

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Dorothy Louise Price Rose

PLACE OF BIRTH: Lamar, Johnson County, Arkansas

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: April 7, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Northridge, Los Angeles County

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PREFACE

Dorothy Rose is a published poet. Many of her poems deal with her experiences as a migrant and are interspersed throughout the interview. In addition, many of them are included with the limited access materials. Mrs. Rose is a nervous, self-conscious person and found it difficult to speak about herself - particularly since the interview was being taped. She pointed out that this is one of the reasons she writes poetry - it is her way of expressing herself since she is not a verbal person. Mrs. Rose still has a great deal of bitterness about her life in the 1930s. It bothers her a great deal and those painful experiences are what prompted her to start writing poetry. Today Mrs. Rose and her family live in a very nice home in Los Angeles.

Stacey Jagels
Interviewer

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

99 Vintage: Nine Heartland Poets, Issue Five of Valley Grapevine,
edited by Art Cuelho (Big Timber, Montana: Seven Buffaloes
Press, 1980) contains:

Los Angeles 1936
Watsonville California (1936) 9th Grade
Salinas 1939
Phoenix

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INTERVIEWEE: Dorothy Rose (Age: 60)

INTERVIEWER: Stacey Jagels

DATED: April 7, 1981

S.J.: This is an interview with Dorothy Rose for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Stacey Jagels at 9480 Aldea Avenue, Northridge, California on April 7, 1981 at 11:00 a.m.

S.J.: I thought we'd start first with when and where you were born.

Rose: I was born in 1921 in Lamar, Arkansas, near Russellville. Russellville is about 100 miles from Little Rock but I'm not sure in what direction.

S.J.: You lived in Arkansas from 1921 to 1929. Could you tell me a little bit about your childhood there?

Rose: We lived on a farm and I suppose it was about five to ten miles outside of Russellville and I remember two houses that we lived in. They were probably about a mile apart and my father raised corn and cotton and watermelons. Corn and cotton were what they called the cash crops. We raised almost all of our food. We had cows and pigs and, of course, chickens for eggs and we had orchards on the farm where we had almost every kind of fruit that would grow including grapes. We raised popcorn, peanuts and all kinds of potatoes and my mother canned a lot of food. They killed the hogs which was about our only meat. I hardly remember eating beef at all. We had chicken during the year but otherwise our meat was from pork.

There were creeks running through the property, almost like rivers. We had snow in the wintertime. I remember that. It seemed that the whole family worked on the farm and we went to school. At that time we would go to school when we weren't working. That meant that we went to school during the winter and then we would be taken out of school to work the farm and then when the crops were laid by we had a summer school. Then we were out again to pick cotton and take care of the farm.

S.J.: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

Rose: I had a brother and sister older and a brother and sister younger. I hardly remember going to school in Arkansas because I was seven or eight when we moved to Oklahoma.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about your parents? Were they both born in Arkansas?

Rose: Yes, they were both born in Arkansas. They were both from large families and their families as far as we know were from Arkansas too.

S.J.: Were your grandfathers farmers too?

Rose: Yes, they were. They were both farmers. One grandfather had a sorghum mill and a lumber mill on his property. I remember he had a country store and I used to love to go there because we would get candy and that kind of thing from him.

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

Rose: Yes. I remember the house pretty well. I know we were on a mountain and it was set up on wooden stilts. It was a wooden house. There was a large kitchen and it seemed that all the other rooms, three or four rooms, were used for bedrooms. There was always a big porch of some kind that we sat out on for visiting. I don't remember us having a living room as such. It was more in the kitchen or out on the porch when the weather permitted. We had a huge barn. The barn was much larger than the house.

S.J.: Although you were very young then do you remember if you were fairly well off as compared to other people in the community or about average?

Rose: We were about average, about average. There were people who were much better off than we were really.

S.J.: What made your father decide to move from Arkansas to Oklahoma?

Rose: He decided to move to Oklahoma because he felt that the land was better for farming there. Where we were it was very mountainous. A lot of the time was spent clearing the land of trees and stones and rocks and that sort of thing in order to make it capable of being cultivated so he wanted to move to Oklahoma. In fact, I think probably at that time he would have liked to have come to California but was afraid to go such a long distance from the grandparents.

S.J.: When he made this decision was he having great difficulty providing for the family or were things okay but he just wanted to do better?

Rose: I think there had been a drought and perhaps he was having difficulty just making a living there in Arkansas and thought that Oklahoma

would be better.

S.J.: When you were young do you remember if your family might have had problems or was there always enough food?

Rose: There was enough food in Arkansas. There was always plenty of food as far as what we grew and raised.

S.J.: Do you remember if at that time he was able to afford any luxuries of any sort?

Rose: The only luxury that we had that was something that we could possibly have lived without but I know that he bought my mother a Singer sewing machine. We even brought it to California later. She hung on to that.

S.J.: You weren't old enough to remember much about your schooling in Arkansas?

Rose: Not too much. I remember that we walked quite a long ways and I can still see in my mind the schoolhouse that we went to during the winter and the summer. It was beautiful, really. The countryside is beautiful with pine trees and wild flowers. It's quite lush in the area where I was. I suppose there's a tremendous rainfall because it was always very green and beautiful with the trees and the green and the snow in the wintertime.

S.J.: Where did your father move to in Oklahoma?

Rose: We moved to a town called Checotah, Oklahoma. My father never learned to drive but he hired a touring car to take Mother and all five of us children there. He went on a freight train and brought the farm animals and the farm equipment with him. Apparently he'd gone before we did. He'd gone up there and made arrangements for someplace for us to live which I think was maybe 100 or 150 miles from Arkansas to where we moved to in Oklahoma. I remember that we stopped at a cousin's house and slept overnight before we went on. We got into Checotah before he did and we stayed in a hotel for a few days until he got there.

S.J.: Then you moved onto this farm that he'd made arrangements for?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Could you tell me about that farm?

Rose: It seemed to me that it was very, very level country. It was very level and very windy and very cold. The wind was blowing and it was a very hard time. I know that we almost froze to death that first winter. We did have a fireplace and a cook stove. He had to spend most of the time bringing wood to throw on that fireplace. It was so cold we couldn't venture to the other rooms of the house hardly. We

sat there or stayed around that fireplace for warmth and I think my mother even cooked over that fireplace. It wasn't what we expected in the way of a place to live. It was much worse than where we were in Arkansas except that the land was level and there were quite a few acres. It looked as though it was something that he could raise corn and cotton real well on.

S.J.: Do you remember how many acres either one of the farms were?

Rose: I really don't, perhaps it was twenty acres, something like that.

S.J.: Did your father ever hire extra hands when it was very busy or did he have enough children to help him out?

Rose: We were getting old enough, the three oldest ones were getting old enough that we could help and he did sometimes hire. The neighbors would help each other and I do remember one colored man that he did hire to work some. I don't think he paid him other than some food we were raising or gave him chickens or molasses or something like that in payment.

S.J.: Was that fairly common because money was scarce? People would exchange their labor for supplies?

Rose: Yes it was. For cotton picking my father did hire young kids from the other farms and pay them so much a pound for picking cotton and that was about the extent of it.

S.J.: When you describe that first winter in Oklahoma that was so bad and so cold it sounds like you were probably very disappointed when you first came there.

Rose: Yes, I think we were. I think that was, according to history, one of the worse winters that Oklahoma had had. I think it was called the Blizzard of 1929. Some days we couldn't go to school but when the buses were running the school buses came out there to pick up people. We would walk down to a country store. I don't remember just how far that was. We had gloves and over boots, prepared for winter, but my oldest sister actually froze her hands carrying her books to that store. I remember that they got water, ice water first, and put her hands and so forth until they were thawed out and there was no damage done but there could have been.

S.J.: Quite different from those lush valleys that you described in Arkansas. On the farm there did your father grow many of the same things as he did in Arkansas? You described a great variety in Arkansas.

Rose: In Arkansas we seemed to grow everything compared to Oklahoma. I don't know if maybe the climate wasn't such that we could but mainly in Oklahoma we had cotton, corn, watermelons and cantaloups. There was

such a Depression you could hardly sell anything.

S.J.: Were you able to grow most of the food for your family in a small garden?

Rose: Yes, we continued to do that.

S.J.: You had hogs and chickens as you did before?

Rose: Yes, we did, and cows.

S.J.: Times were bad from the very first year you got there. Do you remember if things got worse and worse or perhaps they got better for a while?

Rose: As I remember it just kind of got worse and worse each year. Either some of our livestock died or they were just worn out. It just got worse either from drought and storms or whatever that would ruin what we were growing. Or there was no market. The price would go so low for cotton and corn or whatever.

S.J.: Do you remember if you ever had to skip school or leave early to help out?

Rose: Not to a great extent, not really.

S.J.: That probably would have been pretty common since most of the kids you went to school with were also from farm families?

Rose: Yes. The only time really that I was out of school was when we left Oklahoma to come to California and we left before school was out there. My family just took us and we went in the spring of the year. It was another couple months of school that we didn't finish. Now my older brother left school to work and he didn't finish high school.

S.J.: That was fairly common though?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Do you remember very much about the school there? Was it a small school with one room?

Rose: Yes. I think my father rented a farm. We didn't buy anything. It seemed that each year that things were worse and we would move to an even smaller farm until finally we were living in the town and he was just farming some land outside of the town. So I went to several schools there. I went to school where it was a one-room school with all grades. There was an iron potbelly stove or something like that that heated the entire school and one teacher taught all eight grades. The older ones would help teach the younger ones and so forth in the school. It was very nice.

S.J.: Do you remember enjoying school then?

Rose: Yes, I did. We had nice picnics and Fourth of July parties and we played baseball a great deal, at least the boys did. I remember the one-room school with the toilets outside.

S.J.: You had these extra activities like baseball?

Rose: Yes. Then we went to church all the time, everybody did I guess, every Sunday. There were certain social activities connected with the church and that was mainly our life.

S.J.: Church was very important to your family?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Do you remember anything about the revivals that they would have in the summertime?

Rose: Yes. I remember but I can't really tell you much about it except that I guess everybody went. Sometimes they would come and make a tent for it. They also did that with medicine shows. I remember that some too.

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

Rose: I'm not quite sure but I think that perhaps the person who was going to sell the medicine rented an empty store or something like that. He would usually have young colored men or colored boys and men with him. We all liked to go because they would dance and sing and beat a tambourine and that kind of thing. It was like going to a movie or something, we didn't really go to movies. Then they would sell the medicine. It looked kind of like syrup in bottles and they had a sideshow.

S.J.: What kind of activities did the church have? Picnics? Socials?

Rose: Yes, picnics. They would have pie suppers. I think that was through the church. I'm not quite sure that's what it was. It had something to do with a pie where they raffled off the pies, I guess to raise money for something. We had that.

S.J.: Some people have told me that the church was really the major social outlet for people in that area.

Rose: Yes, it was.

S.J.: Not only was it religious but it was also social because you were so far apart on these farms. It was a way of gathering together.

Rose: They had quilting bees. That was with the church also. Some of

those were during the daytime. The women would go and quilt. I think maybe they quilted quilts to give to somebody who was even poorer or someone who was getting married or something like that.

S.J.: Would you say there was much more of a community atmosphere in that town in Oklahoma than in California?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Fairly close-knit community?

Rose: Yes. Especially in Arkansas, everybody knew everyone. When it came Christmas time the whole farm neighborhood would go to the school whether they had children there or not, grandparents and everybody would come for the Christmas party. The children in the school were always putting on the play. They would cut and trim a tree and the whole section was responsible for decorating the tree. It was a community affair, even the school and the church.

S.J.: Did people help each other out very much? If they knew one family was really doing a lot worse than they were would people bring them extra food that they might have or something like that?

Rose: I'm sure, without giving it a thought. If someone was sick even neighbors would come and sit up with them, neighbors and family. A community or group affair was hog killing day. When the weather got cold enough to kill the hogs they would go from one family to the next until they had all the meat butchered and salted down and cooked out for the lard and that sort of thing which no one family could hardly take care of for himself, so they would help.

S.J.: So it was really a joint effort. Do you remember aside from some of these community things and church socials if in the evenings you had extra time what you did?

Rose: We embroidered. The women would sew. Of course, we read more then. My father used to repair our shoes like a blacksmith. He knew how to do that sort of thing. He would work on the leather that had to do with the harness for the farm. That was before tractors actually so he had mules and horses that pulled all of the machines.

S.J.: Do you remember seeing any tractors?

Rose: Just before we came here.

S.J.: But it was not common then?

Rose: No, hadn't gotten common then. It was coming in and there were very few cars. They were just coming in; that is, farmers didn't have them. We still went by wagon.

S.J.: Do you remember the chores that you were assigned to do?

Rose: Yes, we had to gather eggs from the outside and feed the chickens, slop the pigs. In the house we did ironing with the irons that you put on the wood stove and the washing was done on the rub boards. The floors were scrubbed down. And, of course, there was raking and sweeping of the yards. Then when we were old enough we went into the fields. We chopped and picked cotton and did everything that had to be done to the corn. We shook the peanuts and turned them up to the sun. We played mumbly peg, jacks and of course, jump rope.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

S.J.: You said your father didn't own the farm in Oklahoma. You thought he probably rented.

Rose: I think he was probably sharecropping.

S.J.: In Arkansas had he owned his farm or was that also a rental?

Rose: I think that was a rental but it's possible that he had ownership in that someway. I know that both my grandparents did own their place and it seems to me my grandfather gave each of his sons a part of the land as long as they stayed there and worked that land. If they left I think it went back to my grandfather. I'm not quite sure on that but it was something like that.

S.J.: But when you moved from Arkansas to Oklahoma you did feel that you were sort of taking a step down?

Rose: He felt that it was going to be a step up but it turned out to be a step down.

S.J.: He had anticipated something better.

Rose: Right, yes.

S.J.: You would move from one farm to another and these were increasingly smaller farms?

Rose: As I remember it, yes.

S.J.: As times grew worse.

Rose: I remember the last place we lived in was in a very small town anyway, Checotah. We paid some kind of rent and I think the person who owned the property also had a butcher shop or something like that. I remember my mother washing the aprons from this butcher shop, washing and ironing those aprons to pay the rent for the house and we helped her.

S.J.: Do you remember how long you were in that house?

Rose: I think about a year, probably about a year.

S.J.: Do you remember much about the houses that you lived in what they were like? Whether they were fairly similar?

Rose: Yes, I think they were.

S.J.: But none were as nice as the home you described in Arkansas?

Rose: They didn't seem to me to be, maybe because I was really homesick for Arkansas. People from Oklahoma who lived there did not care for Arkansas people. They made fun of us. They laughed at us. It was kind of a joke that went around among the people from Oklahoma that the people from Arkansas didn't wear shoes.

S.J.: Did that bother you much at that time?

Rose: Yes, it did. We were always trying to justify it and getting into fights as kids about it. We were always saying that Arkansas was as good as Oklahoma or better. We were comfortable from a social standpoint and every other way. We always kind of remembered that. We also left our relatives when we left Arkansas to go to Oklahoma and missed uncles, aunts and grandparents.

S.J.: Do you remember the sorts of things the kids would tease you about? Perhaps you spoke differently?

Rose: Yes. The way we were dressed. I can't remember especially.

S.J.: But you do remember that they teased you.

Rose: Yes, I remember that very much. On our own place he always made things for us. We learned to broad jump. He made stakes and made a high jump thing for us. He made things for us in the way of equipment for games and for playing. We played horse shoes.

S.J.: Do you have fairly happy memories of your childhood in general?

Rose: Yes, I do. I think so.

S.J.: The Depression came just about that time you moved to Oklahoma and times were pretty rough. Do you remember if your father talked to you and the other children very much about what was happening? Were you aware that financially things were getting worse and worse for everyone?

Rose: I think so. I think everything was discussed. Our livelihood or any cash at all came out of the farm or out of the house. For instance, I remember one Christmas they just absolutely could not get us anything.

They just had absolutely no money. There again in Arkansas I can remember the beautiful Christmases and the beautiful doll that we girls got. During the Depression there was not even a nickel. There was just no money, no cash. Sometimes we had to eat things that had been put aside. There was nothing left but potatoes and onions and flour to make biscuits or meal to make corn bread. That was all. We did have a cow or something until we moved here, we had milk.

S.J.: So it became fairly obvious to you and your brothers and sisters that times were difficult?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Although you lived in the eastern part of Oklahoma and most of the dust storms were in the west, do you remember seeing some dust?

Rose: Yes, I do. The terrible winds, I remember that. I remember one summer when we had the watermelons that were ready for the market and a hail storm came and just smashed them all to pieces. I saw my father cry for the first time.

S.J.: Do you remember much about the drought? Whether your father talked about how it was ruining the crops?

Rose: I remember a little, I do. I remember seeing it.

S.J.: You were old enough to realize that that was happening?

Rose: The corn just dried up. They had lived through that a great deal thinking that the next year was going to be better.

S.J.: Some people have said that a lot of the farmers in that area didn't use very sophisticated methods of farming and possible because of the way they farmed that was one of the reasons they didn't get good crops. Not very many of them rotated the crops.

Rose: They didn't even know about it, I don't think.

S.J.: So they would take the same nutrients out of the soil each year and the crops would get worse each year. Do you think that might have been a contributing factor to the problems they had growing their crops?

Rose: Oh sure.

S.J.: Do you remember if your father planted in straight rows or in curves?

Rose: I think in straight. I remember the planters, I remember those machines pulled by a mule or a horse. The machine was kind of tricky in that it had a cog in it and it would spit out so many seeds as it went down the row. I remember that. I don't remember the curving type really.

S.J.: Usually they did the straight rows year after year in the same places.

Rose: Especially in Oklahoma, because the land, as I remember it, was as flat and as level as a table. In Arkansas it was hillside. There might be a terrible boulder that they just couldn't take out all over the hillsides and very large trees which they'd go around.

S.J.: So you would plant here and there.

Rose: Yes, in patches. But in Oklahoma it was just like a road map it was so flat. I remember it.

S.J.: Do you remember the crops? Cotton would be in the same place year after year?

Rose: I think it probably was.

S.J.: Did you ever hear anything about President Roosevelt's programs to pay farmers actually to plow under crops? Do you know if your father or any neighbors were paid by the government not to plant or to plow under?

Rose: I don't think that happened before 1936. I remember the talk of it and I remember the NRA [National Recovery Administration] but I don't remember our being paid for anything that was plowed under or not harvested or whatever or paid just not to do it.

S.J.: But you heard that this did go on.

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: I've also heard that farmers were paid to slaughter their cattle and pigs. Some people have said that that meat was burned. Government people would come out and actually destroy the cattle. Some people say that the meat was left and everyone had it for free. Do you remember hearing anything like that?

Rose: I remember something about burning but I don't remember that for sure. We didn't raise enough cattle for selling anyway. It would have been very little and the things that we sold were eggs and some milk and cream. We didn't raise it for beef because we didn't eat it. We didn't like it.

S.J.: In your community did other people raise cattle?

Rose: It could have been but mostly they were like us. Some of my uncles and aunts raise cattle now on land that we used to farm and just raise beef.

S.J.: Coming up to about 1936 do you remember thinking that you were really a lot worse off than the people around you or was everybody sort of

of together?

Rose: We were sort of together but some I think were better off, especially that last part of the time that we were in Oklahoma and were living in town, the so-called town. Then we were surrounded by people who were at a different level. Some of them weren't farmers. They were shopkeepers or whatever.

S.J.: But you didn't feel particularly singled out then?

Rose: No, I don't think so.

S.J.: What made your father decide to come to California?

Rose: I think that he saw that there was very little livestock left to pull the plows. He needed to replenish that. Some had died or they'd gotten too old. The equipment was worn out. Then we had some friends who had come out here, not really close friends, but somehow he had gotten information that they had come out here and were going to do all right. I think that he thought that if he sold everything that we had that we could possibly get out here and make it.

S.J.: So he had heard by word of mouth that there was employment in California.

Rose: Right.

S.J.: Do you remember if your father talked about why you had to move from the farm? Some people blamed it on the drought, some people on the dust storms, the economy, some blamed it on a combinations of things. Do you remember if your father placed the blame for his misfortunes on anything in particular?

Rose: I think maybe it was the drought and the hard winters and the Depression, generally. I think that he still felt that he was a farmer and I don't think that he saw any way that he could get back into the farm in Oklahoma. I have an idea that he thought that he would eventually farm out here but I'm not really sure. We'd had the blizzards in the winter and the drought and the hail storms. I think it was President Hoover's fault too. I remember so much talk about that.

S.J.: So he seemed to realize it was a combination of things.

Rose: I think so.

S.J.: Do you remember if you ever considered going to another state? Someplace other than California?

Rose: I don't think so, certainly not. I think it was California.

S.J.: Back in Oklahoma did people talk about California when they heard from relatives and friends who had moved out here?

Rose: Yes, they did. I'm not quite sure because we didn't really have relatives and friends who had moved out here exactly. We'd heard of something like that but there was no one that we wrote to. There was no uncle or aunt that close.

S.J.: I was thinking about rumors.

Rose: I think it was mostly rumors.

S.J.: Do you remember if you heard very good things? That there was employment out here?

Rose: Yes. My father, when we came out here, was probably about in his early forties and it seems to me that he heard the talk from people that would have been in their late twenties or something like that.

S.J.: Perhaps a little more hopeful.

Rose: Yes, I think so.

S.J.: Do you remember what you expected California to be like? Did you have an idea in your mind what it would look like and be like?

Rose: I don't know. We remembered Christmas when we got oranges and they came from California. I don't think we really realized that the weather was so warm most of the year in most of California. We probably didn't know that we wouldn't have seasons but I think we just thought it was one big orange grove with a lot of employment.

S.J.: So you expected employment and a better life?

Rose: Yes. I really think that he thought that he would farm again. Or if he didn't his children might because he had never really worked for anyone and kind of looked on working for someone else as not being your own person or something like that. I think that he felt that he would find something better here.

S.J.: Was he terribly disappointed when he found that most of the farms are very large and owned by various corporations?

Rose: I think that things were so bad that he couldn't even look that far at that time. It was just to have a job and some cash income to buy the necessities.

S.J.: Would you read this poem for me entitled: Los Angeles 1936, which you wrote and published in 1980?

Rose: [Reads Los Angeles 1936]

We live without locks
With open hearts

Toward

California
Land of sunshine
Fresh fruits

My father buys
With the last of our money
A huge bag of bananas
This must sustain
Our family of 9
One more day

Our broken-down truck
Cannot see at night
200 miles
To reach friends
Before dark

Weary dirty hungry
Too proud to eat right away
We drive onward

At last
We open the bag
On top
5 beautiful bananas
Underneath
Rotten rotten

S.J.: I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about what made you write that particular poem. If you had an experience very similar to that?

Rose: Yes. We got into Los Angeles directly from Phoenix. How long it took us to get to Los Angeles I'm not quite sure. We got into Los Angeles and my father pulled our truck over to the side to a fruit stand. We bought a huge bag with these bananas sticking out of the top of it then we continued on in the truck. We were going up the coast route to our friends. After we were on the road for a while we opened the bag to give everyone some bananas which was to be our breakfast and lunch. The few bananas that were sticking out the top were all right but underneath it was just mush.

S.J.: You must have found some symbolism in this. That was sort of the way California was in general?

Rose: I don't think that we thought so at that time.

S.J.: Later on, when you wrote your poem, looking back on it it's been a symbol for that?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: There was a great deal of disappointment for most people who came out here. Could you tell me a little bit about that journey? You traveled out in a car with eleven people?

Rose: Yes. When my father decided to leave he hired an auctioneer. I remember the auctioneer coming to the house there and my father had all of the farm equipment that was left, whatever was for sale besides our housesold items. In one day the man held the sale and sold everything that he could for a few dollars--bedsteads, chests of drawers or whatever we might have had in the way of furniture, the hoes, rakes and shovels, bridles--whatever came from the farm that he still had. I wish that I could remember how much money that we had but I know that my father bought a used Graham Dodge. I had a brother who was eighteen or nineteen and I had a brother-in-law who was a couple years older. These two men could drive. My father didn't know how to drive but they had learned how to drive. They built some kind of sides on the back of the truck where we would sit. My oldest sister was married and they had a baby. So there was our family of five plus the baby, my mother and father and a preacher and his daughter who shared the expense in order to come with us. He was a man of about 40 or 50. I was a child and he seemed like an old man to me then. He had a daughter in her twenties. She quit her job. She had a job working in a restaurant or some kind of cafe but they wanted to come to California so they came with us.

My father built a way that three could ride in the cab up front and the rest of us rode in the back. I suppose there was a bench on either side. I think that he paid something like \$50 for that truck. It seems to me that he had in cash something like \$30 or \$40. I guess we had canned foods. That's home canned foods and maybe some flour and meal and we brought a few dishes. I know that my mother brought her Singer sewing machine. She wouldn't let him sell it. We had a trunk. I still have it out in the garage. He bought a trunk to put our linen in.

I guess they had a map. I don't know how they knew where California was but I know we started. The first day going toward Texas we had a flat or blow out. It was blowing and windy and cold, although I think it was in May when we started out. They had to take that tire and walk into town and come back. It took half the day or more. We had that sort of situation all the way coming out here. How many days it took us to get to Phoenix, I can't remember. We would pull into a tourist camp. They were called tourist cabins. For about fifty cents you could rent one of those tourist cabins. There was even a wood stove that you had to put the wood in and my mother would prepare our

meal in there. We didn't cook out along the road. We would eat in there and the women and children would sleep in there and the men slept in the truck bed. That's mostly how we came. Except once we were broken down and we had to sleep around the truck a time or two because we couldn't even get to the next town. Then we pulled into Phoenix and we were out of money and the truck was broken down and that's where we stayed for a while and worked.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 2

Rose: There my brother-in-law got a job right away on a grapefruit ranch just outside of Phoenix. My brother, my older brother who was old enough to go to work, worked someplace. But my father and I were picked up in trucks that would come and pick up field workers. We would go out and work in the fields a little bit there if we could. A lot of people would be waiting there to go out too and they would come and pick up as many people as they needed and we'd go out and work in tomato fields and maybe cucumber fields. My younger sister and brother were too young. We lived there and I don't know if it was a housing project for workers but whatever it was it was a terrible place in which to live. Maybe it was like tourists cabins. You were just kind of in a box. There was a wall between each one. Everybody had to use the same facility as far as the toilets were concerned. I think maybe there were showers there but as I remember everything was plugged up and running over. It wasn't taken care of. It was a very bad housing facility of some kind.

S.J.: Was it owned by a rancher? It wasn't a government camp was it?

Rose: No, it wasn't government. I don't think so. We had to pay something for it but I guess it was the cheapest thing that we could find to get into. We stayed there until we could get enough money together to repair the truck and there was talk of going back home, back to Arkansas or Oklahoma, because it had been so hard getting that far. I think they were getting to the point of thinking what in the world is it going to be like in California when we get there.

S.J.: Do you have any idea how long it took you to get from Oklahoma to Phoenix?

Rose: I don't know but it seemed like it was a couple of weeks.

S.J.: It was a pretty rough trip then with all the car trouble.

Rose: Yes. There was car trouble all the time. I don't remember the geography too well. In Phoenix they were still talking about the terrible desert that we would have to cross getting into California. I think they heard rumors from people coming back that maybe they wouldn't let us cross the border. But we were determined, my father was determined that we come on.

S.J.: Do you remember how long you stayed in Phoenix?

Rose: About three months, something like that, two or three months.

S.J.: Were there lots of other workers there in your position? People who were from Oklahoma or Texas?

Rose: Yes. That's what they were made up of where we were staying and living in that particular section of that town. The preacher and his daughter decided not to come. They decided to go back home. They had just had enough hardship and were afraid to come on. He was pretty religious and I remember the only place his daughter could get work other than field work was in a cafe. They sold beer in that cafe and it was very much against his religion for his daughter to be working there so they decided to go back. When we continued on it was just my family. There would have been nine of us then.

S.J.: So you'd saved up enough money then to go on to California?

Rose: Yes. We'd saved enough money to repair the truck and to come on. My brother-in-law had kind of a difficult time deciding whether to quit his job. He did have a job on this ranch and a little house which was provided for my sister and their baby. My mother and father didn't want to leave part of the family so they wanted them to come on so he decided to come on with us. That probably took us a couple of days to get into Los Angeles. Our friends were up in a town called Watsonville. That's below San Francisco and that's where we ended up. We considered our journey finished. We had gotten to California and there was someplace where we could at least stay overnight or two and see what we could do.

S.J.: When you were still in Phoenix and you described these terrible living conditions were you anxious to get on with your trip into California or did you want to go back to Oklahoma?

Rose: I think I wanted to come on to California. My younger brother wanted to come to Hollywood. Somehow he'd heard of it and he had a beautiful singing voice. Bobby Breen was a star at the time and about his age.

S.J.: So you still had some hope left?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: You had expectations that California would be a good place even though Arizona had been bad for you.

Rose: Arizona was the worst as far as what we had experienced up until then.

S.J.: It was just that living conditions were bad?

Rose: Yes. There wasn't that much work even when we could get out to the fields. It was like a fight to see if they were going to choose you to go on the truck to go out to the fields. I think they paid us by

the piece otherwise they wouldn't have hired me anyway. I was too young probably. I'm sure they paid us by the piece. There wasn't that much to pick.

S.J.: Do you remember if you were treated very well by the growers and the people who hired you?

Rose: I can't say that it was bad. I know we were in fear of them. Mainly because there were more people than jobs. We heard that the scales were crooked as far as weighing things in. We really had no control over that anyway. We were just happy to have the work.

S.J.: Did that bother you that you had to compete just to get on the truck and go out there and work?

Rose: Yes. Usually if there was a large number of people they would take the largest and strongest looking people. My father was a very small man. He weighed about 120 pounds. He always felt that he would not look strong enough.

S.J.: When you started coming into California you had heard before that you might have trouble at the border. Did you experience any problems then?

Rose: Not really. They did let us through without any trouble. I think that's maybe when I first heard the term Okie or something like that in a derogatory way. Just another bunch of Okies. I think that we were worried about that but I think probably just as worried that the truck would break down again before we got across. I think we tried to travel the desert at night. I don't know if we did. It seems to me that we didn't have truck lights that worked anyway.

S.J.: But you made it across the desert without any big problems then?

Rose: Right.

S.J.: Do you remember what your first impression was of California? You drove over a huge desert.

Rose: I just think we didn't think we were there yet or something.

S.J.: How did you travel up to Watsonville? Was it up the Valley?

Rose: I really don't know. I don't know, maybe it was the coast route.

S.J.: Do you remember thinking that California is pretty? Or California is not as pretty as you thought it would be?

Rose: Not too much, I don't think. Even though we were children in those days I think we were ashamed to be traveling in a truck, in the back of a truck like that. I didn't even want to look out. We'd keep covered up. Today, kids love to ride in a pickup truck. This was

just like a covered wagon on wheels with an engine. I don't remember. I can't remember if we drove to the ocean to see it but it seems as though we did.

S.J.: So you first went to Watsonville where you first had some friends. What happened then?

Rose: I think we probably stayed with them a few days. I'm sure that we were just out of money but my father and my brother and brother-in-law found some kind of work. Then we got into some kind of building for a few days. I think the church helped us and then my father got a job out on the edge of Watsonville finishing up tomatoes and beans that they were picking. This man let us come there to live in what really had been a chicken house, my father, mother, younger brother and sister and I. It wasn't a large place. This man really only needed one to oversee that part of finishing up the tomatoes and beans and my father saw to it that they were picked. He packed them in crates. I think that we sold that truck. The truck wouldn't run especially anyway. It needed a lot of work and my father didn't drive. My brother and brother-in-law had found some kind of work. He got enough money together to pay rent on another shack that would take us over through the winter. That's kind of how we spent the first winter there. Once the farm work was gone there was nothing else that he would have had to do. He did have the rent paid and he probably bought staples like coffee, sugar and flour to barely get us through. He worked and I helped him. He cut wood. I guess it was on somebody's property. He cut the wood by hand and I ricketed it. That's the way it sold. It sold by stacks so wide and so high. That helped him through the winter too.

S.J.: You described one house as a shack. Your standard of living had really deteriorated from the time you were living in Arkansas. You were fourteen then?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: So you were very much aware of things. Do you remember how that affected your parents?

Rose: I know they felt very bad and very much ashamed about it. Especially that first one that really had been a chicken house. I remember we scrubbed the thing down. Instead of steps going up it had a ladder to get up into it. We were in that just a short time really, a few months maybe, two or three. Then we did get this place that he rented and paid in advance for it. That was a very poor situation too. It did have an outhouse, that was right here in California. It had a kitchen and a bedroom. It did have land on it that my father saw some future in. At least he started a garden and berries and everything like that.

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

Rose: We stayed there for one year. I finished high school there but things

got better from that. They didn't get better in that he had employment that he could be proud of. After that year we moved into town. I guess he got a ride and went out and worked on farms. He didn't drive. I started high school and got a job after school as a mother's helper. After school everyday I used to go and work in a woman's house and take care of her two children so she could get out. Then he didn't have anything he could do in the wintertime. When he couldn't find anything then he had WPA [Works Progress Administration]. He had to go on that.

S.J.: So you were in Watsonville for four years from 1936 until 1940?

Rose: Yes, until World War II.

S.J.: Did you live in that same home in town then?

Rose: No, we moved. There at least we did move up from a \$12 place to a \$14 or \$16 place or something like that. My younger brother could mow lawns or something like that.

S.J.: So everyone in the family helped out?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Did you eventually move into a place that you might have considered as nice as the homes you had in Arkansas?

Rose: Yes, the second or third year probably. But they were in town and there was no way of having stuff. They did still make a garden but we couldn't have cows or chickens or anything like that.

S.J.: Do you remember meeting very many others who were in your situation?

Rose: Not too many. After awhile we kind of avoided it.

S.J.: You might have tried to make friends with other people on purpose?

Rose: Yes, that's right. Mother and Father and my sister that was married had friends from Arkansas and Oklahoma. They settled more in Bakersfield and the Valley and around Watsonville, Salinas. A lot of us worked in the lettuce. Living in town and going to school there I can say that our neighbors were probably from everywhere and mostly they were natives.

S.J.: You might have felt a bit singled out and alone?

Rose: Could be.

S.J.: Do you remember hearing about any government camps or visiting any government camps that were built for the migrant workers?

Rose: Yes. I can't remember just where it was. I think at one time after

living in what we had in Watsonville, what I saw in them would have been nicer had you been able to get in. There was a waiting list to get in them anyway but I didn't have any real experience with it.

S.J.: Although there weren't that many people who they would call Okies in Watsonville do you remember ever seeing people congregate beside the road, sometimes beside a ditch or under a bridge, very, very poor people much worse off than you who had no place to go? Sometimes they would put up tents or shacks or something.

Rose: I didn't really see that. I've read about it a lot but I didn't see it there.

S.J.: You mentioned that you had lived in San Jose and Fresno and Bakersfield. Was that during World War II or after that?

Rose: That was during World War II.

S.J.: When your father was out of work in Watsonville did he ever travel to other places to get work?

Rose: I think he did but we didn't go with him. I can't remember where.

S.J.: You continued to rent the home that you had?

Rose: Yes. My older brother and brother-in-law went to the Imperial Valley following the lettuce and tomatoes and so forth. They did do that now that I remember. But my mother and I and my younger brother and sister stayed. Once she had us in school she wouldn't leave. Somehow we had managed.

S.J.: You were settled and you weren't one of the migrant families that we've heard so much about.

Rose: Right.

S.J.: I wondered if you could tell me something about the high school you went to. I know you've written several poems describing some of those experiences. You were about fourteen then so you would have been just going into high school.

Rose: Yes. I was in the ninth grade. It was a four year high school, the only high school in that little town. It was called Watsonville Union High School. It was a nice school. We were definitely a minority and most of the people who I got to know were from California. There were Japanese people too and they were quite a large population at that time. There were Italians, Slavs and Portuguese too. I don't think there were more than one or two blacks.

S.J.: All these minorities were there and you say people who were called Okies were a minority too. Do you remember that you were teased any more

than the rest of them?

Rose: You mean more than the Italians?

S.J.: More than the Italians or the Portuguese.

Rose: I think so at that particular time. The Italians and Portuguese had been there longer, even the Japanese had, than this influx of the people from the dust bowl. I know that I learned very quickly to try and drop the brogue, although you didn't realize you were speaking differently from the others. I really don't know my younger sister and brother's experiences but I think it was even worse for them, maybe not.

S.J.: That was one thing that they latched onto and really teased you about?

Rose: And, of course, I suppose the way we dressed to an extent, especially in the first year before we could afford to buy anything. I guess maybe my poems tell it better than I can remember.

S.J.: Would you read this one for me? Algebra Teacher really tells what I'm asking.

Rose: [Reads Algebra Teacher]

I study hard
I do my homework
My grades are good

Like a thief
I enter high school
I am three months into the school
Afraid that my secret will be learned
Some cop will yank
Me from high school and
Send me back a grade or two

I did not graduate from grade school
We had been in the cherry orchards
cotton patches tomato fields vineyards
Of Arizona and California for a couple of years

I keep to myself
Stay away from the town-people's kids
Take my poke of lunch
To the Main Street Park Plaza
I eat alone on a bench behind the shrubbery

[continued]

I start to walk back to school
Miss Potts my algebra teacher catches up with me
They say that she was born in California
She looks old as Methuselah
At least forty-nine

HELLO MARCELLA she said
WHY DO YOU EAT YOUR LUNCH OFF THE SCHOOL GROUNDS
oh miss potts
i like to be alone
to hear the birds sang
to look in store winders
see that purty chester drawers
look in that bakery winder yonder
don't that pie look larapin

HOW MANY ARE IN YOUR FAMILY
five kids not countin mamma and daddy
one married they have a baby
WHAT DOES YOUR FATHER DO FOR A LIVING
works fields in the summer
wpa in the winter
he don't like wpa
says it's a shameful thang
hurts a man's pride
makes him beholdin to somethin he kant see
fifty dollars buys victuals
fried taters buscits and beans
and milk for the little youngins
rent's nine dollars for the house
ain't no water or heat in it
we keep warm by the cook stove
my niece she's two years old
i'm makin a play-perty for her
in my crafts class

WHERE ARE YOU FROM MARCELLA
I shudder I don't want to lie
arizona i say and i keep my fingers crossed
YOU DON'T SOUND LIKE YOU'RE FROM ARIZONA
YOU SOUND LIKE YOU ARE AN OKIE
That's not the truth either
But she may think that arkie is worse

i'm sorry i gotta go now miss potts
i don't wanna be late fur my class

That night there was a storm in my head
Rain fell on my pillow

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

S.J.: Do you remember very many incidents like that with teachers or was that just something that stuck out in your mind because it was unpleasant for you?

Rose: That one stands out in my mind because it was unpleasant. I'm sure that she knew that I was from Oklahoma from my speech. I think she didn't mean to be cruel. I think maybe she just didn't want me to tell a lie and yet kind of forced it. I don't know why she would have done that but I certainly remembered it. There were incidents like that in talking with the students and trying to make friends with the girls. I remember that I was once describing my shoes. I was telling a girl about my Sunday slippers, telling what they were like. She said, "You don't call shoes slippers. You're suppose to call your shoes shoes." She was trying to make me understand that slippers were bedroom slippers that you wore at home. We called what we wore at home house shoes. If we wore dress shoes like patent leather or Sunday shoes those were our slippers. It was a fancy shoe. There were lots of things like that.

S.J.: Kids at that age aren't always so tolerant.

Rose: I don't know if they still do this. It seemed like every time we'd go into a new class we always had to write down where we were from in some kind of an essay. They made fun of us if we said we were from Oklahoma or Arkansas. So I always dreaded writing anything like that. I would like to lie and say I was born someplace else because right away that got you off on the wrong foot.

S.J.: Do you remember if you enjoyed the academics in high school? Your work in school?

Rose: It was all right. It wasn't that bad but I know that I preferred people away from the school because I think I felt that people from another school wouldn't know where I was from for some reason. I hardly ever dated anyone when I was in high school that went to that high school. I dated them from surrounding towns. At that time we went to all the surrounding towns quite a bit. We went dancing on Saturday night at a certain ballroom and it seems that all my friends that I felt comfortable with were from other schools. They weren't going to know I was an Okie or call me an Okie.

S.J.: So while you were at school you were very much aware of this and perhaps on guard?

Rose: Yes, after the first semester I was.

S.J.: Would you say that you still enjoyed your high school years though?

Rose: I enjoyed them. I certainly went everyday. The one reason that I

didn't enjoy to the fullest extent was that we couldn't afford to buy the clothes that were necessary for going to things like the prom. I didn't go to the prom. I still remember that. I think by the time that I graduated I was able to afford to buy the yearbook but I couldn't buy the yearbook in the ninth or tenth grade I couldn't afford it. I didn't go to the junior and senior proms because it was a matter of needing to buy a dress.

S.J.: At that time that was probably something very important to you. It was a big thing.

Rose: But I did well in school. I went everyday.

S.J.: There's another poem you wrote about school that I particularly like, WATSONVILLE CALIFORNIA 1936.

Rose: [Reads WATSONVILLE CALIFORNIA 1936 9th GRADE]

Lougene's family came to California last year
She has learned a lot & she is a little older than I am

"Don't make my mistake" she said
"Never say YOU ALL
When talking to one or two people
To be safe never say YOU ALL
Unless you are talking to at least 500
If you forget and say YOU ALL
They will think that you are ignorant
You are the scum of the earth
That you are white trash
Lower than a snake's belly
A real green horn
They'll shun you
Like a pole cat
Even at church
TRUST NO ONE
The meanest of them all
Are the 'Okie' kids
That came here before you"

I had rehearsed & rehearsed my speech
There would be no southern drawl
It was my turn

"I was born in Arkansas" I began
"Moved from that dreadful place
To Oklahoma You know
The state where Indians live
No they don't sit around in blankets
Smoking peace pipes (no stanza break)
[continued]

Doing war dances
They wear no feathers
They dress like everybody else
In fact they have oil wells
Drive new cars
Wear silks in every color of the rainbow
My last teacher was a Cherokee
Like Will Rogers"

The class seemed warm and responsive
I got carried away

"I toted my lunch to school today
In a poke
I wore my sunday slippers
The ones I wore to the social saturday night
My family went the whole shebang
To listen & watch the people dance
Because my brother sings and plays
In the strang band there
It was a real humdinger of a party
Leastwise that's what mamma said

I was almost late gittin' to school today
Daddy carried me here in the truck
We had to mosey along because
The tars were low &
We had to stop at a fillin' station
To put some wind in them

The subject I like best in 9th grade is typin'
As soon as I can learn
Which keys to mash down
I'm amin' to git a job
Typin' in the attendance office"

I heaved a sigh of relief
Glad to be shut of my oral assignment
Without saying yawl onect

S.J.: You described some of the dances you would go to with people from other schools. Do you remember other activities, social things or hobbies?

Rose: We went to the beach. We were close enough for that. We still went to church. It was a lot of our social activity. We went roller skating too.

S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about church. What sort of religion?

Rose: It was a Protestant religion. It was called the Church of Christ. The whole family went to church every Sunday morning. We continued that.

S.J.: So that was very important.

Rose: Yes. We went every Sunday morning, every Sunday evening and I think every Wednesday evening.

S.J.: Do you remember if you were accepted into the church immediately? You mentioned that a church had helped you when you first came to Watsonville.

Rose: Yes, we were accepted into the church immediately. That particular church is made up mostly or was at that time of people from Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma, from the south.

S.J.: So you seemed to fit in?

Rose: Pretty much, yes.

S.J.: You didn't have any problems then with that.

Rose: No.

S.J.: Because your family was very religious, perhaps that helped you in dealing with some of the difficulties you had here in California?

Rose: It did. I'm sure it did. From reading actually what other people had gone through.

S.J.: You said when your father first came he was working jobs here and there and traveling a bit and then he went to work for the WPA. Did you know about that, about his job there?

Rose: I'm not quite sure. I think they went out and did some kind of road work. I do know that he didn't like to have to do that. I guess it seemed like relief and that was something that he didn't want to have to accept.

S.J.: But he was in a situation where he had to do it.

Rose: Yes. Where there was absolutely no income and he had to, he had to.

S.J.: He was embarrassed by that?

Rose: Yes, he was terribly embarrassed.

S.J.: How about the rest of your family? Did your mother consider it that way?

Rose: Oh yes. I know we all did. It was a shameful thing. Today that sort of thing isn't. It's better that it isn't I suppose.

S.J.: Were times ever so bad that you took government aid in the form of money or food stamps or anything like that?

Rose: I don't remember food stamps.

S.J.: They called it commodities.

Rose: I think so. I remember them going down someplace and they were given a sack of beans and things like this and cans of things. It was marked on there. I remember we were humiliated about it. I guess relief was written on there or something like that. I remember our opening something that was called corn beef hash. We weren't accustomed to that taste and we couldn't even eat it. We didn't like it. The flour and the beans I think we were able to eat. Whatever it was wasn't brought to them they went to get it someplace.

S.J.: But you did feel embarrassed especially when they would stamp it on the product.

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Do you remember other people who were in your situation who took commodities or was that something that probably wasn't talked about?

Rose: I don't think it was talked about at least not where we were. Our situation was different in that we were in that kind of town.

S.J.: When your father was working on the farms going from one place to another did you have enough money to get by?

Rose: Someway it was enough.

S.J.: Do you remember if he found work most of the time until he finally went on the WPA?

Rose: Yes, he did. They would go where the work was.

S.J.: How did he know where to go? Was it word of mouth?

Rose: He went with someone else and followed the sun wherever it was up and down the state. Then he would be back.

S.J.: Do you remember when he was out of work what he did? Whether he was continually looking for more work or did he become depressed and upset that things were so bad?

Rose: He became depressed and upset but I think everyday he would go someplace.

S.J.: Still kept trying.

Rose: Before World War II he found more or less steady employment, working

in a lumberyard, something that was outside of the fields. He worked in the canneries but that was during World War II by then.

S.J.: Did your mother ever go out and work?

Rose: No, she didn't. He didn't want her to. That was a certain belief that he had.

S.J.: That would have been sort of the last straw as far as he was concerned. You did go out and help. What different places did you work?

Rose: I worked in beans and tomatoes and berries, all kinds of farm work, picked, hoed and chopped cotton.

S.J.: Did most of that money go right to the family?

Rose: Until we had enough to pay the rent and the food.

S.J.: Did your brother-in-law and sister and her child continue living with you then?

Rose: No, they went on their own then.

S.J.: So you were really a major contributor to the family.

Rose: Part of the time, yes.

S.J.: During summers or weekends?

Rose: When I was going to school I earned \$10 a month as a mother's helper. If the rent needed to be paid I helped with that too but mostly by that time I was able to buy what we would consider luxuries such as clothing, not only for myself but for my little sister, brother and mother.

S.J.: Do you remember seeing very many women and children working in the fields?

Rose: I suppose I did. I didn't think too much of it. My mother had the two younger ones. My father just didn't want her to go out to work. I know when we first came here she had a large ulcer on her leg. She had that almost a year. It was very bad.

S.J.: Did she receive a doctor's care?

Rose: She must have gone once or twice or something. I think they more or less treated it themselves.

S.J.: Did your family have any other health problems?

Rose: I was in the county hospital to have my tonsils out and I had an emergency appendectomy.

S.J.: That would have been free of charge?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: How did your parents feel about that?

Rose: Bad. I felt so bad I didn't want any school friends to know.

S.J.: Because you considered this another form of welfare. There was really nothing you could have done. You also worked in the canneries didn't you?

Rose: Yes. That's getting later, that was in San Jose. When we left Watsonville the family moved to San Jose and we worked in the canneries, the packing house. I think there is where my father got what was not season work. He got a job for General Box Company which is a lumber company and from there he transferred to Fresno and worked for that.

S.J.: Was the work in the canneries easier than the work you did in the fields?

Rose: Yes. I considered it easier. For one thing you were in and away from the elements. Although there was no air conditioning or anything like that, anything to get out of picking cotton, picking and hoeing cotton and bending and picking berries, that kind of thing.

S.J.: When you did pick cotton and berries and worked in the fields did you consider this terribly difficult work or did you just accept that you had to do this?

Rose: I accepted it. Later looking back I think doing the things that we had done everything else was easier. Each job was easier or you'd think it was anyway. It was easier, it seemed nicer, it was cleaner or maybe you at least made more money.

S.J.: Do you remember what you were paid for the farm work?

Rose: It was very little. I suppose that must be on record someplace. One cent a pound for cotton. I'm not sure. I remember picking berries. They would weigh them. The box had to weigh so much. They would click a thing that you would have so many of them picked in a day. It was very little. The first job that I got paid by the hour was 35¢ an hour. That was in the lettuce. I think it was trimming lettuce in the lettuce packing sheds. That was a lot of money.

S.J.: Did you feel that you were underpaid or did you just feel that this is all I can get so I have to be happy with it? Did you have any desire to ask for more money?

Rose: No, not too much. Even with the union you didn't dare ask for what had been really promised or what you were suppose to get like a coffee break.

S.J.: Was there a union?

Rose: I think there was in the lettuce but not in the fields.

S.J.: Did you have much to do with the unions?

Rose: No. I just paid the dues.

S.J.: How about your father?

Rose: I don't think he had anything to do with it either.

S.J.: Do you remember any strikes in the late 1930s?

Rose: No. I don't think there was enough work for strikes to have done any good at that time, although I think I've read of them. We considered working in the lettuce sheds such a fine job.

S.J.: Do you remember how the growers treated you?

Rose: I guess we thought we were treated well. We were just so lucky to have the work. I don't think there was room to have done anything about it. We were just lucky to have the work.

S.J.: At that point you were concerned with survival then.

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: I'd like you to read this poem, 1939 COTTON PICKING TEENAGER where you describe really what it's like to pick cotton.

Rose: This is picking cotton, not the first picking but the last picking when all of the good cotton has been picked practically. So it's a little more difficult to pick it because it's mostly hard bolls.
[reads 1939 COTTON PICKING TEENAGER]

Monday It is the end of the season
This last week I can have
For my very own
All that I can earn
I must work hard
Not miss a day
To have ten dollars by Friday

The mornings are cold wet foggy
By noon the field is a furnace
My cotton sack is threadbare
It has been patched turned and patched
The cotton bolls are hard and thorny [no stanza break]

[continued]

My nails are broken
My fingers swell and bleed
My legs tremble
Sweat boils out of my body
My back rebels

But my head makes pictures
A blue taffeta dress
Hangs in Monkeywards lay-away room
One dollar put my name on it
Nine dollars will bail it out
It wants to be free
To dance Saturday night
At the Veterans Auditorium
To the music of Harry James

It wants to be hugged by
Berge Robert Sergio and Tony
It wants to dip to the waltz
Swirl to the fox-trot
Spiral to the jitterbug
Streak across the floor to the tango

Friday night my teeth ache
Saturday morning
Doctor Boyer says
Four cavities
Ten dollars cash please

S.J.: Did something like that really happen to you?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: So all that work seemed a little bit futile. At the time did it seem that you were not going to come out of the circumstances you were in?

Rose: I don't think so.

S.J.: You always had hope that things would get better then?

Rose: I think so.

S.J.: When you worked in the cotton fields or wherever did you ever tell people at school that you did this?

Rose: No, no way.

S.J.: This was something you didn't want to talk about.

Rose: Right.

S.J.: Do you remember seeing other minorities in the fields? I think you mentioned Filipinos in the one of the poems or Mexican workers.

Rose: No, but it's possible they were there.

S.J.: You described some of the things that happened at schools and you said that you had no problems at your church basically because most of the people there were like yourself. Do you remember going into public places such as stores or post offices and having any trouble? People knew you were Okies?

Rose: Somehow we had that feeling especially if we went into a so-called better store. You just felt like you were kind of afraid to go in there, maybe you were more comfortable in Montgomery Wards or Penneys. To go in Bruce Brothers or the larger stores I think we would have been a little more afraid to go in.

S.J.: Was that because of the past experiences you had?

Rose: I think so.

S.J.: Do you think maybe you became very sensitive to that then?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: Probably no one would have noticed.

Rose: That's true, I'm sure. I'm still sensitive today, socially. We can just attribute it to the ignorance of other people but that term is used a lot--Okie. In social gatherings even of my own friends, it comes up all the time. It still does.

S.J.: Do you think the term has changed since then and people seem to say it sometimes in fun? They don't really mean anything by it sometimes?

Rose: That's probably true.

S.J.: But back in the 1930s if someone called you an Okie you took that quite seriously. They meant it in a derogatory way.

Rose: They still do in a way. Someone that I know who is very well-to-do, who has lived in California all of his life was saying how he loves to go camping. He has a large camper and goes camping and he always thought that that's just what Okies did or that's the way Okies lived. He just loves it.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2

S.J.: You'd read the book, The Grapes of Wrath and obviously have an opinion because you wrote this poem, SALINAS 1939.

Rose: [Reads SALINAS 1939]

I hate him I hate him Charlcia said
His book is a bunch of lies
Dirty filthy nasty lies Mary Elizabeth said
Steinbeck sells our hearts
Our guts our pride Royce said
He makes things worse
For all the Okies in California Louise said
Better to leave it alone
Unwritten untold Grandma said
It should be banned Gerald Ray said

Daddy everyone is reading the book
How can we go to school tomorrow I said

With your heads held high Mamma said

S.J.: Do you remember when the book was published and there was that outrage?

Rose: Yes. I read the book and I liked the book as a story but we didn't like it. Everyone who spoke about it just said that he didn't know what he was talking about. It wasn't like that and so forth. I feel a lot of that was like that but I feel a lot of it wasn't like that.

S.J.: A lot of it was?

Rose: Yes, I think so.

S.J.: Do you think he also exaggerated a lot?

Rose: I think he exaggerated some.

S.J.: But at that time because you were still in that situation it would have been difficult for you to say part of that was true?

Rose: I think so.

S.J.: It is easier to look at it thirty or forty years later. Although it wasn't published until 1939 a lot of people, especially in other parts of the United States, didn't know about the migration or about Okies. Their concept of these people who migrated to California was based on the book and that movie. Do you think that Steinbeck had very much to do with the way people have thought of Okies since then and the way they use the term Okie?

Rose: I think so. Had the book not been written I don't think it would have been nearly as strong a feeling.

S.J.: Perhaps it would have been purely a central California phenomenon? Okie wouldn't be a widespread term that people use?

Rose: Maybe not, I don't know.

S.J.: Did most of the people you knew from your background become very upset when they read the book or heard about it?

Rose: Yes, some of them wouldn't read another thing that he wrote because they felt that this was such a lie that everything else that he wrote would be too. I think that they don't want to admit that things were that hard for all of us.

S.J.: Do you think anyone ever took the view that he was actually being sympathetic? He writes that they were rather crude people and sometimes immoral. He insinuates that some of them were from prisons. At the beginning the Joad boy comes home from prison. Basically part of his point was that these were very human people and he was sympathetic.

Rose: At the time the book came out the people from the dust bowl were having such difficult times anyway and they were a proud people they didn't want their misery emphasized. I think that it was hard for them to look at the book and feel that he was showing great compassion for these people. It took a few years to re-read the book to see that's what he was doing, that's what he did in reality. I know in discussing the book during that time I can't remember anyone who had any relatives or anybody who came out here who'd served time for murder like the main character in the book.

S.J.: At the time it really did do your people a disservice?

Rose: Yes, it did at that time.

S.J.: I don't think that was his intention but as it turned out that's the way it was.

Rose: No, I don't think so either.

S.J.: You did have some problems when you first came to California as all of the people from Oklahoma and Texas did fitting into the community. How long was it before you felt really comfortable and that California was your home?

Rose: Never.

S.J.: Do you still desire to go back?

Rose: No, not really to go back to live there. I think that will always follow me. Maybe if I live someplace other than California I would not have that feeling of being an Okie.

S.J.: But that's still how you identify yourself, your self image? You think, "I am from Arkansas and Oklahoma."?

Rose: I hadn't really thought of it. I think of myself as a Californian. I sure think of this as my home. We had just recently a year ago bought a home that we plan to retire in and I still have this feeling that someone is going to ask me where I'm from and I won't lie about it. But there's something about it from all of that. It's still there.

S.J.: There's one poem you wrote called PHOENIX that really tells how it was. How terrible the conditions were.

Rose: [Reads PHOENIX]

The sun rises
The hovel stifles
The floor a matress
Toilets run over
Garbage heaps high
Flies swarm
Mosquitoes hum
Children cry
People hungry
They couple and couple

The field a prison
I bend my back
Strain my arms
Cramp my legs
Crawl like a caterpillar
I pick tomatoes berries
The sun beats my body
Vines poison my legs
Briers scratch my arms
Bugs suck my juices
My labors are weighed
My voucher is issued

The sun sets a halo

Tomorrow
Emerald City

S.J.: I can see why you described those three months in Phoenix as just about the worst. When World War II came you said you moved out to San Jose at first?

Rose: Yes, we moved shortly after the war. The family moved to San Jose.

S.J.: What did your father do then?

Rose: He worked in the cannery. I don't know if he worked in the fields also but the best job that I can remember is that he worked for Del Monte Canneries.

S.J.: Did your family's economic situation improve then when the war came?

Rose: Yes, it did.

S.J.: Did your father ever do any defense work?

Rose: That was done in the canneries too. The only thing in the way of defense was packing boxes for I think they were dropped by parachutes or something like that. It was provisions.

S.J.: World War II changed the way your family was living and the direction you were taking?

Rose: Yes. We were able to rent a better house. I think even got a telephone. Yes it was better.

S.J.: Has your life changed a great deal since then?

Rose: Oh yes, yes.

S.J.: Did that seem like another world?

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: You are very well off today.

Rose: It's like another world.

S.J.: Are you glad you came to California when you look back on it?

Rose: I'm glad that we came to California in some ways. I don't think it would have been bad to have remained in Arkansas either since I've gone back there to visit. At the time I think it was the best thing that my father could have done, the best my father and mother could have done. I have visited relatives, uncles and aunts who are in their late seventies and eighties who remained there. They have lived a beautiful life. You give up one thing for the other. By coming to California we gave up a certain family, the community sort of life.

S.J.: California didn't seem to have that closeness?

Rose: It doesn't have for us.

S.J.: Then you don't necessarily think that life is better for you than it

would have been if you had stayed in Arkansas?

Rose: It has to be better but on a different level. If one likes the seasons you would have it back there but California has certainly been good to me.

S.J.: So you're happy that you're here now? You do visit, you have ties in Oklahoma, people that you go to see?

Rose: Yes. Not too many. They were large families on both sides of my family and I think about four or five generations were born in Arkansas but almost everybody left except those that are in their seventies and eighties. Once in a while someone my age retires and goes back there.

S.J.: Since World War II you were married and have three children?

Rose: Yes, I have three children. I have a daughter who works for the police department downtown. She's a court reporter. I have the two younger who are adopted and are still in school.

S.J.: You mentioned that you went back to college.

Rose: Yes. I went back to school and graduated from Northridge State College [California State University, Northridge] in 1961. I majored in art and also went a fifth year in special education.

S.J.: Did you work after that?

Rose: I have worked but not much after college. I worked for about ten years for Bank of America.

S.J.: About three years ago you became interested in writing your thoughts in poetry and short stories.

Rose: Yes.

S.J.: They've been published?

Rose: I was first published in 1980. I've been published in about five or six magazines in California, Texas, New York, New Jersey and I think North Carolina. I've been published in an anthology about the San Joaquin Valley by writers from the San Joaquin Valley who had lived either in or still live in the Valley. I'm being published in two more anthologies in 1981. I think that he's going to publish a book of mine in the fall 1981.

END OF INTERVIEW

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