

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin ValleyOral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Mildred Lenora Morris Ward and
James Harrison Ward

PLACE OF BIRTH: Wagoner County, Indian Territory and
Rogers County, Oklahoma

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: January 19 and 24, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Dinuba, Tulare County

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PREFACE

This interview involves a retired grammar school teacher and her husband. Mrs. Ward seems to have spent her life trying to prove that an "Okie" is just as good as anyone. Mr. Ward appears to have handled the experience by denying that it had any effect on him. A very important statement is made by Mrs. Ward on Page 16 regarding this experience.

There was little editing necessary.

Judith Gannon
Interviewer

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INTERVIEWEE: Mildred Lenora Morris Ward (Age: 74)

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATED: January 19, 1981

J.G.: This is an interview with Mrs. Mildred Ward, 640 Cedar Lane, Dinuba, California, by Judith Gannon for the CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project on January 19, 1981, at 1:30 p.m.

J.G.: Okay, Mrs. Ward, if you would just start out by telling me a little bit about your childhood in Oklahoma and just feel free to reminisce and recollect as you go along.

Ward: My earliest recollection, I think, was when I was about five. I remember we were living in a little tiny three-room house on the bank of a little creek. Sometimes when it rained the water would come up into our house. One time I remember, we had baby pigs and the water came up and my parents brought the pigs into the house, and they got into the bedroom. There were two beds in the room and the pigs got hold of the quilts on both beds and dragged them off into the muddy water. We kids thought it was fun but Momma didn't.

Papa was a farmer and we were always very poor, but my parents always tried to have a Christmas for us. I remember one Christmas the only present that I got was a doll head. That's when dolls had porcelain heads and hands and I had broken mine, and they gave me a doll head and the other children some little toy. We had always an orange and apple for Christmas and also some candy and nuts in our sack, but I remember looking forward to Christmas for the orange and apple.

J.G.: Did your father rent his land?

Ward: Yes for years he rented land. I guess I was about twelve when he bought a little 80 acre farm, but we were still just about as poor as we were before. There were nine kids in the family. It was hard to make a living for us and pay for the farm. I remember the summer that I was sixteen and my younger sister was fourteen, we worked in the fields all summer barefooted. We even shocked grain and if you know what it is to walk in a stubble field barefoot you know that it hurts your feet. That summer my sister and I shared one good pair of slippers. One Sunday Gertrude got the shoes and went to church and visiting or wherever and the next Sunday I got them.

When I was fifteen I dropped out of school. I went to high school one year but I had to live away from home and work for board. I'd get up at four o'clock every morning and work before I went to school. The next year the folks tried to get me to go back, but I thought if that's what it's gonna take to get an education to heck with it! So I stayed home. I thought I would work in the fields or do housework or something, but just before I was seventeen the teacher said, "Mildred, why don't you take a teacher's examination and teach school?" At that time only ninth grade education was required to teach school. So I borrowed some books and stayed at home and studied by myself.

I got to where I wouldn't go anyplace with the family. I didn't go to town on Saturdays to meet with people or to socialize or go to church. I wanted to stay home and study in the quiet. In a little three-room house with nine kids there was never any quiet. When I was seventeen I passed the examination and started teaching school and things began to look up. In 1925 the Depression came and times were really rough. We didn't have any money. Of course, we'd always been poor before and most everybody else in the country was poor too so we didn't feel any stigma or anything because we were just like everybody else.

When I began teaching in 1925 I got I think \$75 a month. That was a lot of money then. None of the teachers were any better educated than I was because they all started out about the same way.

When the Depression came along money was hard to get. I

know one year I taught we owed an account at a store for some groceries and clothes. They took my checks for the first three months and by that time I had the account all paid off. The school allowed \$25 a month so I got a total of \$75 that year. There was a little country grocery store and filling station. They took the rest of my checks but it was all in trade only--no money. But we were able to eat and have gasoline so that was pretty good.

J.G.: When you say "we" were you still living at home?

Ward: I was still living at home. The next year I went into a different school. There they had the money to pay their teachers, but they only paid me \$60 a month for eight months--\$480 for the year's work.

I was married. I married a boy that lived just next door to the school. He tried to farm. We borrowed money to buy a team and seed and a plow and a cultivator. One year the drought killed everything. We made \$100--just enough money to pay the rent. And the next year the flood did the same thing exactly, and that's what decided us to come to California. Of course I could have stayed there and continued to teach, but my husband didn't want that. Being a young man he wanted to work. We were reading articles in papers about how many hundreds of workers were wanted out here in this crop and how many hundreds of workers were wanted in another crop some place--all over California. We just knew that there was work in California because of what we'd been told and what we'd read in the papers. So we decided to come to California.

I didn't come with my husband the first year. He came out alone and worked one year because I had a contract to teach school, but I came out and spent the summer here then I went back and taught school. Then the following year we came out to stay. We came to Dinuba because I had a brother who had come here a year or two before. We drove an old Chevrolet with our belongings in a little two-wheel trailer pulled behind the car. We even brought our dog along. We had a highchair tied on top of the trailer, and we had a flat every day I think. We stayed in motels on the way--motels that had a kitchen where we could cook our supper and our breakfast. My brother and another young man came along with us. They came along with us. They came to get work too.

J.G.: How did you get the money together to actually make the journey?

Ward: Oh I'd been teaching. I was teaching for I think about \$75 or \$80 a month or something like that so I had a little money. We arrived here with I think it was \$45 cash and we still owed one car payment of \$40.

J.G.: You came right straight to Dinuba?

Ward: Yes. We came to Dinuba in 1938.

J.G.: Do you recall anything about being harassed along the way by people or any events that stand out in your mind during the trip?

Ward: No. We were never harassed by people. Oh, the road was just full of people like us coming out here. People with all their belongings tied onto old cars--all over their runningboard and even on tops of their cars. Cars full of kids--most of them had big families of kids. One amusing incident--we had traveled along for several days with one family in an old touring car. There was a whole bunch of kids in the family and of course we'd recognize each other as we passed each other. We were down here in California down the southern end of the Valley, and we passed them again and my husband said, "Where are you going?" because we both headed up this way. One little boy in the car said, "To California."

J.G.: That was their destination.

Ward: That was their destination, yes. Many people slept out on the way to California here. We'd see them fixing the breakfast out or see them asleep yet. But we didn't sleep out. We stayed in motels because we had a little babe. He was about two-and-a-half, three, about three years old then. When we came out here we found that the work wasn't to be had like we had thought that it would be--like we'd been led to believe that it would be, and my husband worked at just anything he could get to do. The first job he and Papa did was to tear down an old barn over by the foothills near Dinuba. That spring it rained all the time. They couldn't hardly get work because of the rain.

J.G.: What year was that?

Ward: Jim [husband] came in 1937 and then went back to Oklahoma after the work was all over here and we came back out in spring of 1938. Jim worked at anything he could when we came to Dinuba. We lived right on the next street over just about a block down. We lived there for about thirteen or fourteen years then we moved just a few blocks farther east. Finally twenty years ago we moved here to this house so we've always been right here in this corner of town.

J.G.: You aren't itchy-feet people are you?

Ward: No. We're not. Jim worked in packing houses and in the fields. Several summers he went to Bakersfield and worked in the potatoes. He worked in any of the harvest that there

were here anything there was to do packing houses, anything. I didn't work then. I had a baby right after I came out here and a few years later I had another baby, in fact, I didn't much want to go back to work because I wanted to stay and be a mother. I did go back to teaching when our youngest daughter was about four or five years old. We came to the realization that we would never be able to educate the children just on what Jim could earn. We decided then that I would go back to teaching. That was after the war and then they would just hire anybody to teach there was such a shortage of teachers. First I started out substituting. I thought I can do that for a little while. I substituted one place and I was asked if I would like to come back next year so I told him yes I would like to come back and stayed there 24 years.

J.G.: You are a study in stability I can tell.

Ward: We never moved around in Oklahoma even. My dad didn't move much; in the thirty years before I left home he had moved, I think, three times.

J.G.: In Oklahoma?

Ward: In Oklahoma, yes. And then we just moved from Oklahoma out here to Dinuba.

J.G.: Just kind of go back to Oklahoma for a second. A lot of people have told me about some of the government policies that were hard on the farmers at that time. Did you have any of that kind of experience in Oklahoma?

Ward: Not that I recall. Mmm. I can't recall any.

J.G.: The farmers plowing up crops and the big owners getting paid for not growing crops?

Ward: That's right, you're right, yes, uh huh.

J.G.: Did that ever affect you and your husband while you were a farmer?

Ward: No it didn't affect us. We were just little bitty farmers. I was teaching during the Depression. I was teaching and when the government first began to make a survey to try to help people, they had teachers survey their districts. This is rural teachers I'm talking about. I don't know who did it in the towns, but I know I had to survey my district to see what people really needed help. I had a little boy and girl in school and I noticed that at the beginning of the term they were very intelligent children, very bright, and they

just got to be such lackadaisical children, they'd want to sleep in school you know and they just couldn't do anything. I found when I went to their home that those people had one cow, the man had no income he couldn't find any work. They would have a dish of corn meal mush and milk for breakfast, for lunch they had nothing cause the children stayed there at school all the time and for supper a dish of mush and milk. Where they got the corn to grind I don't know, maybe he had raised it or something but that was all they were having to eat. I know she had a baby at that time and one of the neighbor ladies came to school to get my first aid kit to take over there because there was nothing in that house for in the way of first aid or anything to use.

J.G.: To deliver the baby?

Ward: To deliver the baby, that's right. All the materials she had she got from my school.

J.G.: So it sounds like your teaching job was the way that you and your husband managed to keep from going hungry during that time.

Ward: Yes. And it was the way that my family before I was married kept from going hungry too. I had two grown brothers and my father, they all tried to get on the WPA but they wouldn't let them get on because I was a wage earner in the family.

J.G.: You had to have no income whatsoever to get on WPA [Works Progress Administration].

Ward: I guess, I don't know. Yet we knew of other people that had three or four little oil wells on their place and all of that family got on WPA but my family couldn't. There was a lot of politics played.

J.G.: Whoever happened to be in favor with the politicians?

Ward: That's right, whoever would do things maybe to get in the favor of the government officials whoever they were.

J.G.: How far did you live from town?

Ward: We were ten miles from town. Now that's before I was married I was ten miles from town. And then after I was married we were nine miles farther on.

J.G.: You were nineteen miles out in the country then so what did you do on Saturdays and Sundays during that time? What was your social life like? What did you do for recreation?

Ward: Our social life was going to town on Saturday and meeting people.

J.G.: That didn't change?

Ward: That didn't change much, no. Sundays we went to church most of the time. If there was a church out there in the country. We didn't have church buildings. The churches were all held in the school buildings and if we could get a minister to go out there and hold meetings well, then we had a church. If we couldn't get a hold of anybody we didn't.

J.G.: And if you didn't have meetings did you just meet as a group of people without a minister?

Ward: They would try to continue the Sunday School. When I was young and growing up we young people would have play parties every two or three weeks, Saturday nights usually.

J.G.: What is a play party?

Ward: A play party is where we'd play games where we'd sing and we'd go through different motions you know. One of them was Skip to My Lou and oh I don't know I can't think of the others now but there were several that we played. Well you get to hold hands that way you know. There was one game we would play where sometimes they'd have us to go around the house together. That was fun!

J.G.: The farms were close enough together that people were able to at least get together once a week?

Ward: Oh yes. There'd be a half mile, mile, two miles apart.

J.G.: To backtrack even a little bit further you talked about going to school as a youngster. You lived in the country. How far did you have to go to get to school?

Ward: The closest I ever lived to school was a mile and three quarters. I've lived from that distance to two and a half miles from school.

J.G.: And you walked to school?

Ward: We walked to school most of the time. Occasionally when it rained a whole lot and everything would be wet and water standing sometimes I'd hitch a team to the wagon and take the kids to school.

J.G.: It sounds like the area that you were in didn't have the gigantic dust storms.

Ward: Oh yes we did! Yes, we would have dust storms there till we couldn't see. It would be as bad as the fog is here in the Valley when it's at its worst only the dust is a little

different color and it's difficult to breathe. We had to hang sheets over our doors and windows to help to keep out the dust. When we'd go out we'd put something over our mouth and nose to keep from breathing the dust. It was a kind of a yellowish color. It was as dense as this fog now only a yellowish color and it would completely hide the sun. you couldn't even tell where the sun was.

J.G.: When you do remember the dust storms as being really bad?

Ward: What year?

J.G.: Was it while you were still living at home or while you were married?

Ward: Yes, it was while I was still living at home that's when they were the worst about 1934-1935.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

J.G.: Okay. Let's go back to California now and tell me a little bit about what your first home here in Dinuba was like.

Ward: My first home was a little cabin out west of Dinuba. The little tiny thing--little tiny room with just a little tiny offset for a kitchen--just one room. At first my parents were living there and we stayed there and slept outside. It was in June I guess when we got out here and we just ate there with them. Then Jim got a job on a ranch out east of town here and there was an old tank house out there and we moved into the bottom of that tank house. And our son was three years old and he was so proud of our little house. Every time we'd come into town he'd say, "Mommy let's go home to our little house." It was just the bottom of a tank house unfinished inside. And then our next house was a little cabin out on a ranch farther east of town; it was all unfinished inside too but it was nicer and bigger. And then Jim got work I don't know where, but anyhow we moved in to town. It was a slightly better one. It had two rooms.

J.G.: Did the houses have water and did you have an outhouse?

Ward: We had an outhouse and yes when we lived in the tank house. No we, I'll take it back, we had a toilet inside the tank house, it had been fixed for people to live in. And at the other house out on the ranch we did too.

J.G.: What kind of work was your husband doing on the ranch?

Ward: It was just farm work. He worked in the grapes or whatever there was on the ranch that had to be done.

J.G.: So, it sounds like you weren't one of the families that followed the crops.

Ward: No we didn't follow the crops. Now there were a lot of them who did. Some of our friends who came out here they followed the crops all the time but we didn't. We wanted to stay put.

J.G.: Was your husband able to find something all year around or were there long periods of time when there was no work?

Ward: The first we came here he wasn't able to find anything much in the wintertime. He would maybe pick up little jobs now maybe it wouldn't be but a half day or a day or something you know. He did yard work and he's done practically everything that he was capable of doing. He's worked in packing houses. Finally he got to working for a lumber company. Sometimes he would have to go down south of Bakersfield and work in the mountains down there and he'd work up here in the mountains. He was the dynamite man. He'd do the blasting where they were building roads for the lumber companies. He worked for the lumber company until he retired.

J.G.: The house that you bought here in town, did you buy that house or rent?

Ward: We rented for a number of years until we were able to buy. We bought one that was just outside the city. It was just another little bitty house, three rooms, but at least it was ours and we built on to it later.

J.G.: How did you manage when that first year jobs were so few and far between?

Ward: We just managed. We ate beans and we ate oatmeal for breakfast and lots of time that would be all we would have. Biscuits and oatmeal for breakfast or beans and potatoes for supper and dinner. It was rough. It was rough for everybody then. It really was.

J.G.: There was so much unemployment here. . .

Ward: Oh yes.

J.G.: Did you know a lot of families that had to turn to public agencies?

Ward: Yes, there were a lot of them who did.

J.G.: What seemed to be the general feeling about that?

Ward: The people generally were very proud and they hated to take any kind of assistance. They wanted to make it on their own. We didn't come here to get a handout we came here to work.

The majority of them didn't want any kind of assistance. Now there was one family I knew of though they'd come out here every summer. They had a big family and they'd come out and work, and when the work was all over why they'd go down someplace and they'd get money to buy gasoline or tires or even children's coats to go back home. Then the next spring they were right back out here again to work. That was just one that I knew of that did that.

J.G.: You were able though during that time to stay at home with your youngsters?

Ward: Yes. I did a few ironings and I took in some washings and I did a little sewing for people. I did anything I could get to do other than teach.

J.G.: That sounds like those were years when the paychecks got to be pretty small and far between.

Ward: Yes they were! One time I had been feeding tramps that would come by and one morning one tramp came to the door and he wanted something to eat. Well, we had eaten breakfast not very long before that and we had some biscuits left over. I said, "I've got some cold biscuits left over, you're welcome to have them" and you know he wouldn't take them he wanted me to give him coffee. Not a cup of coffee to drink but coffee to take with him. Well I wouldn't do it because coffee was too hard to come by. I quit feeding tramps after that. I thought if they just wouldn't eat biscuits the same as we did, they could just do without and I quit feeding them and it wasn't a little while till they quit stopping. I guess they learned I quit feeding them.

J.G.: During this time, what kind of reception did you get from local California people? What was it like to be a migrant during that time?

Ward: Wasn't too pleasant, sometimes. A lot of people were kind and good as they could be -- nice to us, but some of them weren't. I even had a minister whose sermon one Sunday morning was about the migrants. During the course of his speech he said that we just find it virtually impossible to integrate these people into our western culture.

My son was about three when we came out here and after he

started to school he was six, seven, eight years old, he'd come home and tell me that kids called him a dumb Okie. Well now, the kids didn't know what they were saying. I'm not blaming the children at all but they'd heard it somewhere. No it just wasn't very good sometimes.

J.G.: Were there other incidents of things like the minister said?

Ward: At the church the people weren't friendly. Some of the more influential people in town belonged to that church and now that's probably the reason. And I never did go back there. I went to another church.

J.G.: You were talking about the people weren't very friendly in that particular church that you started out going to. So did you just stop going to church or did you go to another church?

Ward: I stopped for a long time.

J.G.: What other kinds of incidents do you remember that you felt being from Oklahoma was being used against you?

Ward: Oh, I can't recall any other incidents except after I began teaching there was one teacher who made a derogatory remark about all the people with the emergency credentials and that's what I had when I started teaching. I had one year of college when I came out here. She said she just wished they didn't have any people like that teaching here and I know I felt badly about that.

J.G.: When did you get your year in college?

Ward: In Oklahoma after I started teaching I went to summer schools and to pre-sessions and post-sessions and took correspondence courses until I got the year's college. Sometimes we'd have a cotton picking vacation, not the kind Ernie Ford talks about. When the cotton was ready we would stop school for five or six units depending on however many weeks I could go to school.

J.G.: Did you teach then in Oklahoma after you had your son?

Ward: Yes, I taught after my son was born, but that was one of the reasons I was wanting to quit teaching because I could not find a suitable babysitter. But of course I couldn't pay them much about two and a half dollars a week for babysitting for five days. It was out in the country too where I had to take just whomever I could get.

J.G.: There has been a lot of discussion by people that I have talked with about the way that the growers treated their

workers. Some of them felt that the big growers took advantage of their workers. Did you have any experience or any knowledge of anything like that?

Ward: Well now I didn't because I didn't work much. I did pick grapes but I didn't work for any growers. There was one incident when we lived on the ranch out in the country. The man fixed up our cabin and he was talking to another man that was there working about what a fine little cabin it was and he would love to have this cabin in the mountains. He went on and on and on about what a fine cabin it was since he got it fixed up. Well I resented it so I said, "Well, if you think it's so fine why don't you live in it?" Maybe he didn't mean it the way I thought he did but I took it to mean that he felt that I should be proud to live in that house since he fixed it up. He may not have thought it at all.

J.G.: What about when your husband worked for some of the growers or the ranchers, did he ever feel taken advantage of? For example, a man was telling me that unless you kept a really close eye on them when they weighed your cotton, you were likely to get shorted on the amount of cotton you got credited for. So did you remember your husband talking about anything like that?

Ward: No, now he never picked cotton. The work he did was hourly work so that wouldn't have affected him at all, but I had heard that about the cotton pickers.

J.G.: It sounds like your husband didn't really ever work the crops, that he worked more doing labor around the ranch. Am I misunderstanding that?

Ward: He never picked cotton. I don't believe he ever picked oranges. He picked olives when they first came here, picked up olives rather. He never picked grapes. I picked more grapes than he did.

J.G.: Who did you pick grapes for? You say you didn't pick for the growers?

Ward: Oh I picked for whoever lived around here. This used to be a vineyard. I've picked grapes right here where this house is. Yes, I worked for growers in that respect.

J.G.: How did they treat you? What was your feeling about that?

Ward: Well I wasn't around them much. They were never around. It was usually a contractor that would be out in the field.

J.G.: I see. How were they to work for?

Ward: They were all right so far as I knew. I didn't have any complaints, of course I didn't work very much.

J.G.: You didn't feel that you really had to keep your eye on them all the time, that they would take advantage if they had had a chance?

Ward: Oh no.

J.G.: What if you got sick during that time? What kind of medical care was available?

Ward: You went to the county hospital. My oldest daughter was born in the county hospital. I had some minor surgery in the county hospital.

J.G.: How about your youngest child? Was that a county hospital?

Ward: No, no, she was born here in this hospital.

J.G.: How did you feel about getting medical treatment in a county hospital?

Ward: I resented it very much. I was ashamed that I had to and frankly I didn't think the care was what it should have been. For instance, I had a baby and then I had stitches afterwards and no anesthetic of any kind was given, not even for those stitches. There was several women having babies there in the hospital. It was crowded and they had put me out in the hall. I went to screaming when the baby was coming. I went to screaming, they rushed me into the delivery room. The doctor wasn't available I guess because the nurse grabbed my knees and held them together until the doctor got in there and wouldn't let the baby come. That was not right, that was not good.

All of that with no anesthetic but then that wasn't as bad as the stitches. I had three stitches and no anesthetic and whew that hurt.

J.G.: Yes, I can imagine that it did. What did you think the attitude of the people at the county hospital was toward you? Did you get any feeling that you were treated any different than say somebody else that didn't come from Oklahoma or Arkansas?

Ward: Well, I don't know whether there were any other people at the county hospital, people who lived here. I don't know whether they went to the county hospital or not. I wasn't very well acquainted then but I know that a lot of them were migrants and Mexicans at the county hospital at the time my daughter was born. The nurses were just like in any of the

hospitals. Some of them were very good and kind, but we had one nurse that was a stinker. None of us liked her. You get those in any hospital.

J.G.: What was your social life like when you got here to California? What kinds of things did you do for entertainment?

Ward: We didn't have any social life. We would play cards some with my brothers and parents. I spent a lot of time reading to the family. We'd checked books out of the library. Other than that we had no social life. We didn't have money to have any kind of a social life. Socializing takes a little money no matter what you do and we didn't have it.

J.G.: Did you find that you got acquainted with people pretty rapidly after you moved out here like I know that it must have been hard to socialize when you were out on the ranch. There probably weren't too many other people.

Ward: No there weren't.

J.G.: But when you moved back to town did you find that mostly your friends were also people that came from Oklahoma or that migrated?

Ward: Yes, we sort of got together. That's who you would want to be with. [We had kindred feelings.]

J.G.: And the townspeople, what were the townspeople like? Now when you moved to town off the ranch about what year was that?

Ward: Let's see we came out in 1938, oh probably 1940-1941 along there.

J.G.: Did you feel like the townspeople at that point were beginning to be more accepting of you or did you still feel there was some hostility?

Ward: No, we still felt the hostility. You see the times were very, very bad then. Even when we came here to this town there were so many people that had been unable to pay their taxes and the houses had just been moved out. There were just lots of vacant places here, vacant lots here in Dinuba at that time [when] we came here.

J.G.: They just took the house and put it someplace else.

Ward: Yes they'd move the houses someplace else. I don't know where but there were vacant lots and vacant places.

J.G.: Did you feel that the town thought that the migrants were

taking jobs from the locals?

Ward: I'm sure they felt that, just like we do now about the Mexicans. I'm sure they must have felt the same way.

J.G.: That brings up another thought. About the people that your husband worked with in the vineyards, were there mostly white crews?

Ward: White, yes. There weren't that many Mexicans here at that time.

J.G.: What about black workers?

Ward: Um no. This town has never had over one or two black people living in it ever since I've been here.

J.G.: Not even when the grapes need harvesting?

Ward: No, when I began teaching Orange Cove in 1947 we would have only maybe one or two Mexican children in each room, some rooms would not have any. And now the school is about 55 per cent Mexican they say.

J.G.: The white families who were harvesting there in the grape fields at that time, did their kids go to school here in Dinuba or did they work in the fields right along with their parents?

Ward: The children could work in the fields, there was no law against it at all. But the grapes were usually harvested by the time school started or shortly after and oh yes then you'd see whole families out in the vineyards harvesting the grapes.

J.G.: We've gotten now through the time of your arrival and what it was like here in California. Can you think of any other thing or any event or anything that we haven't touched on that you would like to bring up?

Ward: No not that I can think of now.

J.G.: What was your first impression of California after having lived in Oklahoma. What did you think that life was going to be like in California and what was your first impression of the way that it was?

Ward: Well my first impression was that it was a desert and I thought, my goodness this is not what I thought California was going to be like. Of course, I knew it would be different up here in the Valley. Well, I was glad to be here because at that time I thought that it would be so easy to work. All you had to do was just go and ask for it and you'd get the work.

I didn't realize what it was really like.

J.G.: It sounds like it must have been a big disappointment for you thinking that this was going to be a place that you could really do better and it turned out that that's really not the way it was.

Ward: Yes it was. At home we were some of the leading or outstanding people in the community. In our community everybody looked to my father for things for advice and help and so forth and in Jim's community everybody looked to Mr. Ward for the same thing. They were both outstanding men and we had been of those families. We were kinda looked up to and at least respected and come out here to this where we were nothing.

J.G.: That was a real change.

Ward: That was a change.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

SESSION 2 January 24, 1981

J.G.: Mrs. Ward during the late 1930's John Steinbeck published a novel called The Grapes of Wrath and there was a lot of talk and it really created quite a furor at that time. I wonder what you thought about that book. Did it seem to depict the life of the migrant to California fairly accurately?

Ward: Yes, most generally it did. There were exaggerations in it of course. About the old person dying on the road and being buried by the side of the road. I don't think that ever happened, but really it was largely true to life.

J.G.: Times were that bad for many of the people, they were bordering on starvation?

Ward: Yes, I think so.

J.G.: Was your experience close to that?

Ward: It wasn't very far removed from that. We didn't have very much money. We arrived here with I think forty or forty-five dollars and we owed a car payment when we got here and work wasn't as plentiful as we thought it would be.

J.G.: You mentioned, excuse me for interrupting, last week that you

had actually seen flyers and things advertising for workers in California.

Ward: I did. Yes, and articles in the newspapers.

J.G.: Where do you think those came from since when you got here it wasn't at all like that?

Ward: They probably came from those large corporate farmers I imagine. Then too the workers were just beginning to organize a little bit. There was talk of organization and of course those big farmers didn't want the laborers organized and it was to their advantage to have a lot of people out here to work.

J.G.: When you say that the laborers were beginning to organize can you tell me whatever you heard or know about what went on?

Ward: No, I didn't really hear anything I'd just read that they were beginning to organize at that time.

J.G.: Around here at Dinuba, there was never any labor strikes or violence due to attempts to organize or anything like that?

Ward: No not at that time.

J.G.: Not at any time during the time that you lived in this area?

Ward: Well now I've lived in that area ever since I came out here.

J.G.: I was thinking of the thirties, late thirties or early forties.

Ward: No I don't think there was any attempt to organize then around here.

J.G.: So as far as labor problems and that kind of thing Dinuba has been fairly calm.

Ward: Yes I think so. You can ask Jim about that. He was the laborer. I was the stay-at-home then mostly.

J.G.: Okay you mentioned earlier that you did some research into this period yourself. Is there anything that stands out in your mind that you would like to share that you learned from your research or something that when you were doing research which didn't quite fit with what you had experienced at the time.

Ward: The thing that I remember that was so interesting was eighty percent of the people who came here from the Midwest were still living in the county in which they arrived and fifty percent of them were still living in the same town.

J.G.: So that kind of shows that most of them wanted a permanent place.

Ward: Yes, that's right they wanted to work and they wanted to establish homes.

J.G.: What brought about your decision to do some research into this period?

Ward: I was in college and I had to do a paper on something. I had to do research on something and to me that was an interesting subject so that's what I chose. I was glad that I did because the following year when I was in a speech class in which I had to make a long speech and I used that information in my speech too.

J.G.: Did the reading that you did pretty much back up the experience that you had?

Ward: Yes, and I learned too that all of the people from Oklahoma did not come to California. They were migrating all around. They would go north and follow the grain fields north up into Canada, they would go east to Arkansas and work in the fields and in the fruit. They would go to the south and work in the cotton fields. They just went all around.

J.G.: Yes, I think the Californians had the idea that the whole world was trying to get into California and it wasn't quite accurate.

Ward: I think they did.

J.G.: Do you ever remember hearing anybody talk about incidents at the border where people were turned back when they tried to come to California.

Ward: I don't recall.

Mr. Ward: Yes I've heard of it but I never did know it to be true. I think it was mostly talk.

J.G.: Mrs. Ward you didn't hear or know of anybody that actually was turned back or anything like that?

Ward: No.

J.G.: Do you ever go back to Oklahoma?

Ward: Yes. We've been back many, many times. As long as his parents were alive we went back at least every two years and after they died we go back every three or four years. We were back there last fall.

J.G.: Do you both still have family back there?

Ward: I have a brother and a sister back there and jillions of cousins and nieces and nephews. Jim has two sisters and a lot of nieces and nephews.

J.G.: So there's still a real pull to go back there to Oklahoma.

Ward: Yes.

J.G.: One of the questions that I've been asking and it's interesting because you get lots of different kinds of feelings. What did you think about being called an Okie?

Ward: I didn't like it too well. Because it denoted something that was not quite right or friendly. It was derogatory I felt.

J.G.: What was the derogatory part of it? What kind of connotation was there that you didn't like?

Ward: That people felt that we were dumb, ignorant. In fact, when our son started to school here he came home several times and told me the kids had called him a dumb Okie because he was born there and he didn't even know what an Okie was.

J.G.: Did your kids go to school right here in Dinuba with the local kids? In some places they actually separated out the migrant kids and put them in a school one place and the local kids in a school another place.

Ward: No ours were all together in a school here. I didn't know they did that anywhere.

J.G.: Yes they did. In fact right as close as Tipton and Porterville.

Ward: Really?

Mr. Ward: That's something I've never heard about.

Ward: Of course, then we didn't take a daily paper, we couldn't afford to.

J.G.: That may not have been something they wanted to publish.

Ward: Well they wouldn't have, no.

J.G.: What do you think is the thing that most affected you living through the experience of the migration? Do you think that it had any long-term affect on you and, if so, what?

Ward: I don't know that it had any long-term affect on me. I really don't know. I know I was determined to live it down so I guess

I did.

J.G.: You wanted to prove that a lot of these stereotypes that they had about the people coming in were not true.

Ward: That's right. I know when I began teaching I wanted to prove that an Okie teacher could be just as good if not better than any other teacher could.

J.G.: So my guess is that you probably worked twice as hard at being a good teacher than anybody else.

Ward: Probably because I sure worked at it, and I think I did have a good reputation. That sounded boastful, I know, but it's the truth.

J.G.: Well it's okay. If you've done a good job at something it's okay to be proud about it.

Ward: Well I'm proud of what I've done.

J.G.: Do your children live here around the Dinuba area or have they moved?

Ward: No, they've all moved away. Our youngest daughter lives in Fresno, she's the social worker. The son lives in Arcadia, you know that's down south. He's an industrial arts teacher in the L. A. schools. And the daughter lives in Fountain Valley and she's a teacher.

J.G.: It sounds like you made very sure that your kids got an education.

Ward: We did. That's the reason I began teaching after we came out here is because we knew that on his salary or his income we could not educate the kids. And that's what we wanted to do above all else. In fact, our son graduated from Reedley College over here the same night that I graduated from Fresno State.

J.G.: Isn't that something! What year was that?

Ward: What year was it, Jim -- 1955 or 1956 I guess it was.

J.G.: So you started teaching in the 1940's and went back to school part time to get your degree.

Ward: I have eleven years of college. I had a year before I left Oklahoma. Then I started teaching here and going to school, summer schools and correspondence courses, night schools and weekends, until I got my degree.

J.G.: And you got your degree in 1955 you say.

Ward: Was it 1955?

Mr. Ward: I don't remember the year.

Ward: 1955 or 1956 I believe.

J.G.: That must have been a happy moment for you.

Ward: Yes it was.

J.G.: If you look back over the whole experience of living through the time of the Depression and the migration and the 1940's what period was the most difficult for you. What time was the hardest?

Ward: Well I think it was after we came out here.

Mr. Ward: First two or three years.

Ward: Yes, first two or three years after we were here. That was the most difficult.

J.G.: And that was mainly for what reason?

Mr. Ward: Not steady work.

Ward: We didn't have work and we had a baby. And I had to go to the county hospital to have the baby. Didn't like that. We just didn't have any money at all.

J.G.: What was the turning point. When did things start to look up?

Ward: I think they didn't begin to look up until after the War started. Then work began to pick up. People began to go to the factories and there was more work for people here.

Mr. Ward: You could work all the time then.

Ward: Yes.

J.G.: Is there anything that you would like to say, anything that you thought of since I last saw you that you would like to mention that I may have forgotten to ask you about?

Ward: Yes. About the time that they were killing all of the hogs and the cattle for the farmers because the meat didn't sell. In 1933 or 1934 the government cooked up the idea of killing off these animals and paying farmers or ranchers so much a head. We lived near some big ranches and they would kill the animals

and just leave them lay out in the pastures to rot. So I bought a pressure cooker for Momma to use so that she could go out into the pastures and can. They'd build up a fire and take the cooker out and Papa would cut out the best chunks of meat and they would can it right there in the pastures. Incidentally, I still have the cooker that I bought then and I've still used it all through these years because I've always canned a lot.

J.G.: Were people permitted to do that?

Ward: Yes, they could do it. The government didn't care about that, no.

J.G.: They just didn't want the farmer to sell it.

Ward: That's right. You see they paid the farmer so much a head. I don't remember how much it was though.

J.G.: Okay. Why don't I go on and talk to your husband a little while and if there's anything that you think about we have a little of time left on this tape then we can go back and finish up with you.

Ward: Okay.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1