

ARKANSAS EXTENSION HOMEMAKERS COUNCIL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Official transcript of:

Mary Gray Askew

Former Boone County Extension Agent

Original recording made 7 February 2012

at Harrison, Arkansas

Interviewed, recorded and edited by:

Terry Edwards
Boone County Extension Homemakers Council Member

Transcribed by:

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Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council

Oral History Program

Terry Edwards, Boone County Extension Homemakers Council Member

7 February 2012

This is an audio recording of Mary Askew, former Boone County Extension Agent. This interview is part of an Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program, and Mary is answering questions asked by Boone County Extension Homemakers Council Member, Terry Edwards.

Questions and comments by Terry are in boldface type; Mary's responses and comments are in lightface type.

I'm Terry Edwards, and this is the interview with Mary Askew for the Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program. This is being done on February 7, 2012, at the EHC [Extension Homemakers Council] Office, Harrison, Arkansas, in Boone 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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Are you willing to give the Pryor Center permission to make your dear [audio] file and transcript available to others?

Yes, I am.

Now, first, I would like you to give your complete, legal name and spell it for me, and then tell me the city and county in which you presently reside.

It's Mary Gray Askew.

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How do you spell the Gray?

G-R-A-Y.

G-R-A-Y. And Askew is A-S-K-E-W?

Correct.

Right. And the city and county where you reside?

I live in Harrison, Arkansas, Boone County.

Yeah. Now, Mary, this is going to be a very informal interview, and I want you to share your memories of your involvement with the Extension Homemakers Program, the good times and the challenges. What has been your association with the Extension Homemakers Program as a member or as a professional—an agent, specialist or something like that?

I started working for Cooperative Extension Service in July of 1969, and I was in Clarksville, Arkansas, as a Home Economics teacher. And I had to do a—an adult class for that job, and the Home Demonstration Agent at—in Clarksville came to that training and she asked me if I would ever be interested in coming to work for Extension Service. And I had no idea what it was. [TE: Laughs]

So I checked into it, and I interviewed, and I was hired. And I did my training in Ozark, Arkansas. And then early in September of—of 1969, I came to Boone County as a County Extension Agent for Home Economics.

And that was the story?

That's the story of how I got started.

Well, well, well. Now how did you actually learn about the Extension Homemakers Program?

Well, when I started work, we were actu—I was very much involved with it. The County Extension Agent at that time was the person that took over EHC,

helped them do [Yeah.] their work and gave a lot of that training to them.

Yeah. And how long in years roughly have you been associated with the program?

Well, I was ex—with the Boone County Homemakers as a County Extension Agent from September of 1969 until May of 1983. And then I took early retirement. And then in 2005, I came back to work over in Newton County [Yes.] as a County Extension Agent for Home Economics, and I worked over there for six years.

Oh, well, well, well. So, that's quite something! Now have you attended state Council Meetings? I did so want you to tell when you attended your first one.

That would have been in 1970. And that was a state Council meeting through the Boone County [Ah.] Extension Program.

Now, I'll come back to . . .

I attended . . .

Sorry.

I'm sorry. I attended every one when I was working.

Right. Now, I believe you were a member of a—an Extension Club for a year weren't you, as well?

I was.

So I—I'm going to ask you a few questions that relate to that time. So, what was the first club with which you were associated and what year?

The Harrison Extension Homemakers Club and it was in 19 . . . No, I'm sorry. It was in 2004.

Right. Are you presently a club member?

No.

Do you have any special remembrances of your first meeting or that first club?

Just that it was kind of a different experience for me being on that side of the—of the table. I had always worked with Extension Homemakers Clubs, but being involved with them as a club member was a little bit different. Just enjoying being there and taking part in the club meetings as a member rather than as a person of authority.

Now, why did you join?

I had retired from Extension, and I was at home all the time. And I thought it would be a fantastic organization to be a part of on the other side of the table. And I knew all the ladies that were in that club, and I consider them friends.

Yes.

So, that's why I joined that particular [Yes.] club.

So—So, really, your prior experience as—as an agent and so on had a—an affect.

Big influence on this.

Yes, yes. So, I believe you haven't continued your membership up to this...

I have not.

Date—no. How involved did you come?

Uh . . .

This is talking about your—your club membership.

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OK. My club membership. Well, I was—I attended all of the meetings. I can't—I don't think they made me an officer. This was back in 2004, so that's been a few years ago. But I think I was just basically a member and—and helped them to do things.

Did you have any special responsibilities at all [at all]?

Not that I'm aware of.

No. So, going back to those state Council meetings—what year did you attend your first one?

That would have been in 1980—no, 1960—1970. I started in 1969, so it would have been in 1970.

And then you said you continued . . .

I went every year—uh-huh.

Do you have any special remembrances of that first one?

Not particularly.

And any other special memories of any particular one?

Just—just memories of being there with the ladies that—that went from the county, andenjoying all the programming that they did. We had—we learned a lot when we went to state meetings.

Yes.

And so, even as a County Extension Agent, I learned a lot. You know, as far as food preservation, and—and all of the good things that we used to do.

What did you enjoy the most? Did you enjoy the crafts, programs, or did you enjoy the practical ones like the food preservation? Or did you find a lot of interesting the ones that have to do with social matters that needed,

you know, attention and needed more knowledge?

I was really more of a practical side. I enjoyed the craft work that we used to do.

Yes.

And I enjoyed the food preservation. And actually, as a County Extension Agent, getting hands-on and teaching people how to do things. The housing part of Extension at that point in time was really interesting to me. And we even did horticulture work way back then.

Oh?!

And I would go out if a person had a problem with—or some interest in gardening, or putting out landscaping. We did that years ago.

Tell me a bit more about it [laughs].

Well, we had a—a—had a specialist out of Little Rock, and when we had a—a new—a person that was building a new home or redecorating their home, we went in and helped them with their landscaping. And they came out and actually went to the store with the—with that person.

Really?!

And I helped them pick out things and—and plan their entire landscape.

That really was hands-on.

It was hands-on. It was fantastic.

Oh. And tell me of the things that you did in that way in teaching people at the EHC? Did you teach them the canning and the—the domestic things like that?

Yes. We had workshops for canning. We also had weatherization.

Yes.

As a matter of fact, we started the—it was a fair—a Home Builders Fair. And I invited all of the [*unclear word*] home builders, landscapers, plumbers, electricians, whatever, and they came out to the mall that was very big and active at that time here in Harrison.

Yes.

And we did a Home—Home Fair, and that went [Ah.] on for several years.

I should think that was really valuable.

It was valuable to individuals who were working on their home remodeling or building new ones. Another part of that was that I wanted to involve the Extension Homemakers in that one. So we started a Quilt Club. And they did their quilting and then they brought them out to that show and sold them and had a—a—a judging event as part of [Yes] that, as [Yes] well.

And this is all at the mall was it?

Uh-huh, it was.

And were you involved in the Quilt Workshop that's still going on 33 years later?

[*Laugh*] Just—Just helping to organize it was all—the only part I had in that one.

Yes.

I'm not a quilter, so I don't know how to quilt. But there were a lot of fantastic people around that were able to do that. [Yes.] Still are. [TE: *Laughs*]

What—What other things—I—know that these early years, particularly the EHC had a very strong educational kind of component, helping people to have better lives and learning how to do thing. What other kinds of

things did you teach them in those earlier years?

It—It was basic home economics. It was cooking, canning, financial management.

Yeah.

All of those things that people have to do that make their life worthwhile.

Yeah. And did you teach them anything about what foods are good for you and that kind of thing?

We—we got into a little bit of nutrition education.

Yes.

More of it was probably hands-on, how to do stuff, [Yeah] the cooking and the canning, and baking, and became a big part of the Fair. You know, [Yes] when we were involved, we used to be very involved in the fair, and I—I understand now that they're getting away from that just a little bit. But [Yes.]we did—we taught a lot of sewing—clothing construction.

Yeah, I—I think the Fair is diminishing a little bit now, [It is.] which is a great pity.

Two weeks after I started working for Boone County Extension, was the District Fair. And the County Fair was part of that District Fair at that time, so we didn't have them separated.

Oh, I see.

And the Extension Homemakers were very active in the Country Kitchen, and we [Yes.] served hamburgers, and hot dogs, and chili, and apple crisp. That was our menu. And [Yes.] we were out there from 7 o'clock in the morning, and sometimes I was out there until 1 o'clock the next morning.

Cooking up a storm! [Laughs]

Cooking and managing the kitchen—exactly.

Yes, yes, yes. It's a—it—it will be very good when we actually do get another industrial kitchen out there. It will make a lot of difference, I think, to the things that can be taught.

And they've made a lot of changes to that kitchen over the years. But it was a demonstration kitchen primarily is how it was built. And then, of course, when they started doing the—the Fair food, then, [Yes.] you know, we utilized that a lot. But we used that kitchen to teach a lot of the food preservation and the food preparation classes.

When you were doing your job as a County Agent, did you get a lot of help from the state officers?

We—we had a lot of Specialists [**Oh.**] when I was working, and in almost everydiscipline. In the food preparation, and in the canning, and—and in the clothing. We had specialists for everything. So we would have trainings in Little Rock, or they would come out and actually do programs at the county level.

That was good.

It was fantastic!

Were you associated atole [at all] with the 4-H Clubs or anything like that?

When I started working for Extension, we did a little bit of everything. And we didn't have 4-H Agents as such.

Yeah.

So the County Extension Agent for Agriculture and the County Extension Agent for Home Economics did the 4-H program.

So that—that was quite a—a job wasn't it?

It was a big job, [My goodness! Yes.] and we had a lot of 4-H Clubs in this county and a lot of EHC Clubs in this county. When I came up here, I believe we had 14 Extension Homemakers Clubs with about 120 members. And I can't remember the exact number of 4-H clubs, but there were upwards of 10 at [Yeah.] that point in time.

Yeah, yeah. Well, of course, to some extent, society itself has changed hasn't it in the way that people learn things and the way they live their lives?

Yes.

And I think besides the aging of the long-term members, I think that's had a terrific effect, because women particularly mostly go out to work for a large part of the week and don't have as much time. And they also have the chance to learn things and be entertained on computer and TV. But as a previous lady that we interviewed said, that you miss out on the fellowship to such a great extent. It's not the same atole [at all].

No, there was a lot of fellowship; a very, very close knit group. Even though we had 14 Extension Homemakers Clubs, we got together at least once, sometimes twice a year and not—not counting the Fairs and that kind of thing and they formed very close relationships and had, you know, some people that belonged to more than one club.

Yes, I think we still do that. We've got some who—who belong to two. Now—as an agent, too, did you get—did they give you a car? Did you use your own car? How did you get around? [Laughs]

We used . . . We used our own vehicles. We didn't have—have anything like that, so . . .

But they gave you a—an allowance, I hope.

We got a travel allowance. That was great.

Yes, yes, that was good and much needed I should think with all that

traveling around.

It was. Yes.

Yes. What did your own family think about your—your very strong involvement in EHC?

They were very supportive. My son was born after I started work for Extension Service. And very often I would take him to Extension Homemakers Club meetings that—that took place at night, and he was—he learned a lot from being there.

I bet he did!

You know, and—and he's a very social person now, and I think it started out being a social person when he—he was practically raised at the fairground.

With the ladies, they would spoil him, [Exactly.] and they would give him a lot of attention.

Exactly. And he—he—was practically raised at the fairgrounds. [*Laughter*]

There we are. Well, now, what has been your favorite event or activity?

I really loved the fair. I was very involved in the District Fair over the years, and I loved seeing all the people, being involved in—in every part of the fair—the Country Kitchen and the—the displays, and the exhibit booths, and I—I think that was my favorite part.

Yeah. Have you ever exhibited yourself?

No. [*Laughter*]

All this time. They . . . I—I think the fairs are still a delight—a pleasure, and I—I hope it goes for a long time.

I do—I do, too.

That's great! They really are a crown of the year aren't they for a rural community particularly? It's such good fun.

Exactly. Exactly.

Well, what has been your least favorite event or activity?

I don't know that I have a least favorite. I don't.

Well, one that you didn't enjoy quite as much as the others.

Maybe financial management—teaching financial management, because it was so individualized. You know, everybody has . . .

That's very true.

Everybody has their own set of concerns and problems. And, I think trying to get the younger generation in particular to understand, you know, about saving and—and planning ahead [Yes.] probably is my least favorite part, even though it might have been some of the more important things.

Probably it was. It doesn't seem to come naturally does it?

No it doesn't.

It needs a little—a little push. But was there anything else that you weren't—weren't so fond of doing?

I don't think so. I enjoyed my years in Extension. I—I loved the people, and I—I loved the work, and I loved to see the successes, and I especially liked to see the 4-H kids as they grew up and [Yes] got to be County Extension Agents, and teachers, and the other occupations that they chose for their lives. And to [Yes] think that maybe somewhere along the line, you know, they've learned something from me that helped them in their life.

Yes, yes. I—I think most teachers find that one of the most rewarding things. Particularly when some—some little infant that you remember this

high and a real pest turns out to be a pillar of the community. It's good fun, isn't it? Now, what—think about this especially. What changes in every aspect have you experienced in the Extension Homemakers organization?

I think that we have kind of gotten away from being the expert that—County Extension Agents used to be the expert on so many things, and I—I don't think that there is anything particularly now that we do that people can't learn somewhere else. And when I was a County Extension Agent, we didn't—we didn't have as much information on the media through television and the—and the Net, where people could go and find out things. And so, they would call the County Extension Agent to find out how to do this, or "My pickles are not doing right. What . . . [Yes.] what have I done wrong?" Or, "How do I . . . How long do I cook a turkey?" or all those various things [Yes, yes.] like that that—we used to be the expert. And I think now it's more diversified.

Yes. [noise in the background] And do you feel that there's a good side atole [at all] about this greater availability of information—you know, via the Internet and TV and so on or not?

I think it's fantastic that—that we have that information out there for everyone, because not everyone could come to an Extension Homemakers Club, and not everybody has access to a County Extension Agent, you know, to help them on a one-on-one basis; whereas on the Net you can, you know, pretty much [Tailor.] tailor it to your need.

And do you think there's a bad side to that?

There may be a lot of information out there that is not research based.

That's a good point.

Yeah.

And do you think from the—the point of view of people's lives and how they live them that there's a bad side to the fact that they're no longer getting together so much in—physically in clubs. Well, of course, they have

the social media. But to my mind that's rather a poor substitute. But how do you feel about this?

I—I agree with you. I think that it's very important to have that social aspect—one-on-one with other people, or maybe even in a group setting. I think maybe cell phones have been really bad for youth in the—in the fact that they don't—they're not able to communicate with other people, as well. It's always . . . You know, they're always texting or calling on the phone. I'm glad that we still have a lot of [great?] kids involved where they have contact with other people their age that's not necessarily a—a school environment. It's—a—more of a one-on-one, or—or let me help you do this or whatever. I—I think that 4-H [Yes] 4-H experience is great for kids.

Yeah, and it also gets them outdoors, because children just don't play or—or work outdoors as much as they used to.

They're not sitting in front of the TV set or the computer any more as much as they are doing now. We need to get them out to where they're doing things with other people.

Yes. And also to have first-hand experience of—of animals and bringing up, you know, other creatures, having to be responsible, knowing where their food actually comes before it hits the counter.

That's—that's correct.

Yes. Yes, I think so. Now, has your Extension Homemakers experience taught you anything about people? And it doesn't have to be necessarily totally related to Homemakers?

Yes, I've—I've learned a lot about—about people. In fact, the job I'm doing now is all about people. I—I loved Extension. I quit because I thought that it was time for me to retire. And then I was so bored in retirement that I decided to go back to work, even though I was a member of an Extension Homemakers Club it wasn't—wasn't quite the same as working.

It didn't fill your day.

Right. But what I do now is still working with people, and I love working with people. I think it's—it's—it's my calling for me, because I—I love people and I like to help them in any way I can whether it is practical, learning to do canning and sewing, or whether it is teaching them to grow old gracefully and to give them the help and support they need as they get older.

Do you feel, not necessarily through EHC, but partially, I expect, that more care is taken of the needs of the elderly these days or not?

It depends on where you're coming from. I—I—I think the job I'm doing now with [*unclear word*] has—has shown me that even though we have a lot of strong family values in this country, and one of the things we taught, you know, in Extension Homemakers was family—family values, and through 4-H, [Yes, yes.] family values. But I see so much of the as you get older and you're put into a nursing home or a retirement center, that a lot of the families kind of disappear from the scene.

Really?

They don't provide that emotional support, I think, that the people need.

You mean e—even in an area like Harrison, where there's a lot of close families around?

Yes, you're exactly right.

Really!?

It's shocking. It's surprising to me.

You surprise me. Yes, yes. Well, thinking again about people as a whole. Do you think they're still basically the same as they always were with the same needs and—and everything? Or do you think that people themselves are changing with the—the changing world around them?

I think our needs are the same. I think our priorities are different. I think we all need love and support, and being able to feel independent. But I think we are so

dependent on other entities that as you get older you're more dependent on the government—you're depending on what resources are out there to keep you independent.

Yes.

And, I think, we need to keep people as independent as long as possible.

Yeah. Thinking on those lines about the needs of people in the community, our community is now getting not a huge number, but more Hispanic people coming in to work, and do you see the EHC as having a role in being helpful to them.

I would hope so. I would hope so. I—I'm—our country is so diverse, and we're getting more diverse all the time. And whether or not you agree with illegal immigration or legal immigration, or just [They're people and they're here.] they are more people, and they're here, and we need to support them in every way we can. The Spanish people have a tremendous family value. [Yes, which they can teach us.] They can teach us some—some things about taking care of family. Because you . . . In the job I have now, I very rarely see a Hispanic elderly people in the nursing home, because they take care of them themselves at home.

Yes. Yes.

And I think we have a lot to learn from them.

Yes. We were talking earlier about the EHC and our Hispanic and other ethnic residents, and we were thinking that although they do have in—in this community very strong family support at the same time it would be very nice if we could involve them, because they could probably teach us almost as—well, as—as much as we can teach them. And if the time was available for this to happen and the will, it couldn't be anything but good. And . . .

I agree with that, and I think our problem is going to be getting them to want to be involved with—with these clubs.

I agree with you.

I don't think that that's probably one of their top priorities. I think we need to make it interesting and available to them.

To try and reach out.

Reach out.

Yes, and maybe to learn a little Spanish so that we are able to communicate. [Laughter]

I agree.

Yes, well now. Have you got any other memories, experiences, or thoughts—which I'm sure you have—that you would like to share? Not necessarily EHC related, but, of course, if they are to do with EHC, that's extra specially interesting?

I just remember some of the fun times we had when we went to state, and—and I . . .

Tell us about them.

Three or four Extension Homemakers with me in my car, and we'd—we'd travel down there. And we had a couple of ornery ones that would kind of pull pranks from time to time. But those are the things that you remember.

Oh, yes, yes.

Those are the things that are still in your mind. I had an—an Extension Homemakers Club member that was a little bit on the ornery side, and she went with me to a meeting and got homesick. And I was actually riding with her, and she left a note that I needed to find a way home because she had gone home the night before. [Laughter] Left me in the room.

[Laughs] Left you in your room. That would be a memory, I should think!

Yeah, and that same ornery little gal came and turned the lights off on several of the Extension Homemakers Club members that were taking a shower, and we were staying in a dorm over at the University of Arkansas [at Fayetteville], and the lights went off. And, of course, me being the younger one in the group, I had to go and get the light turned off [on]. And I was thinking, "Oh, if somebody grabs me, I'm in trouble." But [TE: *laughs*]—but we had a lot of fun, and we've had a lot of good experiences, and a lot of close relationships over the years with [**I can imagine.**] EHC members.

And any sad times that, you know, have been particularly poignant?

I—I think just losing them as they—as the—that population got older—losing them and having to carry on without them.

Yes.

And as I look back, you know, most of the EHC ladies that I was involved with—most of them are gone now.

Yes.

And so, I cherish the ones that are still here [**Yes.**] and miss the ones that are gone.

Yes, I think one of the things that getting older, particularly in the EHC because of the terrific character EHC attracts, you realize that ladies who are getting well into their 80s and 90s until physical problems really hit them, they have such a lot to offer, wonderful memories, and often very [unclear word] sense of humor.

That is true.

You know, they—they are absolutely [for?] members and how. Yes, yes. That—that was a lot of fun. And, Mary, if you could do it all again, would you change anything?

I probably would have continued to work for Extension rather than retiring at,

you know, in—in 1983. I—I missed being with the group. I missed doing those kinds of things. Although I enjoyed the years that I—that I wasn’t working, and I always used to say, “I retired early, and then I could go back to work and work until I wasn’t here anymore,” [laughs] which is probably the way it will be. Just the thought that it is coming true, but I enjoyed my time off, but I—I missed the—the ladies.

Yeah, and perhaps missed the sense of purpose when you left.

I did. I did.

**If you were able to change the EHC in any way, what would you change?
I’m talking about now, not—not as it used to be, but as it is now.**

I—I think it’s still very important entity in our community. I would like to see them more involved in overall, general community activities. It—it seems like we don’t get a—they don’t get enough publicity. If you don’t know about them, you don’t know they exist. And I think that we need to keep that out in the forefront; keep what we do as Extension Homemakers club members—let everybody know what we’re doing. [Yes.] Stay involved; get involved [Yes.] with what’s going on. Not just within our own little club but in our total community.

Yes. Have you heard of the WI, the Women’s Institute in Britain?

I have not.

Well, this is very similar to the EHC, with similar aims and a very similar history. And they—they have a lot of the same challenges that we do now. You know, aging members, things being different and so on. But they do seem over the years to have had a very strong emphasis, particularly at the—at the higher meetings. We—We don’t exactly have state meetings, but we do have—regional meetings and so on. And they do tend to get involved in what is happening in the country and where there’s a need or something that needs addressing. And they—they’ve often been quite vocal in showing their—their feelings. There was one meeting, I particularly remember, up in the Albert Hall in London, where the Prime Minister

came along—Tony Blair, I believe, and he made some sort of emollient remarks. And then he said something that really did not please the WI, and by golly they let him know it in—in no uncertain terms. They—They weren’t rude, but he knew. And I—I don’t think that’s all bad.

I don’t either. I think that they need to be involved in what’s going on in the community, [Yes.] because if they sit back and don’t get involved in things, then nobody knows they exist and they can’t make changes. And I think we—years ago, I think, that Extension Homemakers was very instrumental in kind of shaping [Yes.] how our community evolved.

Yes, in fact, they—they were a strong component in the running of the community.

Exactly.

All together, and I would hate to see that gone and lost. Well, Mary, have you anything else that you would especially like to talk to us about? It’s been great talking to you.

I’ve—I’ve enjoyed every bit of this today. I can’t think of anything else. I could probably talk forever once I got started, but I—I feel like I’ve covered most of everything that we needed to.

Yes. Well, I should thank you very much personally and on behalf of the EHC for all your contributions. And I would thank you very much for sharing your time and your memories with us. Thank you, Mary.

Thank you. I’ve enjoyed being here.