

ARKANSAS EXTENSION HOMEMAKERS COUNCIL

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Official transcript of:

Ellen Center

Washington County Extension Homemakers Council Member

Original recording made 31 January 2012

at Winslow, Arkansas

Recorded, transcribed and edited by:

Susan Young

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



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Oral History Program

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

26 January 2012

This is an audio recording of Ellen Center, member of the Washington County Extension Homemakers Council. This interview is part of an Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History program, and Ellen 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; Ellen's responses and comments are in lightface type.

I am Susan Young. This is the interview with Ellen Center for the Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program. This is being done on January 31, 2012, at Ellen's home in Winslow, Arkansas.

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.

First off, let's start out, give your complete legal name and spell it out for me.

Ellen Darlene Center. E-l-l-e-n, D-a-r-l-e-n-e, C-e-n-t-e-r.

Tell me the city and county in which you presently reside.

In Winslow, Washington County, Arkansas.

Now, we're just going to relax, and I'm going to ask you these questions that we've already looked at a little bit. Let me see. How did you first learn about Extension Homemakers?

Mostly through newspaper articles and things about different clubs.

How long have you been associated with Extension?

Since 1964.

Would you mind telling me what you told me earlier, about the group of ladies that wanted to form a club?

I would love to. There was a group of young homemakers around Winslow—there was probably 10 or 12 of us. We were so young that we had lots of questions about homemaking, canning, candlemaking—all kinds of things. We were meeting in our different homes and just discussing things, and one day somebody said, “Well, let’s join the Home Demonstration Club.” So we all got interested and began to investigate it. Our president—I can’t remember who she was—went and got us involved in the Home Demonstration Club of Washington County.

At the time when you all were first just meeting together, before you became involved in Extension, how did you all keep in touch? Did you live close together?

As I recall, we didn’t have phones. I guess from just one meeting to the next. Through school, mostly through our children's school. Just searching out young homemakers who had questions and maybe one of us could answer them.

By the way, you're the mother of five children.

Yes, I am.

That first club—I know we're having a little trouble remembering the name of it. Just a ballpark idea, when you all become involved with Home Demonstration?

Nineteen sixty-four. I know that, because I had a daughter that year while we were organizing.

Did they give you a baby shower?

I can't remember, but probably.

So you were in midst of raising babies and forming an Extension Club.

That's why we met at night, because we all were young homemakers and had lots of children, so we waited until our husbands came home to take care of our children. We met at night in each other's homes. We did all kinds of demonstrations, like how to make a red velvet chocolate cake, how to make candles, just all kinds of homemaking skills. We shared one with another. When we joined Home Extension, or Home Demonstration Clubs, we had more access to better, more positive information.

Did the Home Economist come out to your meetings?

I'm sure she did. That long ago—I'm just sure she did.

After you all became a Home Demonstration Club, did you still continue to meet in people's homes?

For many years we did.

What do you remember, just one skill in Home Demonstration, that you loved?

Just one skill? [*Laughs*]

Oh, you've got a list! Well, let's talk about that list right now.

What did I learn. Well, we're talking over lots of years, so we've learned a lot. Canning, freezing, all about wild birds, and all about Arkansas' gorgeous wildflowers. We've learned about gardening; we've learned about herbs and the use of herbs, and quilting, for just a few.

These topics—how would you learn those? Did someone in the club present the topic?

We usually had the hostess—and we had meals together, too—the hostess planned the meal, and she planned the program. For many years, that's the way it was. As we progressed, we went more with the University [Extension Service] educational programs that were in our book—our little yearly book. We started following those a lot. But we've always gotten off on our own, and as we grew older, we began to realize we'd learned how to do most of this stuff, and it was time to go more toward compassionate service, so we did that.

But one of the first things I remember that we did that I loved so much—we had a home for boys up here at Winslow. It was called Boyland. One of our members, Margie Trimble, her husband worked up there. Another member named Betty Carroll, her husband worked up there. They mentioned to us that it would be a good thing to make birthday cakes for the boys on their birthdays. It was so wonderful because we bought us a great big cake pan that would hold two cake mixes, then we took turns. We signed up. Everybody had a turn to bake a cake for the boy, and they were always standing there waiting on us when we took the cake up there after supper.

That is such a great thing.

That was probably one of my favorite projects.

I'm so glad you mentioned Boyland, because I was thinking of that as I was coming out here. Is the building still there?

You know, it's closed now. Some people, I think from Texas, bought it and really expanded it as a private place. But as far as I know the lodge where the

boys ate and did their games and things is still there. I think a lot of the homes of the managers and workers might still be there. But since it is locked, I don't know.

Margie, what was her last name?

Trimby. Her husband's name was Glen. He was a manager, I think, or oversaw Boyland. Archie Carroll was one of the employees. They got us started making cakes, and I think of all the projects that we've done over the years—because of the excitement in a boy's eyes—there would be a bunch of them standing out there. It just meant so much to them, and we made it a point never to forget.

Each boy had a cake?

Just on their birthday.

If there was more than one in a month, would you do one cake for the month, or one cake for each boy?

I can't remember that.

Either way, what a sweet thing to do.

I can still see—I'd put one of my kids in the back seat to hold the cake. I can still see those boys standing out there waiting on those cakes. It meant so much to them.

Do you remember what kind of cake you made?

Oh, just whatever. White, chocolate. It was just in a pan.

Like a sheet cake.

A sheet cake. And then we would—it seems like Margie Trimby or Betty Carroll would bring the pan back—and the next person up to bake a cake would take that pan home. They would buy the ingredients for the cake, the candles and everything.

How many members were in your club?

We usually run about 12. But back then I can't be sure. Some more of our projects you want to hear about?

Mh-hmm. Absolutely.

Veteran's Hospital—one of our members oversees Valentines and tray favors and things for the veterans. Our next big project is the Children's Hospital. That's a pretty big one. It seems like we find a lot of time to make diagnostic dolls, to make pillows, and to buy toys for the children for Christmas.

What's a diagnostic doll?

We have a pattern, and you lay it out and cut around the pattern. Then you sew this doll—it's a plain doll. It doesn't have any features or anything, it just has hands and legs. We take those down to Little Rock—we don't the County Extension does. When a doctor is going to do surgery on a child, they get one of these diagnostic dolls, and the doctor writes, say it's going to be an appendectomy. He will show them what's he's going to do, then he signs the doll. I think—I'm not sure about this, but I think different staff members sign the doll. Maybe their friends. Say they had a finger operation. He'd draw a finger on there. But it's just a flat doll, with pillow stuffing in it.

We make cute little children's pillows that they can all take home. They take these diagnostic dolls home, when they're released from the hospital, as well as the pillows. Then for Christmas, we usually buy a lot of toys—the whole Washington County does—and has to meet certain requirements. Has to be new, has to be in good shape.

Over the years we've done the unwed mothers, and we've done battered women, and we've cooked for the homeless. I think an awful lot of the organizations in Fayetteville cook for the homeless. They take days where they go in and cook. We did one that really made a hit. It was a Mexican taco salad kind of a thing. Boy, they loved that.

In our local community, we've done baskets for Thanksgiving and Christmas to

people who were in need. We had a schoolteacher in our group, and she guided us through her knowledge of people who maybe really wouldn't have had a Thanksgiving or Christmas dinner. This was sad for me to believe, but she said a lot of the children came to school with no underwear, no socks. They'd come with just shoes. So our club bought a lot of socks and little underwear for some of the kids that came without. We made washrag house shoes for them, so when they came into the classroom they'd have some kind of a little sock to put on.

We do the Christmas Angel Tree every year. Here's a project that I like—we do Bingo for the seniors here in Winslow. We all buy and donate the prizes, then one of our ladies goes and calls the Bingo numbers.

Is there a senior center here?

Yeah, it's down across from the ballpark.

Where that canning factory used to be?

Boy, I've canned lots there.

That was a great community project.

It was. There was a little talk about it coming back, but—and the last project I'm going to mention is gift wrapping for Christmas at the mall. That's where we get a lot of our money. We used to do bake sales and cook food at auctions—anything to raise a little money. That was years ago. Now we can do gift wrapping and that gives us some money for fabrics and things we need for our projects.

What's the name of your club today?

Winslow Home Extension.

**Those are a lot of very worthwhile projects. What did you call it?
Compassionate?**

Compassionate service.

I love that. That's a perfect description of what you all do. Compassionate service. Let's see. You are presently a club member?

Yes, I am.

I know it's been many years, but any memories that stand out for you about your very early years in being in Extension Club—when you were raising your family, and had your home.

I kind of hit on those. We made our husbands take care of our children.

They didn't mind doing that?

Well, they better not! [*Laughs*] At one point, we had more children than we had ladies. I had five. My friend had four. It just goes on and on. They overpowered us. We couldn't get the gist of the meetings; we couldn't really enjoy it. The kids made messes from the food, so we just put them in our husbands' hands, and we went on to club.

And that worked out very well.

That worked very well. We had a lot of fun. A lot of good friends. I might mention the friendship I have through the club is very important to me.

Friends that you made back in the [19]60s?

Through the years. Most of my friends that I had back in the [19]60s are no longer alive.

Are you the last one from that early group?

I'm the last active one. There's two more—one lives at West Fork and one lives out toward Devil's Den, but they left the club many years ago. Their husbands died and they moved on.

It sounds like you and the other folks who wanted to join just had a love for learning.

Being a better homemaker. We needed to know how to can; we needed to know how to sew. There was so many things that we needed to learn. We didn't have TV, and you know, today, I can sit down at my computer and type in something and up pops the answer. We didn't have access to anything like that back then. We had a few magazines like the *Progressive Farmer* that might have recipes. But we were hungry for more.

Did any of you grow up learning those things, like canning? Did you grow up learning . . . ?

Oh yes, I was able to teach a lot.

So you could also bring your own skills into the club?

That's right. Share our knowledge. Back early on, we could pick our own program.

What did you pick?

Oh gosh, everything. Everything. Anything like childcare. I've been on some committees for childcare. That's one of my favorite subjects.

Why is that? What is it about childcare that you love so much?

I just love children. I have a great love for children. It's been really easy to tell other people about what it takes to be a good mother.

We always did gardening, and I love herbs. We learned about herbs.

Why are you still a member today? Why have you kept on all these years?

Oh, gosh. Well, like I said a minute ago, I like the compassionate service. I like the friendship. It keeps me up with my friends and their families, that are all pretty well grown by now.

We need more young homemakers, but we're just not really able to find them. They all work away from home.

That's a challenge for the Extension Clubs, I would think. A big challenge.

It is.

Were you ever an office holder, or serve on a committee?

I have been secretary-treasurer, and let's see. Leadership, I haven't really been much involved in being a leader. Like I said earlier, just more of a worker.

You're a worker bee.

That's me!

Worker bees are what make it happen! What about state Council meetings? Did you go to any of those?

I don't think I've ever been to one. In all these years, I've never been to a state Council.

This is a big, broad question: How has Extension Homemakers touched your life?

Well, it's been very educational for me, and it's provided me with service projects that I like to do. It keeps me in touch with friends. It gets me out in the world.

What's been your favorite event or activity?

We used to go on trips, and that was my favorite. But they don't do that anymore. We'd get charter buses, and go to the azalea gardens in Muskogee [Oklahoma], and we'd go to some museums in Tulsa [Oklahoma]. We've been to Branson [Missouri]. We used to do things, as the whole Washington County, but they have gotten away from that. I don't know of that for many years.

I like the entertainment where we meet with other clubs, and they entertain us, or we entertain them. That gives us more of a one-on-one, and its just fun to know about other ladies.

Those would be my favorites.

The fellowship—it sounds like you enjoy that.

I do.

I asked you this before I turned the tape recorder on—about a least favorite. Is there a least favorite?

I don't have one. I absolutely cannot think of one least favorite thing.

That's a pretty good endorsement.

I thought about it a long time. I just can't think of anything.

What changes have you seen over the years, in Extension Homemakers, the organization?

In the organization, access for information on the Internet. I never would have dreamed that you would be able to just type something in, and up it would pop—the answers. That's been a big change in our whole county. Let's see, we do the fairs, but we've done those for years. I think the technology is the biggest difference I can think of.

That's impacted every aspect of our lives.

Yes, it has. It's expanded our world.

Did your club do a booth at the fair?

Every year.

Do you still.

Yes. It's narrowed down from a whole lot of booths to just a few.

I always enjoy looking at those.

I do, too.

I pick up every handout.

This year we did one that I thought was really great. It was on therapy on horseback. I can't explain it, but it's therapeutic to ride a horse, but if you're handicapped, you have to do it under real close supervision. They have places around here. That was our booth this year. I really thought it was a good educational booth.

How do you pick your topic?

We just get together and have a group conversation, a discussion. Different people submit different things that they think will make a good fair booth—education, and meet the requirements. We have a committee that puts it together.

You said there's about a dozen of you all active today?

There's about 14 right now. Oh, and also, we meet in the Baptist Church. We no longer meet in the homes. I think I omitted that a while ago. For several years now, we have met, first in the Methodist Church, then we met up at the Ozark Native Craft Shop for many years. My sister was a member, and she managed the shop.

Really! Who's your sister?

Connie Wright. She's moved back to Arizona. We decided since we weren't having to go to the Ozark Native Craft Center to do our meetings—because she wasn't there anymore—we started meeting at the Baptist Church in Winslow.

You meet in the daytime?

Yeah.

And do you still have potluck?

Every time.

That makes it worth going.

Mm-hmm. Good cooks around here!

I'll be happy to come do a program for you all sometime.

Don't think I'll forget that! What do you want to do?

I'll leave you my card. I'd be proud to do that.

That would be wonderful!

Let's see, we're almost done. Have Extension Homemakers taught you anything about people?

Yes, it has. That people have all kinds of different ideas. People are just very different. People are kind and wonderful—friendly, helpful. You just have to get out and know people. Some people need more than others. Those are pretty much the things I've learned about people. I like most people.

What else? Anything else that you've made notes on?

No, I can't think of anything.

I'm just really struck by that term you used—"compassionate service."

Well, anytime you serve another person in their time of need, that is compassionate service.

How do you come to have that value? Is that something you grew up learning?

Grew up with it. Grew up with it. When you're involved in any church, you're a member of any church, you learn compassionate service, and you do it. It just becomes a way of life. I think as long as we can help somebody else in real

need, then that's what we need to do.

The world's a better place for you having that kind of attitude.

Most people do, if you get right down to it.

I think you're right. I think there's more good about us . . .

There is. There really is. You just have to look, and you'll see it. It's everywhere. Matter of fact, sometimes some people have so much compassion in them, it's just overwhelming—how wonderful people really are. Our past Washington County president, she does so much compassionate work for other people. It's just unbelievable.

Who is it, do you mind me asking?

If it's all right to tell it.

Oh, sure! You're being very complimentary.

It's Billie Sue Hughes. She was president of Washington County last year. If there's a need, Billie's there. It's amazing. How does she find out these things? She just knows. Seems like she takes care of everybody.

The heart of a servant.

Mmm-hmm.

OK. You think we're done?

I think we're done.

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