

Oral History Interview

with

Mr. and Mrs. Leon C. Slaten

January 11, 1973

conducted by

Mrs. John Burroughs

For the Eastern New Mexico University Library

MRS. BURROUGHS: This is Mrs. John Burroughs. The day is January 11, 1973 and I am visiting in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Leon Slaten. Good afternoon, Leon.

MR. SLATEN: Good afternoon.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Thank you for letting me come on this snowy afternoon.

MR. SLATEN: Yes, it is a bad day.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Would you like to say something about this unusual weather we have been having?

MR. SLATEN: Well, I can say that this is about the worst winter we've had in five or six years.

MRS. BURROUGHS: More snow.

MR. SLATEN: More snow and freezing up on the high lines and the trees and everything. So...we have had this kind of weather years ago, but this is the first in a few years.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Not recently.

MR. SLATEN: No.

MRS. BURROUGHS: I would like to introduce Mrs. Slaten, Bernice. You came from Kansas, didn't you, and this weather isn't so unusual to you.

MRS. SLATEN: No, no. This is what I grew up with and was real happy to leave as far as that goes. New Mexico has exactly the kind of snow and weather that I like. It snows in the morning and it thaws in the afternoon. However, this little spell we have had just now has not been like that. And I think we all just about have cabin fever from having to stay in. But today is a beautiful day. The sun's shining and there is snow all over and it is cold out but it is pretty.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Leon, I know you are a long time citizen of Roosevelt County, but I would like to know something about your grandparents.

MR. SLATEN: Well, my father's mother and father, I had never met them in my life. They lived in Alabama and they passed away when I was a kid, about twelve or thirteen years old.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Now, their name was Slaten.

MR. SLATEN: Right.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Now what about your mother's people?

MR. SLATEN: Well, my mother's father, he passed away in Kansas years and years ago. Grandma Bell, that is my mother's mother, she came to Portales and lived with Mom for about a year and a half, and then she passed away and she is buried out here in the cemetery.

MRS. BURROUGHS: What year was that?

MR. SLATEN: That was in 1928.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Now when did your parents, Mr. and Mrs. Willie Slaten, come to the county?

MR. SLATEN: In 1905.

MRS. BURROUGHS: And where did they come from?

MR. SLATEN: They came from east...Denton, Texas. They came from Denton, Texas. They lived there for awhile and Orville, my oldest brother, was born there in Denton and he was just a little kid when they came out here.

MRS. BURROUGHS: How did they get here?

MR. SLATEN: They came by wagon.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Like everybody else.

MR. SLATEN: Yes, by wagon.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, you mentioned Orville was born in Texas. How many of you were born in New Mexico, and name the children of the family.

MR. SLATEN: Okay. Orville was born in Texas. Blanche was born down there in Richland. I was born there, Berwyn was born there, and Woodrow was born there.

MRS. BURROUGHS: All in the Richland Community.

MR. SLATEN: There were five of us children and we were all born down there, except O.T.

MRS. BURROUGHS: What was your father doing in the Richland Community?

MR. SLATEN: He was a farmer. He homesteaded on that land in 1905.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Did he have the usual 160 acres or did he buy up more land?

MR. SLATEN: No. He had a section and a half of land.

MRS. BURROUGHS: How did he acquire all of that under the Homestead Act?

MR. SLATEN: Well, he bought the section and a half at first. Back then it was only two and three dollars an acre, back in those days. But whenever he finally wound up, he bought more land and he

wound up with about two and a half sections.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, he was a more prosperous farmer than some of the ones who came and tried to "eek" out on eighty acres. What did he raise down there?

MR. SLATEN: We raised broom corn, and corn (capped corn), and maize, and cotton.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, you were commenting a while ago about the unusual amount of snow. Wouldn't that have been very welcomed to your dad down there in a dry land community?

MR. SLATEN: Yes, we used to, back in those days, we used to get a lot of snow, back in...oh, before Christmas and then after Christmas. I can remember Woody and I used to go and hunt rabbits, and snow would be on the ground, and we would get our twenty-two and go out and show a good shooting.

MRS. BURROUGHS: You lived on those rabbits some, didn't you?

MR. SLATEN: Yes, yes.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Can you recall any instance in your childhood down in that community that would be of interest? Can you think of something that happened during your boyhood?

MR. SLATEN: Well, no, I don't exactly. I went to school down there until 1927 and we moved to Portales. Then I went to school here, two years, I graduated from here in 1929.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Your sister, Blanche, was telling me something about the school situation down in Richland and that they needed to move the schools around from place to place because of the tax money and the nearness to where the children lived. Can you comment on your dad's feelings on that? Do you recall...

MR. SLATEN: Well, dad took a lot of interest in the school down there and he thought that Richland was a good school, and it was. At one time, Marion Stinnet was our superintendant there.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Oh, is that right?

MR. SLATEN: Yep, yep. Back there in 1925 and 26.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, he was of a homestead family. Now what part of the county did he live?

MR. SLATEN: Let's see, he came from out towards Floyd somewhere, I believe.

MRS. BURROUGHS: And he was the superintendant of your school.

MR. SLATEN: Yes, he was our superintendant down there. Henry Miller drove the school bus and he was my teacher. I was in the fifth and sixth grade that he taught me. That is Jamie Miller's father, Henry Miller is.

MRS. SLATEN: He has the laundry here in Portales now.

MR. SLATEN: He has the laundry here in Portales.

MRS. BURROUGHS: I thought he was retired now.

MR. SLATEN: No, he still works.

MRS. BURROUGHS: He still keeps that laundry.

MR. SLATEN: He still goes down there but Jamie does most of the work. Jamie runs it most of the time.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, how many children rode a school bus to a school like that?

MR. SLATEN: Well, there was about forty-five or fifty of us in that school bus whenever we...

MRS. BURROUGHS: Oh! All in one bus?

MR. SLATEN: All in one bus. And it was a great big bus.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, it must have been.

MR. SLATEN: Yes. And we played basketball down there and we played marbles.

We used to play a lot of marbles.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Jay Thompson reminded that he was the marble...one of the marble champions of the nation.

MR. SLATEN: Yes.

MRS. BURROUGHS: That was before the days of T.V., wasn't it, and moterbikes.

MR. SLATEN: Oh, yes. Didn't know what a T.V. was back in those days.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, how did Mr. Miller manage to pick up the children in bad weather; when the snow was deep and drifty like it has been the last few days?

MR. SLATEN: Well, whenever it was real bad, well the school bus didn't run.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Just didn't have school.

MR. SLATEN: No, they just didn't have school.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Was this a two teacher school?

MR. SLATEN: No, we had about eight or nine teachers in all.

MRS. BURROUGHS: That was a fairly large school.

MR. SLATEN: Yes, it was. It was a consolidated school and it covered a lot of territory of the students that came in from all around. About twelve or thirteen miles distance out.

MRS. BURROUGHS: But some children still walked to school then.

MR. SLATEN: Oh, yes. I used to, back in the old days, ride my donkey to school. I had a burro and I rode him many a time, "Ole Pete".

MRS. BURROUGHS: Pete?

MR. SLATEN: Yep. That was the name of my donkey.

MRS. BURROUGHS: You rode him by yourself or did you have somebody else on behind?

MR. SLATEN: No, Woody would ride with me.

MRS. BURROUGHS: The two of you. What did you do in sand stormy weather?

MR. SLATEN: Well, sand stormy weather, why we stayed inside mostly. And we had a lot of sand storms back in those days.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, you still went to school though, didn't you?

MR. SLATEN: Oh, yes.

MRS. BURROUGHS: How did you combat the wind and the sand blowing in your eyes?

MR. SLATEN: Well, we just...most of the time we rode the school bus. But we did, there in the early part, rode our donkey.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Do you want me to tell you a funny story about John Burroughs?

MR. SLATEN: Yes.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Now this was in Texas, but the weather and the climate was the same in that they had lots of sand storms. He went to a little country school named Carlisle and it was not a large school, there was no school bus. So he and his older brother used to take turns wearing the lunch bucket back over their heads as they walked back home. One would have it for a while, an old syrup bucket you know, a large bucket, and the other one would put it on and they would take turns leading the other one blind. So that is the way they managed in sand stormy weather.

MRS. SLATEN: Leon, I remember you telling me about carrying your lunch to school. What did you have in your lunch pail? I think it is interesting to know what they used to...

MR. SLATEN: Well, mother used to make homemade bread out there on the farm. And a lot of times she would fry steaks every morning and put them in our lunch.

MRS. SLATEN: Make a steak sandwich?

MR. SLATEN: Steak sandwich, yes.

MRS. SLATEN: Or sausage maybe?

MR. SLATEN: Yes, a lot we would have sausage, and ham.

MRS. SLATEN: Everybody took their lunch in a pail?

MR. SLATEN: Right, yes. We carried our lunch in a pail. And we had holes jabbed in the top of it so it wouldn't sweat.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Oh? In the lid of the...

MR. SLATEN: In the lid, uh-huh.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well now, how did you carry that on your donkey? Did you fasten it to the saddle or...

MR. SLATEN: No, we had no saddle on the donkey. We rode him bareback.

MRS. BURROUGHS: So you just carried the lunch pail.

MR. SLATEN: We just carried it in our hands. The little pail had a bail on it.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, then your...

MRS. SLATEN: Our other teachers that you mentioned there that I think people around here might know; Lavonne Brown...

MR. SLATEN: Yes, Lavonne Brown taught school down there, that is L.L. Brown's daughter, that is named after the school, L.L. Brown. And Josephine Good, who was our teacher down there and her name is Josephine Howell now. She lives down at Elida.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Is that the John Howl's...same family?

MR. SLATEN: No, no. This is Howell. You are talking about Ed Howl's folks. And Brodie McAllister. He is from Floyd and he was a teacher down there too, years ago.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Yes, I think he has come back to Portales now to retire.

- MR. SLATEN: Yes, he lives out there on...well, it is out there close to Texas Drive. He lives there now.
- MRS. BURROUGHS: As I understand, the Richland Community was one of the more prosperous in this area. People had good crops, good schools...
- MR. SLATEN: It was, it was one of the biggest communities. It sure was.
- MRS. BURROUGHS: I think Bernice, you were mentioning to me something about the way they took care of their meat in the winter time.
- MRS. SLATEN: Well, I remember Mr. Slaten and Leon and Woodrow talking once and they had remarked about how our winter seasons here were getting so much warmer and more mild than they used to be and they compared this to the times when they would butcher their beef. They would hang a half of side of beef on the windmill and keep it there all winter long. Put a sheet or a clean cloth over it, you know, and keep it there. And they said well, now it was too warm and it wouldn't keep, that meat simply would not keep as warm as our seasons had become here in New Mexico.
- MRS. BURROUGHS: So there has been a change in the weather then.
- MRS. SLATEN: Yes, apparently.
- MR. SLATEN: Yes. Back in those days, Jean, it used to a lot of times would snow seventeen or eighteen inches in one night. We used to have...Oh, I can remember when Woody and I would go out after cows in the afternoon, the milk cows. Well, we would be in snow a foot deep or better in snow. Yes, back in those days it really did snow.
- MRS. BURROUGHS: Well now, how did you manage to feed the cows with snow that deep?

MR. SLATEN: Well, they would come to our house. They would come to our horse lot and they would go inside and we had bundles of feed and so forth, and we would feed them during the day. Whenever the snow was deep they would stay right near the house.

MRS. BURROUGHS: So there was no forage for them in deep snow.

MR. SLATEN: No.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, I would like to ask you--Bernice talked about the windmill--how did you keep the wolves and coyotes off that meat hung on the windmill?

MR. SLATEN: Oh, we had it hung up on the tower, up high.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, how did you get the meat for your own use? How did you get it down?

MR. SLATEN: We would climb the ladder, go up, and...

MRS. BURROUGHS: Climb the windmill ladder?

MR. SLATEN: Climb the windmill ladder and bring it down.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Would you bring the whole carcass or would you take a knife up and cut off what you needed?

MR. SLATEN: No, we would leave it hanging up there and whenever it was cut up in hind quarters and front quarters and everything. And so we would get up there and let it down with a let rope. It was too heavy to try to carry down, you couldn't carry it. Then, a lot of times, we would hang it up on the north side of our shed that we had out there (where we had our cream separator) and dad had a big box that he had built in that shed and he would put the pork--the sow's that we would kill--in there with salt between them, you know, and it would keep in there.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Just cure it then.

MR. SLATEN: Yeah, uh-huh.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, now can you estimate how much meat a family like yours would eat during a season. That is, you had plenty of beef and pork. How much did you eat?

MR. SLATEN: Well, usually we killed one beef...

(Tape fades out.)

MRS. BURROUGHS: You were telling me about the number of beefs your family would consume during a season.

MR. SLATEN: Usually we would kill one great big beef that would last us all winter.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Then I think Bernice mentioned a flock of turkeys.

MR. SLATEN: Yeah,

MRS. SLATEN: Yes, Leon, tell them the incident about the time you killed one of your mother's turkeys.

MR. SLATEN: One afternoon I went out and I picked up kind of a flat rock and I don't know why, but I threw it at the turkey. I hauled off and sailed it and I hit one on top of the head and down he went. So I had to take him...

MRS. BURROUGHS: And he wasn't quite ready for market, was he?

MR. SLATEN: No, and I had to scald him and dress him and cut him up. Mom made me fix him all up, so we had turkey.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, was she very put out about that?

MR. SLATEN: Yes, she was a little bit.

MRS. SLATEN: Well, I think the thing that was funny about it was that Leon-- the way the story went, the way I remember it--Leon called his

mother's attention to the fact that there was this dead bird, you know. Well, of course out there at that time you didn't let anything go to waste and so she didn't really know what had happened or how come the turkey was dead. But it was still warm so she went ahead and had it dressed out. And nobody would touch--after the turkey was fixed and on the table-- nobody would eat a bite of it until Leon started. He wasn't afraid, see, to eat some of it. He was the fellow who took the first bite, so then everybody knew that the turkey was all right and the story came out as to how and what had happened to the turkey.

MRS. BURROUGHS: So your appetite betrayed you.

MR. SLATEN: Yeah, that's right.

MRS. BURROUGHS: How old were you, Leon, when you did that?

MR. SLATEN: I was probably eight or nine years old.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Was there any other punishment forthcoming?

MR. SLATEN: Oh, yeah. I used to get whippens every now and then for something I did.

MRS. BURROUGHS: Well, that is an understandable thing for a kid to be throwing a rock rather recklessly.

MR. SLATEN: That's right.

MRS. BURROUGHS: I think you mentioned a flock of antelope. Now did you ever kill those for food?

MR. SLATEN: Oh, yes. We used to kill antelopes and prairie chicken and quail. Yeah, we had a lot of antelopes down there. They would roam with our cows out in the pasture, you know. Sometimes there would be twenty-five or thirty in a bunch.