

ARKANSAS EXTENSION HOMEMAKERS COUNCIL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Official transcript of:

Ruth Janice Watson

Member Crabtree Extension Homemakers Club, Van Buren County

Original recording made: 8 December 2011

at Clinton, Arkansas

Recorded by:

Katherine Bensuk

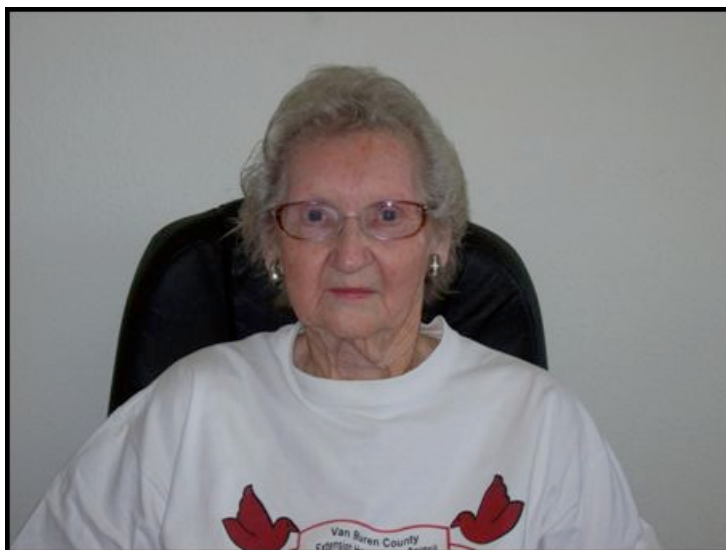
Highway 110 Extension Homemakers Club, Van Buren County, Secretary

Interviewed, transcribed and edited by:

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Oral History Program

Cynthia J. Pace, Van Buren County Extension Homemakers Council Vice President

8 December 2011

This is an audio recording of Ruth Janice Watson, member of the Crabtree Extension Homemakers Club of Van Buren County. This interview is part of an Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program, and Ruth is answering questions asked by Van Buren County Extension Homemakers Council Vice President, Cynthia J. Pace

Questions and comments by Cynthia are in boldface type; Ruth's responses and comments are in lightface type.

I am Cynthia Pace and this is the interview with Ruth Janice Watson for the Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program. This is being done on December 8, 2011, at the Van Buren County Service Conference Room – excuse me – Van Buren County Extension Service Conference Room, Number 133, of the Van Buren County Courthouse Annex. And we're in the city of Clinton, Arkansas, in Van Buren 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 of the University of Arkansas.

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Are you, Ruth, willing to give the Pryor Center permission to make the audio file and transcript available to others?

Yes, I am.

Good, Thank you. First I'd like to give you—like to have you give us your complete legal name, spell it for me, and then tell me the city and the county in which you presently reside.

OK. I'm Ruth Janice Watson and it's spelled Ruth, R-u-t-h J-a-n-i-c-e W-a-t-s-o-n, and I'm a member of Crabtree EH Club, which was organized in 198 – 1978.

And that's in Van Buren County, correct?

Yes, that's Van Buren County.

Good. Well, Ruth, this is going to be a very informal interview and I want you to share your memories of your involvement with Extension Homemakers Program—good times, bad times, challenges, whatever. So what we'll begin with is what has been your association with Extension Homemakers Program. I—you've been a member, correct?

Been a member and been Secretary of the EH Club at Crabtree in Arkansas, and I've also been President of the Arkansas Crabtree EH Club.

Do you remember what year that was that you were President?

I was Secretary in 1978 when we first organized and in the [19]'80's I was President.

Excellent. Question—how did you learn about the Extension Homemakers Program?

Well, I learned about it when my mother had it at her house in 1930—[19]'35. They organized the club in Van Buren County and mother had—Zella Reynolds had the, had the EH Club at our house and made cheese in 1937.

Oh my goodness. Was—was that also in Crabtree?

That was at Low Gap. Low Gap Extension Homemakers.

And that was the formal name of the club at that time?

Mh-hmm.

So you've been associated with the program a long time then, if that began with your mother in the early '30's?

Yes, Yes, uh-hmm.

What was the first club with which you were associated, and what year was that?

That was 1978, and that was Crabtree EH Club in Van Buren County.

And are you presently a member of that club?

Yes, I am.

And, again tell us the name of club, the county and the district that's in.

OK. It's Crabtree EH Club and it's in Van Buren County Arkansas and it's District?

Ozark.

Ozark District. Mh-hmm.

Do you have any special remembrances of that first meeting that you went to in your first club? What impressed you most?

I don't hardly remember what impressed me most, but I was just proud that we was getting a club in Crabtree, Arkansas.

Can you tell me how many members there were at that time?

Seems to me like we must have had about 18 or 20, 21.

That's a good number.

Twenty-one.

That's a good number. So why did you join? What . . . ?

Well, I wanted to help the community and I wanted to be a part of learning other people—teaching other people to do things for the community and be a good worker.

And that gave you a good opportunity to do those things.

That's right.

So is that, can you tell me why you have continued your membership with EHC?

Well, we learned a lot of things and we did a lot of work for the—the county, like making—making mattresses. When I was a little girl, the county made mattresses for the people and they—we built a outhouse at the Crabtree Community Center, was our—one of our first projects and we set out trees at the church there in Crabtree and lots of—lots of other things I can't even recall now.

Did you recruit people from the community to help build the outhouse?

Yes.

Now tell me a little bit more about this outhouse, if you will.

Well—the—I guess the county come and dug the hole and—and we bought the lumber and, and put in two—two doors, one for the men and one for the ladies, and it was a—it was a real good project and it helped lots of people because they had decorations and funerals and things there and people could go. We didn't have no water at that time—the water didn't come 'til [until] years later.

Do you remember offhand what year that was?

Uh, [19]'86.

Nineteen eighty-six [1986].

Nineteen eighty-six [1986] is when water come to Crabtree.

You did earlier list some of the offices that you held. Were you on any committee—committees or did you chair any committees or have any special responsibilities with the Crabtree Club?

Well, I was on some committees, but I don't—I didn't do the main thing, the main project, but we had—we did lots of other things. We made clothes for the nursing home and we made bibs for the nursing home, made caps for the [Arkansas] Children's Hospital in Little Rock, Arkansas, and I can't remember what—and caps and gowns and things and we made stockings for them for Christmas for all of them that's in the hospital in Little Rock, for the—the children there and they can [take] them 'em [them] home with them and have a little better Christmas.

So can you tell me how the Extension Homemakers has touched your life?

Well, it's helped me to—to go and do other things for other people trying to make it more comfortable, and we try to get more people to join and just—it's just been a good project all along to help—to help people.

Question I have, you mentioned earlier that you had helped make mattresses at one time, can you give me a—a time frame off hand how it might—how long it might take to make one of those?

Well, they made several in a day. They met—met at the schoolhouse at Low Gap when I was just about 9 years old. And the people in the community come and then others from Clinton come, and we got the material, we got the ticking, and we got the cotton and I don't remember how we got—how—who furnished the cotton and the ticking, but it was real exciting to be there and see them working on that. And we made a lot of mattresses—a family of four got two mattresses. And if you had more, you got more mattresses.

Mh-hmm. And they hold up pretty well. You know, by golly, I saw one at our museum here in Van Buren County that was made by the Extension Homemakers Club that was in that area at that time.

Well, that was—they—yep, they held up good.

That's wonderful. What has been your favorite event or activity that you did at your club? Do you have a favorite?

I don't. I don't know what would be a favorite, but we have a community supper, or dinner, we have it in the evening in August every year and we invite our husbands and other people to come to that. And we—and well—one thing I really remember is when we got to go, we all went to Little Rock for the Governor's—to the Governor's Mansion at the first of the year when they were inaugurating the new Governor. And then we got to send a Christmas gift, Christmas ornament for the Christmas tree from Van Buren County. Every county in the state was invited to send a or—ornament and we sent one every year. Mh-hmm.

Ruth, can you tell me the names of any of the individuals that you may have worked with in the early days—the early EHC'ers?

Yes, I can. Enid Heffner, Dee Myers, Irene Arnhart, Lilly Wilson, Katie Mae Wilson and Dorothy and Edna Wilson Lemings, and then the Home Ec Lady then was Mary—the Home Demonstration Lady—was Mary McKnight. She was here in Clinton, Arkansas. And then we worked under Debbie Phillips and Janet Maine and Kris Elliott. And the first EH Council Lady was Stella Hall Simpson, and she was also my schoolteacher at Low Gap between Scotland and Alread, Arkansas, and she was the Council EH Club Home Demonstration Lady with Miss Ruth McEleny. And she was the first one that I remember being here and I was just a little girl in 1935 . . .

Oh!

. . . when she came to Clinton, Arkansas, in Van Buren County. And Nancy Autry, which is my husband's Grandmother—James Monroe Watson's grandmother—and she was a member of the Crabtree EH Club in 1935, and her

daughter, Amanda Autry, was one of the ladies that come to Low Gap to our house to make cheese in 1937. That's all I can remember.

OK. Has—has Extension Homemakers taught you anything about people?

Yes. Yes, they have. The people are good to—to help each other and another thing, that people here in Van Buren County are real hospitable. And they—and they most all of 'em [them] go to church and we have devotions every time before we have a meeting and that's wonderful to see how they grow and how our club grows. Mh-hmm.

What changes have you experienced in the Extension Homemakers organization in the many years you've been involved?

Well we don't have as many organizations—lessons like we did, but in the early part, [*choke*]—I've got to stop. [*Cough*]

OK.

[*Beep*]

Can you tell me what has been your least favorite event or activity?

Well, one of my least favorites is trying to tell—put down all the hours that we do, volunteer hours, and that's just like “crowin' [crowing] for yourself!” And I don't like that.

But, I like that.

That's, that's the main one. Mh-hmm.

How does your club support the local 4-H or county fair. Have you ever?

Yes, we support the county fair, and we put up booths and we take lots of our stuff, especially cannin' [canning] and clothin' [clothing]. Thatnt to meetings at other counties like Searcy, Harding [University] at Searcy and Heber Springs at—in Cleburne County and got lessons on how to judge at the fairs and I've

judged at Conway, Arkansas, in—that's Faulkner County, and then in Heber Springs in Cleburne County and Searcy County—Marshall in Searcy County. And I enjoyed—I enjoyed getting to go and see what the other counties had in their thing, but anymore it's failing off on the young people who don't need—don't sew and they don't can and stuff like they used to do. So we need to encourage our young people to get back to the basics of living.

Do you have any ideas that—on how we might recruit some younger members to the Extension Homemakers Program?

Well, a lot, if they would have the meetings at night they could probably do better because the ladies work in the daytime and they can't come, and if they had a babysitter to keep the kids at night that would help. Mh-hmm.

That's so true. So many of the—and in this generation are working and it's difficult. Now you mentioned that you judge—judged in other counties. Can you tell us some of the events that you judged, was it the quilting or – or . . .?

The clothing, the clothin' [clothing], the canned foods, and up at Marshall I was on the main thing for the—that—got the sweepstakes [Interviewee's Edit: Determining the sweepstakes prize.] at Marshall.

Oh, how fun. What do you think about the 100 Years Extension Homemakers—we're commemorating the—the 100-years existence. What are your thoughts on that?

Oh, I think it's—I think it's good to let 'em [them] know that we've been working in EH Clubs and Council Meetings in the county for that long. And it's been lots of, lots of people that was in the—in the EH Club that and the county agents and things, and Mary McKnight was the one when we organized our EH club at Crabtree . . .

She was helpful.

. . . in Van Buren County.

Can you tell us what your most successful fund-raising effort was and when that might have occurred; 'cause [because] I'm sure you've had to try and raise money for your various activities.

Yes, we've had political candidates come and speak and had pie suppers and sock suppers and sold that to raise money and we, I can't remember all the things that we did to raise money over the years, but we did a lot of things. Made crafts and sold them, and one lady, especially Francis Whitaker of the Crabtree EH Club, she made lots of crafts and crocheted stuff to sell to raise money and a lot of the others did, too, and we quilted quilts for other people and raised money doin' [doing] that. And that's the main—main one thing, yeah.

Has your club—Crabtree Club—ever hosted a Spring or a Fall Council Meeting and, if so, how was that experience?

Oh, we had did lots of 'em [them]. We—even before we got water in the community—we took water and had it down at the Crabtree Community Building and—and then the last few years we've had it at the church house and, of course, we got water at the Crabtree Four-Square Church House.

Was it sometimes difficult for you, especially, probably, in the earlier days, to balance your family and club obligations?

Well, my family was pretty well gone, *[laughter]* whenever I had—I didn't have—I had to babysit my grandchildren and—and had to take them part of the—part of the time to the club meetings.

Ruth, can you tell me who the current members of the Crabtree Club are please?

Yes, the current members of the Crabtree EH Club is: Francis Whitaker, Mary Lou Shirk, Marie Chalk, Opal Tester, Vicky Shackelford, Arlis Strickland, Helen Davis, Joy Lemings, Barbara Jackson and Betty Jackson.

Are Barbara and Betty related?

In-laws.

OK.

Their husbands are brothers—cousins.

If money were no object, what gift would benefit your club members most?

More members.

[Laughter]

More members.

Why do you suppose that the Extension Homemakers Clubs throughout the United States have been so successful and have remained active for so long?

Because the people have been willing to work and to do things that would help the community in the state and the United States.

Another question I have. In one to three words, how would you describe the members of your club?

Very good. Very, very good.

OK. *[Laughter]* Thank you. What lesson have you learned from your EHC experience, or what words of wisdom would you pass along to a new member coming on board?

Well, they—they need to be dedicated to what they have joined to do and to help people to have a better life in general.

What—what have you learned through your—through your experience with Extension Homemakers that you might use in your everyday life?

Well, we've had lots of cooking and we made two different cookbooks and sold

them and that was another project that we did to raise money, and just everything in general. Yep.

Can you give us any other memories you might have, experiences or thoughts that you would like to share; is there anything else that you'd like to talk about Ruth?

Well, we made our clubs really interesting because we had skits and Barbara Rossback, one of our old members, she made—brought these skits. And we had them and made it enjoyable for the club meetings and for the Council Meetings when we had the Council Meeting, we had one of the skits. And . . .

Can you tell me what one of the skits might have been about?

Oh, one was a Christmas skit about Santa Claus and then the—and the birth of Jesus. We had a skit on that and then for one time we had this—I don't remember what all went into that. For the Council Meeting one time, the spring flowers and things and then we all made hats and had a hat show at the Council Meeting.

Has your . . .?

In Clinton. And that was in Clinton.

Oh. OK. Has your club worked with any other organizations to accomplish a goal? Like any other—like did you team with other clubs or organizations and what was the occasion or purpose?

Well, some of the ladies in our club had the 4-H kids and taught them to learn to sew and different things. Mh-hmm. I don't remember the other things that they did, but they had livestock. My son had a—had a calf for show at the county fair. Mh-hmm. They participated in the fair.

Is there any project that you'd like to see your club do and why? Is there anything that, you know, in your wildest dream what activity or what would you like to see your club do?

I don't know. I don't know. They—they've always worked good doing a lot of things to help people and to get more members. It's, I guess, more members to where they participate more. Mh-hmm. The more members you have, the more that thinks of things to do.

I understand that once upon a time [Ruth Watson coughs] there were about 30 clubs, Extension Homemaker Clubs in the Van Buren County area and we're down to seven at the moment. What do you think might have contributed to the drop in having so few clubs today?

Well, one thing, is the older people have got older and passed on and the younger people are working and they don't get to come. So, I still think at night would be a good thing for the younger people to get involved.

I agree. Are there any other activities or anything else that you'd like to bring up for us to talk about today, Ruth?

[Paper shuffling]

No, I can't think of any.

Well, you've sure done a mighty fine job and I tell you what, we can't thank you enough for your participation in our Oral History Project and we thank you so much for being here. We appreciate your time.

OK. I've enjoyed it.

Good, thank you Ruth.

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