

Interview with Grace Conant

By Anna George

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Anna: What year was it when you were 16 years old?

Grace: I was born in 1935 so probably about 1951.

Anna: Where were you living at that time?

Grace: We lived on a farm out here north of Cimarron at that time. But I attended high school at Friends Haviland Academy and lived in the dormitory so I was probably away at school.

Anna: Where was that?

Grace: At Haviland, Kansas, down by Pratt, about seventy miles from here. I lived in a dormitory down there all four years of high school. I came home sometimes on weekends and summer of course. It was different, but it was a wonderful experience; it was a wonderful school.

Anna: Was it just you staying in the dorms or did you have a roommate?

Grace: Oh, I had at least one, sometimes two roommates. And they remained friends for life and some of them have passed away now... one of them.

Anna: When you did come home, who was living in the house with you?

Grace: My daddy and he had remarried; my mother died when I was nine years old. He didn't remarry until I was about fourteen. So Daddy and Merdy were always there. And my grandma also lived with them, my grandma Sauer. She was pretty elderly, but she lived with them at home until she passed away.

Anna: Did you have any siblings?

Grace: Yes, I had two older sisters and then Dwight, a brother, was younger. There was four of us. And then after Daddy got married, they had one girl. And so she's my half sister and she lives in Ohio now.

Anna: Oh wow!

Grace: One sister lives in California, one in Colorado, one in Ohio, and Dwight and I both live in Kansas.

Anna: When you were home, what chores did you have to do around the house farm?

Grace: I drove a tractor sometimes. I didn't like doing that, I didn't like working out in the field, but we would help there. We'd milk cows, feed the calves, and sometimes we had chickens and we'd gather eggs and things. I, we, didn't like the chickens very well. Didn't like going in the hen house very well. And sometimes we'd have baby chickens and when they'd get up about, I don't know old, whether they were six weeks or two or three months old when we'd kill them and put them in the deep freeze and have farm-raised fried chicken. My daddy never thought the chickens at the store tasted half as good as the ones we grew.

Anna: What did you do for fun around the farm?

Grace: I was nine years old when we moved to Cimarron so I have lots of early memories. We lived in Sylvia, Kansas, and there were several cousins rather close and we had groves of trees and there were all kinds of birds out in the trees. And we would sometimes rob their nests and collect various types of eggs; that's terrible. And then we'd build forts out there and it was simple fun, but it was a lot of fun and a lot of good memories. Just getting to play together and we had cattle in the pasture and sometimes coyotes would bother them and Daddy would and another man, he had the dogs, and we'd go coyote hunting out in the pasture to try and keep them from hurting the calves and things. So we just had a lot of good times.

Anna: Yeah, it sounds fun.

Grace: It was!

Anna: What did your dad do for a living?

Grace: He was a farmer. It was pretty unusual; my father graduated from college in 1928, I believe. He was born in 1901. And not too many people went to college at that time. And he taught school for a while, but ultimately he farmed and raised cattle.

Anna: What did your mom do for work?

Grace: My mother never worked outside the home. She canned vegetables and fruits and we had a garden. Of course washing wasn't as simple as it is now. I remember the old wringer type washing machines and having to fill, you know, getting the water heated on the stove, filling them, hanging the clothes on the line and ironing. So there was a lot of work in just being a housewife back in those days and that's what Momma always was. But she wasn't well and so she died and...

Anna: What did you eat at home for your meals?

Grace: We had good food! And we always ate at home practically. We didn't know what it was to go to a restaurant. But we had our own beef and chicken and those were the two meats that we ate. We didn't ever eat pork when I was little, we didn't raise it on the farm, my daddy didn't like that. So we had plenty of meat and wonderful food from the gardens, and we had a few fruit trees so we always had, we just always had good food. And lots of ice cream, we made so much homemade ice cream. And lands, that was just a specialty when we had all the milk and cream. But it didn't really affect us and make any of us really fat. I think we ran and played enough that we worked it off.

Anna: When you were at your high school, did you eat homemade food too?

Grace: No, we ate in the dining hall there, and we had reasonably good food I would say. I don't remember complaining about it that much. We ate three meals a day there.

Anna: **What was your favorite food?**

Grace: I just liked food; I enjoyed food. I suppose I liked roast beef and the dinner made that way. That was an awful good dinner. Probably some steak, but I don't think our steaks were as good as they are today. And Daddy- we butchered out on the farm- and the neighbors would share some or Grandpa would get part of it. So the meat probably wasn't as nicely done as it is today, corn-fed and all that.

Anna: **Did you have a job?**

Grace: No, I never ever worked until after I was married, except on the farm, driving tractors, doing farm work.

Anna: Did they pay you?

Grace: No, I never ever had an allowance in my life, but I was well cared for. I didn't even think about asking for an allowance. We just knew that was part of living; that's part of a family and that's the way we did it.

Anna: **What was your method of transportation?**

Grace: We always had cars. In fact, I had an older sister, and part of the time we even got to take the car down to Haviland.

Anna: So if you didn't have a car with you at school, did you walk?

Grace: We walked. We walked to church and to Haviland. It's a very small town so you'd just be there and if your didn't have a car, why, maybe your folks might come get you on some weekends and take you home. So we weren't that far, seventy or eighty miles.

Anna: Well, I guess you already answered where you went to school.

Grace: Mhmm.

Anna: **What classes were you enrolled in?**

Grace: Probably very general high school classes: English, Algebra, Typing, Spanish. And our Spanish teacher was an elderly lady who had been a missionary to Cuba and she had beautiful white hair, of course she was very fluent in Spanish, and I don't know that I gained as much out of it as I should have. But I had two years of it and you know how that goes.

Anna: Yeah, I'm on my second year of Spanish, and my aunt and uncle were missionaries in Chile.

Grace: Yeah, uh huh.

Anna: **What books did you read?**

Grace: At that time as few as I had to. Now I love to read, but at that time, and I don't know if I remember especially one. I know I read The Silver Chalice by Thomas B. Costain, maybe? It made quite an impression on me. It had something to do with maybe the crucifixion of Jesus. And it was a wonderful book. And then when I graduated from college I taught English in high school. I was not very well prepared, the only reason that I, could, was qualified to teach at Lesley was because I had New Testament and Old Testament literature. They called that literature. I didn't know much about literature or English, but as my daddy said, "You learn a whole lot when you teach it." It was fun. I just taught two years in high school and after that I taught at home school.

Anna: **Do you remember what you got paid for teaching?**

Grace: Yeah, the first year I taught was in 1956 and I got \$3,900 for the year. That was pretty good back then, but that might be one months salary now.

Anna: That's crazy.

Grace: It's crazy. But I don't think people are much richer now than we were then because we paid \$45 or \$50 a month rent on a house.

Anna: Yeah, I remember my dad telling me he'd go down, and they called it the Nickel Store. They would get candy bars and they thought they were so rich.

Grace: I know, and now you can't buy anything for a nickel or a penny.

Anna: What were the hairstyles and clothing styles like?

Grace: We put our hair up in pin curls with bobby pins. And sometimes you used smoothing lotion and made waves. And then full circle skirts, kind of long, but they were the full circle and then peasant blouses and probably bobby socks and saddle shoes, some of those kinds of things, high heels. I found out I don't have to wear those anymore.

Anna: My grandma would always wear them and she was a hairdresser so when I was little she would always put my hair in the pins.

When I was really little though my mother- we had rag curls- and there'd be long strips of rag, that's really what it was, and then they had a way to wrap our hair around it and wrap that and so the next morning when you'd get up you had curls to wear to church. But I didn't have that much hair, so I always had little ol' corkscrew curls, and my sisters had beautiful, long ringlets. So, mine was kind of bad.

Anna: What would your friends and you do when you went out?

Grace: Mostly, I guess we go to ball games, or go to church, or there'd be some kind of an activity planned at the school. And when we were home, we'd invite the church kids out to the farm a lot, and there were basketball goals out in the shed, or play volleyball, or we'd play things like blind man's bluff, fox and geese, sometimes we'd play softball out in the pasture so that's kind of what I think we did.

Anna: Did you date whenever you were younger?

Grace: I did. My husband Elden and I started dating while we were in high school in Haviland. And then we got married and we were married for 42 years before he passed away. We had wonderful, wonderful marriage- lots of fun with our family.

Anna: What would you do on dates?

Grace: Go to ball games, he'd bring me home afterwards and sometimes we'd stay in the parlor there in the dorm so kind of like that.

Anna: Did you have a favorite class?

Grace: I loved math. I always enjoyed math. Algebra I, II, Geometry; that's all we had. We didn't have calculus back in my high school; it was pretty small.

Anna: I like math too.

Grace: Do you?

Anna: Did your school have sports or clubs?

Grace: Yes, we, I played a little bit of basketball but not much. But the boys would play basketball. And I don't know we played some tennis. I was in choir and we'd go on trips with the choir, and then I was in some smaller singing ensembles, trios or sextets. And one summer we traveled for the school. I was on a sextet that we went around to different churches and we sang.

Anna: Uh huh, sounds fun.

Anna: **Did you have a favorite sport?**

Grace: No, not really, I mean just going to a basketball game was fun for me, and I never was a cheerleader or anything, but I yelled a lot.

Anna: **What kind of music did you listen to?**

Grace: Probably more Christian than anything, although we knew about Elvis Presley and listened to little. Now his music almost sounds like religious music compared to what we have today. And I can't think of where he was from but we went to his home. Isn't it something how music changes? Music was much more beautiful then than it is now.

Anna: Yeah, I'm not sure if I like it too much now.

Grace: Harmony, I love harmony and we were always in choirs, or trios, or sextets, or mixed courtets. Harmony is what life is about and this music that we have today doesn't have it.

Anna: Yeah I usually listen to church music, Air1, and 99.1.

Grace: That's good stuff and it's kind of soothing. Life needs a little of that rather than getting all crazy.

Anna: **Did you have a favorite band/ singer?**

Grace: No. Probably Elvis was a, you know, he did have a beautiful voice. And it's sad because so much of what is sung on the radio they don't sound- I don't know if they have a voice or... It isn't beautiful music. I don't know if it will get back to that.

Anna: Hopefully, maybe everyone will get tired of it.

Grace: It could be, they might.

Anna: **What kind of dances did you do?**

Grace: We didn't go to dances at that time. We didn't go at all. We didn't do it on campus. That was a Friends School or Quaker. We just thought that it could lead to other things so we didn't do it. So I don't know much about that.

Anna: Do you remember getting a TV in your house?

Grace: Yes, it was after I was married that we got one. And I think my folks thought, "Hmm, I don't know." And of course it was horrible what we saw, and had some rabbit ears up on top, and it was so snowing you could hardly make out the picture. But I can remember there were some good programs on at that time. My children watched *Captain Kangaroo*, *Big Band Eye*- he was so funny, and *Andy*. They were so innocent and we just seem to think they aren't good anymore. So mostly now I watch *Wheel of Fortune* and ball games, because I do like both basketball and football. I enjoy those kinds of sports to watch. And I watch the news, but that's about it.

Anna: I remember my grandpa would always be watching *Wheel of Fortune* every time we'd come over.

Grace: My friends kind of know that if it's 6:30 that we better turn on the T.V.

Anna: So when you were younger, did you listen to the radio for shows?

Grace: A little bit, I remember it. Of course the radios weren't all that good, but I can remember when I was really young and back at Sylvia, that *Andy 'n' Amos*- they were so funny. And- *Amos 'n' Andy* it was, and there was one other one. They were really funny, but you'd hear it and then there'd be static so it wasn't good listening. Then I can also remember during that war that Daddy would try to hear a little bit to know what was going on. That kind of- it wasn't very pleasant trying to listen.

Anna: So was that what you mostly heard about on the radio, was the war?

Grace: Yeah, just a little. And *Amos 'n' Andy* and there was one show. They were kind of like Arkansas- corny funny. They enjoyed listening to that. I don't think the radio was usually on during the day. Then we had a telephone where you'd ring it and you'd hear everybody else's rings. That's changed a bit.

Anna: Would you say the radio was your main source or news or...?

Grace: We probably took a newspaper. I imagine we took the *Hutchinson News*. We went to town a lot; my dad liked going to town. He wouldn't mind taking us out of school so we could all go to Hutch, I don't know why but we just did.

Anna: Do you remember who the president was?

Grace: When I was born it was Franklin Delano Roosevelt. It was- we were kind of just coming out of the depression. But I know the depression did not effect me in anyway like it did- because when you had a farm you had your own food and water. I think the prices were horribly cheap, but other things were kind of that way too. So I didn't ever have to be without food. Of course, we, Momma and Grandma, made a lot of our clothes out of feed sacks. I was the younger sister so I think I got lots of hand-me-downs. Life was simple; but it wasn't bad.

Anna: Do you remember seeing any effects from the depression?

Grace: No, we were back at Sylvia. They were having some dust storms out here in Western Kansas at that time but we lived 120 miles to the East and we didn't have dust storms. They were awful out here, of course. And I can remember some pretty bad ones, even in the '50s but not so continuous. But I didn't know much about the depression.

Anna: Do you remember when they added another state?

Grace: I certainly remember Alaska and Hawaii. Those were the only ones.

Anna: Was it confusing?

Grace: No. It was a little big- that was kind of different to have something. I'm kind of glad we quit when we did. They kind of talked about Puerto Rico for a time. But I think Alaska and Hawaii are probably enough.

Anna: Well, that's pretty much all I have.

Grace: That was fun Anna!

Anna: Is there anything else that you want them to know about your childhood?

Grace: I think that I am blessed that we didn't have a TV. We would make our own little tractors and little implements out of pieces of tin and blocks of wood and maybe spools that Momma and Grandma had used the thread off of. It encouraged so much more creativity. And then we often slept outside at night because we had no electricity of course and it was often so hot inside the house. We would spread a blanket out on a trailer or truck bed, and sometimes we just slept on the ground, even on just a blanket. It would be awfully hard. Daddy would sleep out there with us. My mother didn't ever sleep outside, but she was never very well. We spend more time sleeping on the floor in front of where the breeze was or out on the outside. But we slept well. I just felt so safe and so love and all of those things. I don't think I have them; you know, the difficulties, the stresses that so many kids have. The only thing that made us anxious a bit was that my mother wasn't well. I guess therefore we had a wonderful Daddy thank the Lord. Because when she died, why...

and maybe because he was strong and she was not we kind of always looked to Daddy naturally. But many joyful things- many things to be thankful for.

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