

Oral History Interview

with

KEITH PAYNE

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Portales, New Mexico

By Jean Burroughs

For the Eastern New Mexico University Library
Oral History Project

Burroughs: I am in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Keith Payne. Mr. Payne is a long time resident of Roosevelt County and former Assistant Postmaster. Good evening Mr. Payne.

Payne: Good evening Mrs. Burroughs.

Burroughs: Can you make some comments concerning your parents or grandparents? Were they ever in Roosevelt County?

Payne: None of my people have ever lived in Roosevelt County, nor in New Mexico, except one brother at one time taught at an institution in Roswell. He is no longer in the state.

Burroughs: Well, how did you get here?

Payne: I got tired of picking cotton down in Central Texas, and I had personally qualified as a teacher through a college program. I wrote to the Teacher's Agency in Denver, applied for a school here and was accepted.

Burroughs: What subject was that?

Payne: Gradeschool. My entire subject for the first year was U.S. History.

Burroughs: So that was maybe the beginning of your interest in History?

Payne: I always loved History.

Burroughs: When did you become so interested in the history of Post Offices of Roosevelt County? To compile this list that you have?

Payne: Perhaps the beginning of it was when Mrs. Armstrong asked me to do a program on the Portales Post Office for the Altrusa Club, and she had Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Jones as guest. Mrs. Howard. . . . I believe at that time Hazel Little was Postmaster. And after I did that I began to get interested in enlarging the field and began from that and accumulated the material that was available. There were sixty-one names that were used for post offices in what is now Roosevelt County. Some of these were only changing names--some both changing names and site. Four were never activated and later resented. . . . Portales Post Office, the earliest record was request for establishment of the post office. But the Post Master General's Journal of Orders for April 6, 1899 listed Portales, Chaves County, New Mexico among post offices to be established. Zeph Morrison was the Postmaster.

Burroughs: Was that the son of Uncle Josh Morrison, who had the first store out in Portales?

Payne: I believe it was.

Burroughs: How long did Zeph Morrison keep this postmastership?

Payne: He was Postmaster until Mr. Leech took over on the first of November in 1900.

Burroughs: Now, Roosevelt County was not yet established at that time.

Payne: No, Roosevelt County was created in 1903.

Burroughs: Can you name the post offices that were established and became part of Chaves County?

Payne: Yes.

Burroughs: The early ones besides Portales.

Payne: Bethel, 1902; Kenna and Elida also in 1902. There were some other offices that were in Chaves County that were later in Roosevelt County by change of boundary. . . .

Burroughs: I see.

Payne: . . . which included Kenna and some others.

Burroughs: That's interesting that Kenna, Bethel and Portales are still some of the largest post offices, and many of the number that were established have been discontinued.

Payne: Now, Floyd was one of the first ones that was established, soon after these. . . I do not have the date right handy. Offices were established at the rate of two or three a year until 1907, when fourteen were established. 1907 to 1918 a few offices were [established] nearly every year.

Burroughs: Can you comment on why you had so many during those years?

Payne: Transportation was the principal reason I would suggest because at that time there were no automobiles, the roads were poor, and there were homesteaders on at least every section of a quarter section. And for the convenience of the people, it was

not difficult to establish an office. We had some offices where there was only--the whole time the office was in existence--only one postmaster for a period of time, and some did not stay long.

Burroughs: Were those early post offices developed during the height of the Homestead Era? Were they always in connection with a store, or were they a separate building?

Payne: Usually in a store or in a room of a home.

Burroughs: In the room of a home!

Payne: A lot of them at home. . . . The post office at Pep--no not Pep--one of the offices still in the county is in a residence.

Burroughs: Well, that is very interesting. Can you comment on how the mail was put out and kept for the patrons? What sort of set-up did they have in their home?

Payne: Well, they had some kind of desk facilities and usually some pigeon holes to put them in, and as the volume of mail was not very much, I'm sure a lot of the mail was transported by horse-back or by pack. It was quite a long time. When I first went to work in the post office, the mail came from Bluit, to Lingo, to Emzy, to Causey, to Dora, to Rogers, to Portales in a Model A Ford.

Burroughs: Oh, did that come every day?

Payne: Yes, and most of the postmasters were also storekeepers, and they shipped eggcases by mail.

Burroughs: Eggcases?

Payne: Cases of eggs came by mail. I remember seeing a Model A come in with maybe a half a dozen cases of eggs besides the other ones.

Burroughs: Well, I've heard of shipping baby chicks, but I never have heard of shipping the eggs.

Payne: We had one fellow one time his wife was postmaster at Upton. Mr. John Russell sold a ton of beans, and he shipped them by mail.

Burroughs: A ton?

Payne: A ton of beans.

Burroughs: How were they packaged?

Payne: They were packaged in fifty-pound bags. Now, he brought them into Portales instead of having them come in by the regular mail route from Upton to Elida. He just brought them in and mailed them in at Portales.

Burroughs: That was quite an innovation in mail service, wasn't it?

Payne: It was, but it wasn't unusual for them to ship most anything that wasn't too big by mail. I heard the story of a fellow that was moving and he broke his furniture down--chairs, for instance-- and he broke them into bundles and shipped them by mail.

Burroughs: Oh, now Mr. Payne.

Payne: I've heard that story. I have seen wagon axles. . . . wagon axles, windmill fans, broken down and shipped in the mail, plowpoints.

Burroughs: Shipped by mail, not express? What kind of postage rate did you have in those days?

Payne: Well, it was not an expensive rate at that particular time. . . .

Burroughs: What year was this you're talking about?

Payne: Oh, probably late twenties to the mid thirties. Mail order business was tremendous. All the rural patrons got mail order catalogs.

Burroughs: Oh, so that's how they supplied their household needs then.

Payne: And they would be delivered out in the country to them. So much of it. . . . We used to get as many as a thousand mail order catalogs in one shipment at the local post office.

Burroughs: I know why I exclaimed so over shipping plowpoints by mail. You can still order those things, but they usually come to the Sears office or Montgomery Ward office and you have to pick it up, instead of it being mailed directly to you.

Payne: But mail served the people that were a tremendous distance from the shipping point, and that's the reason they used it. That's the reason mail order was so successful.

Burroughs: Well, that supplied the West then, didn't it.

Payne: Yes, it did. Now, there used to be a little post office out between Carlsbad and El Paso--I forgot the name of it right now--but they got mail twice a week. And as I recall, it was about

ninety miles away from Carlsbad. Of course now, I guess perhaps the farthest we would have here would be perhaps now to the Lingo area.

Burroughs: How many miles is that?

Payne: I expect 35-40.

Burroughs: That's in the southern part of the county?

Payne: Southern part of the county, yes. Southeast. Milnesand, about 40. But those people down there could still get stuff that was not too big and heavy delivered to their post office.

Burroughs: Well, that was remarkable. Now was that carried in a car? A Model A, like the eggcases?

Payne: Yes. By the time I came to the post office all the mail in the area was by motor vehicle. But I don't guess, in other words. . . . Mr. Upton told me one time that some man--I've forgotten his name--ran the mail route from Elida to Upton and some of those northwest of Elida. He used a two or four horsed mule team.

Burroughs: To haul the mail.

Payne: He ran a hack and carried passengers, freight for the patrons along the route that couldn't go by mail.

Burroughs: And incoming mail. [?]

Payne: Yes.

Burroughs: Have you ever heard the town that when the railroad first came through--and that was, I believe, 1898 before there was actually a post office--that they had the mail in a big container or box and they set it out on the station and people came to sort through.

Is that correct?

Payne: I understand it is. Mrs. Eddie White told me that story. And I heard a rumor one time that somebody stole the mail.

[indistinct remark follows]

Burroughs: The box sat there on the station until everything was clean, then.

Payne: I guess so.

Burroughs: While you're speaking of that reminds me of what you had mentioned earlier about Doak Goode [?] having a mail route that was never an actuality. Will you comment on that?

Payne: A Senator Dorsey, I believe he was senator from Arkansas, became involved with--I don't know how many people, and I don't know the entire details of it, but you can find it in the history that there was such a thing--the Great Mail Swindle. They set up a group of fictitious mail routes to be carried by contract.

Burroughs: Fictitious.

Payne: Non-existent. And they drew the money for it, transporting this mail. And this Doak Goode, who was the first permanent settler in the area at the Portales Springs, also was one of the mail carriers for that group.

Burroughs: For Dorsey's group?

Payne: For Dorsey's group. I think his contract was probably Fort Sumner to Lubbock. I think later on it came out. It didn't . . .

I don't know how long it existed, but Senator Dorsey got involved in it. I don't know whether he served out his term or resigned his term. He came to New Mexico and built this Dorsey mansion up in the northeastern part of the state.

Burroughs: I think that's near Clayton, isn't it?

Payne: Somewhere in that vicinity. I've never been there.

Burroughs: So Doak Goode got paid, but he didn't run any mail. Is that correct?

Payne: He probably wasn't getting paid very much. He probably got paid for the trips he made.

Burroughs: I see.

Payne: And they were getting paid perhaps a job rate the trip, probably once a week each way; and maybe two or three months might have been as much as they operated.

Burroughs: Well, that's typical of some of the operations in those early days, I think. [laughter]

Payne: Yes.

Burroughs: I think you were mentioning too before we began this interview about the number of post offices that at one time existed in the county.

Payne: Thirty-nine were the most in existence at any one time, and that dwindled down a few at a time. This continued for various times. In 1918 there were eight discontinued in that one year. In January 1, 1912, there were actually thirty-nine post offices. When I

compiled this in 1955 there were eleven. Since that time Arch has been discontinued, leaving only ten.

Burroughs: Ten post offices.

Payne: Ten post offices at the present time.

Burroughs: And we have only four school districts, and we used to have over a hundred.

Payne: Yes.

Burroughs: So that shows what has happened to the population and how it shifted.

Payne: With the discontinuing of the post offices, the service to the patrons perhaps has not suffered because of the various routes. The routes have been extended and cover those thickly settled areas. [?] Out of Portales they have two rural routes at the present time. When I retired, one of them was 112 miles long and the other one about 90 miles long.

Burroughs: You mean one rural carrier would drive that every day. One hundred and twelve miles. Well, that was lots of driving in the rain and snow, and what is the rest of that saying about the

Payne: Neither rain nor snow nor gloom of night will dissuade the couriers from the swift provision [?] of their duties.

Burroughs: That's the post office oath, I believe, or

Payne: That is a tribute to one of the early-day historians--I've forgotten his name. . . . [Indistinct remarks]

Burroughs: That's true, that is a Greek. . . .

Payne: That was a saying of the couriers for the nobility rulers at that time, and that is engraved on the front of the New York City post office.

Burroughs: Mr. Payne, when was this particular post office that we now have in Portales built?

Payne: Federal building?

Burroughs: Yes.

Payne: We moved in that May of 1937.

Burroughs: And it's been remodeled and added to several times since then, hasn't it?

Payne: Yes. The first thing they did, they completed part of the basement for offices for the Federal agencies; then the bigger remodeling came. I don't remember the date, but they moved the post office facilities out for about a year--maybe eighteen months, I don't remember--and completely remodeled and added to it.

Burroughs: Now when did you retire?

Payne: I retired the fifteenth of January, 1969.

Burroughs: So you served forty years.

Payne: Forty-two years and two months from the time I started as a substitute. [?]

Burroughs: I see. Well, that was a very interesting life, too. Aren't you a stamp collector?

Payne: Yes.

Burroughs: Would you tell me about the commemorative stamps that the post office puts out from time to time?

Payne: The commemoratives are designed to commemorate some historic event or personage. One of the most recent issues we have had is a group of four, all in the same sheet, depicting endangered species of wildlife.

Burroughs: I've seen them. They're beautiful.

Payne: The ^{cardinal}culdma, [?] the brown pelican, the polar bear, and the big-horned sheep-- that four. Now, in past years we have had some other wildlife conservation stamps, but a big lot of them are historical events, prominent personages through the years, many of our presidents, some of our prominent congressmen, senators, various fields. Along in the 1930s we put out a series of famous Americans. There were five stamps in each set. There were poets, writers, artists, musicians, scientists. Seems to me like there were two others, but I don't recall what they were.

Burroughs: When was the Portales stamp club organized? I know you have been interested in that.

Payne: Let me think a minute.

Burroughs: Not too long.

Payne: About 1964.

Burroughs: So less than ten years.

Payne: Yes. When Dr. and Mrs. Webster at the University came here, they were instrumental in an organization.

Burroughs: They still are very active.

Payne: Yes, they're very active. And the club meets the second Tuesday of each month except during the summer. Next Tuesday will be our. . . .

Burroughs: Regular time.

Payne: Uh huh.

Burroughs: Mr. Payne, do you release these statements made for the use of the Oral History program at Eastern New Mexico University?

Payne: Any way you or they care to use them.

Burroughs: Thank you. I know that it will be of interest to the students, particularly the dates of the establishment of the post offices. Thank you.