

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

NARRATOR: Earle and Patsy Dirks

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION: Patsy Dirks was born in 1936. She was born and raised on a farm near Thomas, Oklahoma. Patsy has two younger sisters. Earle Dirks was born in 1936 in Hutchinson, Kansas and spent most of his life either living in town or traveling between his father's two farms, one which was just outside Hutchinson and the other which was near Ingalls, Kansas. They now live in Cimarron, Kansas.

DATE OF INTERVIEW: January 14, 2003

INTERVIEWER: Rebecca Pederson

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Cimarron, Kansas

NUMBER OF CASSETTES: 1

LENGTH OF CASSETTES: 60 min.

LENGTH OF INTERVIEW: 35 min. 20 sec.

SUBJECTS DISCUSSED: Experiences with the dust and sand of the Dustbowl; Farm life, what was used for drinking water, refrigeration and irrigation, milking; Memories from World War II and the rationing it caused; Experiences in the country school and community life; The arrival of radio, television and telephones; Family life, gatherings, and entertainment; Farm machinery and harvest.

**Earle and Patsy Dirks
Narrators**

**Rebecca Pederson
Interviewer**

**January 14, 2003
Cimarron, Kansas**

Earle Dirks - **ED**
Patsy Dirks - **PD**
Rebecca Pederson – **RP**

(Side A)

RP: Today is January the fourteenth of 2003, and I, Rebecca Pederson, am going to interview Patsy and Earle Dirks. We are at Cimarron, Kansas.

Uhm, where were you born, Patsy?

PD: I was born in Thomas, Oklahoma at home.

RP: What time, like, what year?

PD: 1936

RP: How about you?

ED: I was born in Hutchinson, Kansas in 1936.

RP: Uhm, the Dustbowl and stuff, were you guys, you guys were alive during the Dustbowl, or was it about over by the time . . . Because I know what happened the thirties. I don't know how long it would have stayed around, if you remember anything.

ED: I wasn't living out here at the time . . . and Father farmed through it I guess. We farmed two places here, in Hutchinson . . . in Buhler. I remember hearing he . . . They thought they had a crop, they was gonna bring out barley in spring and sell it to the neighbors and come and found out the wheat was all dead so they planted barley. That was in 1933.

RP: [unclear]

PD: I, I don't, I don't hear as much, didn't hear as much talk about the Dustbowl days in Oklahoma, so I don't know if it wasn't as bad but I do remember – and I think this would have been in the forties. Didn't we have some . . . Yes, I remember one year, my, my parents were janitors at church and we would have to- we always had evening services-

and we would have to almost clean the church between the morning service and the evening service because the dirt had blown in. The sand, there was a difference in Oklahoma. It was sand. Up here it was dirt. We had . . .

RP: Lots of sand?

PD: Yes, and it would blow and that was kind of a frightening time, all that. We, I can, I can remember that. We'd go home and we'd . . . in our house we had a bay window and the pictures would be covered with dust and [unclear].

RP: What about the Depression? What kind of things do you remember about the Depression and, or you know, stories your parents told to you?

PD: I just remember my, my dad talking about working, he . . . I'm not sure what wages he got but he would hardly get any wages. You know that, everything. But they just didn't pay much. But I don't really remember the Depression. I've- a lot of people in our area where we lived there on the farm, a lot of people there talk about the Depression but I don't really remember.

RP: What was you guy's farm's like? Like what did your houses look like? I mean were they just about the same as regular farms now or were they a lot different?

PD: I think where I grew up it was pretty much as it is now. In fact, someone still lives in the house I was born. They've remodeled it and brought it up to date. Well, ok now, this, this was some, I, I remember outdoor toilets [laughing]. I can remember when my dad added on to our house - my dad was a carpenter- he added on to the house and put in indoor plumbing and uh, we had a bathroom. We didn't have to go outside at night any more and use Sear's [unclear] catalogs for toilet paper . . . actually we did that. And we did have - and I can remember this before he remodeled the house - we had uh, I guess for our drinking water we had, we called it a cistern. I don't . . . has anyone talked about those? Right out, right next to our house, it was a hole and then kind of covered with cement and then, in the kitchen we had, oh, the water pump, you, know you'd, you'd pump to get the water up from the cistern. Probably wasn't safe but we lived through it. And then I remember, he, he built, built on that addition and then maybe that's about the time electricity came in because I remember when we did not have electricity.

RP: How old do you think you were when you added the plumbing?

PD: Oh, I suppose maybe I was, I was, I was in school by that time so I would have been seven or eight maybe. It seems like electricity didn't come in to our part, where I was living, we had something on our . . . What did we call . . . wind charger! You know we were back to using wind and we had a wind charger on our house and oh, that was noisy. And somehow, don't ask me how it worked, but I just remember our wind charger on the house. See all of that happened, was probably before he, he did the remodeling other house.

RP: Did you guys have, like, cattle and chickens? Uhm, Doc [Kopper] said they had sheep and, you know, did you have hogs?

PD: Did you keep hogs?

ED: [unclear] What I can remember . . . see my sister got married in '44 and my dad had a farm out here and one back at Hutchinson and he give my brother-in-law a choice were he wanted to farm and said he wanted to farm back there so that's when we started farming out here. We'd live here in the summer time and go back for school back in Hutchinson.

PD: And you lived in town.

ED: We lived in town. But, so I didn't have to . . . didn't grow up with cattle or sheep or hogs.

PD: But didn't your parents . . . When did they start bringing out chickens?

ED: First, first summer. We came out here and we brought some chickens along to eat. We . . .

PD: Didn't have refrigeration, I think your, wouldn't your mother kill a chicken every . . . every . . . much?

ED: Well, we just had a, you know, couldn't see it very good but [referring to a photograph] . . . we first started we had just a square house like that; no electricity, no running water, or anything.

RP: Was that, uh, before you moved in here or in here?

ED: We lived in this house from 1944 to 1953.

PD: It looks barren around there too, no trees.

ED: We had some other picture of [unclear].

PD: And what I thought was interesting when we came out, well it was '60 when we moved out but some of the remains were, were still there. They was, they would refrigerate, used refrigerators . . .

RP: You just used . . .

PD: Yes, you had, well they had a, uh, uh, tank. Somehow you'd run, they'd run water and put their-

ED: We had barrels.

PD: They had barrels in the water.

ED: They just, just, this windmill- you can't see it- there was a windmill beside this and there was what they used it in whiskey barrels and we'd run one water in for drinking, I mean, and we'd had another barrel that we'd run water through it and the water would come out here and then we'd have . . . used for irrigating the garden. But the second one is where we'd put the pop and the milk and the butter down in the bottom and we'd have to reach down in that cold water . . .

RP: To get it out.

ED: To get it out. And so we had for a few years until we got an icebox.

RP: Do you guys remember any stories about the plagues, like, jackrabbit or any of the plagues?

ED: I just hear about the roundups. That's all, I don't know if they ever . . .

PD: I, I just remember- and I don't know what period of time this was in Oklahoma- they would pay so much money for coyote ears. I don't remember when that was, but I can remember if they would kill a coyote, they would save the ears and sell that. Animal rights people wouldn't like to hear those things [laughing].

RP: What about World War II? How did that affect you guys' family?

PD: I, I just barely remember that. I had an uncle that was in the service. That's probably the main thing I remember. Oh, another thing that I remember, see we had radio to listen to and that . . . it was just always on the news was the war and I guess as a child I wondered, when the war was over, would they even have news because that's all I remember hearing would be about the war. I do remember the, the day it ended. I think I can remember that. But I don't know how much more it affected me.

ED: Do you remember anything that [unclear]. Then we had these stamps and stuff and the farmers always got [unclear], you know, get their quota of stuff, tires and gas. I just remember when the war was kind of over or before the war was over, we had sugar stamps and there used to be . . . we used to grow sugar beets around Garden City. Well, there used to be so much sugar in the bins in Garden City, the bins broke and the sugar ran on the ground. There, I remember there wasn't much of a shortage, I guess, because the bins were so full the bins broke, one of them broke and the sugar just ran right out on the ground. I remember that.

RP: Do you remember any of the shortages or the rationing?

PD: I, I just remember candy being rationed, Hershey bar [laughing]. Maybe that's the reason Hershey bar is one of my favorite candies today. No Hershey bars was one thing

that was rationed. Now, this is off that subject a little bit, but in our area in the fall of the year the school, there still the little country schools, one room- I went to a two room school- and we would have, we called it a box supper every fall. Uh, you know, the girls would bring boxes and then they would sell the boxes and then that's how they would make the money to buy the Christmas trees for Christmas.

RP: What kind of boxes were they?

PD: The, oh, you know, we would just take boxes and fix them up pretty so that guys would buy them but I remember my dad would always try to have a Hershey candy bar for us to put in our boxes because that, that was a treat to have a Hershey candy bar and, but yes, we would have . . . that would be a big community event because everyone would come to those. We'd have a program at the school and they'd sell the boxes. That's, that's about all I remember about it. I don't know if you had those or not.

ED: No we didn't

PD: Then they'd take the money and then at Christmas we'd also have a program and that was probably the only time we'd see Santa Clause. Santa Clause would come to the school and then he would bring us these sacks of candy. Hard candy. I didn't, you know, they'd just bring Christmas candy and pass it out to the kids.

RP: So would . . . there the, were all the classes were in one room . . . did you just have one teacher or did you have one teacher? Did you guys have desks or did you just have chairs and tables?

PD: We had, we had desks and I . . . thought I had a picture but I don't, I don't think it was in any of these . . . No, they, they, was a desk and, and the, the top would lift up. But we'd, our, in our school we would have about five or six desks would be kind of fasten and so when they would move the desks it would be like moving a row. It wouldn't be like moving, moving just one individual desk. They would be kind of hooked together. But we would . . . they'd have, we'd have to lift the top and also in this desk would be an ink well. So we, see then that was before ballpoint pens. And this would just be the, the larger . . . maybe the seventh and eight grades that would have this. You could put your ink in there so you could fill your pens.

RP: So what did the lower grades write with?

PD: Probably just a pencil, because that ink was messy. Believe me, it was messy. You'd get too much ink in that pen and it, you'd get that ink on your clothes and not only that, pigtales, if a guy sat behind you they'd, you know, they'd try and put your hair in those, in that, in those inkwells. I, those were a mess. Maybe those ballpoint pens were good inventions.

RP: Uhm, what was your guys' life at home, like day-to-day life, how has it changed? I mean, you told some memories in how there was chickens and refrigeration but did you

have like special duties you had to do every day? Like Doc [Kopper] talked about how he had to go milk the cow every day since he was seven or eight years old. Did, you know, I mean, it doesn't about farm stuff . . . and another question is like, how did your family raise money? Did your parents have jobs? Uhm, Lucille [Kopper] talked about how they traded eggs and cream, I didn't know if, you know, just stuff like that.

PD: My dad was a farmer, and of course then women pretty much worked at home. I do remember we had, had cows, we milked cows. I never did have to milk. I never learned how to milk but we sold milk. I don't know if many farmers did that or not. But there, evidently they did because someone would come around . . . well, you've see these big milk cans and I can remember someone would come by there and pick up our milk everyday so there must have been quite a few people in that area doing that. And I remember we had our milk, we would separate the milk from the cream by using a cream separator. There, on top of this contraption there'd be kind of a big bowl and you'd pour the milk in and somehow you'd - you didn't have that did you - somehow you'd turn this handle and to get the milk to flow down and somehow the cream would go one way and the milk would go another way and that's how we would get our cream. I guess if you wanted to do it another way you could just set the milk out because he just . . . the milk then we would have, we would get because we got from the cows so you could also just set the milk out and the cream and the milk would separate. The cream would come to the top. And my mother made her own cottage cheese. She would let that milk set out until it was soured and then she'd put it in uh, some kind of, of clothe. She had a special cloth, I guess and the whey would kind of, the stuff would drain off and what was left would be the cottage cheese. Oh, that was good. She'd make it like gravy. It would be . . . it looked more like gravy but it tasted, it tasted like sour cream. We'd put that on fried potatoes. That was the thing in our family, cottage cheese and fried potatoes.

But I don't know what chores I had to do.

ED: [unclear] get the milk and the stuff out of there. Get down in the cool water and pick up the butter and milk and bring it to the house. Then take it back.

PD: I guess I can remember listening to the radio just like kids watch the TV now, especially on Saturday morning. I had my favorite radio program and, you know, we would listen to the radio a lot. There were a lot of . . . in the evenings they kind of, I can remember we'd sit around and listen to the radio. We had our favorite programs. That was before TV because I can remember seeing my first TV show. We went to the neighbors had TV. And one of our favorite, my favorite programs on the radio they were going to show on TV and how with radio you can use your imagination and you just know how those characters look. Well when we saw them on TV they didn't, they, what I was expecting them. I was kind of disappointed with the show - not with television- but just that show. They didn't look like I thought they . . .

RP: What show was it, do you remember?

PD: The Life of Riley. And uh, did you watch that show? They had one character, my favorite character, he was – this sounds dumb - he was an undertaker, called Digger O'Dell. I wrote some of this down. He was called Digger O'Dell and he had such a deep voice and you know, I expected him to be so . . . just . . . I could hardly wait to see him on TV. Well he wasn't as impressive on TV. But uh, it took awhile before everyone got TV in our area.

RP: How old were you? How old were you when the first TV came out there?

PD: Oh, I was probably close to being out of grade school.

ED: I don't think we had TV until I was in college.

PD: No, we, we had TV earlier. Some people had TV. You see in our, in our area, where I grew up – so some things might be different than what a lot of people did - but in our area where I grew up it was a rather conservative Mennonite group and we, we were, we did not go to movies. So we were not suppose to watch TV either and my grandmother had . . . one of my aunts from California sent my Grandma Miller a television set and you know, we were all so excited about it except Grandma Miller because then we had antennas so then everyone in the country, in the community knew that Grandma Miller had a TV set and that was kind of a no-no [laughing]. But it was fun to go to Grandma's to watch TV. So Grandma had one almost as soon as they came out. Aunt Mary thought Grandma should have a TV set, and so people . . . People didn't want the TVs in their house but they would stop to see Grandma Miller, and her TV set.

RP: That's cool. I'm trying to think what else I had questions about.

PD: Well I guess this would have come in that period too: our telephones. Our telephones were totally different than they are now. We, we were on a party line and we had . . . I don't remember what our number was but it was three "shorts." If anyone wanted to call us it would go 'zip zip zip.' That was our telephone and if some people would have a long . . . you would either have so many shorts or long rings, and you know, if you had called someone and they had a long ring, you know you'd ring quite a while for the long ring. And if there was anything that everyone needed to know on that party the operator- see, we had operators- and so the operators would make a line ring, just a bunch of short rings and so everyone would know "you better go to the telephone and see what's happening. That's how word was spread and see, this, this operator . . . unless we were on the same line, if I wanted to call you here in town, I couldn't just dial your number. I would have to call the operator and probably would tell her – if I didn't have your number- I would just say I wanted the Stuart Pederson residence and then whatever your ring was, that's what she would ring. And so it was, you know, if you didn't answer the phone . . . we definitely couldn't leave a message so we would have to keep calling back and you know, go through this operator every time and operators could listen in on conversations and so they knew what was going on in the area.

ED: So did all your neighbors too.

PD: Well so did all the neighbors, yes, yes. You had to be careful what you said on the telephone because people often listened to conversations, because everyone on our party line – I suppose there would be about eight people on this party line. And anytime it would ring at our place, well it would ring at all these other places too, and so you would go, very quietly, you'd take the receiver off the hook and you would listen to people talk. We weren't nosy or anything. We just wanted to know what was going on. But, uh, so, the phones now are much better.

ED: [unclear] more people listening it was harder to talk?

PD: Yes. I still, to this day, you ask my daughters about this they will tell you. I have a tendency to talk really loud on long distance calls, because on these party lines, if we had a long distance call, well, you just had to shout to hear the other people. And sometimes the operator would even help you if you couldn't hear the other person talking the operator would help you and tell you what the other party had said. So I still talk loud, thinking you still have shout when you're talking long distance. I'm working on that. I've been working on that for quite a few years.

RP: Well do you guys have any other memories?

PD: Well talking about family life, is that what we're still . . . You know, we . . . our family lived together, you know . . . Families didn't live apart like they do today, and we would go to my grandpa Detwiler's (sp?) almost every Sunday for dinner. Bringing in food, I don't remember Grandma cooking very much. Everyone would bring in food and the adults would sit around the table but us kids, we'd bring our plates, we'd stand by our mother and as the food would be passed we'd take our food and, and then we would go to sit wherever and eat and you know, we'd see our cousins almost every week. At least our family did.

ED: Well I remember hearing . . . They used to do that in our family but then they had a . . . somebody got mad at somebody and somebody got mad at somebody else. Its, uhm . . . that all stopped. Like I said, it seems real sad. I didn't know all my cousins because I don't know . . . Because we used to get together all the time but . . . I mean . . . brothers and sisters wouldn't speak to each other and it got worse and someday they quit getting together.

PD: Our family had a few squabbles along the way but somehow we seemed to work ourselves, because we're still . . . You see, some of these cousins, we're still close. We still get together quite often, don't we? We just grew up. We were just a close family and, it was kind of a large family. I guess that was a lot of our entertainment was family gatherings . . . ice cream socials. I can remember, everyone would bring their freezer. We did, we didn't freeze the ice cream before we would take it. They would take the ice cream there and, back then we bought our ice in blocks. You know, you would go to the ice house in town and you would get a block of ice and someone would put it in a sack and, and take a heavy hammer and smash it, and then that's, everyone would freeze their

ice cream when we were together. The adults would. The kids, we'd have ice fights and those kinds of things. That's what I remember about these ice cream socials. Haven't been to one of those, a good ice cream for a long time because now people either, around here it seems like they freeze their ice cream before they take it, and miss out on all that fun of the ice fights.

RP: Did you . . . I've seen all your pictures. Did you ever have any . . . did you ever keep any diaries or newspaper clipping about that time?

PD: No. No, we did not. If you're – this is off the subject – but if you're ever leave home . . . someone had told me, uh, uh, I went to a meeting one time and some lady said, "You should always keep your mother's letters, if you're away from home." Maybe people don't write letters as much but keep your mother's letters because that would tell you a lot about that time period and about how women lived and what women were doing through that particular time and I've, you know, I wish I would have kept all of my mother's letters over the years. That's one way to document history, especially from a woman's point of view. No, we didn't. And, and Earle's family even had more pictures that we do, except I notice farming must have been important to you because most of your pictures are on farming. You know, your tractors and your . . .

RP: Well, that's about all I have unless you guys can think of anything you'd like to say.

PD: Well, uh, about the only things I have here is that we didn't touch on is when, I don't know, when we were talking about farming . . . My mother used to help my dad on the farm. He's heard these stories [laughing]. But my mother would, uh, kind of drive the tractor, and someplace we had a, where a, and I don't know which picture was. . . Back then there were not self-propelled . . .

(End of side A, Beginning of side B)

PD: . . . but any man holler at me like my dad would holler at my mother. You know, he was just giving her directions. She was trying her best [laughing]. And they, they would work together pretty good, and I guess we did too except once I remember Susanne or Janet one asked me, "Do you understand what Daddy's hollering at you?" [laughing]. I realize then, hey, I was following in my mom's footsteps: I married a farmer. But uh, you know, mother would get out – and maybe that's one of the reasons I did help on the farm – mother would help my dad on the farm a lot, driving the tractor. Because so many things back then were not self-propelled and so it would take two people to operate something.

RP: Uhm, do you remember any other, like, farming things that are a lot different? Like you know, tractors pulling combines . . . What other kind of things do you remember?

PD: We were not nearly as aware of safety as people are today. I remember a highlight of harvest – and I would have been young at that time – see these, well these tractors pulling the combines, things would move slow. And I can remember my sisters and I, we

would go out to the field and it was so exciting to, to jump on the combine with daddy while everything was moving, all these machines, all this was moving along. We would climb on the combine and then we would work our way up and then we would get on top, inside the bin where the wheat was coming. Now that was dangerous. That was so exciting though. I don't think, well today you couldn't do that. There are augers in the bins. But uh . . . Yeah people . . . you just didn't hear as much about safety back then and I don't know . . . Oh, we must have worked our guardian angels overtime.

RP: So did you just kind of, did you guys just have one tractor and one combine . . . did you have, like, pickups? Did you have a couple tractors?

ED: Well, started out with one, and then we got another one. We had one combine, but you could hardly get tractors and stuff in the [unclear]. I don't know how we got, get the second combine. We was one day [unclear] hitch, you could put behind the front combine so you could pull two combines with one tractor so you didn't need the other tractor. I remember a little way we'd cut mud holes is that person in the back there, run him through the water holes and keep the tractor on the dry grain, we'd cut out mud holes. If you kept the tractor on dry grain you could pull the other combine through.

PD: We, we just had the one tractor. My dad didn't have a hired man and uh –

RP: How many brothers did you have, sisters?

PD: I have two sisters, two younger sisters.

ED: I have one older sister. She's thirteen years older.

RP: Well, thank you so much for your information and your time. I really appreciated it.

(End of Interview)