

ARKANSAS EXTENSION HOMEMAKERS COUNCIL
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Official transcript of:

Opal Arbella Watson Tester

President Crabtree Extension Homemakers Club, Van Buren County

Original recording made 8 December 2011

at Clinton, Arkansas

Recorded by:

Cynthia J. Pace

Van Buren County Extension Homemakers Council Vice President

Interviewed, transcribed and edited by:

Katherine Bensuk

Highway 110 Extension Homemakers Club, Van Buren County, Secretary





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Oral History Program

Katherine Bensuk, Secretary Highway 110 Extension Homemakers Club, Van Buren County

8 December 2011

This is an audio recording of Opal Arbella Watson Tester, President of the Crabtree Extension Homemakers Club of Van Buren County. This interview is part of an Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program, and Opal is answering questions asked by Van Buren County Extension Homemakers Council's Highway 110 Club Secretary, Katherine Bensuk.

Questions and comments by Katherine are in boldface type; Opal's responses and comments are in lightface type.

I am Katherine Bensuk. This is the interview with Opal Tester for the Arkansas Extension Homemakers Council Oral History Program. This is being done on December 8, 2011, at the Van Buren County Extension Service Conference Room 123-133 in the Courthouse Annex 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 at the University of Arkansas.

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

Yes.

Thank you. First, I'd 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.

OK. I'm Opal Arbella Watson Tester. OK.

Spell it.

I reside . . . Opal, O-p-a-l; A-r-b-e-l-l-a; Tester, T-e-s-t-e-r.

And where do you reside presently?

Crabtree, Arkansas, in a rural community.

And the county is Van Buren County, right?

Van Buren County, yes.

Thank you. Opal, this is going to be a very informal interview. 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?

Well, we joined in 1978. We organized and Enid Hefner was the president of the County Extension Homemakers, and she helped organize it and Mary Emma McKnight was the one that encouraged us to form the membership.

[Audio Person: When you're ready.]

Go.

[Squeal]

How did you learn about the Extension Homemakers Program?

Working with the OH 4-H club with Mary Emma McKnight and Mossy Silva, and Mary Emma encouraged us to form a membership club.

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Who was Mossy Silva?

He was the county agent.

How long have you been associated with this program?

Thirty-three years.

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

The first club was the 4-H.

Extension Club, I'm sorry.

OK. It was [19]'78.

And the name of the Club?

Crabtree Extension Homemakers Club.

And you are still a present—a current member?

Yes.

OK. Please give the name of the club, the county and the district.

Crabtree Extension Homemakers Club, Van Bur—Van Buren County, Ozark District.

OK. Do you have any special remem—remembrances of that first meeting or that first club?

Oh, yes.

Can you tell us about it?

It was exciting. It was, of course, we had some—Enid was there and Mary Emma McKnight was there and we had 21 members.

OK. Why did you join?

To be a help in the community.

OK. Why have you continued your membership?

Enjoy it.

How involved did you become? Have you held any of the offices? Were you a committee chairman? Did you have any special responsibilities?

Right soon afterward, I was secretary of the County Extension Homemakers.

And what about in your club, have you held offices inside your club?

Oh yes, president, secretary. No, I wasn't secretary, was I? I might have been.

Have you attended any of the State Council Meetings and if so, what year?

Yes, but I'm not sure I can remember all the years. I remember the first one we went to was Russellville and I always took my car. We had a carload, *[chuckle]* and I can remember that because they had a—OK—special singers. I can't think of the word now. I think it was the Browns that was popular back then.

How has Extension Homemakers touched your life?

[Whispered] You didn't let me finish on those others.

[Whispered] I'm sorry.

OK. You want another state meeting? To Arkadelphia and we had a carload down there and we stayed in the Ouachita College and slept in the dorms and, and to Hot Springs, I know, twice to State Meetings. That's all.

OK. How has Extension Homemakers touched your life?

Wow, we've learned to do so many things. I know, I have always sewed anyway, but I've learned to do more and I worked with Mary Emma McKnight, and we had, and she had a teaching clothing class at nights and she had me helping her teach these classes in sewing, sewing machines. Some of these ladies brought their sewing machines that they had never used and didn't know how to use them and we had to teach them how to thread them *[laughter]* and do all that.

Oh, you essentially are the county expert at sewing?

I sup—well, they tell me so.

What has been your favorite event or activity associated with the club?

[Garbled] I enjoyed the County Council when we all get together and just to meet each other and learn more about the other clubs.

What has been your least favorite event or activity?

Whoa, *[garbled]* I think I wrote it down. *[Chuckle]*

You can flip through your . . .

Right now I can't even think of any.

OK. What changes have you experienced in the Extension Homemakers organization?

It's been a lot of differences. When we started out, it was like cooking, canning, sewing and now it's more about health care, and, and how to protect your banking accounts.

Would you say that—like the sewing and the canning has just kind of gone by the wayside and it's just—it's not even stressed as much anymore?

Yes.

What do you think about that?

I'm disappointed at it because at the county fair we don't have the sewing there that we used to have and I try to turn, tell the ladies, sew—bring your sewing, but . . .

Has the Extension Homemakers taught you anything about people?

Yes, you learn to get along with people, and you learn to accept them as they are.

Any other memories, experiences or thoughts, that you'd like to share with us before we get into another set of questions?

I just like to say we like at the monthly meetings when we get together. We all love each other and we just like to talk and, you know, and learn what the other ladies are doin', [doing] you know, in their lives.

How does your club support the local 4-H or county fair?

Well, our County Council, we give them so much per year, I think we did.

OK, that's monetary support. What about support as, like people?

Well, occasionally, as you know, I worked with 4-H for about 40 years, so I guess that's a big help. *[Chuckle]*

How have you helped them?

Well, the kids, they learned how to do demonstrations, and it helped them in their school work, too. And then they learned to do things, some of 'em [them] learned to sew, some learned to crochet, some learned to cook. We had cookie sales to raise money.

Speaking of the county fairs—did, did you have anyone who went and worked at the county fair?

Oh, yes.

Could you tell us about that?

Before we had the county fair where it is now, we had it uptown where the ball parks is now. The school and the Extension Homemakers ladies was the ones that did the fair. We were the ones responsible—put it on. And we had a little place where we made hamburgers and sold hamburgers, and each one we would work at like, Ruth and I usually worked at the clothing department and you checked em' [them] in, so forth.

So you were the superintendents?

[Chuckle] Yeah. *[Chuckle]*

Anything else? You, you worked in the kitchen, you were the superintendents, and you said that the Extension Homemakers . . .

We had booths. We had booths and some of 'em [them] we won in, and some of 'em we just placed.

Has your club worked with other organizations to accomplish a goal? And if so, what was the occasion or the purpose of it?

I think in our community we worked with the cemetery; we worked with some of the churches.

So you're really community oriented a lot?

Right.

OK. Can you name your most successful fund-raising event and what—how—when and how that occurred?

Well, county wise, there's our bake sale. Let's see, I'm trying—we had a cookie sale, too, one time.

[Long pause]

Did ya'll have something to do with signs? Road signs? Did—maybe was that a maybe—a fund-raiser about doing road signs?

We might—yeah, we might have done that, too, but Kay's mother was the one that organized that.

And who's Kay's mother?

Camille, I want to say Rice but its Wilson. *[Laughs]*

And who is she? Is she associated with your club, or . . .?

She's a member of the 110 Club and may I say her and I went to high school together and we graduated the same year. *[Laughter]*

That's great! So, you, you knew each other in high school. You knew each other after that and then you were associated again then with the EH. Is that how it seemed to be a lot? Did—I guess what I'm asking is the rest of your class that you graduated from, are they members of EH, as well, or . . .?

No.

No? Most of em' [them] moved away or somethin' [something]?

Weren't interested.

Oh, OK, I'm sorry. What items would you put into a time capsule today to be opened in 100 years from now? Is there anything in particular that you could think of?

I could go ahead and say about Camille was the one that talked me into being President the last, about 1999, *[chuckle]* of the county.

OK. What about the time capsule? Anything, anything at all that you would put into a time capsule that would be buried now and then opened 100 years from now?

Well, all the good work we did for the county, and not only for the county, we did for Children's Hospital [Arkansas Children's Hospital at Little Rock]. We do things for the nursing home. We do things for the special school. We do things for foster children; we do things for the Dove House, and Food for Life.

What do you do for foster children?

We take little things that, you know, like toothbrush and toothpaste, soaps and different things like that and sometimes we've taken quilts.

You mentioned the Dove House. What's the Dove House?

Well, that's for battered women and battered children.

And, and so your club works with them quite a lot?

Yes.

Was it sometimes difficult for you to balance family and club obligations?

I've never really had that much problem.

In one to three words, how would you describe the members of your club?

We're all good friends; we like to be together, work together.

Who was your favorite Extension Agent and when were they—when were they an agent?

I'm gonna say Mary Emma McKnight. She was our first one, and she, I learned more under her than any of the others.

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

I guess a clubhouse.

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

Working together as women.

Because as we all know, women can do anything, huh?

Yes!

I understand the County EH Clubs celebrated the Arkansas Sesquicentennial, which is the 150th anniversary, in a big way with a quilt. Did your club participate in that?

If that was the largest quilt in the—in the world? Yes, we worked at it; we've got pictures, too, to prove it. *[Laughter]*

What did you do? Tell us about the project.

We made blocks and they were what, a yard square, and they were—what do call that? *[Voice of Ruth Watson: Nine patch.]* Nine patch, and they put them together and we furnished some material.

Where did you put this quilt together at?

Fairgrounds, at the fairgrounds.

Was—did the news cover it? Did . . .?

Yes, *[Voice of Ruth Watson: Chuck Dovish]* Chuck Dovish come up and filmed it.

OK. Is that the only thing that the county did to celebrate the Sesquicentennial?

[Long pause and a noise]

Any other big projects? I heard someone mention cookbooks; were there any kind of other books that you all put out?

Oh, yea, we did cookbooks, quilt books.

How did that go?

That we sold to raise money.

Did you—did it—did—were you able to sell quite a few? Did you raise quite a bit of money?

Our first, our first cookbook sold really well, and then our quilt books did, too.

Who was behind that?

[Whispered] Wasn't it your Momma? Camille Wilson. *[Laughter]*

[Whispering: Ready]

So, Opal, has your club ever hosted a Spring or Fall Council meeting, and if so, how was that?

We've hosted several different times, but one that I especially remember was a, a Spring Council meeting, and Janet Carson [Editor's Note: Janet Carson is Extension horticulture specialist with the University of Arkansas Division of Agriculture] from the State horticultural came and was the speaker and our theme was butterflies. So we decorated with butterflies and I have a butterfly dress and I wore my butterfly dress. *[Chuckle]*

Lovely. Did your club ever take any trips, go anywhere to see anything?

Yes, we went to the Van Buren County Museum they had out at Choctaw, and that was one of our first trips. And we went through it, and it was very interesting.

Can you tell me some more about that?

OK. About this train—they had this electric train and this whole hillside, and whole towns and everything it went through. And it was, children especially liked it, you know, they would stand there. Well, I've still got a child in me, too, so I enjoyed it, too. And then we went to Little Rock and toured—set in on the Legislature meeting, which wasn't very interesting because they were so rude. *[Laughter]* But then, of course, we went through the Capitol and then they took us over and we went through the Governor's Mansion, to see that. And the Old Arkansas Capitol, we toured that.

Has your club participated in any activities with any other of the counties, the surrounding counties or even further away?

Yes, when we do the Bake Sale, that's a major thing in May—Friday before Mother's Day. Ruth and I most always worked in the—our club, the Crabtree Club, brings their food to my house and I transport it down there and I take two tables and set up.

What about judging? In other counties?

Oh yes. I've judged in Jasper, Mountain View, Marshall, Heber Springs, Conway.

What is it that you judge?

It's usually clothing, but sometimes it's foods.

Where did you learn how, the criteria and stuff to do that at?

We went to schools; most of 'em [them] were in Batesville.

How many times did you go to that?

I'm not sure, maybe four times. *[Inaudible]*

Have you been to—I guess the—the big center in Ferndale?

Twice.

How's that?

I've been to Ferndale, enjoyed that, but first time I was down there I broke my ankle. Had to drive, and I drove all the way back home *[laughs]* with a broken ankle.

I understand that they used to have workshops to learn different things.

Yes, and that, the first time I went there, we had to cook bread, and we had so many minutes to do it. So none in my group wanted to do it, so I *[laughs]* was the one that did it and I don't remember where we placed in it, but . . .

Was that at Ferndale?

Yes.

Did you ever participate in any of the leader workshops, like for basket weaving, or chair canings or quilting? Weren't there some quilt workshops like in Harrison? Did you ever go to any of those?

I don't think so, but back to the judging in the fairs, I worked in the District Fair in Harrison and we had to spend the night up there in a motel. Go back and forth, two days, and then we had to go back after it was over, you know.

Did you enjoy doing that?

It was fun, but it was a lot of work, a lot of hours.

Are there any other memories, stories, or anything that you'd like to share with us?

Oh, yeah, we always, and I don't know if they still do it or not. But the county, we had a tree on the Capitol grounds in Little Rock and we—I can remember in our 4-H we made the decorations to put on it one year and then we furnished—the Extension Homemakers—they furnished decorations to decorate the tree.

And that was a Christmas tree

Yes, on the State Capitol grounds.

What do you think of the 100-year celebration of EHC?

Wow, it commends a lot of work through those 100 years for the women of the county to learn how to do things; how to can, use those pressure cookers.

You like pressure cookers?

I did in the past 'cause [because] I did a lot of canning, but that's sort of by the wayside now.

You're ready? [Beep]

So, Opal, are there any other memories that you want to share with us?

Yes, I want to tell about our first Quilt Show that we had where we also had a hat contest and we had to make our hats, and we had some that were outrageous and some that were pretty and . . .

Who thought of—of making the hats?

I think it was Bea Canaday.

What club did she belong to?

Clinton. OK. We had the hat contest and our club won with the quilt that first year.

Who designed your quilt?

My Aunt Pearl Turner.

And did you all work on it? Did you all quilt on it or did she sew it together and you all quilt it or . . .?

She got it together; she put it together.

And she was your Aunt?

Yes. And I'd like to talk some more about our agents through the years, too, and besides Mary Emma—she started us out. I don't know how many years we had her, but it was several years. And then we had Janet Main, and she taught us how to make a lot of different things, one of 'em [them] was our denim jackets, which I still wear at home, and you put fringe around the edge and clip it and wash it, and it just keeps fringin' [fringing]. *[Laughs]* And then Kris Elliot, we loved her; she was the sweetest thing and we cried, I think, when she left. And Earlene Brecheen has been one of our favorites; she was just like, like we'd always known her. And so, and Regina, when she's come it's just like we've known her for years. *[Background sound]*
And, too, I forgot to mention . . . *[Long pause]*

Go ahead.

Oh, about when Mary Emma McKnight, when she retired, we made her a special quilt, and I have a picture of it, but I don't think I have it with me, to give her for her retirement gift. And one thing I forgot to mention. We do the County Council each year—we do a nurse's scholarship for one that's training in Van Buren County. And that's where we do our special quilt. A quilt we make each year and sell tickets on it to raise the money and we try to raise \$1,000. Sometimes we raise a little more and sometimes we don't.

Has that been given away yet this year?

Was that the, last week, at the Christmas Council meeting at Western Sizzlin.

Is there anything else you want to share? *[Long pause]*

Ruth was telling about makin' [making] the mattresses back when she was—I was 2 years old, and I remember playin' [playing] under the mattresses when they were making 'em [them] 'cause [because] they had 'em on stands, [chuckle] you know, [chuckle] and I can't remember what kids played with me, but we did it at—in a house; we didn't have a place to meet at like they did. We did it and it was William and Jewel Bond's home. And they used, what do they call those things? Where you, your cotton, had to do those . . .

A Gin?

No, it, those hand things that you, the cotton that you had to . . . [Ruth Watson whispers, “Card,” several times.]

You card the cotton?

Whatever she said. [Laughter] I can't remember those things.

[Long pause]

OK. [Beep] Question, when you joined back in [19]'78, do you remember the names of some of the women that belonged to other clubs that were active in the clubs?

One of the main ones was Bea Canaday, Lorea Jones, Bertha Lance, Mildred Emaheiser, Zella Reynolds, Dorothy Henderson, Ruby Newland. That's all right now that I can come to mind, and I know there's a lot more.

You touched—looking at my notes—you touched on this big quilt. Can you tell us more about this big quilt and what you were doing with it?

We were, we were making it trying to, striving toward the “Guinness Book of [World] Records,” and we were doing it to raise money for our fairgrounds to build buildings, so forth. And we took it apart and sold it into blocks, and I can't remember if it was \$5; it seemed to me like it was \$5 a block.

Sitting here opposite of you, I see these gorgeous T-shirts that, that you and Ruth are wearing. Tell us about these T-shirts.

OK. This was in [19]95. Camille Wilson was the one that organized [*background whispers*] about our T-shirts and her [*noise*] sister, Rosalie O'Donnell, was the one that did our designs—designed it for us. And recently, afterwards, she died with cancer. And on them, it said, "Van Buren County Extension Homemaker's Council," with the two big birds, red birds. And then we had the red flowers down there, one is "Community Service"; the next one, "Fellowship"; next one, "Education" and "Family" and "Leadership." And I was so proud of it after we got it done and then she was gone and that was a way we honored her was with our T-shirts.

You said the “Guinness Book of World Records.” Is it still in the “Guinness Book of World Records,” the quilt?

As far as I know, they said it didn't make on account it wasn't all sewed together when they took the picture.

And that's the one that Chuck Dovish came up here and . . .

Right.

Covered?

. . . and filmed. We liked Chuck Dovish because he looked like—at that time—he looked like Ruth's son, Gary, [*laughs*] and he had quite a personality.

Is there anything else that you'd like to—to share with us? [Long pause with background noise]

I can't think of anything else; is there any else that?

I can't think of anything else. Opal, I want to thank you very much for all your contribution to the Extension Homemakers and for sharing your time and memories with us. I've had a fantastic time with you. Thank you, so much!

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