

ARKANSAS EXTENSION HOMEMAKERS COUNCIL

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Official transcript of:

Kathryn Skelton

Member of Washington County Extension Homemakers Council

Original recording made 24 January 2012

at Springdale, Arkansas

Recorded, transcribed and edited by:

Susan Young

Shiloh Museum of Ozark History Outreach Coordinator
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Oral History Program

Susan Young, Shiloh Museum of Ozark History Outreach Coordinator at Springdale, Arkansas

24 January 2012

This is an audio recording of Kathryn Skelton, member of the Washington County Extension Homemakers Council. This interview is part of an Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program, and Kathryn is answering questions asked by Shiloh Museum of Ozark History at Springdale, Arkansas, Outreach Coordinator, Susan Young

Questions and comments by Susan are in boldface type; Kathryn's responses and comments are in lightface type.

I am Susan Young. This is the interview with Kathryn Skelton for the Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program. This is being done on January 24, 2012. Right now we are not at Mrs. Skelton's home because she's recovering from back surgery. We are at the Shiloh Health and Rehab Center in Springdale, Arkansas, and that's in Washington County.

The audio recordings and transcript of this interview will be donated to the David and Barbara Pryor Center for Arkansas Oral and Visual History at the University of Arkansas.

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Yes, I am.

First, give your complete legal name and spell it for me.

Kathryn, K-a-t-h-r-y-n. Ann, A-n-n. Skelton, S-k-e-l-t-o-n.

Perfect. Now tell me the city and county where you're living right now.

Washington County, Elm Springs.

Now we're going to relax a little. This is very informal. I think you know this—did they give you a set of questions? Have you seen the questions at all?

An interview that was done by somebody else.

Yeah, so I'm going to ask you those same questions, just about your experiences of being in the Extension Homemakers. Now, were you ever a [Home] Demonstration Agent, or were you a club member?

Just a club member.

You've told me this, but I'm going to ask you again. How did you learn about the Extension Homemakers Program?

Well, as a girl growing up, my mother belonged to Stony Valley Home Demonstration Club, and then we moved to Elm Springs, and there was no club there, and so until I got married in [19]57, I didn't belong to any club or anything.

Where was Stony Valley?

Greathouse Springs, in that area.

As a little girl, do you remember, did you ever go to the club meetings with your Mom?

Well, they mostly quilted, and yes, I would go with her and play under the quilt while they quilted.

It was a quilt on a big frame?

Yes.

What do you remember about being a little girl and being under that quilt frame?

Well, that we just kind of played around while they quilted. Some of them would have it coming down from the ceiling. They would roll their quilts up on a rope and let them down from the ceiling. But, just playing around while Mother quilted.

So several of the women would bring the children along.

Well, there weren't that many. It wasn't that big of a club.

What would they do with the quilts once they were finished?

I think they quilted for each other. They would piece them, and then they would get together and quilt them.

Do you remember any of the patterns, now that you're thinking back on it?

Well, I'm sure there was the Wedding Ring and some of the old patterns. The Wedding Ring was a popular pattern back then.

How did they—did they share—say if the ladies are making a quilt for your mother. Did she supply the fabric, the scraps, or how did that work?

Yes. Well, sometimes they would do what they call friendship quilts, and they would pick out a block, and then they would pass out the pattern, and each member would make a block, and it was just, there was no real color scheme to it. I guess you would say the backing is what drew it all together. That was called a friendship quilt. They would sign it, each block had the person's name in it.

There's a lot of history in a quilt.

Yes.

They're just wonderful. So you grew up then, with your mother being in, back then, they called it Home Demonstration Clubs?

Yes.

And you told me, then when you got married—tell me the story again of how you came to join once you got married.

Well, when we moved to Elm Springs, there wasn't a club there—an Extension Club, or Home Demonstration Club, back then. So I wasn't involved until I got married. My mother-in-law belonged to the Victory Home Demonstration Club, and it was elderly ladies. They just met in each other's homes, and my mother-in-law didn't drive, so I joined the club to take her to club meetings . . .

Now—I'm sorry, go ahead . . .

. . . It disbanded, I believe it was in 19 and 60, something like that. Early [19]60s, it disbanded. Then, my daughter was in Girl Scouts—Brownies—at that time, and the other lady that was a Brownie leader with me, belonged to the Growing '59ers Extension—well it was still Home Demonstration, to begin with—and she invited me to come and join the Growing '59ers. So I did, and that's what I still belong to.

Wow. So the Growing '59ers are still active today?

Yes, not like they used to.

Yeah, that's a challenge for all the clubs today, I think.

It is.

Now, the Victory Club. Let me go back to that one. Where were they—was that around Elm Springs?

No, it was out, well, my in-laws lived on the northeast side of Springdale, and it

was up in that area of Springdale that most of them lived.

And you've lived your whole life in the Springdale area?

Yes, I was born at Cave Springs, or the doctor came from Cave Springs.

Who was the doctor?

Highfill.

Oh, sure. I think we have his sheepskin, they call it, in our museum. All right, so you and your husband were married in 1957 . . .

Yes.

. . . That's when you joined the Victory Club . . .

Victory Club.

. . . Then you joined the Growing '59ers. When you joined, had the Victory Club already folded, disbanded?

A year or so before that, they disbanded.

Do you remember going to that first meeting with your mother-in-law? Of the Victory Club, do you remember going to that?

Vaguely. In fact, the first meeting was at her house.

At your mother-in-law's house.

Yes. It was more of a friendship club than anything else. They just got together and once in a while they would have some kind of a project—well, a quilt, or something like that—but it was more of a friendship than anything else.

And you were by far the youngest member?

Oh yes. [*Chuckles*]

How old were you when you got married?

I was, let's see, I was married in [19]57. I was born in [19]36.

So 20. About 20 or 21.

Yeah, uh-huh.

Did you enjoy going to the Victory Club, even though you were so much younger than all the other ladies?

Yes, they would, you know, relate all the stories and things. Then I had my first child in '58—1958—and the ones that weren't widows, their husbands were retired, of course, and were at home, and they would watch the baby, or as they got older, while they had their meeting or something.

Oh, that's wonderful. So the husbands . . .

We had a built-in babysitter!

That's wonderful. And they didn't mind doing that?

No.

I love it. Let's see, make sure I'm not missing any questions. I know why you joined Victory, because your mother-in-law encouraged you to. But then, what about Growing '59ers? Was it because your friend, the Girl Scout leader, asked you to?

Well, yes, and I knew some—would you like to know how it got its name?

Yes!

All the women in 19 and 59—the '59ers—were expecting a baby, so they named their selves the Growing '59ers. I was pregnant; I would have qualified

to be a charter member—I was pregnant with my daughter in [19]59. But, yes, I knew most of the members. I enjoyed and wanted to get into Extension.

Did you tell me about when it was that you joined the Growing '59ers?

Let's see, in [19]67, I believe it was. Along in there.

And were most of the ladies in that club, did it tend that most of them lived kind of close to each other?

No, they met in the First State Bank Hospitality Room, and the three that got it organized, their husbands were connected with the University Extension—well, county agents.

Do you remember their names?

One of them was Jane Wright, but I can't remember the other two. I was a neighbor to Jane for several years. They weren't that active on a county level, but I encouraged them to put their first booth in at the Washington County Fair. I put it in for them, and we got a blue ribbon.

Do you remember what it was?

It was on grilling safely.

That would be a timely thing today.

Mh-hmm.

Was that in the [19]60s?

Yes.

Why did you think that was important to do?

I don't know. I wanted to get involved. I didn't go on to the University [of Arkansas at Fayetteville]; I just had my high school education. I was told that if

you got into Extension, they had different workshops and classes, like in tailoring and money management, and that if you got involved and took all of that, you would have the equivalent of a degree, and so I wanted to learn as much as I could. So I encouraged them to start going to the county Councils and get more involved.

So it was up to each club how involved they wanted to be, and county Council—was that when all the clubs would come together and meet?

Usually twice a year, once in the spring, and once in the fall.

Did the Home Demonstration Agent come to your club meetings?

Yes.

Who was the . . .

To start with, I think Mrs. Brownfield was before Mary Gilbert. I believe she was the one before Mary Gilbert. I really got involved on the county level when Mrs. Gilbert came as Home Economist.

What was her influence on you?

She was a wonderful person to get you involved. I became vice president of the county, and that first year, for the state meeting, for some reason, we just thought each county could only send one representative. At that time, our president was expecting a baby and couldn't go to the state meeting with Mrs. Gilbert, so I went as vice president. When I got over there and attended some of the meetings, I realized that most of the counties brought a carload. So we came back and from then on, we took a carload.

You made sure there was a carload from Washington County.

Uh-huh, and then got involved on a state level.

You said you were vice president of the county. What other offices did you hold?

Well, then I moved on up as president, and then while I was president, they had what they called district directors that represented a number of counties on the state level, and I became district director, and I served two terms there—director, and I served two terms there. While I was district director, I was elected treasurer for the state, and I served one year as state treasurer. At that time, there was a national organization, and the secretary and the treasurer for the county [state?] took turns planning the meeting to the national meeting. The year I was responsible for Arkansas, we went to New Hampshire. Then I had some side trips; we went a day early and went on into New York and saw the Rockettes.

So the Extension Homemakers got you to New York City!

Yes [*laughs*]. I just learned so much through Extension, and that's the reason that I kept going, and teaching. I feel like that I learned it through Extension, and I need to pass it on as long as I can, to teach workshops. I especially like needlework.

I was going to ask you what were some of the classes that you took.

At the state meeting, we would have a day of craft classes, we called them. I took a basketweaving class at one, and came back, and we finally had the Guild—the Northwest Arkansas Basket Guild, came from that.

From Extension, that was born from Extension Homemakers, learning . . .

Yes.

I didn't know that.

There was a lady in Benton County. She had a little shop in back of her house; she sold some supplies and taught some individual classes. Then we formed the Guild.

You were a member of that?

Yes.

Do you remember when you went to the first state meeting?

Like I say, I was vice president . . .

Of the county? I'm sorry . . .

Of the county, yes. You said the state meeting?

Yeah.

It was over at Jonesboro, and we had had a storm a week before or something like that and they weren't sure they were going to get to have it. But then, we were under the impression that each county just sent one representative . . .

So it was you and Mrs. Gilbert?

Yes.

Did you all drive over?

Yes. Then, like I say, when I got over there, I found out that you could bring as many as you wanted to from your county, and so I made sure that we took a carload after that.

Good for you. So did different counties take turns hosting a state meeting? How did that work?

It got to where one year it would be at the University [of Arkansas at Fayetteville], because it was a land grant university, and then we had several meetings at Harding University [at Searcy], and it kind of went back and forth, where now they just go to Hot Springs every year.

Yeah, I've been to that state meeting in Hot Springs. That's quite a big deal.

You know, when I was district director, we had a national meeting here at the University, and I was chairman of that, or co-chairman.

Wow, that must have been a huge responsibility.

It was, it was. Of course, we delegated a lot of it out and I just gave the welcoming speech . . .

You got up in front of the whole—there were people from the whole United States there?

Yeah.

Do you remember when the name change went from Home Demonstration?

I tried to remember . . .

Or what I mean is, was that met with opposition, or were people . . .

I don't think so. I think it, they thought the change went more with what we were, because Home Demonstration, the agents came more out to your club, instead of you coming in and taking workshops and things, they would come out. Well, the first ones taught you how to use, canning, how to can using the pressure . . .

Do they still offer that, because I would love to learn that. My mother was good at that, but I never paid any attention.

Well, you can request it, and they will organize a workshop on it if there's enough interest in it.

So the shift has gone from the agent coming to the club to now the club goes to the county office.

Mh-hmm.

Do you think there's a role for Extension Homemakers in the world today?

It's changed. So many of the young women, for instance, my daughter, she

joined after she graduated from Harding. She came and joined our club. But then, like I say, she went and got a teaching degree, and she has no time for anything outside of that now. So many of the young people have to work, or are involved in their children's sports and things like that they didn't used to have, be that involved outside of the home. It's just, the role has changed, and we've lost so many because there are not the young ones coming in, that we've lost a lot of clubs just here in Northwest Arkansas.

Yeah, I went to a program. It was several clubs together, there at the Washington County office, and that really struck me, that it had grown to just enough where it could all fit in that one room. Do you know Pat Pond?

Yes.

She got me to come to the meeting that day. Well, you've been talking about this the whole interview, but I'll be sure and ask this question: How has Extension Homemakers touched your life?

Oh, it has taught me everything that I didn't get, because I didn't go on to the University, or past high school. Through Extension, I learned tailoring, and money management, and the different crafts and needlework and things I do and try to pass on through workshops.

What kind of needlework do you like to do?

Oh, right now I like Swedish weaving on monk's cloth, and . . .

I don't even know what that is.

Monk's cloth is a real loose fabric, woven, and you shrink it, wash it and shrink it. It usually loses oh, half an inch. Then you take yarn and follow a pattern. Well, this blanket here [points to patterned fleece blanket], from a distance it looks like it's woven, but it's not, it's just a flannel blanket. It [Swedish weaving] looks like it's woven. You have a pattern, with different stitches that you follow. I learned that through Extension.

Swedish weaving.

Mh-hmm. Then crocheting, knitting . . .

Can you knit?

I'm still an amateur there. [**Chuckles**]

But you can crochet.

Yes, I crochet, and my mother crocheted. Seems like I've crocheted all my life. And tatting, any kind of needlework, I really enjoy.

What gives you joy about that? What is it about needlework, you think?

I guess creating. I brought counted cross-stitch to the county. It was taught at a state workshop, and I brought it back to the county. There was a place called Pat's Antiques [in Springdale]. She started—I came and taught a class or two at her—and she carried the threads and fabrics and things.

Yeah, I loved her little shop. What ever happened to her?

She passed away.

Did she?

And her husband, he's well, they're not sure he'll make it through the week.

Oh. So you actually taught classes. Besides counted cross-stitch, what classes did you teach?

Well, on a county level we offer any of them.

You would teach crochet, or tatting? Did you teach tatting?

Mh-hmm. Yes. We taught tatting classes. Needle tatting or with a shuttle, either one. We did have monthly, we called it cultural arts workshops. We had one at night, and two during the day, and women would sign up for it, and they would go back, if they wanted to, and teach it in their club, or if they just wanted to

come and learn it just for themselves.

So you yourself taught several classes, different topics.

Oh, yes.

Mostly needlework?

Mostly, and basketweaving.

What was your favorite of those?

Well, they're so different. I guess needlework because you don't have to have a lot of space. For baskets, you've got to have a lot of space for your reed, and it just takes more room for the basketweaving than it does for needlework. I enjoy them both, but I guess needlework is still my favorite.

**Did you have a favorite, I don't know, event that Extension Clubs did?
Sounds like you liked going to the state meetings.**

Yes, I enjoyed going to the state meetings, and I taught workshops at the state meetings. I went to every state meeting until, I guess, I've went twice since they started having them at Hot Springs every year, and I got to where I couldn't go. I guess I attended every state meeting after I learned that you didn't have to . . .

That you could send a carload.

Yeah.

What was your least favorite thing, just about Extension in general? Was there a least favorite?

I don't think there is a least favorite. I just enjoyed it all. I really did.

Even being treasurer? Gosh, all the paperwork.

Well, we had from the state office, one that helped us with it and everything.

When you were state treasurer, you were still raising a family, and you've got responsibilities at home. Did you just carve out a time when you would work on that?

Well, there wasn't that much money exchanged until time for state meetings, paying speakers and things like that, collecting dues from the county. It wasn't that hard, and I enjoyed bookwork anyway. I kept my husband's books while he was . . .

Well, yeah, you were a natural for it, since you were your husband's bookkeeper, as well.

It was one of my favorite subjects in high school.

Oh really? Now, when you were in high school, did you think you might go on to college? That was before you met your husband.

Not really. Like I say, I enjoyed bookkeeping, and I got my first job as bookkeeper at Camp's Department Store [in Springdale] . . .

Really!

And they stuck me up in the cubbyhole by myself, and I didn't like that. Then I went to work over at Clarkson's Mercantile [in Springdale] as a clerk . . .

You worked at Clarkson's! You know, LuAnn Clarkson worked at the [Shiloh] Museum for many years, bless her heart.

Morris [Clarkson, the store owner], too, he was a great guy.

Yes, and talk about a family with a lot of Springdale history. Well, I didn't know that you worked at Clarkson's. You knew Emma Avenue when it was very lively and bustling.

Yes.

You've kind of touched on this already, but what changes have you

experienced in the Extension Homemakers organization?

Just that the younger ones aren't stepping in. They just don't have time for it. There's too many that has to work, or are involved in their children's activities. I would say that for a mother, that's the most important thing, is raising your children and being a good parent. Extension is, well, there's not the need for all the, well for instance, canning workshops and things like that anymore. It's just changed, like everything else, through the years.

Nothing stays the same, huh.

No.

Has Extension Homemakers taught you anything about people?

Yes. Each individual has their own personality, and don't judge them by first impression. Get to know them. We all have our flaws. Make allowances for their flaws, and for yours, too. [*Laughs*]

That's very wise advice. How many would be, just on an average, in your club at any time?

Well, at one time we had 25 members.

That was Growing '59ers?

Mh-hmm. I think that was the largest we ever got. We were one of the largest clubs in the county. But now we're down to, well, I haven't got to attend since last year, but I think they said they're doing good if they get 10 or 12 there.

Any other memories, experiences, or thoughts that you would like to share?

I can't think of any right now.

This is kind of a silly question, because it's so big, but is there like a, just the shining moment in your time as an Extension Homemaker, something

that just stands out, that you experienced, or were impressed by?

Well, I don't know that this stands out, but when you became county president, you automatically went on the [Washington County] Fair Board as their representative. I stayed, or was voted to stay on, and be over Thompson Hall, and I enjoyed that very much.

Thompson Hall is where all the clubs have their booths?

Yes. Used to be that 4-H'ers and—but especially the 4H'ers grew until they moved to a different building. They still had their booths in Thompson Hall . . .

What was it about that that you liked?

I guess seeing people bring in their best work, and competing. And then see their faces whenever they come after the judging and see they got at least a blue ribbon, and maybe a grand champion. It was just rewarding.

All these skills you've learned in Extension Homemakers—I know you have one granddaughter. Are there any of those skills that she's interested in, or that you have passed on to her? How old is she, first of all?

This is her second year at the University. She first thought she wanted to be an orthopedic surgeon, but now she's decided she wants to be a therapist. She has part of her classes at the University, and part of them up at NorthWest [Arkansas] Community College [at Bentonville]. That's what she thinks she wants to do right now. Her older brothers, she has two older brothers. The oldest one works in Oklahoma City, and the youngest one graduates this spring from the University. He wants to own his own pizza franchise. He wants to go in business for himself.

He's following after his grandpa as far as being his own boss.

Yeah. Then my daughter has three sons, and one of them just got married. He's going to be a youth minister. He's still taking a class at Abilene [Texas] Christian College. He's going to be a youth minister, and has a part-time job doing that already.

Down there in Texas?

Mh-hmm, right now. And taking this special course at Abilene. Then her middle son, this is his second year at Harding, I guess. Then her youngest one is a junior at Springdale High School.

So all your grandkids are into their teens, at least, or grown up.

Yeah, well, my youngest son has four boys that my daughter-in-law home schools, and the youngest one just turned 12, and the oldest one just turned 18.

No great-grandkids yet.

No.

Might not be long, though.

Well, like I say, the one that had the wedding the sixth of this month is the first one to get married.

Well, is there anything else we need to go over, as far as your Extension Club experiences?

No, I just enjoyed every minute of it, and like I say, I feel like that's how I got my education, was through taking the classes that were available.

What did they teach you in money management? What do you remember about that?

How to budget, and just spend wisely.

Was that in the [19]60s, you think, that you took that class?

Hmm, early [19]70s.

It strikes me that that's kind of progressive, because I would think that a lot of women, their husbands were taking care of the money, so that's

pretty progressive thinking, to teach money management, for an Extension Club. Well, I've enjoyed this. This has been a lot of fun for me. Do you need a drink? Are you getting dry again?

No, I'm all right.

Well, I guess we'll turn this off, but I can always come back if you think of something else you want to talk about as far as Extension Clubs—why, I'll come back.

OK.

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