

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	Viola Lillian Maxwell Mitchell
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Spiro, Oklahoma
INTERVIEWER:	Stacey Jagels
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PREFACE

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Stacey Jagels
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INTERVIEWEE: Viola Lillian Maxwell Mitchell (Age: 69)

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: January 12, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Viola Mitchell for the California State College, Bakersfield, CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at 411 Belmont Avenue, Oildale, California, on Monday, January 12, 1981, at 10:00 a.m.

S.J.: Why don't you tell me about your childhood and your family first.

Mitchell: I was born in Spiro, Oklahoma. That's in the east. When I was thirteen we moved to Hollis, Oklahoma. We came out to Hollis on the wagon train. The train only had three wagons, but it was a wagon train. I was in the second grade and I passed to the third. After about two days the teacher passed me to the fourth. Not long after that the teacher passed me to the fifth grade because she wanted me to teach while she was sick for two weeks. I graduated from the eighth when I was fifteen. I didn't finish high school. I started but I didn't finish.

We lived on a farm and rented land. We had to use old gip water. It was kind of like taking a dose of salts. I worked in the fields too. We raised hogs, corn, hay and cotton. There was no fruit in that country. When I came to California and I could go out and pick fruit and keep half of it and give the rancher half, I thought I was in hog heaven! Boy, we got all that good fruit and it cost nothing.

There was nine children in my family. Two was born after I married. We was raised poor, real poor. I had one dress a year, one pair of shoes. But we wasn't the only poor family. A lot of people was poor. Our folks always gave us plenty of

love and plenty of food, but we didn't have much else. I married when I was seventeen. It seemed like the first year there was one baby, then the next year there was another and the next. I had four in five years. But I was always healthy and happy. I always found something to do all the time and I kept my babies clean. I pieced quilts and things like that.

We didn't have it quite as hard as some people after the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. My husband was the boss of it in Hollis and he got a lot more work. They worked in groups, so everytime anybody went and worked, he went and worked too. The government started having these jobs to help people. Truman [husband] knew nearly everyone in town. His folks was always the sheriff or something like that. He got them to dig a cellar at the schoolhouse. Each one in the community got to work a certain amount of days. Truman got to work all the time because he had to be there to oversee it. I think he got paid just a little bit more than the workers did. It wasn't a whole lot of money but we had enough to buy groceries.

Some people were worse off. In Oklahoma we had a neighbor that had eight children. One time I made a plum pudding that we didn't finish and I took it to them. I didn't know for sure if they would want it, but before I could put it on the table those kids grabbed the spoon and they had that pan as clean as a whistle. That's how hungry people was.

S.J.: When you left Oklahoma and came to California, it was because times were rough and there weren't many jobs, but were there any other reasons why you wanted to come to California?

Mitchell: Well, actually I didn't want to come. It was my dad and my husband that wanted to leave home. I think the reason my dad wanted to come was that he couldn't get any money to farm on. I think there was government money but he couldn't get any. My husband and I didn't farm. We lived in a farmhouse and Truman worked a little bit for the owner, Doc Horton. He worked a day or two to help Doc Horton. There wasn't no jobs. You could go out and work for 50 cents a day. But Truman wouldn't do it. He wouldn't work for that.

He went off to different oil towns and worked a little bit to make some money. He decided he wanted to work in the oil fields. I guess that's his main reason for coming out here. He wanted to get out here and work in the oil fields cause he thought they made big money. And it was the best pay. Used to be the oil fields was the best paying job there was but it's got to where now that they're not the best really. He did refinery work. He worked down here at Golden Bear, but he liked to work out in the oil fields best of all.

S.J.: Do you remember much about the drought or the dust storms?

Mitchell: I tell you, I saw the dust blow so hard back there that I put a wet rag over my face to keep from breathing it down my lungs. The rag would be muddy on top just like you put mud on it. It was terrible. And all the crops would blow out and dirt would pile real high up against your house.

S.J.: Do you remember when tractors became pretty common on the farms? Did they have anything to do with why your father's farm wasn't making any more money?

Mitchell: I don't know of anybody who had a tractor. They still used the horse and plow.

S.J.: When you were young in Oklahoma, do you remember hearing much about California? Did people talk much about what California was like?

Mitchell: Oh yes. My aunt and my mother's brother and sister came and brought my grandpa out here in the early 1920's. He had T.B. and they brought him out here to go up to Keene. Then after Grandpa died, they came back to Oklahoma and stayed with us for a while. They had a friend that came back from California with them and they always talked about how you could get jobs. They really built California up. But I didn't think anything about it because I liked where I lived. I wasn't the one that wanted to move. But I was glad I did.

We didn't have a car back there and when we got out here we got a car and we could go places and do things. Life is easier here even now. People don't just give you stuff back in Oklahoma. If you get anything you pay for it. If somebody had a fruit tree--maybe there'd be one out of twenty that had some kind of little old fruit tree--they wouldn't give you any of it. Well, out here we could go pick up potatoes to eat and never had to buy them. And we'd go pick fruit. I used to can all my peaches and apples and make my raisins. I used to make my chili and cheese back in Oklahoma so after I came out here I made them too. And I grew a garden and had lots of stuff to can. I made all kinds of jelly and sauces too. It was an easier life for us here.

Back there if you didn't have the money you did without and it's not that way here [people help each other out here.] Well, of course you can't help anybody who won't help theirselves. But anybody who wants to help theirselves out here--don't make no difference how poor they are--they can get help if they aren't too lazy to work and try.

S.J.: What finally made you and your husband decide to come to California?

Mitchell: Mama had a cousin out here that she wrote to and he said we could get work. And my mother, Dad and Truman wanted to go to California. A man lived with my parents and had T.B. and was sick. My dad always let anybody who didn't have a home stay with us. So Dad put him to bed and Mama cooked and waited on him and got him to where he could finally get up and when we came out here, he came with us.

We had to sell everything. Oh, I hated to sell my sewing machine so bad. We sold everything we had and got in this old Model-T Ford truck that my brother had and 16 of us started out here. There was my mother and dad, their seven children, the man that lived with my parents, and my husband and I and our four babies all in the truck.

We came the southern route. We got down to Arizona and something burned out in the truck. I don't know enough about machinery to say what burned out. My husband was a good mechanic. He took a meat skin, a bacon rind, and put it in the truck. He fixed it. My husband did all the driving and taking care of the truck. So getting the kids in and out of the truck was left up to me. When I got out here, I couldn't even get up out of the chair without some help.

Mama had a cousin that lived out here on a lease. She wrote to him and he said if we come out that we could get jobs. There wasn't too many jobs here. But it was a lot better than it was back in Oklahoma. We landed out here on April 16, 1935, and lived with Mama's cousin awhile. I told my husband I wanted to get out of there so he borrowed a tent and we moved up on the Associated Lease. We didn't ask nobody or anything. We just moved up there. The truck had an overjet on the back of the truck. We put that up and it was our kitchen and the tent was our living quarters where we slept. All we brought was our clothes, our bedding and our dishes and when we got here we had six dollars and four kids--a dollar for each of us.

S.J.: On the journey from Oklahoma to California, what did you do for food and shelter?

Mitchell: We had the money we sold our stuff for to come out here. We was 14 days coming. We left there April 2 and got here the 16th. We would stop and cook beside the road. We come the southern route. We come by way of Globe. That's the mountain that has all those sharp curves. Oh it was scary! Somehow when you come around those mountains the wind catches you. We had an overjet on the truck and we'd go around and the wind would catch it and more than once we all had to jump up to the other side of the truck and the wheels would be off the ground about to turn over! Then the wheels would flop back down on the ground. Boy! Through all those curves we had to jump back and forth in the truck to keep us from going down the canyon. It was really scary but we got over the mountain. We didn't want to go down the side of that mountain.

There were sixteen people in the truck. I think there was two or three beds in the back. It wasn't too bad. The only thing hard about it was getting up, climbing down and climbing back up with the kids. My husband drove. He wasn't about to take care of the kids. He could have come around and handed them up to me and made it easier on me but he was always doing something to that old truck to keep it running. Him and my oldest brother and Charlie the old man that lived with us rode up in the seat and then the rest of us rode in the back--Mother, Dad and me and ten kids.

When we was coming on and got almost to Needles the wind was blowing real hard and all the kids was crying because they was hungry. We couldn't stop and cook because the wind was blowing like mad. We come along and saw an old garage-like building setting there beside the road and a big nice house near it. So we went up to the house and asked them if we could cook in that garage so we could get a wind break. I had heard how selfish people was out here. But no sir, they wouldn't let us cook in that garage. We had to come in their house and cook. I thought, "Oh my goodness, the kids will drop food on the rugs under the table." So we went in and cooked and the lady put more grease in the skillet for the potatoes if there wasn't enough. She was real, real nice. We ate at the table and the kids didn't mess up like I thought they was going to. I thought, "People don't know what they're talking about when they think Californians are so hateful and mean--these are good people!" And they were.

S.J.: Did you find that most of the people you met in California were nice people? Did you ever have any bad experiences when you first came here?

Mitchell: No, everybody was good to us. We lived up there on the hill and everyday I bathed the kids and cleaned them up and people seemed to really admire me for it. Lots of people, like lease owners, come up and visited us and complimented me. "Oh, I don't know how you do it, I don't know how you keep these little babies so clean in this dirt," they said. People give us a lot of stuff, too. One lady took a rug up and put a new one down, so she gave me the old one and I put it in the tent. Well, gee that made it nice. They gave us clothes that their kids would outgrow. And I always sewed. I sewed all my life. I made the kids pretty little dresses and things out of old clothes. One time I made my oldest son a whole suit out of a pair of pants--vest, coat and pants. Oh, he looked cute.

People here was all good to us. The people that owned the lease couldn't hire a hand all the time, so they just had someone come and work once in a while when they needed them to pull a well or something. They always gave Truman the work and, my goodness, we thought we was really something. It was pretty nice to have a little money. Course Truman had to walk, we didn't have no car.

Later we got a little old pick-up. I called it a T-Model Chevrolet pick-up. I got to go to the store in it when we went for groceries. We went to Tom Miller's store up there at Aztec. Everybody in there would say, "Who's children are those?" "They're mine," I'd say. "I don't believe it, you ain't nothing but a kid yourself," they'd say. Nobody believed those were mine, but they were.

S.J.: So your husband usually worked in the oil fields or with wells, something like that?

Mitchell: When we first came out here we went to Camp, West and Lowe. My dad, Sam Maxwell, was working out there. He worked out there quite a while. Then Truman got a job cotton chopping. He hoed half way through the field and the hoe wasn't sharp, so he was going to sharpen it. The boss bawled him out for stopping so Truman just threw the hoe down and walked out and said he didn't want to hoe cotton anyway. He was always the kind of person that didn't dwell much on little things, he dwelled on bigger things like making more money. If he was going to put a fence up, he'd get the things to pull the wire with. He wouldn't try to stretch it by hand. That's the way he was.

Anyway, he worked for what he could and then we got to move over to Spencer's garage. Oh, I was so happy because I had a wall and a cement floor. We lived there awhile and then Mr. Dickey over on another lease that he worked for sometimes had a house and he let us have it and we got a house to live in. That was in about 1936.

S.J.: Did you know many people in your situation that had come from Oklahoma or Texas looking for work?

Mitchell: Yes, I knew quite a few. I have an aunt and a lot of cousins out here that come from Oklahoma. I know a lot of people that came from Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas. We lived up there in the oil fields most of the time and the children went to Aztec School. It was a little school and you knew nearly everybody in little places.

S.J.: Tell me what you did on an average day, what your activities were at that time. Did you ever have to go out and work?

Mitchell: My husband never did like for me to work. He said he would make a living for us. But when the children got bigger I took them out to pick up potatoes and cotton because they couldn't go out in the oil fields and work and I wanted them to know how to work! I meant for them to get an education, but I thought that if there's ever a depression I don't want them going out and killing themselves cause they don't know how to work. So I took them out to work and gave them all their money and made them put half of it in the bank and spend half for their school

clothes and things. I never did work out much. I worked in the sewing factory three months and I worked one day at Penneys but some of the kids got sick or something. That was during the war because they needed people so bad and I tried to go work but it seemed like it wasn't in the books for me to work then. Then I worked at that women's shop down there by the bridge. I belonged to a lot of clubs like the PTA and Home Ec Club. I was chairman of the well-baby clinic for eight years. Tried to help all I could when the kids were in school.

I did a lot of things besides take care of the kids, like sewing and making quilts. I always was a person that had to keep busy and I didn't keep too busy with four kids. I tried to teach them right from wrong, and I always knew where they were and what they's doing, but I had a lot of time on my hands to do other things.

S.J.: Was your husband employed most of the time when you first came out?

Mitchell: Well, when we first came he worked here, there and yonder. Then in 1937 he went to work at American Naptha Oil Company. Later they sold out to Getty. He was Assistant Superintendent and I done a lot of the office work. Mr. Jobe run it. We lived up there on the lease in the house. One time I had a paint gun and I was spraying the outside of that house and Mr. Jobe come by in the car. In a little bit the guys on the truck come by and said, "Mr. Jobe said you had no business doing a man's work and sent us down here to paint this house." But his wife* done painting inside. I thought that was funny. I wasn't supposed to be doing a man's work.

S.J.: Do you think your family was well off compared to some of the other Okies?

Mitchell: Oh, yes! There was an Okie camp down here by the river and we drove down in there one day. There's people down there living in rooms made out of pasteboard and some of them had tin cans nailed up for wind breaks and a place to sleep and eat. Just a little old place. Just maybe as big as that kitchen [points to her kitchen]. I thought, boy how fortunate I was. I tried to rent a house here in Oildale and I never could rent one. Every-time I'd go to rent a house they'd say, "Do you have any children?" I'd say, "Yes, I have four children." "Well, we don't rent to people with children," they'd say. So I said to heck with them.

S.J.: Did you know any of the people that lived in the camp down by the bridge, or other people that lived in small shacks like that in the fields?

*Mrs. Jobe and I were good friends.

Mitchell: I didn't know anybody that lived down here in this camp. At least I didn't meet anybody that I knew. Out at Camp, West and Lowe they had these little old cabins. There was a lot of people out there. One time I took a box of little sunsuits out there and give them to some of those kids. I took nineteen sunsuits. My kids had lots of clothes because it didn't take much to make a sunsuit and I loved to sew. When the kids outgrewed their things I used to take them out there. I knew some people that came from Oklahoma and just camped out where the old Safeway used to be up there on Chester and China Grade Loop. We helped them a lot. We done a lot of things for them. We give them a lot of clothes and give them food. It was a big family of them. Their name was Simmons.

S.J.: Did you ever hear much about the Okies who worked in the farms and the fields in California and what their situation was like?

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

Mitchell: I knew several that worked on the farms. They just had hard work. They worked and done without. They had something to eat but that's about it.

S.J.: Do you remember how the local people in Oildale and Bakersfield felt about a lot of Okies coming into the area?

Mitchell: Oh, yes! One time they was going to stop them at the [state] line and not let them come. They'd say things about Okies being out here and they were mad cause the Okies was taking the jobs and they didn't have any work.

S.J.: Did you read it in the newspapers about it or was it word of mouth?

Mitchell: It was word of mouth. Just what people would say. Cuss the Okies, that's about all they'd done. Cuss them cause they came out here and took the jobs. They thought Okies was low down and ignorant and everything else. They didn't have much respect for them.

When my oldest daughter started to school, Mrs. Faust was her teacher--Mr. Faust was over the Associated Oil Company, was the superintendent down there--anyway, Eva Lee was going to school and she went to school two or three days and she come home and she said, "Mama, I'm not going to school anymore." I said, "Well why honey, why aren't you going to school?" She said, "Well, I know more than the teacher," she said, "she asked a question and I answered it. She didn't know." So I went down and told the teacher about it. She got the biggest kick out of it. Eva Lee was teacher's pet.

S.J.: Did your kids have any trouble at school with the local kids that were born here in California? I've heard that some of the kids teased the Okies.

Mitchell: No, I don't think they had any trouble like that. My youngest son used to have trouble with the kids at school. He'd start into the school door and they'd run in first and call him an Okie and he had a lot of fights. I always taught my kids not to pick a fight, but if anybody jumped on them, let them have it. That's just what they did. We always held ourselves up and demanded respect and I taught the kids to do that cause back there in Hollis, if you didn't have money and own land, you wasn't nothing. I learned real young to hold my head up high and if they said something to me I didn't like, I let them have it. And I got respect and that's what I kept.

S.J.: How did you feel when you heard the bad things they were saying about Okies?

Mitchell: Well, I just felt if they was smart enough they'd keep their jobs and Okies wouldn't get them. I felt like some of them wasn't quite as smart as the Okies or they'd keep their jobs. I always had something to say when they said something because I felt like I was as good as anybody and anybody was as good as me. I don't ever feel like I'm better than people or people is better than me. In fact, people didn't say too much to me.

My husband was in the beer joint one time and some guy got to talking about Okies. The guy's popping off about Okies when Truman come unwound and stood up. Truman was about 6 feet, 2 inches and 185 pounds. That guy just almost fainted. He was afraid he was going to get his head knocked off. So things like that happened. You know, I never can remember anybody throwing it up to me about being an Okie, I guess they was afraid to. They was afraid I'd get mad and tell them off.*

S.J.: Do you remember very much about the welfare programs or the government aid programs? Did you know very many people who got some help from the government?

Mitchell: I don't know but I imagine most of them did a little bit. Most of them was like us. They wouldn't take charity. They's willing to work and make their living and they didn't want charity. A bunch of them kept insisting to us, "Why don't you got down and get on relief?" Well I didn't feel like we really needed it. I thought we was doing all right. Finally, more or less to please them I guess, I went down and signed up for it and went and got commodities. I had a lot of fun flirting with the guys in there. I always did like to flirt. I got my car full and an old woman got real mad at me. She come up there with an old

*Billy Curby didn't want to come with her parents to our house because we were from Okie, they had to make her come. She thought she was better than me. But her dad, Weaver and mother Dorothy liked to visit us and he gave Truman the extra work he had on his lease. One time Dorothy apologized for looking at me, said she couldn't keep from looking at me. She said, "You are the prettiest woman I ever saw." I thanked her, that was a nice compliment I thought. We are still friends.

ragged dress on with tore places in it trying to get a lot of stuff off the relief. Shoot, I put the best I had on and dressed up and looked the best I knew how. I got the whole back end of my car full of sheets, pillow cases, and dresses, and I don't know what all, and I thought she was going to give me a whipping before I could get in the car and get away. She sure was mad, this old woman. I gave most all the dresses to these people that lived up here on the corners camped out. They had some little girls that they fit. I didn't like those dresses, I didn't like the way they was made or the material so I just give them to them. But I had a lot of fun going down there. I think we got one or two checks and then I quit getting them because I didn't think we needed it. I thought maybe other people needed it worse than I did.

S.J.: Did your family go to church in Oklahoma and then again out here in California?

Mitchell: My mother and dad belonged to the church but we lived way out on the farm 12 miles from town and their church wasn't out there. Once in a while they'd have a Baptist church come out and preach and we'd go. There was a Church of Christ meeting out and I joined the church when I was thirteen. Sometimes my dad was a real good church member and then he'd get tired of it, but my mom always belonged to the church. After we came out here she went all the time, but he didn't 'cause he'd have to work or he'd get tired of it and wouldn't go.

S.J.: How about you and your children?

Mitchell: We went to church most of the time. My husband didn't go to church, he wouldn't go. He said when he was a kid, his dad give \$25 and he had to go without any shoes and he kind of hated preachers.

S.J.: All in all, after you lived in California for a few months or maybe a year were you glad that you came out here? Did you feel that things were better here than they would have been if you had stayed in Oklahoma?

Mitchell: Oh yes, I was glad we came, but I never did like to move. My husband liked to move, he wanted to move all the time. One time I went up to my mother's in Oklahoma to stay all day and he come in the wagon and got me and just took me over to another house. I said, "Well, where in the world are we going?" and he said, "Well, you live in a different house now." So he took me on over to the other house. He had it set up and everything. He said that the chickens run and jumped on the coupling pole, he didn't have to bother about catching them and they just about was trained.

S.J.: What happened about the time World War II came? Did you move or did your husband change his job?

Mitchell: No, he didn't change jobs, but we lived down here in Oildale and my daughter was getting too struck on a little old boy there so I moved. She was thirteen and I wasn't going to have her down here in town right next door to him. We moved out in the oil fields.

S.J.: Did you have any more money when World War II came? Were things much better?

Mitchell: Not much. There was a little bit of a raise, but it didn't amount to much. We'd saved up some money and we bought 15 acres of land. We borrowed all the kids' money and put ours in and bought 15 acres and then we paid them back. We always drove a good car. We didn't have to pay no rent out in the oil field either. Course it took more money to live on account of you had to haul water and come down to town and back. But gas wasn't so high.

I had money saved up for my daughter to go to college and she got married when she was sixteen. That about broke my heart. But she went on to school after she married. She graduated from high school in three years and one summer school and got all A's. Not bad, huh? I made them promise that if they got married she'd go on and finish because I always felt like an education was important. I'd like to have gone on to college so bad and never could. I started night school in 1953 and took typing and in two night school classes I could type 37 words a minute without making a mistake. Wasn't nobody else in that class that could do it.

But I couldn't keep going. My daughter Wyima Jean separated and her and her husband was fighting and, shoot, I had to stay home and take care of her kids. Always something come up that I couldn't go back to school. I really wanted my kids to be educated though. My youngest son Billy Joe Mitchell has a doctorate degree in science in Petroleum Engineering and he's a professor at Golden University. He's over in Israel right now for some oil company. He goes all different places. Sometimes I wonder if he didn't get too much education. Gosh, he sure makes the money though.

S.J.: Do you still have relatives back in Oklahoma? Did you ever go back and visit there?

Mitchell: Oh, we went back every year to see Truman's mother. Then in 1948 we went back and stayed four years. Truman wanted to go back and be around her so I thought well, I get to be around my mother all the time it isn't nothing but fair. I belonged to the Home Ec Club back there and they sent me to Stillwater three times. One time I got a blue ribbon for being the best reporter. I was secretary of the club and lot of different things.

Then we came back out here after Truman's mother died. We moved out on a farm of 25 acres and stayed there a year. My husband never did like to farm very well, he liked machines. When he worked up there for American Naptha Oil Company, he done all their electric work on the big electric lines and fixed all the motors. He started out working for them in the well gang, then he worked as a driller and then he got to be boss over most of it. Mr. Jobe was gone all the time so it was left up to him, and Truman got more money for it.

We was married 40 years and never separated, never. Most people separate once or twice especially when they are young. We had a trailer and a boat fixed up to go all over the United States and he died. That's the way it is. You better have your fun while you're young.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

SESSION 2 January 15, 1981

S.J.: First, why don't you tell me a little bit more about your family. I understand your maiden name was Maxwell. You were born in Spiro, Oklahoma, but did your parents always live there or were they born someplace else?

Mitchell: My mother was born in Possum Hollow, Arkansas and my dad was born in Indian Territory in Oklahoma.

S.J.: Tell me a bit more about the work you did as a little girl.

Mitchell: Well, I really did a man's work by the time I was seven. My dad sawed wood with a crosscut saw and I helped him. I pulled one end and he pulled the other. I also took horses and hooked them onto trees and helped clear land. I had to put the harness on my own team. That was the hardest thing to do because I wasn't very big. And I planted corn too. Of course I washed on a rub board and helped cook, wash dishes, take care of the kids.

My sister Jewel used to cry all the time. One time when she was about a year old or so, Mama made me walk her around till I got so tired I thought I was going to die. I took her out and held her by her hands and twirled her around and around--threw her arm out of place! I was so tired I didn't care what I done to her. I had to get up in the night and take care of the kids. My mom never did get up and take care of them. She didn't like to get up. She was too sleepy headed. I also took care of my mom when I was nine years old and my sister was born. I took care of the baby and took care of her too. I done all the washing, ironing, cooking and taking care of the house.

S.J.: When you first came out to California and you lived on the Associated Lease, do you remember any of your children having any health problems?

Mitchell: Well, of course, my children later had to have their tonsils out. My oldest boy, J.T., broke his leg when he was two-and-a-half. He had been jumping up and down on an old bed I let the kids play on out in the back. He had San Joaquin fever when he was about six. He said, "Mama look at my legs." I looked at them and felt them and it felt like little beebee shots were under the skin. It liked to scare me to death and I run him up to the hospital, Kern General. I doctored my own kids and my own family, until we came out here.

One time I took the kids to Kern General because it was free. I thought I'd just take them and let the doctor see. I don't know whether they all had colds or what, but that doctor really bawled me out. He said, "When did you get licensed to be a doctor? When your kids get sick, you bring them up here, and don't be doctoring them, you're not a doctor."

S.J.: Could you tell me about your diet and how you got water on the lease?

Mitchell: On the lease we carried the water or got somebody to bring a can up there. There wasn't no water right there. For food, we had fruit and potatoes and plenty of canned milk. I had to make biscuits three times a day. I made biscuits three times a day for 19 years and I told my husband, "This is it, I ain't making no more biscuits." We had plenty to eat. I joined Home Ec clubs to learn what the body needed. I always tried to cook a balanced meal. Of course, ice cream and candy were treats. Once in a while we got us a milk shake. That was a great big treat.

We raised chickens and put them in cold storage and raised a beef or maybe a hog out on the lease. We had to buy feed for them though. We raised rabbits too. We usually had our own meat and a lot of times we had our own milk and I'd make cheese and butter and milk.

But the first two or three years in California we bought everything except the potatoes and fruit we picked. They were free if you wanted to go pick them. You had to give the owner half but we never thought anything about that. We used to go down to a place down here on Willow [in Oildale] and pick different kinds of fruit. My mama and dad later bought the place. We'd also go out to Arvin and pick fruit. I know I went out there and picked on the halves. Somebody had an apricot tree and give us apricots. I usually went to the shed at Edison and got potatoes for about 25 cents a sack. Sometimes we'd go pick potatoes and onions after the plow had been through.

S.J.: You told me a little bit about the ditch camp down here by the bridge in Oildale and how you visited it once. Were you surprised?

Mitchell: I was shocked. I was really shocked because they lived in pasteboard boxes nailed up for a house and I thought, "Boy, if they was in Oklahoma, they wouldn't do that, 'cause the the wind would blow it all away." In Oklahoma there were cyclones, hard rains, and snows. They couldn't have lived that way.

There were a lot of people camped out under this underpass over here on Norris Road. One time a guy that owned a beer joint or a gas station or something right on the other side of the bridge had everybody bring toys for the kids living under the underpass. My husband knew him so we stopped to see what they was doing. He give my kids a whole box of toys and I told him, "Well, they don't need them. Give them to somebody else." He said, "Well, they done give everybody else some." They got so many I guess. Anyway, he give them a whole box full.

S.J.: Did you ever think about why those people lived in the ditch camps there? Why you and your husband were able to work and feed your children and live decently and why these other people lived the way the did in pasteboard boxes?

Mitchell: Well, maybe I guess because they just didn't know no better than to move in there. I wouldn't have moved in there if I had to. I just wouldn't! It felt like sometimes that I was going to have to because I couldn't get a house, I couldn't get no place to live since I had kids. But it seemed like the people that lived in there could have come out of it and made something of theirself but they weren't the kind that would.

S.J.: Do you think they lived similar to that in Oklahoma?

Mitchell: Some of them did I know. You could tell by looking. I guess they just lived there because they didn't have any other place to live and they had to be somewhere. You know, Mrs. Roosevelt went down there to that camp and I think she did something about it. It seemed to me like anybody that would move into something like that just didn't have very much pride. They surely didn't or they could have done something else if they tried. It was hard, it would have been hard but I still think they could have.

S.J.: I know you had to work very hard and you belonged to clubs, but what other things did you and your family do in your free time after you were here in California? What types of things did you do for entertainment?

Mitchell: Well, we'd go out dancing once in a while. We'd go visit my mother when we borrowed a car.* I'd give my kids parties.

*We camped out up at Cedar Creek on the Green Horn Mountain. Stayed two weeks, one summer.

They could have wiener roasts and all that stuff out on the lease because it was a nice place for kids to play. It seemed like I worked all the time. I never did have much free time. When I wasn't busy I was reading. I read an awful lot, trying to educate myself a little better. I always did something, like that rug in there by the bed, that's the first one I made. I won a prize for it at the fair. Then I made about 15 or 20 and learned to crochet and all that stuff.

I spent a lot of time cooking too. When my family was young we cooked everything we had to eat. You didn't buy bread, pies or cookies or anything already cooked. You made it from scratch. I learned to make all kinds of hot rolls, yeast rolls and I learned all the things about cooking. And I liked to get in there and do them.

S.J.: Did you ever have an instrument to play or did you sing together with your family?

Mitchell: Well, I played the guitar and sung. I never did have any other kind of musical instrument except the French harp and I couldn't play it. Oh, I could play a Jew's harp. My kids would play it and bite their tongues.

I enjoyed my kids very much. My husband didn't help me with the kids. He got out and made a living and he said that was his part and I had to take care of them. It was pretty hard when they was babies because I didn't even have a baby bed. You know when kids are little you got to run and get them out of stuff all the time, but I really enjoyed my kids. I guess my main aim in life was to be a good mother and raise my kids to be able to make decisions and take care of theirselves and be somebody.

S.J.: You must be pretty happy with them then?

Mitchell: I am. None of them got into any trouble and they've all got real good jobs. My oldest daughter was the assistant manager or superintendent over the Fresno County Health Department and then they did away with that job so last year she got another job that pays a lot more money. They all do good so I am real proud of them. Wyima Jean worked for the office at U.C.L.A. She bought a house in Northridge, California. Eva Lee and W.J. each have a beautiful home in Pismo Beach now, on the ocean front. Billy Joe has a nice home in Denver, Colorado, and J.T., the minister, has a nice home in Los Angeles.

I am real proud of my grandson that I raised too. His name was Jim Scroggins. Wyima Jean was his mother. You know he's twenty-five now and he went to high school when people started using dope and all the doctors wrote articles in the papers that said it's all right to smoke marijuana. It made it hard for a parent to go against it, but I was real, real proud of him. He

done all right. He didn't get doped up and all that stuff and he has a good job now and two children. He owns his own home. I should have adopted him, but I hated to adopt a grandson. I thought there was no reason. Then when my husband died, I was fifty-six and I had to send him on to school. I couldn't get no help from Social Security because I hadn't adopted him. I couldn't draw anything until I was sixty. But I done all right. The kids give me some money and I had some insurance my husband left me. It was all right but aggravated me that my husband had worked thirty some years and put into that and I never got to draw a penny of it. He paid in on that from the time it started till he retired. He got real sick about a year before and he died. And he drew it as long as he lived, but when he died, I couldn't get anything.

Then I had Jim in high school. Jim can play a lot of music. He can play the viola and violin and accordian. He can play just about anything. But he won't hardly ever play. He had a lot of music lessons though. That's what I wanted when I was a kid. Oh, I wanted a guitar so bad I couldn't hardly stand it, but we didn't get what we wanted.

S.J.: You mentioned before that your children corrected your grammar when you spoke. I wondered how you felt about that.

Mitchell: Oh, I told them to. I tried very hard to get self-education. It seemed like I never could go back to school. I always wanted to. When my baby boy was five and started kindergarten I wanted to go back and finish high school and my husband just had a fit. I didn't want to have to get out and work and let somebody else raise my kids and I figured if I went on to school it might come to that. I wanted them to correct me because I wanted to try to talk better--which I don't. I don't talk very good.

When kids start to high school they begin to get real smart, you know. That happened with my daughter. I didn't care for her being smart. Now my dad wouldn't let me be smart. If I learned a new word in school, he wouldn't let me use it. He said I was showing off. I didn't care for my kids showing off. I wanted them to think they was intelligent. So I figured that if Eva Lee got to correct me with some of my words--she never was nasty about it or did it in front of people or anything like that--that would help her. I knew I didn't use very good grammar, didn't use correct grammar. My dad didn't have any education at all, and my mother just went to the third grade and he was a smart man. To save my life I don't know why he never did go out and get a little education. Everybody said he was a smart man.

END OF INTERVIEW

ADDENDUM

[Written comments submitted by Viola Mitchell
after editing the transcript]

My dad, brother and I would go work in the field, we came home for lunch. Ate and washed dishes while they rested and took a noon day nap. Then back to work. I didn't say I was sick, I had to take a dose of castor oil so I'd rather work if I was sick than to take castor oil. I worked all week in the field and washed clothes on a rub board. Had to carry wood and water to wash with.

My brother would go rabbit hunting and exploring, but I got to go some time. One time we crawled down in a jip cave. I could hardly get in and just a little edge to stand on. We could hear water running away down below and I got the scare of my life. I couldn't get out. The opening was wide then tapered off to narrow and if I stepped back I'd go down, down, so we worked me out inch by inch. Pulled my flesh here and there and finally I got out. I didn't dare let my parents know that we had went into a cave.

I taught school two different times in my life. I taught preschool children at Beardsley. Everyone wanted me to stay and I wanted to stay. I loved teaching those little children, but my husband, Mr. Mitchell, had emphysema and took a turn for the worse and I had to be here with him all the time.

In 1943, Eva Lee was about thirteen and we lived in the oil fields in a lease house. She brought 15 kids (teenagers) home with her to eat. I let them cook it. They ate. Truman piled them all in our car and took them back home to Oildale.

In Oklahoma, the Whitsons we visited. One of the boys said, "I et eggs." I corrected him--"You ate eggs." He said, "Well maybe it was eight eggs I et."

We moved from Spiro to Calington then to Albion. When we lived at Albion, Oklahoma, in the Camish Mountains, we had a log barn full of peanuts. My dad gathered peanuts and vines. One real dark night he said, "Virgil, you and Viola go shut the barn door." Our dog, Tig, went with us. When we started to close that barn door, something big and black jumped over

over our heads--fence and all. Well, we hit the house door about the time that thing hit the ground. My dad says, "Go back and shut the barn door." Mama said, "You're scared or you'd go shut it yourself." Virgil and I would get the hide took off of us. But we figured it out later. There must have been two bears in there eating peanuts because just about the time my dad hit the back door, old Tig hit the hole in the door step and under the house he went. Well I sure was glad there was another bear in there.

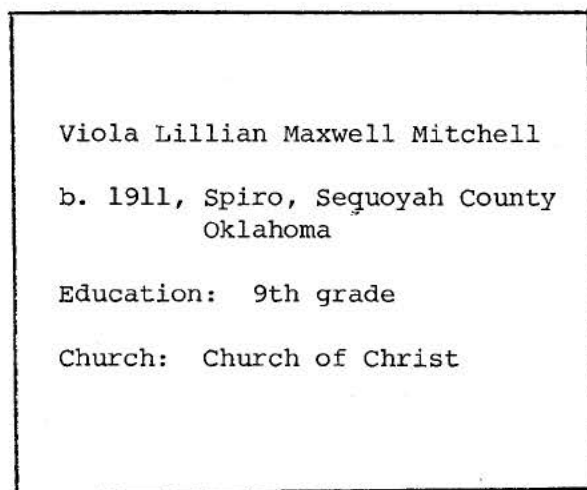
At Calington I took one egg every day on my way to school. I would stop at Uncle Rich's store and get me some candy.

Samuel D. Maxwell
b. 1893, Indian Territory

[His parents from Oklahomal

Lola S. Maxwell
b. 1895, Possum Hollow,
Arkansas

[Her parents from Arkansas]



m. 1928 →

James Truman Mitchell
b. 1909, Garden Valley,
Texas

Eva Lee Mitchell Johnson
b. 1929
Budget director

Wyima Jean Mitchell Gellis
b. 1932
Secretary

J.T. (James Truman) Mitchell
b. 1933
Minister, maintenance engineer

Dr. Billy Joe Mitchell
b. 1935
Professor, petroleum
engineer

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