question because you might help us to think about some people.

A. WHITEHILL: I think the names that come to mind are people that. Well, you would have to be one of them, Joanne, because basically I'm in the job I'm in because of you. It was your idea to have the mentor program and do you know that I continually came to you as a sounding board for suggestions and I wouldn't have come if I didn't feel that you had assisted me with the problem or I didn't respect your thinking. So definitely there in my church, I would say that Marion Lewis and I probably not for the same reason as other people who know her through her active work in our church because working. I've not been able to participate in a lot of the church's women's activities, but Marion because really she was a very fine teacher and there probably are many people who don't realize that today and I was so impressed with the way she talked and the way she worked with young people that I think that probably I tried to model after her and I don't know that she even knows that.

J. DAUGHERTY: That's interesting.

A. WHITEHILL: You know I think of my friends and why they are good friends and each contributes to my friendship but I'm not necessarily sure contribute to the community.

J. DAUGHERTY: Well it's interesting that we do get different names. I think that's a good question. Do you think there are enough women visible in public life? In administration of schools?

A. WHITEHILL: I think there are enough women. I'm not sure of numbers and I don't think enough is a word that I would use, I think some people must feel frustrated or forced at this time and I think we're just paving the way and you know down the road in history, you won't have to worry about if you were the first woman. I'm going to have to go home and think about it. Was I really the first CEA woman president? Yet I didn't look at it, it's never dawned on me until this moment. Nobody ever seemed to react that way, which it was different because I was. I don't know.

J. DAUGHERTY: It is interesting that you and I both saw the first woman, first girl president of the student body.

A. WHITEHILL: Yes we did and now that seems unheard of and you don't think anything about it. I hadn't thought about that.

J. DAUGHERTY: What advice would you offer women wanting to do anything, I guess?

A. WHITEHILL: I really believe you can do anything that you would want as long as you remember your responsibility. Whether they be within a marriage, whether they be within a profession, whether they be within the family I think I really believe the opportunities are still out there and they're even better, bigger and better than ever before and I think that we need to learn how to communicate and going back to all the facets of your life, you need to be able to communicate with your husband and your needs. You need to be able to communicate with your family so that if you decide to go into a profession or try something that if it's having its effect on the family, you can regroup and solve the problem. So I think communication is really the key thing. To learn to communicate well and then of course if you're going to get ahead, learn the communication skills that would allow you to move to advance in a job, to get the education.

J. DAUGHERTY: I think you have exemplified the fact that you didn't love your life as a woman in contrast to a man and you don't think in compartments like that. Do you have any other thing that you would like to comment about your aspect of time in Cheney as a homemaker, wife, and mother?

A. WHITEHILL: I just would like to say that looking back, Cheney was an excellent place to raise a family. It was an excellent place to grow professionally and it offers cultural things, there's recreational things, it offers an educational opportunity. I found it a good place to work professionally and I think maybe it's unique because it is a community that has an education center. I was given the opportunity to grow by my husband, by the principal that I worked for, my own children who, you know, took pride in what I did.

J. DAUGHERTY: That's very interesting. Thank you very much.

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