

## Oral History Interview with Leroy Creek

Conducted by Dr. Julie Abril  
Portales, NM  
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[Mrs. Lea Johnson, the interviewee's niece, and Phillip Russell, the interviewee's nephew, are present during the interview and occasionally join the conversation. At times, Mrs. Johnson and Mr. Russell ask Mr. Creek some questions. ]

**Abril:** Can you tell me your name and how old you are?

**Creek:** My name is Leroy Creek and I am 80 years old—young. I'm 80 years young.

**Abril:** Were you born in this area?

**Creek:** Yes, I was born in Portales, at home. We didn't have a hospital at that time.

**Abril:** Do you have any brothers and sisters?

**Creek:** I have one brother, I have an older brother who passed away when he was one year old. And then I have four half-brothers and one half-sister from the Creek side of the family, and then I have three half-sisters from the Deatherage side of the family, and then I have one brother who is still alive—Paul.

**Abril:** I think I interviewed him last night.

**Creek:** Yes, I think you did.

**Abril:** That was a very good interview with him. Are there any stories—anything about the area that you want to talk about?

**Creek:** Well it's changed.

**Abril:** How has it changed?

**Creek:** ENMU has changed a lot.

**Abril:** Tell me how.

**Creek:** In the beginning there were three buildings on the ENMU campus—the administration building, the girl's dorm and the museum. And I'm more familiar with the girl's dormitory [laughter], than any of the other buildings.

**Lea Johnson:** I didn't know that. [laughter]

**Abril:** Tell me how you are familiar with it, sir.

**Creek:** A lot of times they'd [girls in the dorms] put Cokes in the bathroom window, to cool them off, and we'd cut the screens and steal their Cokes. [laughter] You're not going to give this to the police department are you? [laughter]

**Abril:** No, no...anything you say cannot and will not be used against you in any court—it's past the statute of limitations, so you're totally fine to admit to whatever you did. Did you go to college out here?

**Creek:** Yes, I did, after I got out of the army—let's see, I guess that was in 1948—I went on the GI Bill for two semesters, and then I had to get out and make some money. But I, unfortunately, I started to work at the First National Bank and that was not the place to work if you needed money, because they didn't pay too good.

**Abril:** So...

**Johnson:** Well, tell her...I know what you need to tell 'em about...tell them about when you and Uncle Paul went out hunting and shot your cat.

**Creek:** Oh my, well OK. We had been out rabbit hunting and we only had one 22 rifle, so we would take turns shooting. We got back to the cow lot and he was telling me that I couldn't hit anything with that rifle and I might as well not be shooting. And I said "Oh yeah, watch me shoot that cat running across the cow lot." So I just pulled the rifle up to my hip and I shot, and I hit that cat right in the head [laughter]—killed it dead.

**Johnson:** It was his cat. [laughter]

**Creek:** And then I started crying and I said "you made me kill my cat, I'm gonna tell mother on you." That's about the end of that story. [laughter] I was a real hunter.

**Abril:** Tell me about your hunting—your best hunting experience.

**Creek:** Oh, well, I don't know, I've got so many of those. After we moved to Colorado in 1970, every year I'd go deer and elk hunting. One year I killed a deer and I'd figured out that that was not the thing to do, because after you shoot the animal, then the work starts. You've got to dress it, get it out of the camp, take it home, and cut it up. So, every year after that, I just prayed that I didn't see anything that I could kill. [laughter] But I still enjoy going hunting because of the outing and everything.

**Johnson:** Who'd you go hunting with?

**Creek:** Oh, a lot of different people. One was my nephew, Greg Huett, from Arkansas. And with Bernie Johnston [to Lea Johnson: "You know Bernie"]—I went hunting with him a couple of years—from California. But I really didn't like shooting anything, because they weren't near as pretty laying there dead as they were out running, right Phil? [laughter]

**Russell:** That's right.

**Johnson:** Now, did you live out of town when you were growing up, or did you always live in town?

**Creek:** We lived out on the ranch for several years—Price's Portales Ranch out west of Floyd [NM]—we lived there for quite awhile, growing up. I went to school at Mesa which was a two-room school—I think the school is gone now.

**Abril:** When you were here and the railroads would come by, do you have any memories of the hobos that would come through town?

**Creek:** No, not really, no. We always lived more on the south side of town, so we really weren't that close to the railroad. But I can remember one night a bunch of us boys decided to go swimming in the water tank, and we found out that there was a pretty sharp edge on the top of that water tank and then I was scared to death that they might come along and drain that tank and put it in a steam engine, and we'd be stuck in the bottom of that tank and couldn't get out. [laughter]. But that's about the only thing I remember about the railroad.

**Johnson:** Now, when you were growing up, was it you and Aunt Winnie who went around selling eggs and milk, or was that you and Uncle Walt?

**Creek:** No, that was mostly Winnie, delivering milk. We had some milk cows and we would stake them out in what is now East Ward playground. We would stake our cows out there and pasture them during the day and then we'd milk the cows and sell the milk to Rosco Creek at the Liberty Café. At that time it didn't have to be pasteurized or Grade A or just...just whole milk, good milk.

**Abril:** Do you remember how much you got paid for that?

**Creek:** No, I never did do that much...Winnie did that, but that was just part of her chores each day and we didn't get paid for doing chores, everybody kinda had to pull their own weight. At that time, mother was a widow woman—my dad had passed away—and we were just trying to make a living.

**Johnson:** What was your chore?

**Creek:** Bring in the coal every night.

**Johnson:** And what happened?

**Creek:** One night I forgot to bring in the coal [laughter].

**Johnson:** This is my dad's favorite story...you gonna tell the story.

**Creek:** Yeah. The night I forgot to bring the coal in I went to bed and mother realized she didn't have any coal to cook with the next morning or to heat the house, so she came in, threw the covers back, gave me a swat on the rear-end, and I knew exactly what had happened, so I went out to get the coal. Well, she had a gentleman visitor that night, and he came out to help me, because he didn't think I should—a little kid—should be out there by himself bringing in the coal, so he went out to help me and on the way back to the house, he fell over the little red wagon and almost broke his leg. [laughter]

**Johnson:** One of the things that my dad remembered was dad was there with my mother and he said there wasn't a word said—grandmother did not say one word to Uncle Leroy, she didn't tell him what she swatted him about, he just knew. He said dad was just absolutely scared to death 'cause she just went in and swatted Uncle Leroy and he got up and got the coal and went back to bed and there was never a word said.

**Creek:** But that's the way mother was, she didn't believe in telling you anything to do twice. You're supposed to be paying attention the first time.

**Johnson:** I don't ever remember grandmother spanking me, but we never gave her a reason to either. Did we?

**Creek:** Heaven's no. 'Cause you didn't know when she would quit.

**Russell:** Speak for yourself. [laughter] I don't remember getting a spanking, but she was pretty good about grabbing the hair above your ears and walking you across the floor. [laughter]

**Johnson:** You've got to tell her about your adventure in the Army. This is one of my favorite stories, too.

**Creek:** Oh no...about?

**Johnson:** About when you went to basic [training] and you were supposed to be a cook, and you thought you were a cook...

**Creek:** Mother had always had a café, so I was pretty good at chopping up vegetables. So, I was on KP one day and I was chopping up the carrots and the mess sergeant came by and saw me chopping those carrots and he said: "Are you a cook?" And I said: "No, not really." He said: "Would you like to be a cook?" And I said: "Would it get me out of basic training?" And he said: "Yes, it would." And I said: "You bet, I'm a cook." [laughter]. So, they shipped me out to a different company, which was a holding company, and I stayed there for six months, and I was the head cook and the baker while I was there. And I didn't realize that I only had four weeks of basic, but there might be a chance that I had to take basic over again because I hadn't had it before I could be discharged. But anyway, I stayed there and then they sent me...they closed that holding company...and sent me to Santa Fe, NM and I was in the medical corps, and I got to Bruns General Hospital in Santa Fe, which was a TB [tuberculosis] hospital, and I looked on the roster and I was to report to Ward A-1 the next morning. Now I found out that that was a lady's ward and only officer's wives and nurses were on that ward. And I had never given a shot in my life. I'd always been a cook. So, the nurse handed me a tray with the syringe and said "Give this to room so-and-so number." So, I go in there and I say "I understand you're to get this shot." And she said: "Well, yeah." So I got the needle off the tray and I started to give her the shot and she said: "How long have you been in the medical corps? Aren't you gonna get the damn air out of it?" And I said: "Nobody told me to." And she said, "Let me show you how to do that." [laughter] That was the first lesson I'd ever had of being a medic.

**Johnson:** He thought he was gonna be a cook when he got out of basic training and when he got his orders, he was medic. "I'm not a medic, I'm a cook." And they said "No you're not, you're a medic."

**Creek:** And that was my schoolin' in the Army.

**Johnson:** Lot of OJT wasn't it...on-the-job training...

**Creek:** I thought you wanted me to tell the story about the time the nurse gave me a catheter to go...this guy—he was a veteran—and he had come to the hospital because I guess his prostate had enlarged and so I was to run this catheter in the proper place. So, I take it back and I start trying to put this catheter in and the guy's screaming bloody murder. And the nurse heard him and she came running back there and she said "What in the world is going on?" And I said: "I'm having trouble getting this catheter in." And she said: "Well you idiot, you didn't put any [Johnson interjects: KY...KY Jelly] Vaseline on it." Yeah, "you didn't put any Vaseline on it, no wonder." [laughter] So, I said: "Well, you didn't tell me to." But, those are two experiences I remember, and I'm sure the patients remember them, too. [laughter]

**Abril:** So, when you were here in Portales, were there any great controversies going around, great political debates, or city unrest at all?

**Creek:** No, not really. We all got along pretty good. We had one police chief and he had a couple of deputies, there really wasn't a whole lot of things going on in Portales at that time.

**Johnson:** You did say that that was when the first time...when was the first time that they had their Republican...

**Creek:** That was about in...it was after I married, probably in 1951-52, that I went to the state convention as a delegate to the Republican Party, to the state Republican Party convention. And the only thing I remember about the entire convention was that when they got ready to poll Rio Arriba County, which is a democratic stronghold, all the republicans there couldn't agree on who was to speak on the microphone, and who they were supposed to vote for, so we were a little bit disorganized, at the time. And Phil's granddad was probably one of the first republicans, Mr. John Russell, he was probably one of the first republicans in the county.

**Johnson:** You were working at the bank when you married Aunt Louise?

**Creek:** Right, yeah.

**Abril:** How many children have you had?

**Creek:** We had two adopted girls.

**Abril:** What made you decide adoption was ...did you just fall in love with the girls?

**Creek:** Well, we had been married since 1950, and in 1955 we still hadn't had any children. So, we moved to Anthony, NM and so we went to the state welfare department to adopt a little girl and it took us three years to get Judy. And they wanted to make sure...the reason it took so long...they wanted to match the baby with the new mother. They couldn't be any more different than they are—Judy is black-headed and has dark skin, and my wife is a blonde and very fair. And we waited three years for that to match. [laughter]

**Johnson:** How old was Judy when you got Cathy?

**Creek:** She was, I think three, and we adopted Cathy, the second one, from the El Paso welfare department—we had moved to TX at that time—a little town of Fabens, near El Paso, and we got her from the El Paso welfare department. That only took just a few weeks for that adoption to go through.

**Johnson:** Wasn't she about three months old when you got her, because she had to have that surgery?

**Creek:** Yes. You can probably tell her what it was...

**Johnson:** She had pylorostenosis, which is something...

**Creek:** She couldn't swallow. They had to clip that little flap in there [points to throat], so she had had that operation before we got her.

**Johnson:** And they certainly didn't match Judy and Cathy either.

**Creek:** No they didn't. [laughter]

**Johnson:** Cause Cathy, when Cathy was born her hair was orange—it was the ugliest orange hair I'd ever seen in my life. But then when she lost it all it came back white. She had snow-white blonde hair.

**Creek:** Just as white as it could be.

**Abril:** So, back in Portales, when you were here, how were race relations between the different races?

**Creek:** There wasn't any, because everybody here was Anglo [white]. And we used to have, back when I was just a very young man, we had a colored preacher that would come through town—he would always stop at my mother's café to eat and she would invite him to set in the booth, to eat his lunch, and he never would, because he said: "All it's gonna do is cause trouble, so I'll just eat back here." Back behind the kitchen was the body shop for Max Hobbs Chevrolet, or Ann Hobbs Chevrolet. He would always set up a tray and go back there and eat. But there was no race relation problems at all in Portales, because everybody was Anglo.

**Abril:** Is there anything else about the community that you'd like to talk about?

**Creek:** You asked me about if there was a conflict. Now that we're on the subject, I do remember when they built the Portales Hotel—that was kind of community effort—a lot of people were...arms twisted a little bit to donate money to the Portales Hotel...and then when they got the hotel built and they got a colored cook to come to Portales to take over the restaurant, there was some dissension in the fact that there was going to be a colored man running the restaurant, but I think that got resolved...in later years I didn't hear anything more about it.

**Abril:** OK. This whole family reunion that you're having here in Portales, in Roosevelt County, how do you feel about coming to these things...these family reunions?

**Creek:** Oh, I think it's great. It's great to get to see all of the relatives, and my mother was really family oriented and I think we used to all meet at her place all the time, and after she passed away, why we decided this was what she would want, so I think it's a good gesture and I enjoy it very much.

**Abril:** Do you have any other memories of Eastern New Mexico University that you'd like to share?

**Creek:** Yeah, I used to come out and hunt arrowheads and steal burros where the campus of ENMU is now. That was before it was ENMU, it was just vacant land at that time. And I guess those burros—somebody had dumped them out—but this whole area had a lot of burros in there and we liked to catch them and see if we could ride them, which we couldn't. [laughter]

**Russell:** Were you with the Volunteer Fire Department in Portales?

**Creek:** No.

**Abril:** Did you volunteer for any other activities in the city?

**Creek:** No. I was a...well, I belonged to civic clubs.

**Abril:** Civic clubs? What did you do in those civic clubs?

**Creek:** Well, as little as possible. [laughter] I started out with the 20-30 Club, then I think I joined the Kiwanas Club—I wasn't real active in any of them.

**Abril:** If you knew five minutes from now was going to be your last day, and you wanted to say something to your family about your life here in Portales, what would that be...what would you tell them?

**Creek:** Well I think people who were raised in Roosevelt County really value friendship and family, it certainly isn't for monetary reasons, and I think it's a good place to grow up and a good place to raise children, here in Portales.

**Abril:** OK. Well, on behalf of Eastern New Mexico University and the City of Portales, I'd like to thank you for your participation in this oral history project.

**Creek:** You're certainly welcome.