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Arkansas Memories Project

Interview with

Alta Faubus
19 July 2000

Interviewer: Rebecca Kastelberg

Rebecca Kastelberg: Arkansas and Visual History Center interview of Alta Faubus, July 19, 2000.

Alta Faubus: I was born August 31, 1912 to Rachel Francis Shipp and Jessie Clarence Haskins in the Ball Creek Community in Madison County. I was next to the oldest of seven children, four girls and three boys. They were named Iva Elizabeth, Celia Alta, Velma Lenice, Willie Albert, Jesse Elmer, Garland Howard, and Golda Jean. We were born in a three-bedroom log house near the bank of Lollar's Creek, about 200 yards from the creek. There was a big swimming hole in the creek where we all learned to swim. We had lots of fun in that swimming hole. We took our baths in it in the summer time, and we carried water from it to wash our clothes. A big black kettle stood just outside our yard with a bench and two big wash tubs sitting on it. We heated the water in the big black kettle and washed our clothes on a rub board in one of the tubs and rinsed them in the other. We hung them on a wire fence to dry in the sun. We ironed our clothes with sad irons heated on a wood cook stove. We cooked and heated with wood. We had no running water or electricity. We had a water well in the front yard that we drew water from to drink and to cook with. In the

winter time, we carried water from the creek and heated it in the big black kettle and took our baths in the big wash tubs in the kitchen. We had no plumbing in the house. We had no toilet tissue. We used the big Sears Roebuck Catalogue to take the place of tissue. We made our clothes from flour and feed sacks, which were made out of beautiful printed percale. We grew all our food. We raised chickens for meat and eggs. We got our milk and butter by milking our cows and we raised hogs for meat and cooking oil, which we called lard. There was no cooking oil made from vegetables as there is today. We made our own soap in the big black kettle from the cracklings left from rendering the fat into lard. The cracklings were mixed with lye to make lye soap. We grew a big garden with lots of vegetables. We ate them fresh and canned lots for the winter. We lived on my Grandfather Haskins farm. He was born in Sheffield, England, and he loved gardening. He grew flowers and experimented with fruit trees. He had a big apple and peach orchard. We put apples in the barn and covered them with hay and kept them all winter. We made apple butter in the big black kettle and we dried and canned lots of them. We canned peaches and wild blackberries, which Mother used for cobblers. People came in wagons from all over the county to buy our apples. Sometimes we raised green beans and tomatoes for money crops. We had a flock of geese, we kept to use the feathers for feather pillows and feather beds. There were no paved roads anywhere. We walked, traveled by horseback or wagon to get where we needed to go. We

walked a mile and a half through a trail and on an old wagon road to school. Our school was a community building used for all kinds of events. My father was a Primitive Baptist preacher. He thought he had been called to preach and he spent much of his time fulfilling his calling. He took us kids out of school to work in the fields much of the time, when he would be away from home. We learned to work in the fields by the time we were seven or eight years old. I remember him taking us to Oklahoma two times to pick cotton and to Washington County to pick strawberries. We made our own entertainment. Many times the neighborhood kids would gather and walk five miles to a ball game. We went to the school house and attended singing events. We met at homes and played records and danced. I don't remember any of us ever having to go to a doctor until my brother Elmer put a grain of popcorn in Albert's ear and my grandfather Shipp took him on horseback to a doctor five miles away. My mother had all seven of her children with only a midwife in attendance. Her Aunt Rachel delivered all of us and charged \$5.00 each. I never heard of a dentist at that time. Doctors pulled teeth when they had to be pulled. My mother had seven teeth pulled at one time, with nothing to deaden the pain. In the fall of 1930, a friend, who was a country school teacher, asked me to go to a teacher's meeting with her at Old Main in Fayetteville. I met Thelma Montgomery Ledford, who was also a country school teacher, and she introduced me to Orval Faubus, also a country school teacher, who was teaching at Pinnacle and boarding with her in-laws, the

Alonzo Ledford family. The next weekend, Orval Faubus came to my house with his friend, Lige Combs, who was dating my sister, Lenice. Orval and I dated eleven months and got married November 21, 1931. Times were hard at that time. Orval had saved \$200 and had it in the St. Paul bank. He wanted to buy me a ring with it. I told him times were too hard to spend the money on a ring. In a couple of weeks the bank failed and he lost the \$200 and I got no ring. When we got married I went to Pinnacle with Orval and Mrs. Ledford boarded the two of us for \$14 a month. I went to school with Orval. He had 70 students in all eight grades in one room. I helped him teach the lower grades and studied with the eight graders. I hadn't graduated from the eighth grade when we got married. Orval graduated from the State Vocational School in Huntsville (Huntsville High School) in 1932. At that time if you could pass a teacher's exam you were eligible to teach. Later I took the teacher's exam and taught two schools. I then graduated from high school at Huntsville. No district had enough money for a full term. Each year after school was out, Orval and I would work at any job we could find. Many times we went to Washington state and took school boys with us. And they piled brush to burn where the big timber had been cut. Sometimes we picked cherries and apples while there. In 1932, we lost a baby boy at birth. Then in 1935, we lost another baby boy. Our son, Farrell, was born April 5, 1939. Orval ran for circuit clerk and recorder that fall and was elected. He was re-elected when the two-year term was up. Our country was

entering World War II when he was re-elected. He volunteered and went to officer's training school at Fort Benning, Georgia. I finished his second term as Circuit Clerk. When he came home from Fort Benning, Georgia, he was ordered to Camp San Luis Obispo, California, for training. We had no car. He saw a car advertised for sale in Fayetteville and went and bought it. A soldier had left his car with his grandmother to sell for him. Farrell and I went to California with Orval. One day, when he quit work and went to his car to come home, he found the former owner of the car standing by it and had a good visit. While we were in San Luis Obispo, Farrell was about three and a half years old and he wandered out of the house and got lost. I called Orval and he came home from camp and found him coming down a canyon road. Farrell said he had been for a little walk. Orval was ordered to Camp Rucker, Alabama, next. I couldn't drive, and Orval found Sgt. Brent Cull, from Kentucky, looking for a ride for his wife, Margaret. She was a good driver and went with us and helped Orval drive. She is living in Titusville, Florida, now. We got to be such good friends. She was my driver. We lived in two-bedroom apartments beside each other. Her husband, Brent Cull, whom we had learned to love, was killed in his first battle. We got acquainted with three couples in Dothan, Alabama, who are still my friends. We call each other occasionally. Orval and I were fortunate to have been raised on a farm and to have learned many things. I taught the wives of so many city couples how to do things. Orval was chosen to lead the troops on

maneuvers in the mountains of Tennessee. From Alabama the troops were ordered to the Tennessee mountains for maneuvers. Margaret, Farrell, and I drove to Lebanon, Tennessee to find a place to live. The men came by troop train. A black cat crossed the road in front of us and Margaret wanted to turn around and find another road. We went on and found an apartment in a beautiful big white house. The house burned down the next morning with all our clothes in it. We only had on our pajamas. We found another place where Orval and I celebrated our twelfth anniversary. The same day was Margaret and Brent's first anniversary and we celebrated together. Our next move was to Camp Butner, North Carolina. We all went in our car together. We were in North Carolina about three months when Orval was ordered to Camp Ritchie, Maryland, for six weeks special training in an Air Force Base. When his training was finished at Camp Ritchie, he brought Farrell and me back to Huntsville and he returned to North Carolina to go to Europe with his troops, the 320th infantry. When he left again, Farrell and I went to California and I worked in a small defense plant helping to make radios to go in war planes. Farrell went one year in kindergarten in Brea, California, before we returned to Huntsville in 1945. I got a job with the Employment Security Division as claims deputy and signed up all those people coming home for their unemployment. Orval returned home in the fall of 1946 and bought the *Madison County Record*, the county newspaper. Then our Congressman, Jim Trimble, gave him the postmaster's job. He wanted to

spend his time publishing the newspaper, so he asked Mr. Trimble to appoint me as acting postmaster. I paid for the newspaper with the money I earned as acting postmaster. Orval helped Sid McMath get elected governor in 1947. Sid then appointed him highway commissioner, then later secretary. Orval was Sid's "highway man." When Sid was defeated by Frances Cherry, Sid named Orval highway director just before he went out of office. Frances Cherry had defeated Sid McMath and was governor a short time when he fired Orval as highway director. Many of Sid's friends went to Cherry and told him they would help him in any way they could. He told them he didn't need their help and he didn't want it. No one was on welfare at that time except the old and the sick. Cherry said he was going to "lop off all those old dead heads." His remarks were to come back later to hurt him politically. Orval saw that Cherry could be defeated. He tried to get several politicians to run against him. Finally he told me, "Somebody can beat Cherry and it might as well be me." I begged him not to run, but he convinced me that he could defeat him. That was my first year to campaign, in 1954. Orval lost twenty pounds that year. It was the hottest summer I can remember. It was a heated race, but Orval defeated Cherry. It was the second time a governor had been defeated for a second term. Orval was sworn in on the steps of the capitol and we had a reception at the mansion January 11, 1955. President Harry S. Truman was an overnight guest of ours in the mansion in 1955. We had gotten to know him by attending the 35th Division Reunions. Harry was a

member of the 35th in World War I and Orval in World War II. General Ralph Truman was a cousin to Harry. He married a woman from Fort Smith named Olive. Soon after we would arrive at the reunions, Olive would go get Harry and bring him to our table. The reunion was held in Little Rock in 1955. Mr. Truman was attending the reunion when he spent the night with us. (He played the "Missouri Waltz" for me). Mrs. Franklin D. Roosevelt attended a rally at the Robinson auditorium in 1955 and was the speaker at the American Association for United Nations. She was a member of the United Nations. I sat by her at dinner and at lunch the next day at the University of Arkansas [Fayetteville]. We attended two governors' conferences each year and met many celebrities. When we weren't going somewhere we were entertaining at the mansion. Each year we had a duck dinner for the legislature. We never turned anyone away who wanted a tea, reception, luncheon or tour of the mansion. President Eisenhower called a National Governor's Conference in Washington, D.C., in May of 1955. Orval and two or three governors were late getting there. They had been called to New Mexico to watch an atomic bomb test explosion. Our next southern conference was held at Point Clear, Alabama, in 1955. The last national governor's conference we attended was at the Century Hotel in Los Angeles [in 1966]. Twentieth Century Fox entertained us. They took us to their studios and showed us how they made movies. Then gave us a big barbeque on the grounds, and treated us to the most fantastic fireworks I have ever seen. Irene Ryan with the

“Beverly Hillbillies” [TV series] sat at our table at the state dinner. She was a guest of ours at the mansion prior to that. Mike Wallace with “60 Minutes” [TV news show] was a guest at the conference. In February 1964, I had an invitation to go to the White House and learn about the Head Start program. Sargent Shriver named me to launch the program in Arkansas. I brought all the information home with me and called an integrated teacher’s meeting at the mansion and gave the information to the teachers to take home with them. They went home and went to work and Arkansas had the number one program in the nation. I was honored at the White House for my efforts. *Reader’s Digest* and *Time Magazine* gave me credit for the good work in Arkansas. In September 1964, Orval got sick and asked me to go down to the Convention Center to the Democratic Convention and accept his nomination. After I accepted his nomination, Dr. Rainey put him in the hospital. A press conference was held at the Baptist Hospital and I was given a car and a chauffeur and told to take over the governor’s campaign. Winthrop Rockefeller was running against him for his sixth term. Act 9, the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission had been passed by the legislature early in Orval’s administration and with much urging by many people, the governor had appointed Rockefeller chairman of the AIDC. He (Rockefeller) had been getting credit for a lot of the industry that had moved to Arkansas. The governor was getting concerned that Rockefeller might defeat him. That was the last election Orval ever won, and he gave me the credit for

winning it for him. When I was campaigning, many people did tell me that they were voting for me. Our first grandchild, Fara Elizabeth, was born in 1963 while we lived in the mansion. We celebrated our twenty-fifth anniversary in 1956 when we lived in the mansion. Governor John Connelly of Texas and his wife, Nellie, spent two nights with us during the Texas/Arkansas football game in 1963. About a month after they were our guests, Governor Connelly was shot through the hand while riding in the car with President Kennedy when he was killed. The Central High School Crisis was a much-publicized event in 1957. In 1954, the Supreme Court ordered all schools to integrate with all haste. Little Rock was picked as one of the first schools to be integrated. Governor Faubus had great plans for Arkansas, but he knew if he went along with the federal government he would never be elected again. He asked President Eisenhower for a little more time. The president told him he could have more time. The president's Attorney General Herbert Brownell defied the President and told the governor he could not have more time. Too many things happened to mention. The Arkansas State Police gave me a handgun to carry in my purse during the time of integration. The next time the governor ran after the integration crisis, he carried every county in the state and was named in "Top Ten Most Admired Men in the World." In 1958, we were on our way to a Governor's Conference in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. Kenneth McKee, the sheriff of Washington County, was a state trooper at that time and was driving us. We had a car

wreck as we went through Carthage, Tennessee. An intoxicated driver was coming up the road straight at us. Kenneth took the ditch to keep from hitting head on. Senator Gore, Sr., heard about the wreck on the radio and sent someone to the hospital to get us. We spent the night with the vice president's parents. They treated us like royalty. After living in the mansion twelve years, we moved back to Huntsville in February 1967, and Orval and I were divorced in 1969. I went to Alaska for two months. In 1970, Orval ran against Rockefeller for his second term. I got a lot of encouragement to run against him in the primary. Even the *[Arkansas] Gazette* and the *Northwest Times* offered to help me if I would run against him. Farrell and I talked it over and Farrell said, "Mother, I'll help you all I can, but I think people might think 'sour grapes.'" So I decided I wouldn't run and I went to the Hawaiian Islands instead. I moved to Tucson in 1971 and spent a year. Farrell and Martha Jo had gotten a divorce. Farrell died June 16, 1976 from an overdose of drugs. My whole world seemed to have fallen apart. I took my two granddaughters to Disney Land after their father died, then to Disney World in 1977, the next year after my mother died. I lived for my two granddaughters. I helped to put them through college. They are both lawyers. Fara works for Alltel in Little Rock, does their legal work, and Ellen works for an appeals judge. In 1978, I got a beautiful invitation from Mrs. Helen Boehme [Beam] to go to Israel with her and a group of thirty people from all walks of life to help celebrate Israel's thirty years as a state. Helen Boehme is the widow

of Edward Marshal Boehme, the greatest porcelain artist in the world. She made many beautiful artifacts from porcelain and presented them to leaders of Israel. The next year, in 1979, Mrs. Boehme took the same group, with several others, to Egypt for seven days. This was the most historic and wonderful trip anyone could ever take, "The Journey for Peace to Egypt." I took my granddaughter, Fara, who was 17, with me to Egypt and was offered 500 camels for her. Of course, I declined the offer. In 1980, my youngest granddaughter, Ellen, said to me, "Meema, I don't want to go to Egypt. Do you think you could get me on the *Love Boat*?" I took her on the *Love Boat* up the inside passage to Alaska. We went to Skagway and spent the day there. Then we went back by way of Sitka where I had visited several times when my sister Golda lived there. In 1981, I worked in the Faubus Motel. I was working in the motel or at my newspaper between my travels. When I first moved back to Huntsville I opened an antique shop. The dust in the antique shop aggravated my allergies and I only worked in it about a year, but kept it open three years. The *Gazette* printed a picture of me in my shop. In 1982, I got one of the most beautiful invitations to a dinner dance in the presence of the Prince and Princess of Wales. It was a fund-raising dinner for World Colleges. Prince Charles was president of World Colleges. The event was held at Broadlands, the home of his uncle, Lord Mountbatten, who was the first president of World Colleges. Besides the people who had gone to Israel and Egypt, many celebrities and movie stars attended this event. The next

day, after the dinner, our party went to Windsor Great Park to watch Prince Charles play polo. The queen drove herself out to the park and posed for us to take pictures of her. Several private parties were given for us while in London, including [one] by Mr. Gucci, the designer. After the events ended in London, my group boarded buses for tours in seven countries in Europe. The next year, in 1983, I had another invitation to a fund-raising dinner at a palace in the presence of the prince and princess and I took my granddaughter, Fara, with me. We were announced as we went into the building. The prince and princess greeted us and shook hands with us. There were more dignitaries this time than before. We went back to Windsor Great Park and watched Prince Charles play polo. We toured other European countries and spent some time in Paris. I thought London was a much nicer place than Paris. This was my last trip to Europe. Mrs. Boehm invited me to Russia, but I was tired of traveling and didn't go. I went to the Hawaiian Islands for two weeks. I have traveled in all states except Wisconsin. I took one more trip by car and visited the Berchard Gardens in Vancouver. I developed asthma when I lived in the governor's mansion. My doctor in Little Rock put me on cortisone and I am still on it. I have been walking with a cane for almost twenty years from the effects of taking cortisone. Now I have macular degeneration in my eyes and can't read newspapers anymore. One never realizes how sad it is to get old and useless until one gets there. But, although I cannot get around very well anymore, I have had some

wonderful experiences in my lifetime.

Kastelberg: Thank you for your time Mrs. Faubus.