

Sister Elaine Willett
First Person Plural Project
#1 Tape Summary
15 November 2015

Intro - First Person Plural Project

MN Tell about parents and how met

SEW Mother born in Bald Knob, Arkansas; dad in Kentucky
His family to Jonesboro, Arkansas, when five
Mom to St. Bernards, nursing program for ladies, boarding school
Constructing something at Blessed Sacrament
Mom said watching workers, 'That's the one I want for my husband'
At end of studies invited fella for dance, she invited him

MN Around what year?

SEW Around 1936

MN Did mother work as nurse?

SEW Became pregnant before took boards, stayed home and worked
Worked as nurse much later, private duty, not employed by hospital
Whenever worked with schedule at home, she enjoyed it

MN How was Jonesboro when growing up?

SEW Smaller, more peaceful
Living three miles from church, in country, now in city limits
Neighbors half a mile away
Didn't get out much, friends came to us, stable home, interesting place

5 min

SEW Five of us, I'm the middle one, dad was farmer, raised corn and milo
Had animals, always pigs, cattle, horses
For while goats, turkey, chickens, rabbits
People liked to come with horses and different things
Had 200 acres, plenty place to roam
And mom was a good cook

MN What kinds of stuff would she cook?

SEW The regular, beans and potatoes
Fruit and vegetables from own land, meat, eggs, milk came from farm
Wasn't much we bought

MN Did you help out? What role did you play?

SEW All of them, helped clean house

Among animals, each had chore, I was responsible for chickens
Boys helped with pigs, other things

MN Boys have certain things, girls have certain things?

SEW All mixed, helped cleaning, learned to cook
At farming time, five of us would go out, hoe corn, about 70 acres
At end of that he'd bring us to the movies
Movies wasn't something been around too much, weren't hooked, did together
He cleared land, mom and five of us would clean land, worked together
After finished, told us we could chop cotton with neighbors
Enjoyed because we got paid, it was fun
Learned to work and work hard

10 min

SEW Had way of making play out of it

MN Pretty close with siblings?

SEW Oh yes

MN Lived while out, only went to store every once in a while?

SEW Didn't come too often, mom or dad would go to store
When still small, Depression time
Remember one time mom said she wouldn't be able to get enough sugar
We bought sugar, flour, oatmeal
Mom said she would be canning, things like that
Given ration stamps, only buy so much
Was going to juice the rest and can as juice, later make preserves

MN Creative, do what she can

SEW We had peach trees, plum, apple, cherries, pear; a lot of fruit

MN Describe your school and education when younger

SEW Came to Blessed Sacrament school, first to eighth grade
Left and at time there was girl's academy, entered there as freshman
After short time, asked one of sisters how you become a nun
It was my cousin, had cousin and aunt sisters in community
"You'd have to speak with mother superior, I'll get you an appointment"
She talked to me, "You're wanting to come in? When?"
'The sooner the better'
Told me to come Friday
Came in as freshman in high school
Continued high school, started formation studies for religious life
Was candidate one year, postulant one year, and novice for one, then made vows

15 min

SEW Temporary vows to begin with, did for five years, then did final profession
In that time finished high school

MN What interested in joining?

SEW When at Blessed Sacrament in first grade had Sister Fredalina, excellent teacher
Loved the children, not sure she could always hear us
After recess put head down on desk, would read us life of a saint or missionary
Related to Lord, motivating
Calmed us all down, rested
Had her for two years
Before out of her class already decided I want to be like her
Want to be teacher and sister, stuck in my mind
Never told anyone, until I asked Sister

MN Why do you think that was?

SEW Guess it was just my way, I was thinking about it

MN Made decision then, or considering?

SEW I never wavered in it, only thing I was thinking about

MN What other options? Consider other things?

SEW Didn't really consider other ones
Knew had other options, brothers and sister all got married
Could have done the same thing, knew it
Not what I wanted, felt like this is where the Lord wanted me

MN Role of religion growing up?

SEW Strong Catholic religious family, come to church every Sunday, never missed
During Lent, every Wednesday and Friday night had evening service, always come
Dad would come out of field just in time
Came together all the time, enjoyed it, got to see all of our friends
After service, wouldn't rush home, enjoy ourselves for a while

MN Would chat for while?

SEW About an hour, go to see friends

20 min

MN Have extended family in area?

SEW Dad had brother and one sister in convent, one not in convent here
Mom had four sisters here
As growing up, dad's grandmother living in house with us
Mom's parents in Bald Knob (Arkansas)
Every Christmas we'd go down

See all of aunts and uncles and cousins from mom's family, she was one of 13
Christmas dinner together, feed children first
Uncle in charge of movie theater, give us a double hitter
They would eat and enjoy themselves, then when out would open presents
Grandma and grandpa made handmade gift for all children
When went to movies like 60 of us, and not all there
Grandpa liked woodwork, grandmother would do other things
Must have spent all year getting ready for Christmas

MN January first start again, any particular present you remember?

SEW Gave me whatnot corner thing, tiered, put in room to put knick knacks
That I loved, small, could take care of it
Don't remember all of the things
My youngest brother, one time made him wooden horse

MN Bet he liked that

SEW Loved that

MN Sounds like fun family

SEW Yeah

MN What would you say were values family enforced?

25 min

SEW Didn't realize then, thank God for the family I was in
Considered ourselves poor because dad didn't have cash money
Had plenty to eat, even in Depression time ate well
Mom would sew clothes
Never needed anything, learned not to ask for things that weren't necessary
By same token, learned to be creative, made own toys, games
Did give us liberty, set up boundaries - could never leave dad's property
Had the horses, remember playing hide and go seek at night on horseback

MN Sounds fun

SEW Ones that get smart turn horse loose
Worked hard, but on Sunday we play
Dad did not work, even though he was farmer
'Today's the Lord's day'
At end of year, crops always better, Lord blessed us
Instilled hard work, honesty, and unity
Saw with my parents
Didn't know other families, what goes on
Never heard mom and dad argue, never cross word, just thought it was normal
Mom used to tell story, after married here, attended Blessed Sacrament, all was well
Went back to Kentucky
Catholic church had custom all men on one side and women on other

'No way, I'm married to him and I'll be by his side'
That was her attitude, they were one, they gave in
Sat with men
They did that, did things together
Harvest time, she'd be in the field with us

30 min

SEW She would take food, drive tractor, worked together
Learned to work together

MN She would stand up for what she thought was right

SEW She sewed our clothes
We became curious, wanted to learn things
I was in first grade, had treadmill sewing machine, said I wanted to learn
Played around, made little doll clothes
One day cousin came, was petite
'Would you like new dress?'
Must have been in seventh grade
Ask mom if she had material, I'll make one
People would give us things, had big bag of dresses
'You can use this'
Sears and Roebuck catalogue once a year
'Pick out dress you want'
Took material, cut it up, sewed, looked pretty good

MN Nice, that's impressive

SEW They were impressed
Started making all kinds of things
In eighth grade, mom said, 'Would you like to make yourself two dresses?'
Bought me the material
Made two, didn't have pattern

MN What do you remember about schooling? Good at school? Like school?

SEW Liked school, but struggled very hard
Hard to read, could not spell, but enjoyed it
Two of brothers were same way, two had to repeat
One had to repeat because of polio

35 min

SEW Other couldn't get studies together
Reading hardest thing for me
Understood, but such a slow reader, made it hard
I made it, passed all the grades
Never read a single book through eighth grade other than material we were using
Got to high school, in convent, went so fast
Never read book apart from required textbooks

Thought finished with all this studying, but not really
As sister, would send us to college to get educated

MN You spoke of kindergarten teacher, any others who were important?

SEW One sister I liked because I loved math
Would tell us stories about home, from Texas, much like my home
Didn't have that same feeling as my first grade teacher
This one I remember because of her math
When raining, couldn't get outside, would entertain with math games
Still use them occasionally

MN Parent's attitudes towards education?

SEW Mom became nurse
All of us would ask dad how far he went in school, 'Went in front door and out back'
He was an inventor, any time he needed anything he would just invent it
Had big wood stove
Didn't like to use energy on something that wasn't necessary
If had wood cutter, wouldn't have to go out with ax

40 min

SEW Came up with a wood cutter
Had huge saw, put on tractor, wanted to cut
In mind came up with idea, fixed one
Now they sell them, don't know if he'd ever seen or heard of one
Mom had Alzheimer's, he used ingenuity on that
Had wood stove, she put wood in, getting to point she could burn down house
'Have to keep her from stove, not safe anymore'
Thought about it, went out to shop, fixed it
Next time I visited, had lever under door that shuts, stick toe under
She would have never known

MN He liked to tinker, solve problems?

SEW Yeah, kept house in repair, added on twice
Built huge red barn, bailing hay for cattle, wanted good storage space
Made cylinder block buildings to store corn, wheat
Guess who helped him, all of us
I was out there a lot of times
We learned proportions to make cement, put stones together

45 min

SEW Later I used all of this
Brothers all worked for Otis Elevator Company
When we were together, talk about this
Even before, would be doing light work, putting in light fixtures
I'd be looking what going on, watch them do it, hear them talking
It absorbed, didn't know I'd ever use it, but I did

We just had fun
Did a lot of whittling, dad allowed us to do whatever we wanted in his shop
Rule was, when finished, back like it was
Oldest brother and sister started youth group, going out Wednesday nights, got boring
Mom, 'Can I do something in the kitchen, like to make donuts'
'Do what you want, just has to look how it looks now'
With two little ones, had a ball, and they came out
Dad came in, already eating, enjoyed them too

MN Sounds fun

SEW Was a wholesome life, freedom about it
Worked hard, played hard, did whatever

MN And did together

SEW Did together
Everybody came to us
One Sunday, members of church - two boys, older, still in the church, serving
Two came out, wanted to ride horses
Get them on, take off
Horse turned, weren't used to it, fall off
No problem, get back up and go again
Sister and I would get horses, run a fair piece along road
Clydesdales, didn't have saddles on them
Would take them all the way down, stand up and gallop, race back to house
Spent a lot of time on horses

MN Story about cotton?

SEW Mom tells story about dad

50 min

SEW Before got married, mom said will help on farm, but don't plant cotton, won't help
They had cotton and she'd had enough
He had raised corn a few years
One year said going to plant cotton
When it came time to pick she knew she had to help
Would go out, pick together
She said we'd pick, come back, weigh, she always had twice as much as he did
By end of year, no more cotton, his decision, because he could not keep up with her
He had never raised cotton, in tobacco country
Never again did they have cotton, neighbors had
When he was about 90, decided couldn't do farm by himself

MN Oh wow, waited until then?

SEW He was still planning, working the farm
Asked man to help him last two years he was alive
Farmer asked if he could do rice
Beautiful because when dad diagnosed with cancer, of brain and lungs

I was home with him, mom had already died
He'd be out on tractor, come in, would be tired
'Don't think that could be my age?'
Had beautiful twinkle in his eye
"I'm sure it's not"
Had that as joke
Later on, watched him struggling to get up, too weak
Need to call doctor, went to emergency room, did x-ray
Doctor told me what found, surgery is out, could do chemo [therapy], radiation
Know he's not going to want that
'Take him home'

55 min

SEW Took home, did not say anything
He wished the doctor could figure out
Doctor did find out what's wrong, can't fix it
Told him what it was
'Okay,' that's all he said
'Would you want to call hospice?'
He said yes, with mom had hospice, knew how wonderful it was
I asked doctor how much time, about 6 months is all
Four, five days later brought all the equipment they might need
Getting ready to leave, I asked how long, said probably six weeks
Called my brothers in North Carolina, Florida, and Texas, in the elevator companies
'Should we come home?'
'He's still ok, I'll call you'
Knew they were busy
Next Monday, rechecked him, maybe three weeks left
Called my brothers, could see him heading down fast
'Do you want to see him alive or dead, want to see him alive, come now'
They were there Monday, stayed until Friday
We had a ball
Talking about old times, learned a lot of the history, early life
It was beautiful
Brother had a camera
Asked him all these questions, brother running camera, we've got that to this day

60 min

SEW He would walk outside with them
Farmer going to be combining the rice, want to come down to watch
'I'd really like to see that'
Down there a good hour, almost supper time
Got supper ready, dad said don't feel like eating
Ok, sit at the table or go to bed that's fine
Brothers going home, by next morning he couldn't get out of bed
Problem, back hurts, won't be able to take care of him
'Get one of Hispanics to come help'
During the night need help
About six o'clock in the morning he died

So often he repeated, 'Don't want to be burden, pray I can die with my boots on'
He made it, little over 24 hours that he wasn't out of bed
Never was really uncomfortable, good way
When brothers leaving, going home to get wives ready for when call
When I called, one had just walked in the door, other still on the road

MN Sounds like had nice time together right before

SEW Even at the funeral was beautiful time, had so many friends
Funeral mass was here, relatives from all over came, like big family reunion

65 min

SEW What else do you need to know?

MN Make shift, what was families reaction when interested in being nun?

SEW First told mom, told her I'd talked to Mother
Could enter but had to have parents' permission
Mom said sure, if can get dad's permission
Asked dad, got a yes
They were happy
Brothers and sisters, don't think it surprised them, so many religious in our family
My dad had probably a dozen, mom had three at least
Wasn't like we didn't know them, no resistance

MN Particular reason you chose Holy Angels? Consider others?

SEW Did in one sense, Lord's way of getting me here
Cousin entered in Nazareth, Kentucky, with Charity Sisters
To do that would have to write a letter, hated writing letters
Thought I'll just come here, it's easier
Lack of being able to spell got me here
Lord has done that to me many times
My weaknesses is what he makes the best of, over and over
Tell you about that later

MN What was it like when first joined? What expected?

SEW Heard others say it's hard to get adjusted
For me, wasn't much different from being home
Prayed together, worked together
Rather than my family, here among group of sisters doing same thing
Easy for me to fit in

MN Typical day when first started?

SEW Still having high school classes, have own assignments within convent
Places to clean, things to do, jobs would change

70 min

SEW Learning about religious life
Time had to spend outside in garden, flower beds, loved greatly
All of the things asked to do were normal for me
Cooking breakfast, doing dishes
What I always did, liked it

MN Able to use things learned as a kid in the convent

SEW Yeah

MN Probably excited to have you

SEW Can tell you humorous thing
I was very strong, having worked on farm
Dad would bale hay, we made trapeze we'd do across hay
Had wrestling matches, races, climb trees, hoeing, physical work
Assigned to dust mop halls, been doing it a while
Lord is funny with me sometimes
Had to take mop outside, shake it off, come back in
Went out to shake off mop, cracked handle
Sister looked at me, 'Ok, here's another one'
Still cleaning, go shake off mop, break second handle
Come back in, she sort of scolded me, there's another mop, be careful
Think I was being careful, shake third mop, and it broke
Knew she was going to kill me
'So sorry, it just broke'
She started laughing, 'We'd been needing new mops'
Why I broke three mops, no idea
Things like that would happen, made me realize that I have no control
Third time was going to be real careful, still broke
What else were we talking about?

MN Early years, you were teacher for a while?

SEW First assignment
Dream was to be teacher, nurse
Forgot to tell, she always told us about missionaries

75 min

SEW Have us saying prayers for missionaries
Little tin can to help missions in class, 'penny for the poor children'
Got me thinking I'd like to be missionary
First assignment was to be teacher at Holy Souls in Little Rock
Normally you don't switch professions
Wanted to be a nurse because of mom
I loved that year, just out of high school
Principal was 30 years old, older sister as housekeeper
Eleven of us in school teaching

Principal said, got third grade and fifth grade
Two new, both 17 years old
Haven't made up my mind which, wanted me to do third grade
Again Lord taking care of me
Had problem with phonics, spelling, reading, loved math and science
Teaching third grade, building on the side, two rooms
Third grade teacher that's been there will be there, you have divided subjects
When met teacher, said 'Here's math and here's English, which would you prefer?'
'I'm new, what have you been teaching?'
'Been doing English'
'If that's what you've been doing, just do it'
It worked!

MN How long did you teach?

SEW One year
Excellent year for me, learned a lot
Weekly lesson plan for year, I did it by math, divided down in good breaking places

80 min

SEW Then every weekend make that week's daily plan
Teaching was easy, already knew what to cover
She taught me planning
Come home at end of summer, get assignments
Could be repeat or new, expected to go back
It said nurses training, Pueblo, Colorado
Thought she's not sending me alone, four of us going
Associate Degree nurses program, three years
Had to repeat six months
Lord made sure I knew about nursing, hard way, having surgery twice
Was bleeding, in rotation at surgery, helping as student
Had patient had been bleeding long time, ended up with cancer
Too far advanced, if had reported early on probably could have helped
Scared me, next day decided to check with doctor
Ended up in surgery, just a polyp, didn't have instruments do now, had to do surgery
Nasal gastric tube, learned what felt like
Learned about diets, about surgery itself
Don't teach you in training, I use that

85 min

SEW Then on orthopedic floor, started having severe back pain
Wonder what's causing, no idea
Borrow crutches, weight off body and pain went away
Told my sisters, bring heating pad
Next morning worse, had to go to doctor
To surgery you go, had popped ovarian cyst
Learned much from experiences, Lord taking extra time and trouble teaching me
Missed too much time in pediatric rotation, have to repeat
Hospital run by Sisters of Charity, ones that I wanted to go to

‘You’re going to be supervisor, let you shadow different ones, time in different areas’

Central supply, pharmacy, night nurse, emergency room
Rotation following sisters around, Lord preparing me for work in future
Needed everything learned
Rest of semester to do whatever

MN How did you enjoy Colorado?

SEW Loved it, ironic
Entered convent three miles from where lived
One of others lived in Colorado Springs, hour away from where we were
Entered at home, sent thousand miles away, she came thousand miles and sent home
During break time stayed there

90 min

SEW They gave us things to do
Go on excursions with sisters, got to Pikes Peak, Twin Mountains
Did a lot of studying
First year wasn’t bad
Good school, no one had failed state nursing test for years
I was middle of class in ability
One of seniors failed one test out of five
Came to our class, eliminate students with lowest grades, left me on bottom
No reason not to pass, make sure we had study time
All free time in library, providing adequate study time, opportunity to make it
Studied hard, made it

MN Congratulations

SEW Good feeling

MN After that came back to Jonesboro?

SEW Started at St. Bernards (Hospital)
Assigned as assistant on two floors, both sisters getting very old
Kind, nursing was not like now, wasn’t nearly as technical

95 min

SEW Learned skills being nice to people
I’d seen schedules, made six week schedule
Sister would make for week, hard for her
Asked if I make schedule, keep on making it, like to make it for longer
Made six weeks, everybody loved it
Soon did both of them
Worked here three years
Mercy Sisters hospital in Brinkley, wanting to move out
Asked if we could take over, sold for one dollar
We took over, five of us sent
Stuff learned recovering from surgery served me well

Forty-bed hospital, little thing, didn't have big major central supply
I knew quite a bit, surgery and OB [Obstetrics] I got here [St. Bernards Hospital]
Had surgery and labor and delivery department, no staff
One nursing floor had good staff
Other designated for African Americans, where they put all, no matter what they had
Did bring ladies upstairs for delivery, took them and baby downstairs again
Ended up being director of nurses
Sent to Louisiana a while, came back again

100 min

SEW Loved that place
Nursing director here hardly see a patient
More planning, make policies, implement programs
There it was supervisor of hospital, wherever needed
Worked surgery, nursing and delivery, central supply
Was one decided this isn't right, could do better
Emergency room not staffed, had door bell, I usually responded
Really something I loved, Brinkley

MN How long were you there?

SEW Altogether, three or four years

MN Saying why you enjoyed it?

SEW Enjoyed learning things, inventing things like my dad
You've got to be versatile
Some examples saw in Brinkley, never seen before
One day surgery and patient in labor at same time
Patient on surgery table, daughter of lab tech, scrub nurse had gotten everything ready
Saw doctor coming out of labor room, thought better swing through
Look at her, thought oh my

105 min

SEW I knew she was dead
Knocked hard on doctor's lounge
'What are you going to do?'
'Let's do a [caesarean] section'
Wanted to know if he was agreeing she was dead
Didn't want to say, because if alive, might hear us
'Need anesthesia?'
No, knew she was dead, have to do section
Go back tell mom, not going to be doing surgery
Had to get done fast to save baby, delivered less than five minutes
Then had to go tell father, healthy baby, but wife was dead
Was fifteenth child, had emboli hit brain
Sad moment, most nurses never seen C-section on dead person
Another one, winter, heard door bell, from tone you know it's urgent, ran steps
Lady delivered in car, baby still completely in placenta

Where were you, calculated it's been two and half minutes
Cut open and got baby out, started CPR (Cardiopulmonary resuscitation)
Looked so dead
Had seen in nurses training in emergency room, saw baby brought in looked dead
Resident started CPR, don't know how long he went

110 min

SEW Seemed like hours, but it wasn't
If he would have said it was dead, it would have been dead, gave chance and made it
Followed up, didn't have any damage, amazing
In Louisiana, was night supervisor, didn't have staff usually
Four in labor together, one went in, realized doctor in trouble
Baby was delivered, she was bleeding too much
'Would you like help?'
Struggling, couldn't keep up, needed more help
Ended up with four doctors,
Come back every once in a while
'Doctor would you come deliver baby?'
And then he'd come back
Hysterectomy abdominally, one guy grabbed manually where bleeding was to keep it
Opened up, took out uterus
In meantime, kept saying need more blood, lab trying to keep up
Floor so bloody, cleaned floor under them, there for ages

115 min

SEW Baby and mom both made it

MN Took a lot of time and effort

SEW Took a lot of time and effort

MN Where in Louisiana?

SEW New Iberia, Louisiana

MN Hospital?

SEW New Iberia General (Hospital)
Was county hospital, always had sisters running it

MN When did nursing, come back and assign you each year?

SEW Each year come home for retreat during July
At end got assignments, go back or elsewhere

MN How was getting new assignments? Enjoy? Miss places?

SEW As much as I loved Brinkley, excited about new one
Always adventurous, wanted to see more

‘Sister, didn’t you like it? ‘
If said come back, be excited again
Excited to come back, but going again

MN Always excited about new thing

SEW Yes

MN Read in *On High Ground* about tornado in 1973, you were ER supervisor

SEW That was an experience
Named emergency room supervisor two weeks before
Had been running around, had to see everything, that was my way
Wanted to know where everything was, what we had to work with
It was small, three emergency rooms and one larger room with three cots
Nursing desk up front, there was door
‘What’s here?’
‘Not sure, supplies for emergencies’
‘Take all out and find what’s in there’
Put it all out, put all back
Within week had tornado
Ready for it, as ready as I could be
Knew what had, didn’t have
Too many patients to attempt to do anything
Set up stations to suture, bandage, first aid
Emergency became triage

120 min

SEW Only one emergency room doctor, on call
Called him, there’s been a tornado
First have to get out of house, then walk

MN How long did it take?

SEW Little while
Patients coming in slowly, first didn’t know it was tornado
I knew it was tornado
Emergency room was wooden structure, two floors
Sleeping on second floor of wooden section, had beeper, didn’t go off
Hear noise go over, knew that was tornado, no doubt
Nothing I could do about it, turned over to sleep, then beeper went beep
‘I’m emergency room supervisor!’
Get up and go
Everybody came from everywhere, nurses off duty came, ones that could
Many of sisters, to help people keep peaceful
One thing I did, don’t know if anybody knew
All three hospitals segregated, didn’t like that
Didn’t know anything about prejudice, never saw a black
Guess three different occasions
Chopping cotton for neighbor

125 min

SEW Had other family chopping
Started raining, went to barn, had fun, all we knew
Played together, went back to work
One time riding horse on property, in back was big creek, loved to ride into it
By myself, could roam around, black man fishing, chatted a bit
Thought, 'He's a nice guy', went home
Third time, some event school went to that African Americans went to
In Jonesboro, very few, didn't see
When nurse, still very few, occasionally have one
Maybe one working in lab, not many
One day patient asked for private room, on his section no private room
Had insurance, railroad employee, hip injury
Doing surgery, going to have big cast, going to be immobilized
'Why can he not have private room?'
'None over there'
'We have one open, why can't we put him there, who's going to have problem?'
'Ok,' it worked
Every once in a while I had problem, kept feeding them over there somehow
Amount of nursing care much lower, aides instead of nurses
Somebody with heart attack, who is going to take care of them?
I'd make plea, they'd give in, pretty soon they liked it
Where they should be because we take care of them
After while became nothing
Before it was mandated
When in Brinkley, had three active doctors, one elderly, two younger, another retired

130 min

SEW Older one had been alcoholic, had quit, like godfather for hospital
The other two been there long time, always drinking, but always sober
Younger one not always sober, made a situation
Older one told me, need to pay attention to nursery, what's going on
Couldn't comprehend, said just pay attention, didn't see anything
Had nurse's aide in nursery all of the time, nurses weren't there all the time
Then they brought in a premie [premature], before fancy equipment
'Where's mother?'
At home, delivered at home
Mother delivered before midwife got there, told midwife baby had died
Midwife cleaning her, looked under bed, in shoe box was this baby
Take it to old doctor, 'What should I do?'
'Do whatever you want, not much hope'
Get it warm, not enough strength to nurse, give fluid
Got real weak nipples to feed him
Keep it with me 16 hours a day, feed every hour or two
Gaining weight, getting stronger, I was amazed, at night in nursery
During day, put behind nurses desk, have it with me, put in pocket
Wanted to check his strength, he was getting stronger
He was black
We were doing fine

135 min

SEW One morning walked in, he couldn't cry, couldn't eat, just limp
Go to bottles that were left
Left early that evening because getting stronger, left milk
Went to woman in nursery, she told me how much she gave him
'Where did you get it, there's none missing?'
'I did not feed him,' because he was black
Others had survived, when she was there she was not feeding the black ones
Probably what the doctor was referring to, didn't know it
Called the doctor, I was sick, almost lifeless
Doctor said do whatever want
Knew there was medicine to make IV fluids absorb
Too weak to swallow, probably strangle
Took that, put in his thighs, start IV, had to leave, go to surgery
Don't want to leave alone, want to keep breathing
Candy Striper there, had rocking chair, called for favor, putting a lot of trust
Sit down here, placed child on her chest, keep rocking until I come back
When I came back she was rocking away
When opened blanket, it had gotten enough fluid
Didn't take long to get his strength back

MN Amazing, strong little boy

SEW Yeah
One person got fired

MN What happened to nurses?

SEW Wasn't nurses, they didn't know
It was that aide, got fired
That was the beginning
He [black infant] was first I put in nursery, otherwise would have been downstairs
Pleaded with doctor, have to leave him up here, can't make it on his own
But people get upset if see him, I said remember corner, nobody can see it

140 min

SEW All babies from then, so much easier to take care of baby up here
Stick in corner for a while, gave up on the corner
Staff accept it, everybody accept it
That took care of Brinkley
Pleaded case of nursing mother, leave on maternity floor outside of nursery
Actually closed downstairs, was overflow
In Louisiana, again made use of circumstances that came along
Had medical floor and surgery floor
Decided time for renovation, half medical floor renovate at one time
There was black on one side, white on other, segregation
No one objected because couldn't do otherwise
Intention to move all back

When finished, wanted to renovate other side, have all over here
Nurses liked it, didn't have to run in both directions
Easier to take care in closer quarters
When other got open, didn't move them out, let them be
No big deal, slipped up on them, soon other floors wanted same
Hospital made it without anyone complaining
Making use of circumstances as occur, it worked
By time desegregation mandatory, doing it already

MN What inspired you to work for that?

SEW Thought it was what Lord wanted
No prejudice within me, hadn't been taught
Have to learn it from someone
Learn to accept somebody, like something
Do it by having presented to you
Even kids with foods that's what happens
Didn't think it was right, didn't like it
Then found out parents were prejudice

MN How find that out?

SEW In Brinkley, most of employees African American, some of patients were
Had one little fella, burn case

145 min

SEW Lady came in pregnant, carrying one baby, another walking, severely burned
One she was holding died, the one toddling made it
She came in pregnant, went into labor, baby looked healthy, she was doing fine
Thought we were ok
Weeks later, still had baby, everything fine
Get call, she was downstairs, need help
She just all of the sudden died
Called doctor to come check
Wasn't finished, get desperate call from nursery, child was dying, were left with one
Severe burns on neck, pretty small
Parents came and saw him, made a remark
Had never said anything to us
When little bitty one came, started getting bigger, obviously going to make it, named him
Had no name for him, mother didn't come to check
Named Little Joe after my dad
'Going to look funny having Little Joe follow you saying mommy'
Later the mother came in with vaginal bleeding, in room downstairs
I pick up Little Joe to visit her, 'This is your baby'
She almost froze
'Why did you not come and see him?'
Sure that we would die, didn't want to get attached
Didn't have to worry about Little Joe call me mommy, he had a mommy
Four years later, mother sent me picture of him

150 min

MN He's doing ok?

SEW Doing fine
He's got to be in his 30s, 40s

MN Amazing what you did

SEW A lot of stories
Love nursing, but year of teaching was Lord's way of preparing
Nursing director in big hospital may not have to do teaching
There I had to do all, nurses, aides
Even here, when started requiring CPR for medical personnel, ambulance, police
Working at St. Bernards [Medical Center], volunteered to teach
Vo-Tech [vocational-technical] school from Walnut Ridge, paid salary
Did for nurses, ambulance drivers, police, enjoyed it
Mixed teaching with nursing all the time

MN Been talking a while, if want to end

SEW Let me tell one more thing

MN Want to talk again different day, could tell me thing still
Maybe talk about Mexico, Hispanic ministry, if willing

SEW I would, interesting story
All this preparation for going there
Changing point was, had gone to school in Louisiana at University in Lafayette
Got degree in nursing
Supervisors going to require nursing diploma
In Brinkley, closed hospital, came back home, hadn't been assigned anywhere
Went to teach at ASU [Arkansas State University] a couple of years
Between two years, got opportunity to become missionary
Finished year, then went
Hinge gate between hospital ministry and Hispanic ministry

MN At ASU taught nursing courses?

SEW Had started Associate Degree program, looking for instructors

155 min

MN How did you enjoy teaching that level?

SEW Loved it, as I have everything I've done
Still see some students, getting older, working at hospital

MN That's great

SEW Ok, we live to be

Wanted to add one more thing associated with teaching and nursing
When in nurses training in Colorado, year of disturbance in Little Rock schools

MN Central High?

SEW Taught one year, then went to Pueblo, Colorado
Up there, on the news, documentary of all that happened
Sister were watching, 'How horrible, must have been something'
'What are y'all talking about?'
'Riots in Little Rock at that time'
'Wait a minute, I was teaching in Little Rock, didn't even hear about it'

MN Wow

SEW Didn't even hear, at another school
Think publicity embellished what happened
Probably was riot, got blown up
If outright threat, city-wide thing, we would have heard
News wasn't like now
Teaching in school in Little Rock at same time, never did cross path
Said to myself, prejudice
If media had not been so prejudiced, if told facts
Was an incident, but really that strong?
Don't know, wasn't on site of incident
Not severe enough that we even knew, didn't come to us
Said this is the first I've heard

MN Missed it completely

SEW Even though was that close

MN Interesting how that could happen in same city

SEW Lot of learning things from all that

MN To be continued