

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Ethel Oleta Wever Belezzuoli

PLACE OF BIRTH: Marlow, Stephens Co., Oklahoma

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: March 18 and April 10, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Tipton, Tulare County

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TRANSCRIBER: Barbara J. Mitchell

PREFACE

Mrs. Belezzuoli is the Postmaster of Tipton, California and lives with her husband, a retired farmer, in a comfortable home there. She is a very busy person and made special arrangements for the interviews. Mrs. Belezzuoli was very friendly and open and did not seem to censor any of her recollections. She did not think that her experiences were particularly unique and did not feel that what she had to say was of much consequence. At one point she became upset--when talking about her mother's death.

Stacey Jagels
Interviewer

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INTERVIEWEE: Oleta Belezzuoli (Age: 62)

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: March 18, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Oleta Belezzuoli for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at 710 Lerda, Tipton, California on Wednesday, March 18, 1981 at 1:30 p.m.

S.J.: I thought that first we'd start off with when and where you were born and maybe a little bit about your childhood.

Belezzuoli: I was born out in the country near a small town, Marlow, Oklahoma. My sister and my brother were fifteen and sixteen so I was almost like a grandchild. My earliest memory is that we were living in the town of Duncan, Oklahoma and I had a very great childhood. I was thirteen when we moved out to the country. My dad decided he would be a farmer again and unfortunately that was in the first year of the great drought.

S.J.: You said before you were thirteen you lived in Duncan. What did your father do then?

Belezzuoli: He worked for the city of Duncan. He repaired roads and oiled machinery and whatever else was needed. I don't know what you would call his position.

S.J.: Was that a very large town?

Belezzuoli: It was probably the size Tulare would have been at that time. I don't really remember. It was a middle-size town.

S.J.: You lived in a house in town there. Do you remember much about that time?

Belezzuoli: Sure. I was about ten blocks from school and I skated to school. The school I attended only went to the sixth grade. I remember the May Day. We had a king and queen and we made Maypoles and everybody dressed in cute little uniforms. It was a very happy time.

S.J.: Do you remember whether your family was very well off financially while your father was working for the city?

Belezzuoli: No. We were very middle class. We weren't poor but we weren't well-to-do. We were just a normal family.

S.J.: You said you had two siblings that were quite a bit older than you.

Belezzuoli: My brother and my sister.

S.J.: So there were just three of you.

Belezzuoli: Yes. My earliest recollection of them is that they were married and away from home.

S.J.: Do you think of yourself as being raised as an only child?

Belezzuoli: No, because my parents raised my sister's three children. They were like my brothers and sisters. There were two girls and a boy not a great deal younger than I was.

S.J.: Did you have some added responsibility because they were younger?

Belezzuoli: Sometimes during the harder times I would resent the fact that perhaps I had to do without things--as all children do. All children are selfish.

S.J.: Do you remember the sorts of things you did in your spare time? Were there clubs to join?

Belezzuoli: After I was married and went back to Oklahoma once I talked to one of my earliest teachers and she remembered my mother and me--which I thought after all those years was rather a remarkable thing. I'm not a shy person but what I did during the summers was lay out on the porch swing and read. I love to read. I'd walk to the library everyday and get two books. I'd read them and then I would go back the next day. And I ate lots of ice. I remember going to the icebox and chipping little cups of ice and eating out on the front porch.

S.J.: Did you go to church then?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes, my family were Baptists.

S.J.: Was that an important part of your life?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. My mother always had someone home for dinner on Sundays. She always cooked a big dinner and then after we moved to the country she played the organ at the little churches we attended. After we moved to the country we attended whatever church was there.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about living in the country? How that changed the way you lived?

Belezzuoli: I loved it. I love animals. Of course, being a city child I have never been around very many big animals. When we first moved to the country we had mules and I learned to drive them. We had cows and I learned to milk them, unfortunately. I had to milk them in the morning. And we had all kinds of chickens. We lived in a very nice home. The one thing we didn't have was a telephone. Of course, I don't remember that we had a telephone at my other house in town. We didn't have indoor plumbing except we did have water in the kitchen in the sink. When we moved out to the country we had no electricity so my father fixed my mother's washing machine to run on a gasoline motor and tried to buy her an iron that she could iron with by pumping up some kind of gas. It was a kerosene iron I think, but I don't know. And I had my first experience with the sad irons because someone had given my mother some of those old irons that you put on top of your wooden stove to get hot and iron with. I had lots of pets and pigs and we all worked.

We all went out and helped chop the cotton. I got to drive the mules and ride on the go-devil which is a little tiny type of a cultivator with a little seat on it and it sits very low. It had two little blades that went along in front and cut down the weeds and then there was a little disk that disked behind. I thought that was really great. It was lots of fun. We worked hard.

S.J.: What made your father decide to leave the city job?

Belezzuoli: There had been a change in administrations and my father was getting close to sixty I think. I don't really know. So he lost his job. He had worked there many years but when you get new city managers and they have jobs they have promised, it's the old political game. So my dad had been a farmer in his early life and he decided he would go back.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about your mother and father? Were they both native Oklahomans or had they moved there?

Belezzuoli: My father was born in Arkansas and my mother was born in Texas. A cousin has done a family history of my family. My parents married quite young. I think my dad was 21 and my mother was 15 or so when they married. Early in their marriage they went out to no man's land in Texas and they homesteaded some property. They tried to make a go of it out there but apparently it didn't work out too well. I have a picture of the half dugout that families had to live in out on those plains to keep the cold wind out. They dug dugouts and had half of a house. They lived there early in their marriage and then sometime later they came back to Oklahoma. I was born there close to Duncan.

S.J.: When your father went back to farming after working for the city was he a tenant farmer?

Belezzuoli: Yes. We leased a place from this man. And we bought all of his equipment and whatever he had--animals and the whole works. This was in the early years of the drought and this man hadn't made it. My dad was always an optimist. It's got to rain someday.

S.J.: So all of you helped out including your mother?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. We all worked.

S.J.: How about school--did working interfere with your schooling?

Belezzuoli: We had a school bus. School was probably six or eight miles from where we lived. I never did not attend school.

S.J.: So you never had to stay out of school for harvesting or anything like that?

Belezzuoli: One period my mother had a real serious illness and she was in the hospital. I did have to stay home portions of that quarter but I caught up. My parents understood well that there was never any question that we would attend school. That was something we did.

S.J.: How about your chores? You described milking cows. Did you feel you had a great deal of work to do or did you just take it in stride?

Belezzuoli: No, it was just something to do. Now and then I wanted to go out early to the church but the cow had to be milked.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit about the house you lived in? You said it was a very nice house except that there was no electricity.

Belezzuoli: Yes, considering how most farmhouses were at that time I

thought it was a very nice house. Although we had to use the front room as my bedroom, it had a separate entrance. There were two other bedrooms and a large room which would have been a family room. We did have beds in it because now and then it wasn't really big enough for all of us. Then there was a kitchen with a big wooden stove. We had lamps with globes.

S.J.: You said it was nicer than most other farmhouses that you had seen. Did you feel that you were a little bit better off than other farm families?

Belezzuoli: Some. Some new friends I made and I went home to spend the night with weren't quite so well off.

S.J.: Did you have money for extra things then?

Belezzuoli: No, I don't believe so. I remember some magazine salesman came by and he took two chickens so we could get the Ladies Home Journal for a year. There wasn't any money. No one had any money that I recall.

S.J.: A lot of people have told me that they bartered just as you described. Do you remember that going on quite a bit?

Belezzuoli: Not really. My parents never let the children know if we were hard up. They had to let us know to some extent, but there was never any issue made out of it.

S.J.: Do you ever remember hard times as far as food was concerned? At the time did you feel you had enough to eat?

Belezzuoli: When we moved to the country I believe we ate better than I ever remember. My mother raised chickens in a little brooder. We had fried chicken that you wouldn't believe. My parents always raised a big garden and we had grain to feed the pigs and we had our own pork. So really we only had to buy the sugar, the flour and the basics. My mother would take cream or eggs to town to trade for sugar and flour. I don't believe we were ever to the point where we were starving or hungry or deprived in that sense. But as I said there wasn't money. No one went to shows and no one went here or there. We went to church.

S.J.: Church was your main social outlet then?

Belezzuoli: Yes, it was.

S.J.: Did you go to church every Sunday when you lived out in the country?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes.

S.J.: Some people have told me about revivals that were held every summer. Do you remember going to those?

Belezzuoli: Yes. I think all fundamental churches have revivals. When we moved to the country one place didn't even have a church. They had a little arbor. They put posts up and then they put branches over it and the people met there in this grove of trees. It was just a beautiful place--especially in the early spring and summer. It was along the river. A preacher would come through and he'd hold a revival for a week at a time. My mother always brought the preacher home for dinner. My mother was a great cook. And as I said she played the organ. She felt very responsible.

S.J.: How about your father? Did he feel that he was a big part of the community too?

Belezzuoli: Not in the sense that my mother did. He was not what I would call a religious person. My mother's family was more oriented toward church than my dad was. His family was not. He went to church every Sunday with everybody--like all of us. It was how the community got to know each other.

S.J.: Do you remember very many social things connected with the church such as suppers or things like that?

Belezzuoli: Box socials, yes. If there was a revival then they'd have everyone bring food and they would have big potluck dinners. Then they had pie socials and box socials to raise money. I was thirteen when we moved out. Back in those days a girl of fourteen was fairly adult -- I think perhaps more so than the children today although some of them think they are. I made friends and got to go spend the night with friends and go to the parties. My parents--my mother particularly--was against dancing. In her church she didn't believe that you could dance but I did go to some dances. She was never anyone to push that much for herself. Each adult had his or her own opinion and she didn't try to force her views on me.

S.J.: You mentioned that you read quite a bit as a child. Did that continue on when you were a teenager?

Belezzuoli: Yes, I loved to read.

S.J.: Did you enjoy school then?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes, I always loved school. I did fairly well in all classes except math perhaps. Of course, in Oklahoma children were required to have four years of history, four years of math and four years of English or English literature. When I moved

to California I was a year ahead of most classes. In fact, my my last year at Porterville I took mostly electives. I had some typing and cooking with freshmen. I had so many freshmen classes but that was because I had had all my solids so I didn't need to take any more.

S.J.: It sounds like your life on the farm was kind of an idyllic life. But what happened when the drought came?

Belezzuoli: I don't know if we stayed at the first place one or two years because children don't really know or care. We moved to another place. The house wasn't nearly so nice but it wasn't that bad. My mother was a very clean person. It doesn't matter where she lived. The place was clean so it wasn't that bad. But we moved to a small place. I remember the first sandstorm that I had anything to do with. We were walking home. Of course, we walked a lot then. There were cars and we had a car, but people thought nothing of walking. Everybody walked. So we were walking home probably three or four miles and this huge, huge black cloud came. We thought it was going to be a thunderstorm or a rainstorm but it was only dust. And it just blotted out the sun. It was just like night. People had to use their car lights. The town lights went on. It was very, very bad but then there would be awhile without any storms. Then we'd have more sandstorms and more sandstorms. Afterwards sand piled up two feet high in front of your door. It went through your windows and everyplace. It just permeated everything. Those were bad.

S.J.: Do you remember your father talking very much about how that affected the crops?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. The big question was, "Will it rain?" We noticed every little cloud. But it didn't rain. There was quite a long period there that it didn't rain. The farmers would sow their crops. I shouldn't say there was no rain because I remember my dad did grow some broomcorn and cotton. I remember those two crops. It was very exciting for the young girls in the community when the broomcorn johnnies came. Broomcorn that they make brooms out of grew up and then someone would go along and bend some of them to make a table and then other ones would come along and cut them and lay them on top until the wagons came along and laid them down. Then they were put in drying racks in big sheds to dry. So crews of broomcorn johnnies--as they called them--would join a crew and they'd go from town to town and farmer to farmer. All the women would go and help whoever was having them that day cook the dinner. The young girls would serve and get to meet all the handsome men. That was interesting for me too. I liked that.

S.J.: But as the storms grew worse and the drought grew worse what happened to your financial situation?

Belezzuoli: I rather imagine it was pretty bad.

S.J.: But your parents didn't talk about it?

Belezzuoli: No. But of course we were in the same position that everyone else was in. We weren't unique so the men all talked and the women all talked and the children had fun.

S.J.: But you still remember having enough to eat and the necessities?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. The necessities. I remember my mother did sell some chickens to buy me a dress so I could be in a play. I needed a new dress and there wasn't the money and I think probably the dress cost \$1.50. Things were cheap. She did sell some chickens that time so I could have my new dress to be in the play. The school was putting on a play and I was in it. But we always managed. Back then neighbors were most helpful. Everybody helped everybody else.

S.J.: Do you remember helping neighbors do work in the fields and then having them come over to your fields?

Belezzuoli: My dad would go over and help a neighbor with whatever had to be done and they would in turn come and help him get out a crop.

S.J.: Were there other ways that neighbors would help one another?

Belezzuoli: I can't really think of any except that people were close.

S.J.: Was there much more of a community feeling than there is here in California?

Belezzuoli: Yes.

S.J.: Did you feel like your family really belonged to that community and was a part of it? I've heard some people say that they had such a community feeling in Oklahoma and that when they came to California they lost that. They were very much alone. Did you feel that way too?

Belezzuoli: Yes. There was quite a bit of resentment because jobs were hard to find here at that time. There were people out of work. I heard some remarks that they wanted to stop people at the border.

S.J.: Some people have said tractors started coming on the scene about the time of the drought and that's one of the reasons that people were driven from the land. On the other hand other people told me that there were very few tractors.

Belezzuoli: I don't remember any. As far as I can remember we still had teams and mules and horses. I don't think the mechanization

was primarily the cause. It was just simply no rain and the drought. Of course, the first people that came to California were laborers. They had worked for the tenant farmers in Oklahoma, and when there was no work the farmers couldn't hire them to work. The laborers came first and then later the tenant farmers came. The ones that could hang on to their own farms came out of it when it finally rained. But many of them lost their farms.

S.J.: Was your father able to hire some workers when he was a tenant farmer or did your family do most of the work?

Belezzuoli: No. As far as I can remember we did all our own work.

S.J.: Do you remember how large the farms were that he worked on?

Belezzuoli: The first one was probably 160 acres or maybe more. I know a lot of it wasn't tillable land. It was just open gullies and whatnot. There was a good portion where they planted the cotton and there was a garden. In the east corner maybe there was a cornfield. I would say it was in the neighborhood of 160 acres.

S.J.: Do you remember much about the farming methods then? I've heard some people say that they did not rotate their crops the way we do now and they often would plant a field with cotton year after year after year and it would drain the soil of the nutrients.

Belezzuoli: I think that's probably true. That was true and they didn't know to till across land and make the borders.

S.J.: In curves rather than straight?

Belezzuoli: Yes. It was to hold the water back. I remember one place in particular when it would rain all the top soil just washed away down these little gullies. They have learned considerably since then.

S.J.: So you think that some of the farming methods might have contributed to the problems they had in producing crops?

Belezzuoli: To some extent—although I think if it hadn't been such a prolonged drought it wouldn't have been quite as serious as it was.

S.J.: Do you remember ever hearing about special government programs where they paid the farmers not to plant or to plow under their crops?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. I remember talk about it. I don't know that my dad had anything to do with any of that.

S.J.: But there was some talk about it?

Belezzuoli: There was some talk. In later years they planted trees to break

the wind to keep from blowing away all of the land and there are still many of them back there now.

S.J.: Do you remember hearing about farmers being paid to slaughter pigs or cattle for government programs?

Belezzuoli: I heard about it. We didn't. My dad didn't participate in any of that.

S.J.: Do you think that any of your neighbors or people in the community did?

Belezzuoli: I don't remember. I don't think so. I think that came perhaps a little later after we left.

S.J.: Was there any one thing that finally made your family decide to leave Oklahoma? The economic situation was growing worse and worse and they had probably seen no hope for the farm, but was there something that finally made you decide to come here?

Belezzuoli: Yes. My sister had lived in California for several years. We were raising her children and she had begged us to come for years. She said there would be a good job here for my dad. She had taken her youngest and my parents missed her greatly. They had had her since she was two and she took her when she was six so my parents missed her very much. So that and the possibility of a job made us come to California. We had a glowing picture painted of a good life.

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S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about the glowing picture of California?

Belezzuoli: My dad had a sale and we sold everything we owned. We brought what we could on a little two-wheel trailer. I don't remember if we had mattresses on top or not. That's the picture you get of Okies coming to California. I doubt it very much if we did. The trip was pretty hard. We stayed in some little motels or cabins along the way. It was a very long, hard, desolate trip. I'd left all my friends. Sixteen is a very hard time for kids. When we got here we stayed at a friend's house. They were living on a grape ranch in a cabin and we stayed with them until we could find some housing. It was quite awhile before we found any decent housing. People would not even talk to you about renting a house if you were from Oklahoma.

S.J.: You said you had ideas in your mind of what California was like. Do you remember any of the pictures that you had? Some people said they pictured groves and groves of oranges.

Belezzuoli: I was more into movies then. Glamorous Hollywood. And I wasn't disappointed either. California is a great place. We went to Imperial Valley. We came the southern route through Arizona.

S.J.: Did people talk very much about California when you were back in Oklahoma? Were there rumors about what it was like?

Belezzuoli: I don't remember any. I remember we had one California boy who came to our school and he talked so funny. Everybody in school was laughing about the funny accent that boy from California had. "Have you heard the boy from California talk yet?"

S.J.: Your sister had been living out here quite awhile. What sorts of things did she tell you about California?

Belezzuoli: I don't really remember that she painted any glowing pictures.

S.J.: Just that things were better?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. And you didn't have to depend on rain for farming. There was water available because they irrigated which was quite different from Oklahoma. We moved to a house on an orange and grapefruit orchard. My dad got employment and we lived there about a year.

S.J.: In the Imperial Valley?

Belezzuoli: Yes. But then my dad was unable to stand the heat. He got ill once from the heat from heat exhaustion. He decided he'd rather try someplace else. A lot of people from Oklahoma settled in this valley.

S.J.: You said you weren't disappointed with California but you did have a more glamorous idea of what it would be like. When you first came into the valley here--or the Imperial Valley --weren't you a little bit disappointed just to see this vast expanse of land?

Belezzuoli: Where I lived in Oklahoma there weren't mountains either. There were orange trees here. I thought it was very pretty. I liked it very much.

S.J.: You described selling all of your family's things before you left Oklahoma. You were only sixteen at the time and you said that it was a little bit traumatic leaving all your friends.

Belezzuoli: And my mother's leaving all her treasures was traumatic--not that she had a lot.

S.J.: Do you remember any special things that she had to sell? I've heard some people say they had to sell their sewing machines and things that were very special to them.

Belezzuoli: Everything. My mother's sewing machine that she'd had as long as I could remember. Her beautiful dishes and my bedroom set and lots of other good things.

S.J.: Did you still want to come to California even though it was a bit upsetting?

Belezzuoli: I didn't know that I had any choice. I'm the type of person that accepts things as they are. I don't brood over things I can't change so I just came.

S.J.: You came out in your family car?

Belezzuoli: Yes. There was my parents, myself and my niece and my nephew.

S.J.: You said you stayed in tourist cabins along the way. Do you remember where you ate or if you picked up food in grocery stores and ate beside the road?

Belezzuoli: We did that some. My dad would stop and buy sandwich stuff and we would eat.

S.J.: Do you remember how long the trip took you?

Belezzuoli: It seemed to me about four or five days but maybe not. It just seemed a very long time.

S.J.: You said that you had sold things in Oklahoma so you would have some money on the way out. Do you have any idea about how much money your parents had or was that something they didn't talk about?

Belezzuoli: No, never. My dad never burdened anyone with his problems and we always knew he would manage.

S.J.: So you really didn't have any worries?

Belezzuoli: No, I had no worries that we were going to be hungry and not have food or anything like that. When we started replacing the things we had sold it was quite a disappointment because what we sold was fairly nice and what we could buy was not. Of course, that's true today too. If you're selling you don't get much but if you have to buy you pay a lot.

S.J.: Do you remember any incidents on the journey such as car trouble? A lot of people told me their cars broke down almost every five miles on the way out here.

Belezzuoli: I don't think so. When we came across the desert between Arizona and California we did stop at the sand dunes. We walked around and looked at the wooden sidewalks that they had for some time. You heard stories about people having been lost and starved to death without water and all. But we had no trouble.

S.J.: Do you remember seeing very many Okie jalopies along the way? People piled mattresses and pots and pans and lots of kids in the back. Some people have said the highways were just packed with these cars coming out. Do you remember seeing very many like that?

Belezzuoli: No. We didn't team up with anyone. We didn't know anyone. I wasn't impressed with anything along that line. I imagine there were a lot coming but I don't remember any.

S.J.: You probably wouldn't have known where they were from. They could have been from New York for all you knew.

Belezzuoli: That's true. Sure. I wasn't thinking, "We're all going to the same place --we're migrating." I was probably reading a book.

S.J.: When you came in from Arizona to California at the border do you remember any trouble there?

Belezzuoli: No.

S.J.: Do you remember being stopped and having everything in the car checked?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. I remember my dad had picked up some pecans in Texas. We'd put them in my mother's quilt box. My dad was thoroughly honest and when they asked if we had anything, my dad said, "Yes." So he had to leave them there because you couldn't bring any fruit or nuts in. Of course, we didn't know that then, but he would have told anyway. Yes, it seemed to me the man at the border did make my dad mad not just over the pecans. I think he was a little insolent--looking down on him as another one of "those." I think perhaps that wasn't a great welcoming. But I was tired and wanting to get on.

S.J.: Did your father start to work right away then?

Belezzuoli: I believe so. On a grapefruit and orange orchard.

S.J.: How long did you stay there?

Belezzuoli: I think maybe a year or less until the heat got him.

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

Belezzuoli: It wasn't anything great but it wasn't bad.

S.J.: It was large enough for the whole family?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes.

S.J.: Do you remember much about your father's wages? Perhaps he didn't tell you exactly what he made but did it seem to be enough?

Belezzuoli: It must have been. I don't remember. I worked one day as a waitress in a big cafe but that's another long story. I was a poor little girl that had hardly eaten in a big restaurant. My sister had been a dinner waitress at this restaurant and the boss hired me. I was sixteen and it was quite an experience. She had fourteen waitresses and lots of tables. I think I disrupted a lot of people's orders. I had the cook screaming at the girls and the girls screaming at the cooks. I was just taking orders and serving my customers and they weren't my orders. I had never had any experience in a restaurant but it was funny afterwards. It's a very funny story.

S.J.: Did you ever work in the orchard there?

Belezzuoli: Not there, no. After we moved here I cut grapes and trimmed grapes and I worked in the cannery in Porterville. I worked one place drying fruit. We cut it and left it out to dry. I chopped cotton, weighed cotton and picked cotton. One day I even hoed sugar beets with a little short hoe, but I would never do that again. I would starve first. I did whatever work was available.

S.J.: Was that after school and on weekends and in the summertime?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes, in the summertime. My dad did have to go on WPA [Works Projects Administration] when he couldn't find employment. So he worked there awhile. I don't know where or how long.

S.J.: When you were in the Imperial Valley, did you start back to school there?

Belezzuoli: Yes.

S.J.: Do you remember much about that? I've talked to a couple of people who had a lot of problems in the Imperial Valley with

discrimination against Okies but when they moved up here to the Central Valley they didn't have any problems. Did you experience anything like that?

Belezzuoli: No. I missed about six weeks of school probably during the move. I was taking Algebra II and when I tried to continue after missing six weeks there was no way I could do it. Lots of people were most helpful to me. I don't remember any discrimination. But when I did come here to the Porterville High School there was some. I had one teacher that asked me why all we Okies came out here. And I said, "Probably for the same reason you did." She was the only teacher that had ever made any remark along that line. There were a few people that said things but I always consider the source and with most people it's ignorance. They put all people in one category and we all aren't the same.

S.J.: Do you remember any problems in the community?

Belezzuoli: We didn't really get into the community. My mother didn't go to church there. We didn't get acquainted with neighbors. We saw my sister and her friends. But as far as going out and making new friends and new contacts, we didn't. We never really were part of that community.

S.J.: When your father couldn't take the heat there and became ill you moved up here to Poplar?

Belezzuoli: That's right. In the Poplar area.

S.J.: What made him decide on that particular area?

Belezzuoli: Friends from the area that we lived by in Oklahoma lived here in this area. There were two or three families that we knew of so they knew they would have friends to visit which is very important.

S.J.: Where did your father find a job there?

Belezzuoli: It seemed to me that he worked on a grape orchard I guess. I don't really know.

S.J.: That wasn't very long then. He had difficulty finding work?

Belezzuoli: No, it wasn't very long. Yes, we had difficulty finding a place to stay and then after my mother died the year I graduated from high school, my brother came out from Oklahoma. He was a barber. We rented a small ranch or farm here and we farmed. Then after that my dad bought a small service station and a little grocery store in Poplar. That's where we lived.

S.J.: When you first moved up here you had difficulty finding a place to live?

Belezzuoli: People wouldn't even talk to you. It's funny for me now. There were two very wealthy ladies that had a farm and when my husband was farming we farmed their place. One doesn't know to this day that when we first came here my dad approached her about renting one of her two empty houses that she had out on the ranch and she wouldn't even talk to my dad because we were Okies.

S.J.: What did you do then for housing?

Belezzuoli: It seemed to me the first thing we moved into was a little milk house with a tent alongside of it. It wasn't very much. Then we all cut grapes there. We got a job. The whole family went and cut grapes there that summer until we found something else.

S.J.: Did you talk to other people from Oklahoma who had the same problem trying to find nice housing?

Belezzuoli: Oh, I'm sure I did because they tend to congregate together. We must have. There wasn't housing available for anyone. There was not a lot of housing.

S.J.: Do you remember where you moved after living in that small milk house with the tent?

Belezzuoli: I think we moved down near Poplar to a house on a little egg ranch. We lived there while I went to Porterville High School until I graduated.

S.J.: And you knew quite a few other people that were from Oklahoma, even from your home town?

Belezzuoli: That's true.

S.J.: Were most of them in the same situation you were in?

Belezzuoli: Yes. Everybody was the same.

S.J.: Do you remember very many workers of other minorities such as Mexican workers or Filipino workers?

Belezzuoli: No, I don't. I just don't remember at all.

S.J.: When you were in the Imperial Valley do you remember hearing about the government camps they had people live in?

Belezzuoli: No. There are some in this area even now. I know several such as Linelle.

S.J.: You didn't know anyone that lived in one?

Belezzuoli: No.

S.J.: How about what they call ditch camps where people would live underneath a bridge or near a river. They would pitch a tent or a shack made of paper or cardboard. Do you remember ever seeing people who lived like that?

Belezzuoli: No. I'm sure there were some, but I don't remember.

S.J.: After your father worked the grapes he had difficulty finding work. You said that he went to work for the WPA. Do you remember much about that?

Belezzuoli: No. He just went to work in the day and came back. He was not happy--I know that--but it was a necessity.

S.J.: But you don't know what he did?

Belezzuoli: No, I don't know. Probably road work, but I don't really know.

S.J.: Did he ever talk about it or did you just sense that he was unhappy about it?

Belezzuoli: I sensed that he was not happy doing it. He considered that welfare. After that he was employed by some farmers and worked for them till my brother came after my mother died.

S.J.: He did whatever the farmers needed?

Belezzuoli: Yes.

S.J.: Did he ever talk about the way he felt about welfare and the WPA or was that something you just grew up with--the idea that it wasn't good to be on welfare?

Belezzuoli: I imagine that is correct. He never discussed it that I remember.

S.J.: Did you ever take any sort of aid? Did you ever have a really bad winter when there was no money and you had to take a little aid?

Belezzuoli: No.

S.J.: But he did consider working for the WPA a form of that.

Belezzuoli: A form, yes. He would rather have been independent doing it on his own without help.

S.J.: Did you know very many other people from Oklahoma who did take aid?

Belezzuoli: No. Of course, most of the people that we knew around Poplar were the neighbors and the farmers and the people my mother went to church with. We got acquainted in that community so we weren't limited to visiting with our Okie friends. My mother made other friends.

S.J.: Did you have any way to know about other people who were from Oklahoma--perhaps through school or through the church? Did you know how other people were living--whether you were doing a little better or a little worse?

Belezzuoli: No, we just became a part of the community.

S.J.: How about in school. Do you remember knowing that other students were from Oklahoma or Texas?

Belezzuoli: No. My one best friend was from Texas but her parents were very well off. They had moved all their belongings in a freight car out here and had bought a ranch and so they weren't what you would call your everyday Okies. She was my best friend. We went everyplace together and did things together. My mother did stay fairly close to the friends that had let us stay in their house when we first came. She visited with them often but those were my mother's friends--older people. They didn't have any children my age and so they weren't my friends.

S.J.: If you didn't really know other people or students in your situation did that make you feel isolated? Did you feel like you were the only person from Oklahoma there?

Belezzuoli: Yes.

S.J.: And when they made Okie jokes?

Belezzuoli: Yes, I was the only one.

S.J.: That must have bothered you.

Belezzuoli: When I went to my fortieth class reunion I was talking about how poor I was and they were talking about how poor they were and I said I had to wear just cotton dresses and all the girls wore wool skirts and wool sweaters and dressed nice. A girl laughed and said, "Honey, we were all poor then. We were wearing our brother's and sister's hand-me-downs." But of course they weren't in the situation that a lot of us were in. There were jokes about Okies. I remember the first time I got up in public speaking to make a speech everyone was in hysterics about my accent. But in Oklahoma they had laughed when I got up too because I generally liked to crack jokes. So I didn't think it was that unusual that they laughed.

S.J.: Did it seem more in good fun?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes.

S.J.: Not cruel or anything like that?

Belezzuoli: I would say probably two people in the whole school made a cruel remark. One was this teacher and there was another person, but everyone else did it in good fun.

S.J.: So did it bother you very much then?

Belezzuoli: No, no.

S.J.: How about other places you went such as to church or stores--did people ever remark on your accent?

Belezzuoli: Oh, always.

S.J.: Nothing to be offended by or anything like that?

Belezzuoli: No. We thought the Californians talked funny too so it all depends on where you are.

S.J.: You were talking about when you worked as a teenager and all the different things you did. Was that fairly common for teenagers to go out and work?

Belezzuoli: Everybody worked as far as I know. I didn't know anyone that didn't. It was nothing unusual to work. It was accepted.

S.J.: Did you use that money to contribute to the family?

Belezzuoli: Yes, I did. When I worked at the cannery I brought my check home. I bought tires for the car. There was never any question about it.

S.J.: So it wasn't extra spending money for yourself--it was to help the family out then?

Belezzuoli: Yes.

S.J.: Did your mother work in the fields then?

Belezzuoli: Not a lot, but she did some. My mother was always the mother that stayed home and cooked and kept the house clean and the clothes ready.

S.J.: That was quite enough.

Belezzuoli: In those days it was. She didn't go out and work.

S.J.: Do you remember how your father went about finding work? Did he just hear from people that there might be work here or work there?

Belezzuoli: I think so. He would be talking to someone and would hear they might be hiring over at so-and-so and he would go there and see if he could get a job.

S.J.: Did he ever try to go very far away from here looking for work?

Belezzuoli: No. He always stayed home.

S.J.: How about when he wasn't employed and looking for work or waiting for his next job--do you remember what he did with his time then?

Belezzuoli: I can hardly remember my dad not working. I really can't remember. The year that my mother died my dad was also in the hospital at the same time and both were scheduled for surgery the same morning. He was ill there for a short time but my dad has worked most of his life.

S.J.: Did he ever have much time left over in the evenings or on the weekends for recreation or was it just mostly work?

Belezzuoli: Mostly work. And he wasn't one really to go out and make new friends and go to new churches. When we were in this area my mother and I went together since my dad was like most men. Some of them have to be dragged to church. After a hard day's work he could use the day to rest and fix things up around the house.

S.J.: Do you remember if he ever talked about the way his employers or the growers treated him?

Belezzuoli: No.

S.J.: How about you--when you worked for them--do you remember whether they were unusually nice to you or perhaps not so nice?

Belezzuoli: I don't remember anyone ever mistreating us or talking ugly to us.

S.J.: Some people have told me that the growers would cheat them. They would do something to the scales so they wouldn't get paid correctly. Do you remember hearing anything like that?

Belezzuoli: No. The fact of the matter is I weighed cotton one year for a man and I can assure you we didn't. Some people like to

imagine that people are cheating them. Well, I shouldn't say that.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

SESSION 2 April 10, 1981

S.J.: After you were here in California and in high school what did you do for entertainment in the evenings or on the weekends?

Belezzuoli: We listened to the radio with our friend. We went over and visited him. We might not have had a radio at that time. I don't know. We'd go over and listen to the radio programs in the evenings. Of course, I was a senior when I came here so I dated and went to dances and shows just like everyone else.

S.J.: You mentioned before that your mother had died after you graduated from high school. Did that give you a lot of responsibility taking care of your father and the nephews and nieces?

Belezzuoli: Yes, it did. I was responsible for most of it.

S.J.: Housekeeping and all those chores?

Belezzuoli: Yes.

S.J.: Could we talk a little bit about the food that a lot of people from Oklahoma and Texas cooked? There seems to be a kind of Okie cooking--certain types of foods. Could you tell me a little bit about your diet then in the late 1930s?

Belezzuoli: In Oklahoma or here?

S.J.: Both.

Belezzuoli: We ate lots of fried chicken. That seems to be a good southern staple. We had vegetables, corn and all kinds of green beans and whatever was raised. We ate lots of potatoes and that seems to be a staple in our diet. We ate them fried, mashed, baked, whatever.

S.J.: A lot of pork?

Belezzuoli: No, my mother always thought pork--particularly in the summer--wasn't good for you. You could get sick from eating pork when it's too hot or something. That was a fallacy. In our family we didn't eat anything other than beef.

S.J.: In Oklahoma when you lived on the farm vegetables and fruits were fairly plentiful. After you moved here and you weren't so well off you didn't have this vegetable garden and it must have been more difficult to get fresh foods like that. Was there a change in your diet in California?

Belezzuoli: There probably was but right now I don't remember any.

S.J.: Not anything very drastic then?

Belezzuoli: No. I think probably food was very inexpensive. Bread was \$.09 a loaf so everything was very cheap. I always loved bologna so we may have eaten a lot of bologna. I didn't consider that I was being deprived of anything.

S.J.: But you remember that you were well-fed even when times were tough?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. My mother always managed very well and she was a very good cook.

S.J.: Some people have told me that because times were bad and people were looking for jobs some would become depressed and liquor became a problem with a lot of them. Do you remember things like that?

Belezzuoli: We wouldn't have had that problem in my family because my mother was a very staunch Baptist and drinking is strictly forbidden. There was never any question. My dad never drank.

S.J.: How about other families? Do you remember hearing anything like that?

Belezzuoli: No. The people that we knew came primarily from the area that we did and attended the church and so they were basically the same as we were.

S.J.: Do you remember if anyone in your family had any serious problems? You said that both your mother and father were in the hospital at one time.

Belezzuoli: My mother had a ruptured appendix that didn't get care when we were in Oklahoma and by the time she got to the hospital we almost lost her. She was in the hospital quite a long time there and then after we moved here she developed a goiter

and was under treatment at the Tulare County Hospital for it. At the same time my dad developed prostate which was not unusual. They were both scheduled for surgery the same morning. The one bad thing that I could say that I remember is that we weren't informed that they were going to do surgery on either of them that day. I was at work over in Porterville at the cannery and they called up and said my mother had died.

S.J.: And you didn't even know she was in surgery?

Belezzuoli: No, I didn't know they were going to operate that day.

S.J.: So that came as a shock.

Belezzuoli: Very much.

S.J.: Was this a county hospital?

Belezzuoli: Yes, the county hospital. So they didn't do my dad's surgery at that time because she had died. Of course, we heard lots of stories that people weren't treated very well and they brought in doctors from San Francisco and here and there to practice and to learn.

S.J.: Because it was a county hospital and free of charge?

Belezzuoli: Sure. Of course, I don't know if it's true or not.

S.J.: But you weren't very pleased with the way things were handled then.

Belezzuoli: No. They said that when they gave her the gas her heart couldn't stand it and she died not from the surgery but from the gas they used. So then there was a period there that I didn't remember a lot.

S.J.: That must have been very tough. You said your father considered WPA a form of welfare. Did he consider a county hospital also welfare?

Belezzuoli: He never talked of that but if you have no choice and that is the only thing available--you don't have a doctor and you don't have the money to pay the doctor--then I guess it is.

S.J.: Then he probably did consider that aid.

Belezzuoli: I would think he did.

S.J.: How about you or your nephews or nieces--do you remember having any health problems?

Belezzuoli: No. I don't remember. I don't remember any of us ever going to a doctor so I'm sure we must not have had any health problems.

S.J.: You would go to a doctor when you needed one then?

Belezzuoli: Oh sure. I had Valley Fever a year or so after that. Of course, I didn't know it until 20 or 30 years later when I had a test for it. But I had it quite bad. I didn't go to the doctor. We didn't go to the doctor for every cold we had at that time. It really had to be serious or we didn't go to a doctor. The doctor said later it was just as well because at that time they didn't even know how to treat it.

S.J.: You described how you worked in the fields on the grape ranch and then in the canneries. Did very many of your classmates from high school also do this? Was this fairly common?

Belezzuoli: I don't believe so. I didn't see any of the classmates.

S.J.: Would you tell your friends that you did this--that you worked?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. The fact that a person works has never been anything to be ashamed of.

S.J.: I've had some people say they wouldn't tell their classmates because of the type of work it was--in the fields or in the cannery.

Belezzuoli: Oh no.

S.J.: That didn't bother you?

Belezzuoli: No.

S.J.: Do you remember ever hearing anything about attempts to organize unions in the late 1930s?

Belezzuoli: No.

S.J.: How about strikes in this area?

Belezzuoli: I heard that there had been strikes in Pixley and a couple of people were shot that were attempting to organize. The farmers resented it and didn't want it. Personally we never knew anything about it. I think that was probably before we came. Maybe 1934 or 1935.

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

Belezzuoli: Yes.

S.J.: I wondered if you had any thoughts about it--whether it was a little bit exaggerated?

Belezzuoli: Every Okie that saw it was very mad because it was made to sell movies and they had to make a big thing out of it. I'm not saying it wasn't bad to not have jobs but they made more of it than anything I knew about or any people that I saw.

S.J.: Were you disturbed by it?

Belezzuoli: Oh probably some, but no doubt I forgot it the next day.

S.J.: Do you think the movie and the book The Grapes of Wrath has had much to do with the Okie stereotype that we have?

Belezzuoli: Yes, I believe so.

S.J.: That it's really perpetuated that and made it even stronger?

Belezzuoli: My mother-in-law never really understood what an Okie was or that Oklahoma wasn't a foreign country. Of course, she was Italian herself and the only people that she had known were people that came to her house to work. Some that did come drank. I think the earlier people that came were primarily the workers or field hands and then later the farmers themselves came so the first ones that came were drifters and people that liked to drink.

S.J.: Perhaps they spread a bad reputation for the rest of those who followed?

Belezzuoli: Yes, I believe so. And I know some had stayed in tents on their ranch and had worked for them and she had a biased opinion primarily from that experience.

S.J.: And then when Steinbeck wrote the book and the movie was made everyone across America was finding what these Okies were all about.

Belezzuoli: Of course. Personally, it never really bothered me that much because I always considered that they were ignorant of the truth so you can't blame people. I'm like a lot of people. I believe whatever I see or read.

S.J.: How about the word "Okie"? At that time what kind of connotation did that carry?

Belezzuoli: It was a very bad, ignorant, dirty person with no character. Some people thought anyone from Oklahoma had to be an Okie

but then later I think they tried to see the difference. Okies were the ones that were dirty and the other ones were people from Oklahoma.

S.J.: If someone had called you that seriously would you take offense?

Belezzuoli: I only knew one or two persons that ever did that though.

S.J.: How about the way people use the word now?

Belezzuoli: It doesn't seem to mean the same anymore. Of course, most Oklahoma people can laugh with you about it and don't take offense. We kid all the time about Okies. I call myself that. I call myself an Okie.

S.J.: When you graduated from high school in 1937 what happened afterwards?

Belezzuoli: I believe that's when my brother came from Oklahoma. He was a barber in Oklahoma. He and my dad rented a ranch. Ironically, it was the one where we had lived in the milk house earlier in a tent when we first came to work and couldn't find housing. We farmed that year. My dad told me if I wanted to he would send me to beauty college because I had some talent that way but I didn't go on. As I said, after my mother died I don't really remember a lot of that first year. It was bad.

S.J.: Did they do very well that first year?

Belezzuoli: I think fairly well.

S.J.: And then did you work?

Belezzuoli: No, I don't remember that I worked a lot that year. As I said, I had Valley Fever that year and I didn't work very much. I slept most of that summer which was a good thing because that's basically all you can do. I was sick that summer. Then I met my husband and the next year we married.

S.J.: That was in the late 1930s. And then you were married in what year?

Belezzuoli: 1939.

S.J.: When World War II came did that change things much for you? Was anyone in your family drafted?

Belezzuoli: My husband had two brothers that went. There was some prejudice against them. They were Italians and they had a dairy. Two of their sons either enlisted or were drafted. My husband was

married and of course he wasn't eligible for the draft. The sheriff's department came out and confiscated their radio and all their guns because they were Italian. It's a little bit like what happened to the Japanese.

S.J.: What year was that?

Belezzuoli: I don't remember. I guess 1941 or whenever we went to war.

S.J.: And they actually came out and did that?

Belezzuoli: Yes, that's true. They went to several Italian families in that area down east of Pixley. And they had two sons off fighting. We had children. I had two children. Then we started farming. Prices were very good so we did very well.

S.J.: How long did you farm then?

Belezzuoli: Till 1952--the year Eisenhower was elected. Prices had dropped considerably so lots of farmers went under. We were one.

S.J.: Did you move into Tipton then?

Belezzuoli: In this area. We didn't move into town here until 1967 but we lived in the general area.

S.J.: When you got married and went into farming and did fairly well your standard of living must have changed quite a bit from the way it was when you first came out here.

Belezzuoli: Yes, we could buy a new car. And everybody wants something better for their children. We joined the PTA [Parent-Teachers Association] here. Two of my friends who were from Oklahoma--one was a very successful farmer -- joined the PTA with us. We helped organize and we were quite active. When my older son got to high school he didn't know that people from the sticks didn't run for offices and didn't participate. People that were born here and live here call this the country and Tulare the city. The country people were discriminated against. They were called from the boonies--from the sticks. They'd never have nerve enough to really get in and participate. Our children held offices. I think someone from Tipton was president of the senior class. One turned out to be a doctor and one is a principal up in the mountains. It was a very successful class. We were three Okies that helped organize and better things for our children.

S.J.: How many children do you have?

Belezzuoli: I have four.

S.J.: Could you tell me what they do now?

Belezzuoli: My son, Bobby, had a service station here in Tipton but now he has his own haying equipment. He cuts and bales and does custom harvesting. My older daughter lives in Corcoran and her husband is an executive with Boswell Company. Up till his last promotion he was manager of their big hog operation out there. He drew it up. He drew up the plan for 3,000 sows so there's a lot of little pigs. Now he's gone on up and he's doing very well. My youngest son lives in Tehachapi. He works for the telephone company. He's in management. Then my youngest daughter lives in Visalia and her husband does lawns. He has a very good job. So they've all done quite well.

S.J.: So you're pleased with your children?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes, very much. They have done very well. Of course, we've had our share of divorces like all families these days. It's not unique anymore.

S.J.: And when did you start working for the post office here?

Belezzuoli: I think it was in 1967.

S.J.: Had you worked before at a regular job?

Belezzuoli: No. The rural carrier asked me if I'd like to be her substitute which would just be working now and then and a couple weeks in the summer and I said, "Yes." My kids were all practically through school. My daddy lived with me here in town till he was 93. I started work as a clerk as well as the substitute carrier.

S.J.: And now you are the Postmaster?

Belezzuoli: Yes. It's not probably so great an honor as in some larger town.

S.J.: But it's quite a responsibility.

Belezzuoli: It is. I'd rather be a big fish in a little pond than a little fish in a big pond. It's very gratifying. I like my job and I like the people here.

S.J.: Looking back on it, are you glad that you came to California and settled here?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. I never regretted coming.

S.J.: Did you ever want to go back to Oklahoma at any point?

Belezzuoli: I probably did. The first two or three years at some times. But I always made friends easily and I kept in contact with my friends for a couple of years.

S.J.: Do you think you had a better life here and perhaps had more opportunities for your children than you might have had in Oklahoma?

BElezzuoli: Perhaps at that time. Of course, now Oklahoma is not an agricultural state as it was at that time. There's very few gins. There's very few cotton fields. People don't raise cotton. We went back a couple of times and I was amazed to see that most of them have ponds and raise cattle and are doing very well.

S.J.: Do you still have relatives there?

Belezzuoli: I have a sister-in-law and her daughter. I doubt if I'll ever go back again but it was interesting to go back and go to my old school.

END OF INTERVIEW

Rutherford Theodore Wever
b. 1878, Benton County,
Arkansas

[His parents from Texas & Mississippi]

Nannie Pearl Giddens
b. 1884, Texas

[?]

Ethel Oleta Wever Belezzuoli
b. 1919, Marlow, Stephens County,
Oklahoma
Education: 12th grade
Church: Baptist Community/Catholic

m. 1939

Eldon Oscar Belezzuoli
b. 1915, Hanford,
California

Robert Eldon Belezzuoli
b. 1939
Custom harvesting/mechanic

Richard Wayne Belezzuoli
b. 1948
Pacific Telephone

Judith Nan Rose
b. 1941
Housewife

Maria Lorraine Bostard
b. 1949
Manager, Hot Dog Barn/
Housewife

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