

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	Goldie Mae Jarrell Farris
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Gainesville, Cooke County, Texas
INTERVIEWER:	Stacey Jagels
DATES OF INTERVIEWS:	March 10, 1981
PLACE OF INTERVIEWS:	Fresno, Fresno County
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PREFACE

Mrs. Goldie Farris has had many problems dealing with her experiences in the thirties. Until our interview she had never once discussed what had happened to her family or her feelings about it. She had held feelings of guilt and embarrassment inside for some thirty years. Within five minutes after I arrived Mrs. Farris had tears in her eyes and explained that she had never discussed these painful times. I suggested that we either cancel, reschedule or talk about other things first to become familiar with one another, but she insisted that the time had come for her to finally tell someone about it and that she hoped it would help her.

Several times during the interview she was emotionally upset, but talking about it and reassuring her that her experiences were not at all unique, but really quite common, seemed to help. She states on the tape that she had never talked about this before. Her husband is not aware of the hardships she endured or her guilt about her family taking welfare. Because this happened when she was a young girl, her self-image for the rest of her life was greatly influenced by the guilt and inferiority she felt. Once she had told what had happened, had used the words, she seemed to think it would be easier to do so again. I talked to her a few days after the interview and she indicated that the opportunity to share these feelings helped her. She has since spoken to her sister about it and plans to talk to the rest of her family too.

Stacey Jagels
Interviewer

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INTERVIEWEE: Goldie M. Farris (Age: 53)

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: March 10, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Goldie Farris for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at 4416 North Durant Way, Fresno, California on March 10, 1981 at 1:00 p.m.

S.J.: I thought we'd begin with when and where you were born and a little bit about your childhood.

Farris: I was born in Gainesville, Texas on a farm. We lived there until I was about a year old. We lived on the next farm until I was six years old. When I think about my early childhood I think of that place. It was really a terrible old house. I was the oldest in the family and my sister was just two years younger than I. She was just like my playmate. I can remember her being a small child and her pretty blond hair. I used to take care of her. When she got a little bit older I never wanted to play with her outside because I was more interested in doing other things. I can remember being three years old and sitting on a footstool by my father's chair and I thought if I looked at him reading that newspaper long enough I could figure out how he did that. I knew he looked at it and he talked about it. I became completely and totally absorbed in wanting to learn to read. I knew that letters were coming to the house from people and my parents were reading those letters and talking about them. I would take the letters, hold them up to the window and trace on the back side because I thought I could learn to write that way. I also started collecting poems out of the newspaper. I couldn't read them but I could tell by the way the print was set that they were different. My father would read them to me. I still have that box of poems. Actually they turned out to be old fashioned cowboy ballads. I brought them to California with me in a matchbox and I still have them in the same matchbox. I also liked to sew and my mother taught me to sew when I was five years old. By this time there were five children in the family and I became my mother's assistant. I was always helping to take care

of the children. We lived out in the country and the roads were not very good so when it came time to start school my parents sent me to my grandparents'. I went for the first half of the first grade to a Catholic school and then in the middle of that year my parents moved to another area. It wasn't too terribly far away but I was back to live with them and went to a public school. It was a little country school in Texas.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit about your parents' background?

Farris: My parents came from very different backgrounds. My mother's family was from the north. Her relatives came from Ireland during the potato famine to the northern part of the United States. Her father's family were large landowners up in northern Missouri. My grandfather was a school teacher in his early days but back then it wasn't considered all that great to be a teacher. It was better if you could be a landowner and a farmer, that seemed to be important. My mother and her family came to Texas when she was about ten years old, about 1910, and bought a farm there. She was raised in an Irish Catholic background and they were quite prominent in the community. My grandfather was involved in church and politics. My mother had a good education for her time. She graduated from high school and had a business course. My father's family was also of Irish decent and they were from the south, originally from Virginia. I don't know beyond that where they lived. From Virginia they went to Alabama and they were there during the Civil War where they manufactured guns and bullets and also owned land. After the Civil War times were very difficult in the south and they came to Texas by boat by way of the Gulf. They brought with them or bought their farm equipment and animals. They bought land and they leased a lot of land. My grandfather was from a large family. There were fifteen children and he was in the middle. My father's grandfather was a Texas Ranger and my father had a lot of experiences with his grandfather. When my father was growing up he was an old fashioned cowboy before World War I on the King Ranch in Texas. Then of course he was in World War I. After World War I he had an aunt who lived in the same area where my mother lived and he lived with her and started farming. He met my mother through his relatives, the families were friends. Then they were married. My parents were 27 and 34 when they were married. They had a large family when they were a bit older.

S.J.: And then did he continue farming?

Farris: He continued farming up until we came to California. He finally gave it up in 1939 when we came to California. He always rented farms. We never owned the farms we lived on.

S.J.: Was that sharecropping?

Farris: I'm not sure whether you call it sharecropping. It was a system where the landowner got a percentage of what he made. Maybe it was sharecropping. I don't remember what it was called. I guess that's what it would be.

S.J.: Do you remember how well off you were as compared to other people around you?

Farris: We were the same. Everybody was poor. There was never any cash. Of course the only people that we knew were people that lived on the farms and everybody raised their animals, their own milk and eggs, and their fruit and vegetables. But there was never any money to buy anything like furniture. The houses were very sparsely furnished and you just barely could keep transportation. Everybody was the same. I was not aware of being poor.

S.J.: Did you find there was a strong community atmosphere and neighbors would help one another?

Farris: Yes, I think so.

S.J.: More so than you found in California?

Farris: Oh yes, definitely. But in Texas, even during bad times, my father hired people at harvest time to work in the cotton.

S.J.: Did you work in the fields after school or in the summertime?

Farris: Some. From the time I was about nine years old I worked. And particularly that last summer before we came to California. That's the way we got here. We three older kids--I was eleven, my sister was nine and my brother was seven--and my father went out the first time ever and worked on other farms. This was the beginning of that degrading feeling. We had to go to another neighbor's field and do their work in order to earn a little bit of cash. It was the only way we could get any cash money to make the trip to California.

S.J.: How about your mother, did she work in the fields?

Farris: No, she never did because there were five of us kids and she took care of the chickens and things like that.

S.J.: Because you were the oldest did you have a lot of extra chores such as taking care of the other children and helping out around the house?

Farris: Oh yes. And I felt just like I was responsible for those children. It never occurred to me that it wasn't my responsibility to take care of them and do all of these things. I'm still the one they look to if they have any problems or need anybody to talk to.

S.J.: Could you tell me something about the chores that you had to do?

Farris: I can remember gathering eggs, helping my mother with the milk cows, selling milk, generally helping with the housework and watching after my younger brothers and sisters while my mother did things. I never had a feeling of being really tied down. Those were just the things I did.

S.J.: Did you ever have much time left at night?

Farris: We used to go to bed awfully early. You can't do a lot of reading by lamplight because the light isn't very good. The days were long and hard and by the time my dad would get in from the fields or from milking the cows, supper was late. There wasn't a lot of time in the evenings.

S.J.: Do you remember very much about the house you lived in?

Farris: Yes, I can see that house in my mind. I can see every room and exactly what it looked like. I can see where the furniture was placed and where we used to sit. It is so real.

S.J.: How big was it?

Farris: I can remember three rooms in a row with a fourth room off of the one on the end. There was a huge front porch clear across it. On the back side was the back door to the kitchen and there was one room that had the wood stove. There weren't cupboards in the kitchen in those old houses. There was a cabinet, a portable type cabinet instead of cupboards. Over in the corner was another cabinet that kept the dishes, the table where we ate and the little stand where the wash basin and water bucket were. We brought the water in from the outside. The room off the house was just like a storage room. It was never heated. We kept the meat in there. The next two rooms were combination living rooms and bedrooms. This was the house where we lived the longest. After that we lived in four other houses before we came to California.

S.J.: Were most of them similar to this house you described?

Farris: Actually the other houses had been nicer houses. People who had been the owners and had lived on the farms for years and had built really nice homes let them run down and rented them out. They were actually larger homes. There was this one in particular that had four bedrooms upstairs and one bedroom downstairs and there were fireplaces in all of the rooms. My father remembered that house when he was a young boy. It was the nicest home in that whole area but they had let it run down. I can remember it being very cold in the wintertime.

S.J.: Could you tell me about the winters back there?

Farris: Oh they were cold, very cold. There wasn't a lot of snow, maybe once during the winter there would be some snow. But it was very cold.

S.J.: When you started to school it sounds like you probably liked it very much since you were so anxious to learn how to read.

Farris: I can remember the first grade. The teacher would hold these little flash cards with words on them and the first one that called out the word got to keep the card. In no time I could get one every time she

did this. I could get all of the cards. This was a big game with me. I can remember Christmas vacation in the first grade when I looked at a newspaper and discovered that all those words I had learned were in that newspaper and I could read anything there was. I was reading newspapers and magazines and I just couldn't stop. I can remember sitting at my grandmother's dining room table and looking at that newspaper and making that discovery. I really enjoyed that.

S.J.: So you really liked going to school?

Farris: I liked going to school, yes.

S.J.: Did you ever have to stay out of school to help in the fields?

Farris: Oh no. The one thing my parents wanted was for us to go to school. That was very important to them.

S.J.: Were there other kids that did have to stay out of school?

Farris: No. Maybe there were some but I was not aware of it.

S.J.: Did your family go to church?

Farris: We went to church some of the time. We always lived out in the country and the roads were bad so it was difficult, particularly in the wintertime. In the summertime we would go some. We didn't go to church regularly until we came to California and then we went to church because it was a lot easier to get to church.

S.J.: Do you remember what sorts of things you did on holidays and weekends or during your leisure time?

Farris: We liked running around the farm, exploring fields and trees, crawling up in the barn and that sort of thing. One place where we lived there was a hill that you had to climb almost straight up and I would climb up to the top of it where there was a plateau. I would sit up there and I could see all over. I liked to do that and I liked to sew. I liked to make doll clothes.

S.J.: How about toys that you had when you were a child?

Farris: We didn't have very many.

S.J.: Some people have told me that because there wasn't any money for toys they made their own.

Farris: All of us kids would try to make something like a wagon or something. We'd try to make wheels. We wanted to make something we could pull each other in. I remember doing that. I can remember getting a doll at Christmas and maybe one or two other little things and we really kept what we had. We didn't tear it up or anything like that. The

younger children loved to make mud pies, but I didn't want to get my hands dirty. They would mix up mud and put it in lids and pretend they were having meals. My sister and I still laugh about it. I was more interested in staying in the house and sewing and reading.

S.J.: Do you generally have good memories of when you were a child? Fond memories?

Farris: Yes. There were no really bad memories.

S.J.: You said that even though you supposed you were poor then, you really didn't think of it that way.

Farris: No, because everybody was the same. You always hoped that things would get better. One of the reasons we lived on so many farms in those years from 1935 to 1939 was because my father was so determined that there must be a better place to live, a place with better land. I can remember in 1937 on the farm where we lived with the big house on it we were really doing very well but it seemed like the weather would never cooperate. He had a lot of wheat. He had gone into debt and bought a tractor which was just beginning to be used on the farms. He had a huge wheat crop. The rain came just at harvest time before they got it out of the fields and ruined it. So that was the last straw. I think that particular thing really broke him because he had just reached the point where he thought he was going to be able to accomplish something, make some money and do better. But everything was downhill for the next two years.

S.J.: You said the weather didn't seem to cooperate. Were the dust storms very bad where you lived?

Farris: We didn't have any dust storms where we lived. They were more up into Oklahoma and to the west. That was never our problem.

S.J.: How about the drought?

Farris: I don't remember any droughts but maybe there were. That would probably have preceded the dust storms, that would have caused them. I don't really think that affected us where we lived. It was the farm prices that kept falling that affected us. No matter what you did there was never any money. My mother and I used to raise chickens to sell by the time you'd get your chickens ready to sell the prices were very low. When I was only ten years old I watched those prices in the newspaper everyday and they would just keep going down and down and down and by the time you sold the chickens you didn't have anything left. Eventually you have to have things like sheets and clothing. I can remember my mother planning big on the turkeys she'd raised to buy new sheets and blankets for the beds one winter. By the time it came to sell those turkeys the prices were so low she got practically nothing.

S.J.: Some people have said they bartered their labor or the food that they

grew on their farms. That was how they got a lot of the things they needed.

Farris: I don't remember us doing that too much but I know people did do it. But when one of us would need a pair of shoes my mother and father would take a couple chickens to town. Of course, they didn't trade the chickens for the shoes but they would take the chickens to the produce place where they were bought and take the money and buy the shoes with it.

S.J.: Since you did live on a farm did you seem to have enough food all the time or was that a problem?

Farris: I was not aware of not having enough food until the last couple of years. Maybe when I was little I didn't notice it. Maybe we had more food but it just became increasingly difficult to have enough food. Except for canning there was no way to save what you raised in the summer for the winter. What was particularly difficult was having any cash to buy staples. The last year we were there every two weeks my dad would get an eight dollar check for the milk that he sold everyday and that's all he had to buy sugar and coffee with. Even then you didn't buy a lot with \$8 for two weeks. That seemed to be the big problem.

S.J.: Do you remember if your diet had to change because of that did you start eating different kinds of foods?

Farris: I don't think so because basically we had a very simple and bland diet anyway. There were beans cooked almost everyday and lots of potatoes, pork, gravy, biscuits and corn bread. In the summer there would be fresh vegetables and usually in the winter there would be canned fruit to go along with that. Sometimes we'd go for long periods of time without milk because the cows didn't have calves. It was difficult at those times when we didn't have milk.

S.J.: Do you remember how large the farms were that your father farmed?

Farris: I really don't know. I don't remember hearing him say how many acres there were.

S.J.: But they were large enough so that he had to hire some hands?

Farris: Oh yes. He always had to hire people to chop the cotton, hoe the weeds out, to pick the cotton in the fall and to help when he raised wheat.

S.J.: And you say it must have been about 1937 or 1938 that he bought some tractors?

Farris: 1937. That's when we rented the really huge place. I don't know how many acres it was but it was large in comparison to what we had lived on before. He bought a lot of farm machinery and a tractor for the

first time.

S.J.: Was that fairly unusual to see tractors then?

Farris: They were just beginning to be used. I don't know how long it was before they had them but I know that farmers were just beginning to get them. My grandfather never did have one and he quit farming shortly after we came to California in the very early 1940s.

S.J.: But even the help of the tractor didn't make things any better?

Farris: We only lived there one year. After the problems with the rain and the wheat crop not making it, he sold everything. He actually came out pretty well financially. Another farmer came in and bought the equipment and took over the farm. We came out with some money and we weren't left with a big debt. But if he had made it that year we probably would not have come to California because we would have been on our way out.

S.J.: When he was farming do you remember if he ever had to plow under some crops? There was a program that President Roosevelt had where he ordered the farmers to plow under certain crops at certain times to try to raise the prices.

Farris: No, we were never involved in that. I think that may have come after we left.

S.J.: Did you ever hear of people slaughtering animals and then burying them or burning them? This was part of the same program of Roosevelt's.

Farris: No, I was not aware of that.

S.J.: When you were describing the rains that came and ruined the wheat you said that was the last straw for your father and then he decided to come to California.

Farris: Not right then. It was two years later that we came to California. After that we moved onto my grandfather's farm and he farmed my grandfather's farm for one year. But that didn't work out too well because we were all living in the same house. Then we rented one more farm and moved on it in the fall of 1938. This was a completely different type of farming. There was some cotton but it was mostly fruit and peanuts. Even though there was a good fruit crop there was no price for it and he didn't really make anything. It was at that time that a friend came back to Texas for a visit. The family had come out to California three years earlier. He talked to my father and convinced him that he would be much better off coming to California and working as a farm hand than staying in Texas and trying to farm there. As I look back I'm not all that convinced our family would have been better off. The rest of the family, my father's brothers and sisters and my mother's family that stayed there, did just as well if not better than my

parents did after coming to California. But my parents did what they thought was best at the time.

S.J.: Had they thought of coming to California before that was suggested?

Farris: No. I'm sure it had never entered their minds. We are still the only people from our family that left Texas. My aunt came out to visit back in the early 1970s and she couldn't figure out how anybody could leave Texas and come to California.

S.J.: Can you remember what sorts of things you had heard about California?

Farris: At age eleven I don't remember hearing a lot. I had this picture in my mind of the Golden Gate Bridge and lots of mountains and the ocean nearby. That was the only idea I had.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit about the journey out here?

Farris: That was interesting. By this time we had this terrible old car, a 1929 or 1930 one seater Chevrolet coup. It had a rumble seat that had been taken out and there was like a little pickup bed built in that. Those cars were small but my father, myself, my mother and my youngest sister who was only three years old sat in the front and then the other three children sat in the back along with everything we owned in that car. They had built a top on the back so that the kids were inside. They weren't riding out in the wind. It took six days to go about 1500 miles. I think about 200 or 300 miles was probably the most we did in a day. We had a lot of car trouble coming along the way. We were better off than some because we could at least afford to spend one dollar each night to stay in what they called tourist cabins. It was just a room with some beds and a stove where we could fix our food. To me it was very exciting because I was so eager to see the new countryside. I kept a diary and I wished I had kept it. Everyday I wrote down everywhere we'd been and what we saw and everything that happened to us. Then I wrote my grandfather after we got back and told him the whole story.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

S.J.: Could you tell me about the car trouble that your dad had?

Farris: He would have to adjust the carburetor depending on the altitude of where we were. This seemed to be the only car problem that we had. I remember we came into California at Needles on a late Saturday and then it took us until the next late afternoon to get past Bakersfield into the San Joaquin Valley. My first impression was that I had never seen land so flat. You could just see for miles and miles across this very flat land. Monday morning we left Delano or McFarland where we stayed all night and we reached our destination which was west of Tulare on a farm where our friends from Texas lived.

S.J.: It took you six days and you said you kept a diary of it. Do you

remember the things that happened that you wrote in your diary?

Farris: As we would go along I would describe the scenery. I can remember the Indian cliff dwellers. Actually the trip was very uneventful. I just remember riding and riding and riding. And stopping for my father to adjust the carburetor. The trip was uneventful, we really didn't have any problems.

S.J.: Do you remember if your parents had very much cash with them on the way out here?

Farris: No. We left Texas with \$60 but we didn't have any problem getting here. We didn't run out. Practically the day we came they started working picking cotton for a farmer that owned the farm where we lived. We felt we were lucky because some people just came with nothing, with no money. They tried to work along the way and really didn't have a destination. So we felt we were better off in that respect.

S.J.: Do you remember coming into California to the border?

Farris: Just slightly. I can remember stopping at the station at the borders, where they searched your car to see if you were bringing in any fruit or vegetables.

S.J.: What had your friends told you about California? Just that your father would get work?

Farris: I don't remember ever talking to them or hearing them talk to my parents. They had convinced my dad that he could at least earn a living and it would be a lot easier than trying to farm. At least we got paid for the work that he did. Of course, I think the difficult thing was that it was so seasonal.

S.J.: And you say you went to a place just west of Tulare?

Farris: West of Tulare. It was on the old Corcoran Highway. Our first school was called Waukena. That's a little community not too far from Corcoran, a farm community.

S.J.: And where did you stay when you got there?

Farris: That is where we stayed with friends.

S.J.: What was their name?

Farris: Duncan. Orville and Loreen Duncan. Her family's name was Bostick. I assume her parents have been dead for several years.

S.J.: And so they let you stay with them and your parents found work right away?

Farris: Yes, they worked with the same farmer that the Duncans worked for.

S.J.: And that included your mother? Your mother went out and worked?

Farris: Oh yes, she worked. And all the kids worked after school and on Saturdays.

S.J.: Do you remember how much money your father made? Or how much you made?

Farris: No. In a newspaper article about this a woman says she made \$10 a week. She said, "The man we picked cotton for paid us \$1 a hundred. We picked 1,000 pounds that day and got \$10 and I tell you \$10 in those days bought a real bill of groceries." Now 1,000 for one day for two people sounds like a lot to me. I don't think my parents, especially my mother who was not a very strong person, had never done field work, did that well.

S.J.: How long did you live with these people?

Farris: We arrived about the second week in October and we left right after Thanksgiving so it wasn't too long, probably six or seven weeks. I think was all that we stayed there.

S.J.: You said that you had one room in the house.

Farris: We had one room. It was a large room, probably not as large as my living room. We brought one mattress with us and my folks bought another bed. I can remember my youngest sister who was only three slept with my parents and the four of us slept on the mattress on the floor. There was a table with some boxes and chairs and a little stove. That was all we had. That was the first real shock, living like that. Even though we didn't have a lot of nice furniture in Texas, at least we had a normal type of house with the necessities such as beds, chairs and tables.

S.J.: Living that way seemed to bother you. How about your parents?

Farris: I wish now that I had talked to them in later years about how they felt about it. As a family we just never talked about it. It was as though if we didn't talk about it, it wasn't really happening to us. It must have been difficult for them. It must have been terribly difficult, especially for my mother who came from a higher class of people than my father did. I know it must have been terribly difficult for her but I don't remember her ever talking about it. But it bothered me and it was terribly painful to me. I just really don't know about how my brothers and sisters they felt about it either because we didn't talk about it. My younger sister now lives in New Jersey. She was here in 1977 to visit. Just out of the blue one day she asked me, "How come we were different than most of those other people we knew that came to California at the same time?" Before I thought I said, "Because our family had pride and we knew who we were." It just came out. I had never thought about it before but it was so strong in me that it just came out. We talked a little bit more about that. Some

day we'll have to talk about it more.

S.J.: When you were living there in the Duncan house do you remember if your parents made enough money so that you always felt that you had enough food?

Farris: We had adequate food. I don't ever remember feeling we had a lot of money.

S.J.: You don't remember going hungry.

Farris: No, I don't remember going hungry.

S.J.: You mentioned other people in your situation. Did you know other people from Oklahoma and Texas that moved out here?

Farris: The only people we knew were other people like us. While I couldn't put it into words then, and it's even difficult now, I just knew there was a difference between us and most of those people. I can give you an example. This lady in the newspaper article is still living just like they lived back then, whereas my family has come up socially and economically. We were temporarily down because of the Depression and the circumstances we were in. But we were the type of people that would rise above that the first chance we got.

S.J.: But you don't feel that a lot of the other Okies were that way?

Farris: No.

S.J.: What kinds of people were they?

Farris: I think they were just people. They were good people, I don't mean to insinuate that they weren't. But they were content to stay at the same socio-economic level and apparently they never envisioned rising above that. I remember my dad saying, "I knew I would never be able to do anything for my children but I could at least bring them some place where they could do something for themselves." My parents felt they had to do something so that their children would have a better life and I have been the same way with mine. Their goal for us was to graduate from high school. My mother did too but my dad only went like to the sixth grade. He was an extremely intelligent man and he could have done a lot of things if he had had an education. All of us kids graduated from high school. My one sister went on to be a nurse. I was determined that my children were going to do better. My children have all graduated from college and they're very successful. One has gone on for a master's degree. We are extremely successful, very motivated, ambitious-type of people. When my son and I were talking about this all of a sudden I realized why I'm the way I am. He says he has always thought that he would go to college. It was just part of him from the time he was born. Our family was not content to just

stay down where we were in the Depression.

S.J.: You think a lot of the other people who came out here were content?

Farris: I think that was the difference in the classes, the different socio-economic levels of people. Poverty became the common denominator. It brought everybody down to their knees together. But as times began to change then those who were only down temporarily would come right back up to where they were before.

S.J.: These other people who didn't really want to rise above what they were became the stereotype for Okies in general. It sounds as though you probably resented it when people thought you were in the circumstance so that you must be like other Okies because you were in the same circumstances.

Farris: Exactly. When I read that article* in the paper the first thing that popped into my mind was that maybe that's an opportunity for me to let people know that we weren't all the same. Just like my mother-in-law, after all these years she's still lumping everybody into one category.

S.J.: Can you tell me what she said? Do you remember?

Farris: She was telling me about how some people that we knew in Avenal had lived in Taft before. I said, "I didn't know they lived in Taft, but I knew they had come from Texas." Then she just got started rambling on about how the people from Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas just came in and took over Taft. They just came out day by day in their old rattle trap cars and moved in and took over. By this time I thought I'm just going to listen to her and the longer she went on the more condescending she became. She was saying that the people were such low class people. Finally, I said that I knew exactly all about these kind of people because that's the way my family came to California. "Oh, is that so?" she said. She shut up and I'm not sure she ever even realized what or how she was putting it. I think that's the basis for my feelings about discrimination. I know what it feels like to be discriminated against just because you are from a certain place at a certain time. Even when we lived in Texas I was aware of discriminations. My mother was an Irish Catholic and my father had no particular religion in his family. When we went to the Catholic school because our name wasn't particularly Irish or German sounding they immediately assumed I wasn't Catholic. I remember the nun when I started the first grade. I was sitting in the back of the room and the nun looked up and said, "Are you one of us?" It made me feel so terrible. Then when we went to the public school you had to be very careful. I never would lie about my religion. I just didn't tell anybody I was Catholic. I remember one girl looking at me really funny and she said that Catholics looked just like everybody else. I think most everybody in some way has been discriminated against. So how could you do this to somebody else? That's why I feel so badly about the way people treat the Mexican people now

*Article about the Oral History Program in The Fresno Bee.

and the black people because I remember how it felt. And there just doesn't seem to be anything you can say to these people to make them realize you're just as good as they are. That was one of the reasons that I was kind of anxious to talk about this.

S.J.: Do you know how they knew that you were from Texas, from the dust bowl? Were there signs such as your accent?

Farris: Well, all you had to do was open your mouth.

S.J.: Your accent?

Farris: Oh yes. Every time I uttered a word that first year we were here somebody would say, "Oh, I can tell where you're from." The California voices sounded very harsh to me. My first day of school in California the girls' voices sounded so harsh. The first year I was here, my sister and I really worked at getting rid of our accent and by the end of a year nobody could tell. If I get very tired and my voice kind of drags a little bit I can hear it.

S.J.: So that was really a problem.

Farris: Oh, yes.

S.J.: Did this happen just in school or did you encounter this when you went into town, to the store or a public place?

Farris: I don't remember because we really didn't go anywhere besides school and in Tulare there were so many other people that were the same.

S.J.: I just wondered what people were saying these things.

Farris: It was students at school.

S.J.: You mentioned something earlier about the teachers too.

Farris: Yes. I can remember the first school we went to, Waukena. This teacher looked at me and said, "Why did your parents come to California?" I didn't know how to answer it. I started to try to tell her as best I could and she just had a kind of glazed look on her face. She never would give me any books. I would have to share books with the other students which meant I didn't have any to take home to try to catch up. It was as if I didn't exist.

S.J.: All the other children were given their own books?

Farris: They were given their own books; they were given paper; they were called on to recite, but we didn't exist.

S.J.: She did this to all the kids that were Okies?

- Farris: I'm not aware that there was anybody else in the class at that time besides me who was in the same circumstance. I was always used to being a good student, speaking up, reading and doing my homework. When we left there and went to Brawley we went through the same thing again. The teacher started me in arithmetic clear back at the beginning of the book. Every child was working at his own speed in arithmetic. She started me way back at the beginning but by the time we left in March I was not only caught up but I was almost through with my book. I remember making friends with one girl and I was very careful never to let her know where I lived. Finally not too long before we left there I told her where we lived and I can remember her looking at me and she was so surprised. "You don't look like one of those people."
- S.J.: That probably gave you very mixed feelings. On the one hand you thought, "Well, I'm glad I don't look like one of those people." But on the other hand those people were probably very nice and they shouldn't have been discriminated against.
- Farris: Yes. I have good friends now who were in the same position. They were about my age but I didn't know them then. We went through the same thing. There were those of us who did come up and those who simply stayed on as farm laborers all their lives. There was nothing wrong with it, it was a good life but some of us just weren't content to do that.
- S.J.: You said that as a child you never really felt that you had totally proven yourself. You had to keep trying over and over again.
- Farris: And it has affected me. It still affects me. I get into a new situation and my first reaction is that these people are so intelligent I could never be as good as they are. Every new group I get into I have to go through this.
- S.J.: You never had those feelings until you left Texas? When you first started school you were very confident?
- Farris: Very confident. I was the oldest grandchild and my grandfather was always very proud of me. He was always teaching me things and letting me look at his books and write with his paper. He was always telling me how smart I was. I believed him and I think that's probably one of the reasons I did well in school. I went in with such self-confidence. When I started school I knew all of my numbers up to 100. I could add and subtract. I can remember my fifth birthday, looking at my dad and saying, "In four years I'm going to be nine years old." I knew all my ABCs. I could read. I could read. I bugged everybody to the point that they would teach me. I had a good start in school and I was very confident. After my children got into school I was really lacking in self-confidence. I was married right out of high school and I had been home all those years. I started working in the PTA [Parent-Teacher Association]. I would do things and people would congratulate me and tell me what a good job I was doing. I used to

wonder why they were saying this. I really found it hard to believe that I could do something. When they wanted me to be the PTA president I was so scared but once I got started doing it I could do a good job. I went on until I worked in the state and national levels for eight years. I was a vice president on the Board of Directors. Yet even then I kept thinking to myself, "How am I fooling these people that they think I'm doing a good job?"

S.J.: Back when you were in school in California and these things would happen, did you still keep trying?

Farris: I kept trying.

S.J.: Did you eventually feel like you fit into your school?

Farris: It would always take awhile when I went into a new situation and it still does. It just takes me awhile before I feel that I'm good enough or that I'm capable of working with this particular group.

S.J.: How about your brothers and sisters. Do you remember if they had any problems like this?

Farris: No. We never talked about it. My sister that's just two years younger than I moved to Fresno last fall. For the first time since we're adults we're living close. Not too long ago she said that she was aware of all the problems that our family went through but she felt like she was apart from it. It was like a play being unfolded and she was watching it. I always felt the opposite. I felt I was part of it and I had a responsibility to try to make things better or do something about it. I didn't quite know how. I had all these feelings of inadequacy.

S.J.: Was there anyone that supported you? Were all the teachers condescending?

Farris: Oh no, just some of them and that was at the very beginning. Now when we moved back to Tulare after we went to Brawley we stayed in Tulare from May 1940 through the summer of 1942 which was for us a long time to stay in one place. As soon as we really got acquainted in this little school district and the teachers began to know us and see that we were good students then it was different. They didn't treat us badly. I think it was the students who moved on continuously that were the ones who suffered. I suspect that the migrant children are still treated that way to a great extent.

S.J.: How about the other migrant kids that you knew? You say you don't really remember any in the classroom.

Farris: Of course I only went to Waukena for six weeks and if there were others in my classroom I either don't remember or I wasn't aware of it. At Brawley in my particular classroom I don't know if there were any but there were certainly a lot of students in that school. It was

a huge city school so you know migrant children were probably spread out through the school. When we moved back to Tulare and went to this little country school there were some of the students whose parents owned the farms and then there were some students there whose fathers worked on farms like mine did. There were just the two kinds of kids. It was a small school. There were only five in my class when I graduated from the eighth grade. I'd say in the school there probably wasn't more than 50 or 60 students and two teachers.

S.J.: Did you feel that class division? You say some of the kids' fathers were farmers and others were workers. Was that very distinct for you?

Farris: Oh yes, that was very distinct for me.

S.J.: Were you friends with the children of the farm owners?

Farris: Oh yes, we were all friends. I don't think they felt the difference. I think I was the one that felt the difference. When we moved to Avenal in 1942 my father finally got a job with the Kettleman North Dome Association. It was an independent oil company and then Standard Oil bought them out. There really wasn't any class distinction in Avenal because everybody's father worked for Standard Oil. Some of them were a little higher up than others but there didn't seem to be any difference once we got away from the farm.

S.J.: We were talking about the first home you lived in and your father working on the farm where the Duncans lived. How long were you there?

Farris: About six weeks. From there we went to Brawley and we stayed there until March and then we came back to Tulare and we didn't move any more.

S.J.: And do you remember the living situation you had in Brawley?

Farris: Oh yes. In Brawley we lived in what they called the government camp.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about that?

Farris: Maybe it was because it was a tent and not a house, but for me, for our family, it was the most degrading experience of all. My husband doesn't know we lived there, my children didn't know. This is the first time I have ever said this out loud.

S.J.: As I understand it the government camps were very clean and nice.

Farris: They were, they were. It wasn't the physical environment so much as that we had simply been reduced to that. We had to live on handouts, on that surplus food. That was all we had to eat because my father earned practically nothing while we were down there. They would come around in those big trucks with canned milk and the raisins and the canned tomatoes. We would have starved to death if we hadn't had it.

There was a big platform made of wood about so high and it was painted. They gave you nice big tents and outside the tent area was a cooking area with cupboards. It was on cement. And there was water. Every so many tents there was a wash house. There were washing machines and stationary tubs to wash your clothes. There were hot showers in places and toilets. They were clean. And there was a recreation center.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

S.J.: So the physical part of it was really pretty nice?

Farris: Yes, yes.

S.J.: But that wasn't the problem.

Farris: Yes, in fact it was more comfortable and cleaner than that old house that we lived in. But we were all lumped together. As far as the town and the community was concerned it was a real stigma to have lived there. And of course they were all newly arrived people from Texas, Oklahoma, and Arkansas.

S.J.: Do you remember many of the other people that lived there? Were they like you? Or did you feel that some of them were the sort that didn't want to rise above it?

Farris: There were both kinds. There were some really nice people there. Some of them had trailer houses that they brought with them and parked along side the tent. There were all kinds of people there. The problem for us was that we were there for everybody to look at.

S.J.: It was a very public place.

Farris: Right. And then to have to depend on those handouts for food was just so degrading. We never talked about that. When we got back to Tulare we had a house. It wasn't all that nice but it was a house. I was very careful in Brawley. I had learned from experience you don't tell everything so I didn't tell any of the students or anybody in my class where I was from or where I lived. I made sure they didn't know. I don't remember now why I told a friend toward the end but I did. Once we left there I don't ever remember a conversation in our family about the fact that we lived there. This is the first time I've ever said this out loud to another human being. We just didn't talk about it.

S.J.: Did your parents ever say anything to you about it while you were there? Such as, "Things will get better?"

Farris: No. I realize and understand that his reason for going was that there were crops and he could earn a living. But there wasn't. I don't remember whether there was just not that much work or whether there were too many people for the amount of work or what but he worked very little while we were there.

S.J.: Do you remember what your parents did with their time then?

Farris: No, of course we were in school all day. It seemed like my dad was always off with some other men. I don't know what they were doing.

S.J.: Some of the people who lived in the government camps described some of the social activities they had and they said they had games for the children and dances for the adults at night.

Farris: Right. I can remember talent shows where everybody would get up and sing or do something. The physical environment and the people that we associated with in the camp weren't all that bad. It was when you had to go out and deal with the rest of the community that I had problems.

S.J.: You felt there was a stigma attached to that.

Farris: Oh yes, there definitely was. We didn't want the people back up in Tulare or anybody to know we'd ever lived like that.

S.J.: I guess it really bothered you then that you had to take food.

Farris: Oh yes.

S.J.: You felt like that was welfare.

Farris: It was welfare, there was no question about that. Even after we came back to Tulare, even though my father had a permanent job on a farm, during the winter months from December until when they started planting spring crops, about three months, we would have to get food stamps. That was terrible. This happened only about two winters but it seemed like forever. It was such a degrading experience. It was so difficult for us.

S.J.: Did you feel that other people found it very difficult and other people in your situation felt degraded by this?

Farris: I don't know. We never talked to them about it, or at least I didn't. Certainly we had food to eat as a result of having it but it was just what it does to you inside that makes it hard.

S.J.: Do you remember seeing any ditch camps where people would put tents or paper shacks by ditches or under bridges?

Farris: Oh yes, there was a lot of that. I was talking with a friend that was over here just about a week ago. Her family came from Kansas in 1935 and she was talking about living like that in the tents.

S.J.: But you remember seeing them?

Farris: Oh yes, everywhere. We even had those in Texas the last few years we were

there. People were living like that, especially near creeks because there would be water.

S.J.: Did you know any people that lived like that?

Farris: I was not acquainted with them.

S.J.: That must have made you feel fortunate.

Farris: Right, we were better off than they were.

S.J.: Even though you didn't like living in the government camps you had a lot more than some people did.

Farris: If you were going to have to live in a tent you were better off living in a government camp than you were just along side the road or along the edge of the fields. They had no sanitary conditions.

S.J.: Did you hear that there was a lot of disease?

Farris: I don't remember hearing that. I'm sure there must have been. These people didn't have access to the medical help that we had. We had doctors at the government camp.

S.J.: Did you have opportunity to use the doctors?

Farris: Oh yes. If you had a cold all you had to do was go down and they would take care of you.

Farris: How about the other times in California when you weren't in the government camp? Did you have a regular doctor or did you get medical attention only for emergencies?

Farris: It was just for emergencies. We were quite healthy. I don't recall any serious illnesses. I'm sure we went to a clinic where probably the doctors were donating their time, or maybe they were paid by the government.

S.J.: Do you remember what you did in your spare time then?

Farris: I worked in the fall when there was cotton to pick. It seemed to me I never had a problem finding anything to do because I was always reading or sewing. Or maybe I'd find some girl friends to talk to or go for walks with. When we came back to Tulare we lived in the country and the houses were not that close together.

S.J.: When you came back to Tulare and went back in school did you have any problems then?

Farris: No, not too much. It was a small country school where there were only 50 or 60

kids and things got better after that.

S.J.: But you still have memories of things that happened to you before that. Were you a little sensitive about it sometimes?

Farris: Oh, I'm sure I was. There's no doubt about that. Yes, I'm sure I was probably overly sensitive. I think it probably bothered me more than it did others in the same circumstances, probably even more than some of my brothers and sisters. Of course, they were younger. Maybe if I had been younger I wouldn't have been as much aware of it.

S.J.: We were talking about the term "Okie" and you said that you were from Texas and it always bothered you when people would assume that you were from Oklahoma.

Farris: Texas people are very proud. I'm sure Oklahoma people are too, but we didn't know that. We were very proud that we were from Texas. When you're in the fifth grade you study Texas history before you study U.S. history. The people that lived just to the north of us across the border into Oklahoma were even poorer than we were. When we came to California there was not a slang word for Texans. But if you were from Oklahoma you were an Okie, if you were from Arkansas you were an Arkie and those were not good terms. If anybody ever got you confused you let them know right away that you were from Texas. There was just a feeling that maybe you were just a little bit better, maybe you were just a notch above them. And when you're really down any little thing that makes you feel that you're pretty good is important.

S.J.: People would assume from your accent you're an Okie.

Farris: There is a difference in accents. There was a time I could tell you if somebody was from Texas, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Alabama or Mississippi. I really was aware of accents at that time. Even now I can tell there's a difference. There's a very distinct difference between Oklahoma and Texas. And of course, Texas is such a large state that you have people with different accents within the state. Now our relatives from south Texas talked different than we did.

S.J.: Do you remember if there were other ways that they could single you out?

Farris: I really don't know. I wasn't aware of it.

S.J.: How long was it before you really considered yourself a Californian?

Farris: Probably by eighth grade, 1942. In this small school where I graduated from the eighth grade I liked the people and I began to feel that that was home. In fact, I was very upset when my family moved to Avenal. It's very nice and green in Tulare, it's a very beautiful area. I had become acquainted with the people and I was just going to start high

school there. Then we had to move to Avenal and it was starting all over again. I didn't know anybody and the area was very ugly, very dry and brown and barren. It took just about one more year when I first started over there before I cared whether I had any friends. I did well in school. I concentrated on my school work and by the end of the year I had some friends and I was all right then.

S.J.: Back to your father's job when he went down to Brawley and came back up here. How did he know where to find work? Was it through a grapevine? People would just hear about jobs?

Farris: At that time of the year they were picking the beans and the lettuce.

S.J.: They knew where to go?

Farris: They knew where to go, right. You just went out and hired on by the day. When we came back to Tulare he came back to the same place where we were before. The people knew of another farmer who needed a permanent ranch hand. It was just a few miles north. They sent us over there and it was very lucky because we came up at the right time. We moved into this house and we lived there for about two and a half years. That was probably the best thing that happened to us at that time.

S.J.: That was a permanent job, but were there some slack seasons?

Farris: Yes, it was permanent as long as he worked, but there were times in the year when there wasn't any work to do.

S.J.: And that's when you had to take some aid?

Farris: Yes. That's when we had the food stamps. But they furnished us a house with utilities. It was the old home on the ranch. In the meantime they had built a new one for the people that owned it. The house wasn't all that bad. It had two stories and was very comfortable. Things began to look up then.

S.J.: Even though you said your family never talked about things, do you have any insight as to how your father felt about this? He was the bread winner, he was the one who had to support his wife and children.

Farris: As my son was saying to me the other day, that must have torn his insides out. My younger brother is so much like my father that I'm just beginning to look at my younger brother and maybe understand my father a little bit. He was an extremely quiet person, very gentle and sensitive. I suspect I'm a lot like him. He never talked, just never talked. My younger brother is the same way. He never talks about anything. He was over here to visit a couple weeks ago and my sister came over. We sat here in the living room listening to some new country music records. All of a sudden my brother started talking about country music. There isn't a country music singer that ever lived that he doesn't know everything about and if they're dead he knows what they died of. We

sat here all afternoon listening to him. So if I had known years ago a little more of what I know now I could have talked to my father and drawn him out. I could have learned a lot. But I just didn't know enough to do that. And he just never talked. I know when we were in Texas he played the violin. They called it a fiddle. He played Blue Grass music. I can remember people coming to the house and getting him to play for dances. He didn't bring his violin with him to California so he never played his violin here. Of course, he had no way to bring it with him so he never played his music any more. I know that he liked to listen to music. My sister can remember him sitting by the radio, listening and keeping in beat with that music.

S.J.: Did the family ever sing?

Farris: No, we didn't seem to have any talent at all for singing. That's one of my real regrets. I wish I had known enough [to talk to my father]. My father was 35 when I was born and he died in 1973 at 80. He was very ill a couple of years before he died. I was married very young and moved away from the family home and wasn't around him all that much. But as I look back now there's so much I'd like to know that I could have talked to him about it. He just wasn't the kind to open his mouth and volunteer anything.

S.J.: But it sounds as though he took the responsibility as head of the family very seriously.

Farris: Oh he did, yes.

S.J.: And it pained him as much or more than it did you when he had to take a little aid.

Farris: Oh yes.

S.J.: I've heard that a lot of men who were heads of families and who had a great deal of responsibility couldn't find jobs and when times were rough they turned to the bottle and drank a lot.

Farris: Yes, my father did. My father was one who liked his booze. He never became an alcoholic. He loved his booze. He would tell you he just liked a good drink during those first few years that we were here. I think a lot of the men would get-together when they didn't have any work and they would drink wine. They drank it because it was probably cheap. I can remember him coming home when he could hardly get in the door. It was a problem but it didn't tear up the family or anything.

S.J.: Did he seem to get over that when he found more permanent employment?

Farris: Oh yes. He would still drink once in a while with his friends and maybe get a little too much now and then but it was not a regular thing. Even back then it was never a regular thing. I think it was just from lack of something else to do.

- S.J.: Did you ever know of any or hear of any men who became alcoholics?
- Farris: I'm not personally aware of any. You didn't have to be poor to become an alcoholic. My husband's father died an alcoholic and the man never had a financial problem in his life. He liked his booze and liked too much of it.
- S.J.: Do you remember what he did with his time in the slack seasons? When you had to take a little help was he constantly looking for work?
- Farris: That would only be for three months or not even that long. It was when it was raining and the weather was bad. I can remember him being around the house or in the barn outside. Or he'd go off to town or talk with other men in the neighborhood. There were a couple of other families who did the same type of work that we were friendly with at that time and he'd visit them.
- S.J.: Do you remember if he ever said whether the ranchers and growers treated him well or not?
- Farris: No, he never talked about anything like that. These are the kinds of things I would like to talk to him about now.
- S.J.: Do you have any hint just from what you've heard or from what you've seen as a child whether the bosses treated people well?
- Farris: Of course, the only one we had for those two and a half years treated us well. They were nice people. My dad was a good worker, a hard worker, and this man really came to depend on him.
- S.J.: Did he ever tell you much about the kind of work he did? Did he do just about anything they needed at the time?
- Farris: Oh yes, he plowed, planted the cotton and irrigated the crops. There was alfalfa and hay to mow. They would have to gather that in. He ran the tractors. He did whatever work had to be done.
- S.J.: When you worked what did you do?
- Farris: I picked cotton on Saturday and Sunday. That's terrible work. I remember working in the fruit one summer. My mother and us kids cut apricots. They would bring them in from the field to a big open shed and we'd cut the apricots in half. They were going to dry them I think. I remember doing that one summer for a while.
- S.J.: A lot of people have told me about the diet that a lot of newcomers from Oklahoma and Texas had that was a little bit different from the diet that Californians had. Could you tell me a little bit more about that? You mentioned a little bit about the pork and beans.
- Farris: I can tell you exactly. For breakfast we would have bacon, biscuits,

gravy and coffee. Then at noon time there would always be beans, probably some corn bread and some fried potatoes or boiled potatoes, mostly fried potatoes. Then our evening meal would usually be eggs, potatoes, gravy and more biscuits and milk. Now in the summer there would be fresh vegetables at the noon meal. Sometimes there would be canned fruits. They would butcher the hogs and then cure the meat because that's the only way they had of keeping it. So we would have pork. After we came to California eventually we started eating more eggs and bacon for breakfast, sandwiches at noon. We had breakfast, lunch and dinner in California rather than breakfast, dinner and supper in Texas. When we first came to California, the first summer we lived in Tulare, there were Japanese with little truck gardens. They would have a few acres and sell the produce at the side of the road. My mother and I would go to town during the middle of the week and buy groceries and I can remember buying ten pounds of tomatoes for 25¢. We bought all kinds of vegetables, so our diet did change.

S.J.: Do you think it changed for the better?

Farris: Oh yes.

S.J.: Some of the children seemed to have health problems when they came out here because their diet had been deficient in vitamins and minerals.

Farris: Oh yes. I have a denture today because of that. Bad teeth was probably one of the biggest problems.

S.J.: Did you hear very much about other kids having health problems?

Farris: It was common. I think the teeth was the big problem because they didn't have enough milk and vitamins in their earlier years.

S.J.: We were talking about when you had the food stamps. Do you think that lots of other people were in the same position?

Farris: Anybody who was involved in any kind of farm work had to have the food stamps in the wintertime.

S.J.: But that didn't make you feel any better.

Farris: No. I am not personally aware of who had them and who didn't. It's something you didn't talk about.

S.J.: But you knew a lot of people did.

Farris: I knew they probably had to. My grandfather came from Texas to visit us one winter and my mother was so embarrassed for him to know that that's the way we bought our groceries.

S.J.: Do you remember his reaction?

Farris: No, I don't. I don't know that he even knew it. Maybe she was afraid

he'd find out. It was just something she didn't want him to know.

S.J.: Do you remember your father coming home and talking attempts to unionize the farm workers?

Farris: No. I don't think that was ever even heard of back then.

S.J.: How about strikes? Do you recall any strikes in that area?

Farris: No, I wasn't even aware there was such a word.

S.J.: We talked about the schools and some of the problems you had to begin with. Can you remember other places you went, other public places where you might have had other problems?

Farris: No, I don't remember any problems. We would usually go to town once a week to buy the groceries and then shop and that was really about the only place we ever went. I'm not aware of any problems. As I look back now, since Tulare is a little farm town half the people there were probably just like us.

S.J.: How about going to church?

Farris: That was a strange experience. In Texas we didn't go to church regularly. We always lived so far away. We went to church regularly in Tulare but I don't remember anybody ever speaking to us. For the most part the people that were Catholics in Tulare were Portuguese people. They were farmers, dairy farmers and business people. I don't recall while we lived there anybody ever even speaking to us.

S.J.: How long did you go to church there?

Farris: About two years.

S.J.: And that was probably something your family didn't talk about?

Farris: Oh no, we didn't talk about that. Somehow I guess we just didn't expect them to speak to us. I don't recall ever expecting them to.

S.J.: So you didn't feel inclined to approach them and start speaking to them?

Farris: No. I don't know if you're familiar with the Catholic Church. They're friendlier now, but they didn't tend to do any socializing together then.

S.J.: Were there other people in your circumstance that attended church?

Farris: I'm not aware of any. There were very few Catholic people. I'm not even aware of being acquainted with any other people who were Catholics who were farm workers.

S.J.: Have you ever seen the movie The Grapes of Wrath?

Farris: Yes. I've seen the movie twice. Some day I want to read the book but I just haven't gotten around to looking for it. I saw The Grapes of Wrath the first time when we'd been in California less than a year. It was in 1940. We came out in the fall of 1939 and this was in 1940 when we were still down at Brawley. And believe you me, that was a painful experience. I didn't see the movie again until the 1950s over in Avenal. I was able to appreciate it a little more that time.

S.J.: Do you remember very much about the first time that you saw it? Do you remember things in it that really bothered you?

Farris: Yes. The way they came to California in that terrible old truck. The police were always after them and they were treated so terribly. I just identified with all of that. There have been many times I've said the only difference between us and the Joad Family was that at least we had a place to come to.

S.J.: Did the language they used bother you?

Farris: I don't remember the language bothering me. I'm not aware of it.

S.J.: Or some of their morals?

Farris: Of course, it's probably been 20 years or so since I've seen it.

S.J.: For instance, they buried someone along the side of the road on the way out here.

Farris: But they didn't have any choice. That was my feeling. I don't remember anything like that bothering me. I just sort of sympathized with the people.

S.J.: Do you feel there were very many Okies like that?

Farris: I think there were a lot, yes. At least that was my feeling. There were a lot of people like that. It made me feel a little more fortunate.

S.J.: But you still didn't consider yourself like them?

Farris: No. I never considered myself any different than when we were in Texas and considered somebody. Inside I always knew I was somebody and I could just never figure out why these people looked at us like they did.

S.J.: It sounds as though in Texas you were poor in terms of monetary things.

Farris: Right.

S.J.: But you say you still were an important part of the community. People

knew who you were and they treated you with respect.

Farris: Right. In the south there is a lot of class distinction. My mother's family were prominent people in the community. They had a nice farm, nice clothes and a nice home. My grandfather was very active in Democratic politics and in the Catholic Church. Everybody knew who they were and they were well respected. My father's family were also prominent people in the community. His family was quite well off around the Civil War and after the Civil War they came to Texas and bought land. He had instilled in him that same kind of pride that made you just feel that you were somebody. There may be a lot of other people below you but you were up higher. When we came to California we still felt that way inside, but we were reduced to the same level as all the other people. That was the painful part about it.

S.J.: And that happened immediately?

Farris: Yes. At eleven years old, to me it was a big adventure. But when you arrived it was as though you were thrown into another world and there was no way to get out and no way to go back.

S.J.: You probably did want to go back.

Farris: Oh, I wanted to go back so bad. A lot of people did go back, they couldn't stand it. They went back but my family never considered it.

S.J.: You knew people who went back to Texas?

Farris: Oh, yes and Oklahoma. A lot of the people couldn't take it. They didn't stay. They got back the best way they could, but my family never considered it. My dad was just so sure he was better off and he did what he thought was best.

S.J.: It sounds as though you were pretty disappointed with California.

Farris: Terribly disappointed. We were terribly disillusioned, at least I was.

S.J.: Were there any good things that came out of it at the time?

Farris: At the time I couldn't think of anything good. There was nothing good. It just seemed like life was so hard.

S.J.: You didn't expect to find anything like this either.

Farris: I don't think that I ever thought about what I expected to find at that age. I can remember we'd been here about two years. I have a cousin who was about two or three years older than me and she married when she was fifteen. I can remember her writing to us and she and her husband wanting to come out. My parents were so horrified that we just wrote back to her and told her, "Don't you dare leave." People

were living in ditch banks and tents and we explained to her that she would be in for the same thing. And they didn't come either.

S.J.: When World War II came did your father make a lot more money and things get better?

Farris: Oh yes. For the first time in his life he was making a decent living. They worked a lot of overtime during the war too. They'd work ten days straight with one day off. They owned their home and had nice cars and lived like everybody else lived.

S.J.: So in terms of you particular family circumstances the war did a lot for you.

Farris: Financially yes, and we didn't have anybody in the war.

S.J.: You father was too old to go into the service?

Farris: He was too old. At that point we had no close family in the war. We had some cousins from Texas that were in the war, but nobody in our immediate family.

S.J.: Has your life changed a lot since then? It sounds as though up until World War II you lived one life and it's been totally different since then.

Farris: I was married right out of high school.

S.J.: Was that just after the war?

Farris: Yes, the war ended the summer of 1945. He came home in December 1945 on leave from overseas. He was in the CB's [Construction Battalion]. He got out of the service in March 1946 and then we were married in June 1946 two weeks after I graduated from high school. I just think of my life in two parts: up until I met him and since then. We bought a brand new home in Avenal. His father worked for Standard Oil all those years and they were always used to a better standard of living than my family had. We bought a new home and we lived there eleven years until we moved into this house which was a brand new home too. He always made a good living. We never had a lot of money but we've had a good living. We have a nice home and a trailer house over at the coast. We have a really good life now and it's just continually gotten better. We have four children. The oldest one went to Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University]. He's a mechanical engineer and lives in North Carolina. He was recruited at Cal Poly by an eastern firm that's part of ITT [International Telephone and Telegraph]. Our youngest is our daughter. She went to Cal Poly three years and then she married a young man who was graduating. They moved to Modesto and she worked for three years. Now they've moved to San Diego so she can go back to school full time. She has this semester of classes, the summer and one more semester to graduate. Then she's going to be a

chiropractor so she'll have four years of medical school after that. She's determined to continue until she reaches her goal. One of my sons went to Occidental and got his master's degree at University of California, Santa Barbara. He was one of the ten selected to go directly into a Ph.D. program at UC Santa Barbara. I have four really bright kids. When he got his master's degree they recommended that he work awhile because he was so young and then he never went back. I wished he had gone ahead and finished it but he didn't. My other son that went to Occidental owns a film company here in town. He and his wife and another couple started on a shoe string five years ago. We didn't expect they'd ever do well. They are now really doing well. They do documentaries and commercials. Now they're doing commercials on a nation-wide basis. My daughter-in-law is back in Wisconsin this week doing some seminars on showing people how to use the commercials that they made for them. They have a project that they're going to take to China and they've been to Europe to do filming. His office is the whole top floor of a bank building downtown. We just can't believe it.

S.J.: You must be really proud of them.

Farris: Oh, I'm really proud of them, yes. It was like one generation working totally to push the next generation ahead. My son said he just didn't ever remember when he wasn't planning to go to college. My other son has said that it just never occurred to him that he wasn't going. I said it was because the day you were born when I was bathing you I whispered into your ear, "You will go to college, you will go to college!" We moved to Fresno to get them out of Avenal. We moved to this part of town so they would be associating with the type of people who go to college. They graduated from Bullard High School. The northwest section of Fresno is where all the people who go to college live. Every move we made was just to push those kids one step higher. We weren't ostentatious about it. We didn't say this is why we're doing it, we just did it. It never occurred to them that there was any other way to go.

S.J.: That sense of upward mobility really carried on.

Farris: I was married right out of high school but I took a course in sociology at City College last year. I was so amazed because I was learning all of the things I've been doing and why I was doing it. Also I learned that in one generation you can only push so far forward. My parents only had the ability to push us so far. Their goal for us was to graduate from high school because that was more than they had. The goal my husband and I had for our children was to go to college because that would open doors that we never had. My husband is very successful in his work and he makes a tremendous salary. He's a construction superintendent and if he ever broke a leg or something [we would have trouble]. There isn't the security in the type of work he does that there is for somebody who is trained professionally in college. Our son who's the mechanical engineer is only 33 years old and he's head of the engineering division for that big company. He has 80 or 90

engineers under him. He took a fellow's who was about 55 or 60 years old. He's still going up the ladder. We got them started and they're continuing.

S.J.: That's great. That should make up for all of those bad feelings you had when you were a little girl.

Farris: Right. Maybe I couldn't do it but at least I put my children in the position to do it.

S.J.: As a child you wanted to go back to Texas, but now after all this has happened and you feel that you've had a good life and your children have been so successful are you glad that you came to California?

Farris: I can't honestly say so. It's very hard to say that because I love it here and I would have no desire to change. I think I would have been just as well off had we stayed in Texas or had we gone back. I look at the other members of my father's family and my mother's family and they've done the same thing. They came back after the Depression and their children have gone to college and are successful. We haven't done anything that they didn't do back there.

S.J.: Do you have any desire to go back now to see what it's like?

Farris: Oh, it's one of the strongest desires I have in the world, yes.

S.J.: Maybe even see if you can find the house that you lived in.

Farris: Exactly. That's the first thing I'm going to do. I'm sure it isn't there. It was an old shack a long time ago but my husband has promised me when he retires we will.

S.J.: And you've most of your family back there?

Farris: All of my family is back there.

S.J.: You have ties.

Farris: All of my family is back there. All of the relatives I have except for my own brothers and sisters who are here.

S.J.: When you were a child and you were having problems in school did they ever use the word "Okie" when they teased you?

Farris: I don't remember any one ever calling me an Okie because I never let anybody get mixed up the fact that I was a Texan. I was so proud of that. As far as I knew they always knew I was from Texas. I do know that the term was used an awful lot.

S.J.: Can you think of the connotations that it had?

Farris: Almost the same way a lot of people think of the Mexican children now.

S.J.: Do you think that the term Okie has changed since then? That if some one says "Okie" now it means something different?

Farris: I don't ever hear it used any more. If an older person used it they would mean it in the same way my mother-in-law did a couple weeks ago when we were having that conversation. I know in her mind she was using the term Okie the same way she would have used it thirty or forty years ago.

S.J.: She still used the term in a very negative way. Do you think people still feel that way?

Farris: I think the people who lived at that time still do. I don't think that older people change that much. I know my mother still has the same prejudices and biases that she had back in her younger years. I can't see that she or my husband's mother have ever changed as far as their ideas are concerned.

END OF INTERVIEW

Julius Lafayette Jarrell
b. 1892, Henrietta, Clay Co.,
Texas
[His parents from Alabama & Texas]

Margaret Noema Naughton
b. 1899, Edina, Knox County,
Missouri
[Her parents from Missouri]

Goldie Mae Jarrell

b. 1927, Gainesville, Cooke County,
Texas

Education: 12th grade

Church: Catholic

m. 1946

John S. Farris

b. 1924, Taft, California

Michael Keith Farris
b. 1947
Engineer

David Louis Farris
b. 1950
Teacher/counselor

John Steven Farris
b. 1949
Owner, media services co.

Catherine Anne Farris Curry
b. 1956
College student

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