

Oral History Interview with Lea Johnson

Conducted by Dr. Julie Abril
Portales, NM
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[Audio tape begins here and continues to the beginning of the video interview]

Abril: Will you tell me your name and age?

Johnson: My name is Lea Johnson and I am 64 years old. I was born in Clovis, NM.

Abril: How long have you lived in the area of Portales?

Johnson: I haven't lived in the area of Portales for many years. My husband was in the military, so we traveled a lot, and I was in the military, so I traveled a lot. I really haven't lived in the Portales area for several years.

Abril: Tell me about your most memorable experience that happened more than 50 years ago.

Johnson: I think it is when I learned to wash dishes at my grandmother's cafe. We used to come here and stand on Coke boxes, so we could reach the... I couldn't have been more than six or seven years old and we'd come down here and wash dishes in the cafe for my grandmother.

Abril: Can you tell me what kind of work you did back then besides washing dishes for your grandmother?

Johnson: I really didn't do any work back then. I was only twelve years old when I started washing dishes, so I was going to school. And then when I was a senior in high school here, I worked as a nurse's aide at the hospital--worked from eleven to seven.

Abril: And now you're a nurse yourself?

Johnson: Yes, I went to nursing school, I graduated in 1964 from a three-year diploma program in El Paso, TX.

Abril: And, how were things back then compared to what they are now here in Portales, or this general area?

Johnson: I don't think they've changed a lot. Most of my family has moved away from here. There's some of them that still live here in town, but so far as the Portales area is concerned, one of the primary differences is the fact that Roosevelt County was a dry county back then—you couldn't buy liquor at all and everybody went either to Clovis or down to Kenna to the bar to pick up booze, or they had bootleggers all over town.

[Videotape begins here and continues to the end of the interview]

Course the university has grown a great deal since then, in fact my father built a bunch of the dorms out here at Eastern [ENMU] back in the fifties.

Abril: You want to tell me again how many brothers, sisters, cousins, and couples graduated from Eastern?

Johnson: Well, my grandmother, Mattie Kinney had fifteen grandchildren and out of that fifteen, twelve of us have a bachelor's degree, eight of us have a master's degree, and then one has a Ph.D....there were seven of the grandchildren who lived with my grandmother, Mattie Kinney, while they were going to college here at Eastern. They would work in the cafe and she had some of the best educated waitresses and dishwashers in the country because they'd go in all the time, even when they had finished their degrees, and they were going in there washing dishes and she'd be running short of waitresses so they'd go wait tables, but they all lived at grandmother's. There were only two of us that did not go to college here in Portales.

Abril: Did they go elsewhere?

Johnson: Yes, one of my cousins went to college in Colorado and then I went to college in El Paso, TX, so...

Abril: How was your family life back then, when you lived here?

Johnson: You know we didn't have a whole lot of money, I guess that's one of the reasons why we worked was because grandmother was generous enough that she started paying us \$.50 an hour to wash dishes. We were a very close family—we've always been a very close family. My mother worked at the cafe, my aunts, a lot of my cousins, my sister, my brother, we all worked at the cafe. And we moved back from Arkansas in 1954 or 55 and we lived in...my grandmother had some apartments behind her house and we lived in those, so we were always around grandmother and we were always around all the cousins because they all lived here in town. The cousins...we were all about the same age, we were within five years of each other, so we were always running around together. We'd spend Sundays at grandmother's house and we'd go out and play in her orchard and we just had a wonderful time at grandmother's house.

Abril: You mentioned that times were tough back then, financially—how did you make ends meet?

Johnson: Well, all of us kids worked. Linda and I both worked in the cafe and my brother had a paper route and then he had a shoe shine shop downtown in one of the barbershops, and my mother worked in the cafe washing [dishes] and she would wait tables down there...and we bought all of our school supplies...we got clothes for Christmas and I had a lot of hand-me-downs—I was the youngest, so I wore a lot of hand-me-downs [laughter].

Abril: How did you feel about that?

Johnson: Well, at the time, I was glad to have clothes, I guess [laughter], but it always irked me, because, you know, everybody would look at my clothes and see others'. One of the things I thought was one of the most memorable things...my grandmother worked...she'd get up in the morning at 5:00 and go to the restaurant and make pies—she always made homemade pies—and she would work through the breakfast hour

making homemade pies and then she would go home and in the evenings after the restaurant closed, at 8:00, she would go home and sew...and she made squaw dresses for all of her daughters and her daughters-in-law, and all of her grandchildren, and her sister. And you could imagine how many miles of rick-rack that she had to sew on those dresses, after working all those hours and she'd go home and then she made the squaw dresses and then she took white gingham—different colors of gingham—and she would cross-stitch designs on the bottom of the dresses and on the backs and she made a gingham dress for all of the granddaughters and all of her daughters and daughters-in-law...so she must have made, oh dear, probably ten squaw dresses and gingham dresses for all of us.

Abril: How would she go about getting the materials all the way out here in Portales area?

Johnson: I don't think she had any problems getting those. I do know ...they came down...they had a Sear's store and a JC Penney's and she got them from there—they had those stores here, so....

Abril: Here in Portales? So what happened to JC Penney and Sears?

Johnson: I guess, you know, they just kind of crumbled, you know, but there was a JC Penney's here for many years, so...

Abril: So, what were your childhood chores like, what kinds of activities did you have—farming routines, household activities, meal times...what did you do?

Johnson: Well, we helped grandmother a great deal. We would go out into the orchard—she had a big orchard behind her house—and we would go out and help her pick fruit and slice the fruit up and she canned all the fruit and made jelly and jams so we all got involved with that. One of the things I remember particularly she raised her own chickens, course back then, they didn't have the regulations now that they had then about food you could serve in a restaurant, so she raised her own chickens a lot of time and she asked two of my cousins if they wanted to help her go dress out some chickens, and they were really excited about it, so she took them out there and started wringing the necks of the chickens and plucking them, and one of the girls left, she wouldn't do it. But they thought they were gonna dress these chickens up in dresses [laughter] and get them all fancied up, so they were really excited about dressing up the chickens, when all she was doing was killing them and plucking them, and cutting them up [laughter], they didn't understand what dressing out a chicken meant. And she used to make lye soap—she would bring the grease from the cafe and she had a great big huge cast iron pot and she'd build a fire out in the backyard and made all of her own lye soap that she used to wash the dishrags at the restaurant, so we got involved with that. We'd go out and help her pick the fruit and then she had a beautiful flower garden, and even after working six days a week, we'd have to get out and mow the yard and take care of her flowers. I remember one summer in particular that I was working for her—I was fourteen—and I would wash dishes during the noon hour, and then I had a couple hours off, so I would come back and wash dishes during the evening meal. And then on Sundays we'd get up and go out and she'd mow the grass, and I'd be digging dandelions out of her yard, and spend the whole day out working. There was never a day of rest, I don't know how she did it, but she made all the rest of us do it, too—we had our chores and there were certain things we had to do so far as cleaning the house...we had this little apartment

that we had—there was one little apartment that had that a bedroom, living room, kitchen, and a bathroom, and my mother and daddy lived in it. And then behind it was a little duplex and it just had two little studio apartments that were just one big room, and my brother slept in one and my sister and I slept in the other, and that's where we lived when we came back from Arkansas was back there in those little apartments behind her, because dad really had a hard time getting a job and that's when he came out and helped build some of the dorms out here at Eastern.

Abril: When you were alone with your grandmother, just you and her, what was your fondest memory of just the two of you?

Johnson: Oh, there were so many...when I came here I was fourteen and I came here to wash dishes for that summer and I asked her if she would roll my hair. And she said "who rolls your hair at home?" And I said "well, mother rolls my hair," and she said "it's about time you learned to roll your own." So, she made me roll my hair, so I learned how to roll my hair that summer, but I can remember, one of the fondest memories I had of her...she would come in late at night from the restaurant and there were several nights a week that I would hear her crying and I would get up and she would have cramps in her legs from being on her feet so much and she would have these horrible charley horse cramps in her legs and she would be sitting there just crying, it hurt so bad. I would sit at her feet and rub her legs for her and she would tell me stories about her life and her first husband—the love of her life—who died when she was very young—he was very young too, for that matter; that was my mother's father, but she would tell us stories about going to dances and he played the fiddle so he was always playing the music and she was going out dancing with all the men that were there and some of the men would ask her if they could take her home and she'd say "well, I don't know, I'll have to ask my husband if you can take me home," [laughter] because they didn't realize that he was there in the band, but she'd dance with everybody, she loved to dance. And, but it was just sitting around, and another thing was sitting around the table when we would have big family dinners and they would start telling stories, and we still do it to this day. We sit around and tell stories about things that we did when we were growing up and what our life was like, what her life was like, so those were some of the fondest memories I had of my grandmother, just the two of us was sitting there, listening to her, and I would weep because she was hurting so badly and there wasn't anything you could do—just sit there and rub her legs.

Abril: Were you aware of the hobos that lived in this area, when they came through?

Johnson: No, that was probably before I was here.

Abril: That was the depression.

Johnson: Yes, depression time, before I was born.

Abril: What was your fondest memory of your dad, you and your dad together?

Johnson: Oh, my dad. I cannot tell you the number, just being with my father was a joy. Oh, the fondest memory of my father. I can't begin to tell you...just being around him; he was so funny.

Abril: Can you give me an example of what he would do that was so funny?

Johnson: Well, when we lived in Arkansas, we were even poorer then than we ever were, but when we were growing up in Clovis—I was born in Clovis—we would come down here on weekends, my mother, my brother and sister and I would come down here and spend Sunday afternoon at grandmother's. My dad worked so much and just being around him was a joy for us. I was a year old before he ever saw me awake because he'd get up and I was asleep and he'd come home and I was asleep. One of the fondest memories I have he built us a sandbox; and we came out to the sand hills between Clovis and Portales and I remember him shoveling sand into the trunk of the car—filled the trunk of that car—I'm sure that my mother had a terrible time getting all the sand out of that trunk; but he didn't have a pickup or anything, so he put all of that sand into the back of the trunk of the car and took it back to Clovis to build our sand pile. Then we would go out to his mother's and father's, out on the ranch, and we always had a great time out there—they'd let us ride horses and get out in the middle of the cows.

Abril: Do you know about their lives, how ranching was back then?

Johnson: Well, I mean it was rough, my dad was raised on a ranch and there wasn't anything he couldn't do on a ranch, he was a regular cowboy. He really was a cowboy. My uncle remembers the first time he ever saw my dad, dad was riding a wild horse—he was bucking out this horse and by the time daddy finished, my uncle said that dad had blood coming out of nose, out his mouth and out of his ears because he was bucking out that horse. One of the things I must mention is the way my mother and father met. They were working some cattle and one of the men was on a horse and he would rope the horse and my dad would throw the horse and then one of these men, who weighed about 250 pounds, would come up and sit down on the steer and they would brand it, dehorn it, and castrate it and all the things that they were doing. Well, there was one time that dad threw this little heifer and the heifer rolled over on top of daddy and then this man came over and sit down on the heifer; so here daddy was underneath this little heifer and this man sit down on it and so that was the first time my mother ever saw my dad. And my dad's name for my mother was "the little heifer," he called her "how's the old heifer"...that was her CB handle later on when they started having CBs. He worked cattle just like anybody else. One of the things I remember him doing—they always kept a 22 [gauge rifle] on one of the windmills out in the middle of the range because if they saw a coyote out there they would get the rifle and shoot the coyote—well he had the rifle down and he had killed a coyote and then he was standing in the saddle to put the rifle back up on the one windmill and the horse shifted and he shot himself in the leg [laughter]. So, I mean it was a rough life, you know, but he, uh, was a good cowboy.

One of the other things I remember, and this happened later on, after I was married...my husband was in the service and we were in Europe—I don't know if that has anything to do with it or not—but we used to play bridge with a lot of the officers' wives and we had about four tables of bridge, and they got to talking about their parents and a couple of the girls' dads were generals, and one's was a senator, and one's was a doctor, and one's was a lawyer, and they kept naming off all of these fancy professions; and then they asked me what my father did and I told them, I said: "my dad was an old cowboy." Of course they were fascinated by the fact that I had grown up around someone who really knew what ranching was like.

Abril: In this area, when you lived here, how were race relations?

Johnson: I think we only had one or two black people in the whole town. And I'm not sure about how many Mexicans there were—there weren't that many Latin Americans here, but I mean they were just here, we just kind of ignored them, I mean they were just part of the class, we didn't really ignore them, but they had their own little groups that they did things with and we did our thing. We didn't socialize with them at all, that I remember, but there weren't that many of them.

Abril: When you were here, were there any big political or social dramas or events that were going on in the city or the area that people were all up in arms [about] ...was there something going on?

Johnson: Nothing I remember. I guess the biggest thing was, when I was a senior in high school, some of the girls got caught shoplifting, and the girls who were caught shoplifting were from the families who had the most money [laughter]. Those of us who didn't have any money we were afraid to go shoplifting, I guess because we figured our parents wouldn't bail us out of jail. But there were some of the girls who were caught shoplifting...maybe I shouldn't say that. [laughter]

Abril: Is that an historical fact?

Johnson: It is.

Abril: When were you married?

Johnson: I was married Christmas Day, of 1966. I was married in El Paso, TX.

Abril: You said you had a couple of higher education degrees?

Johnson: I have a bachelor's in nursing, I have a master's in nursing and I have a master's in business.

Abril: Do you have any children?

Johnson: I have two children, I have a son who lives in El Paso, TX, and I have a daughter who's in Washington, DC.

Abril: And your eventual lifelong career turned out to be....

Johnson: I was in the military for twenty years.

Abril: What did you do in the military?

Johnson: I was an Army nurse. I was actually on active duty for seven and a half years, and then I was in the reserves, so I had one weekend a month and two weeks out of the summer, but I did spend twenty years in...and then my reserve unit was called up to active duty to go to Saudi Arabia during Desert Shield/Desert Storm, so during the time that I was in the reserves, my daytime weekly job...I lectured all over the country for two and a half years about nursing subjects, particularly nursing in the operating room, and then I worked in a hospital in El Paso for not very long when I was called up to go to

Saudi [Arabia]. Then I was the nurse manager for the pediatric department at Texas Tech [University] in El Paso, for seven and a half years, before I retired from nursing.

Abril: And, in your life here in Portales or this general area, did you ever have any unusual experiences you want to relate?

Johnson: No, not really.

Abril: Not that you want to relate, or did you not really have any?

Johnson: No, that I didn't really have any unusual experiences. I really didn't.

Abril: When you were young, did you ever get with your childhood friends and do something you weren't supposed to be doing?

Johnson: Not childhood friends, mainly with my cousins. [laughter]

Abril: What might that be...I saw a look of guilt on your face...don't worry, you passed the statute of limitations, nobody's gonna come back [and get you]...

Johnson: [laughter] We didn't do anything that bad, but when we lived in Clovis, we had some little kids that lived behind the barn, behind the alley, on the other side of the alley from us, and they were always throwing rocks at us...and my dad had built a corral in the back part of the house and he would go to the sale barn and buy some small calves and feed them out, and then he would take them to the barn and sell them, but he always had one that he kept—that he had cut up for us, so we would have something to eat, but those kids kept throwing rocks at us, so a bunch of my cousins—we got together and there were three of them—my brother, and one of my male cousins and one of the oldest of the cousins got on top of the barn, and we had this bucket we had a string on and so the rest of us—there were three of us...four of us that were down in the corral and we used to pick up cow chips and put them in that bucket and they would pull them up on the top of the barn and they got to throwing cow chips and we always liked to get the ones that were crusty on the outside but real soft on the inside and ...[unintelligible—laughter], but you know what—those kids stopped throwing rocks at us. And then, there was a bakery behind my grandmother's house in Clovis, and they had tossed out a bunch of dough that they weren't going to use, so we got out there and there was some other kids and we ended up having a dough fight. We had dough, probably within a three block area all around my grandmother's house—we even had dough out at the hospital in Clovis where they had their deliveries—we had thrown dough at each other and all over that place. We had a great time.

Abril: Sounds like it. What is your greatest personal accomplishment?

Johnson: I think the proudest thing I am of my life is becoming a professional nurse. I was a nurse for many years. I was a three-year diploma grad, but I really didn't become a professional—what I really consider a professional nurse—until I went into the military. The military taught me what being a true professional really meant.

Abril: How so, how did it do that?

Johnson: Well, it was the idea that you had to continually improve your knowledge, and you had to share that knowledge not only with your cohorts and your fellow workers, but to use that knowledge to inform and educate your patients. I think I really learned how to use my nursing skills while I was in the military.

Abril: That's a great accomplishment.

Johnson: It really is...I enjoyed my profession, greatly. I must admit that I'm glad I'm not having to be a nurse today [laughter], but, because I think nursing has changed a great deal.

Abril: When you were ten, were there any great events going on, any shocking things that stuck out in your mind?

Johnson: When I was ten, we lived in Arkansas, and I think the greatest thing that stuck out in my mind was before we moved to Arkansas my father worked all the time and didn't go to church with us. And when we went to Arkansas, my dad started going to church and even with my mother was ill, dad made sure that we went to church. And I guess that is when we became the closest, as a family.

Abril: Does your family now, even your extended family—cousins, aunts, uncles—all share the same faith—religious faith?

Johnson: Just about. We're all Christians. We go to different churches, different denominations, but yes.

Abril: Anything else you'd like to add?

Johnson: No, except to say that we started these reunions four years ago, and primarily because my two uncles and my aunt are getting...my one aunt is ninety-four years old...and the others are in their eighties.

Abril: Would that be Lillian?

Johnson: Lilly, yes.

Abril: I interviewed her yesterday.

Johnson: Isn't she wonderful, she's a great lady, and she still remembers so much. Our mother, who was Aunt Lilly's younger sister, just died in January—she was in a nursing home for about fifteen years and she was really very healthy, and she knew us up until about three years ago and then she had a minor stroke and she didn't communicate very well at all, and we lost her in January. Aunt Lilly has become our surrogate mother. I'm very close to Uncle Leroy and Aunt Weesie, too. When my mother was growing up, grandmother was working so much, so my mother took care of her two younger brothers—or her half-brothers, Leroy and Paul; in fact, I'm named after both of them. That's where I got the Lea, and my middle name is Norris, so I was named after my uncle Paul whose middle name is Norris. And then when I went to El Paso, or to Fabens [TX] to be the school nurse, I lived with my aunt and uncle there—Uncle Leroy and Aunt Weesie, and I'm very, very close to them. But those people are very special, and I think the reason our family is so close is because of our

grandmother—she was the matriarch, she was the glue that kept us together—she taught us a work ethic that most people don't ever have.

Abril: If there is one thing you want to leave, one message about the area—the Portales area—that you want to leave with your family and everybody before you go, is there something that you would want them to know about you or this area, or do you have any pearls of wisdom you want to impart?

Johnson: Well, I think the lifestyle of the American family has changed so much, we are so scattered...people move different jobs—people aren't expected to stay in the same job for fifty years like they were before, so you're constantly moving, so I think if there's one thing that I'd like to say to the people who are still here in town is to keep in touch with your family, even those that are scattered away from you. Family becomes more important the older you get, the more important they become to you.

Abril: OK, is there anything you'd like to add?

Johnson: I don't think so.

Abril: OK. Thank you very much for your time, and on behalf of the Eastern New Mexico University Golden Library, I want to thank you for your participation in this project that benefits not only the university, but the City of Portales and to continue to keep this area alive.

Johnson: Thank you very much

Abril: You're welcome.