

Mary Cochran

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So you have lived here for a long time...can we start out with your childhood? What was it like here in Olathe?

Well living on a farm a...and in that day and age a...coming into town was a big event. Because a...in those growing up years that was during the depression, when there wasn't very much money; crops were bad, and so you had to stretch every, every penny. Um, I can remember well that the car that my parents had a...had a tire that was ruined and there was nothing...there was an inner tube in the tire and there was not money to buy an inner tube. So my dad took the wheel off...the tire off the car and...and stuffed the inner tube with oats and we ran on that all summer long. Until the oats started to sprout out of the inner tube. But we had to...there were no other way to get to town. I mean we had a team of horses but then as long as we could afford to buy a gallon of gas, which, mercy, I don't know long...how much it was then maybe ten cents a gallon...I don't know *(she laughs)* But a...that's just an illustration of how we had to get by.

And a...in the depression years, in the drought years when even the crops were bad, we would plant a garden...we always planted a garden...but if there was not rain *(she pauses)* it didn't grow. *(She smiles)* And then...so...it was rough...it was rough on my parents I know. Because they had friends that were not well-to-do and nobody was really well-to-do but they had more money than we had, but everybody else in our area were in the same fix we were. So...it really didn't make any difference because we knew if we didn't have something we didn't have a cup of sugar to make a cake we'd go borrow one from the neighbor which was a fourth or a half mile down the road *(she smiles)* but then you could do that too. But a...it was a good life. It was a good life.

How do you think it affected the actual city of Olathe?

Well...a...it was a very small town. I don't remember what the population was in the 1930s. But a...the fact that at that point in time it was a farming town. They a...business people earned their money from the surrounding area that was primarily farms and so they didn't have much money. And a...the farmers themselves like a...to do the wheat, we had to have a threshing machine to get the wheat out of the bundles and divided for straw and for grain. And a...so the neighbors in our neighborhood all went together and bought one threshing machine and then it went from farm to farm to do that. And I remember one time that a...and when you had the threshing crew come you gave them a big meal at noon and maybe...some of them had maybe an afternoon sandwich I can't remember my mother ever did that.

But a...I remember the specific time when we came into town and a...we had no...we didn't have freezers and that type of thing. If you...when you...butchered something you canned the meat and there wasn't anything in the cellar that mother could feed the threshers and so we came in town to one of the small grocery stores and a...mother...I can remember mother saying well I would like a rolled roast...I have no idea how much it was a pound, but anyway, Mr. Carver did that for her and a...mother didn't have money to pay for it and I can remember her standing there crying...because that was something...she...my family never charged anything it was a pay as you go proposition, and Mr. Carver said...that's alright when the crop...when you get the wheat harvested you come in and we'll make it right. But, **(she smiles)** that something that the kids...my grandkids don't understand that because...not that they have a lot of money...but you've got charge cards and you got...you know...it's just a...it's just a different world.

Was there some point when you figured out its going to be ok...like we are going to get through this?

Um, um, um...faith...um, um. Because...as history repeats itself...it wasn't the first drought that had happened and it was not going to be the last? But it was just something, well, we'll just get through today and we'll get through tomorrow so and get through the next week and through the next...and we did! We did.

So did you have anything...I remember history you talked about alphabet soup kind of things...all the New Deal legislation?

We had a...CCC Kemps, WPA Work Projects...Work Projects Administration I think what it was, but WPA is what we call it. And that was to help people who didn't have a...anything. Being a farm family **(she pauses)** you always were self-supporting, verses having a job. So my dad knew that as long as he could work and earn a little bit of money we could get through, and we just prayed that the crops would do good enough that it would get us through the next winter so that we wouldn't have to...to even think about charging anything anyplace.

Clothes were remade a...my...a...my grandmother's brother lived in New York City and he came to visit one year and he just thought we were just destitute which by his standards we probably were. And I remember he sent um...his daughter's coat that because he had evidently asked my mother 'cause I was a growing kid then I was probably 10 or 11 then...a growth stage and evidently mother said well she just have to wear the winter coat she had last year even though the sleeves are short. And so he sent this coat to my mom so she could remake it for me and that was a normal thing. If...if you didn't have it or you had a family member you just passed the clothes on down. **(She smiles)** It didn't hurt us. **(She laughs)**

When you went into town, we are kinda switching gears which I have a tendency to do, what was town like...was it a bunch of shops?

The courthouse was then where it is now...was the old courthouse. A...and the blocks around had the...had the hardware store, and the horse and buggy doctor, *(she laughs)* and funeral home, a jewelry store, a...what we would call a dime store but that's...that's where...you know...I don't suppose when I was a kid maybe there were more than two or three grocery stores...two I can remember...I don't know about the third. But it all just centered around the...centered all around the courthouse.

So when you were a little bit older teenager did you go into town to hang out?

No, no huh a. A...being a farm kid a...my social circle was 4-H and church and those were the people that we worked with. When the drought was and the depression was so bad a...my brother was four years older than I was and a...badminton had just come into play. Well nobody had any money to buy rackets and so my dad...my brother and some of his buddies hunted around the farm and they found some plywood and some broomsticks and they made us badminton paddles. Now what are we going to do for a net? Well my uncle who stored things at our farm house said well there's a net...a tennis net up in the store room so get it out so they did. So they did that so that was our...that was our sports. Then a...the next year crops still were not good and there wasn't any hay in the hay loft and so we all were wanting to do something and so...roller skating was a big then. And so my dad said well if you kids want to clean up the hay loft and get any hay over that was in the corn there well you can sweep that up there and skate up there. That whole summer we skated in the hay loft...the whole crowd...the whole neighborhood came...and skated.

How big was the hay loft? Was it bigger than this room?

The hay loft? A...well think of a horse barn...let's see *(she closes her eyes and thinks)* I am trying to think of...not nearly as big as the new Mahaffie Museum...half that size maybe. But it was the hay barn and downstairs there were stalls for the horses. And a...so that was just what...that's what we did for entertainment and kept us all out of trouble. *(She smiles)* And another was if anybody...when we went to 4-H who ever had some gasoline and had access to a car they would just go along and pick up all the kids to go to 4-H. There was no...not particular any dating or anything like that we just all went as a group to whatever we were going to.

What about...so did you go to a one room school house?

I went to a one room school and then I taught in one.

So was that hard with all the different ages?

It was what we were used to. Now a...the one room school where I went to school and taught was across from Wal-Mart there on the corner where the Starbucks Coffee is. That is where the school was. And a...I went there in the first and second grade, and then the third and fourth grade...here again this was drought and depression time and families moved every March usually if they did not have a farm...if they were renters that was the time they would move. I can just imagine how hard that was on kids I mean it's still was only a 8th month school so when they moved they maybe had two to three weeks at a new school because school was out the first part of April...now, at this time of year.

And a...they a...would a...move on to the other things but when I was in the third and fourth grade there were not enough families with children to pay a teacher even back then and so the school board of three men talked to the Olathe School District....District 16 is what it was then and a...said can we have...can our children come in and pay tuition to go to school in town for the elementary kids well senior high kids too, but a...and they said yes, and I don't have any idea what tuition was back then. But for those two years a...one of the...one of the families...had a friend in Olathe across from Central School...where...the old Central School where I went...where it is today and so...when they went to work they would take...there were three families of us that did this and crowded into that little Model A coupe and were dropped off at that house and then went across the schoolyard to school and then...we would come home with that same family.

And it was fun for me because then when I entered 9th grade in Olathe I knew some of the people. Otherwise, when you go to a one room school, I was by myself in my grade all the time that I was there and even our 4-H club was centered around that community so you didn't meet people that were four miles down the road especially unless you had farm organization that you belonged to and you met them that way. So it was just a tight knit community and you really...your social group was right there. So it was interesting for me to know some faces when I came into Olathe to school.

How many kids would be in your grade?

I was by myself...I was by myself all the time...all the time.

So was that pretty average?

A...it would depend. Now the school that a...was a...trying to visualized where it...well off of 119th street you know what it looks like now the...a...Pleasant View School that was over there a...was a large transient community by that I mean a lot of renters. And they had big families and so...that school...a...had two rooms in it eventually which was almost unheard of for a one

room school. But they had to do that to accommodate the number of families that they had. So there would be more in a school situation such as that. But probably a...a...the year that I taught I had three first graders which was unusual...so it would depend from year to year...but I never had anybody with me. *(She laughs)*

Well there's like 400 in my class!

Yeah. *(She laughs)*

Well, you are in the top 10!

(She laughs) Right! I was! Yeah, I was!

A...what about, this is kind of jumping around? But you said you moved out of Olathe for seven years?

After we were married...um...

Why did you choose to move back?

A...we moved out of Olathe because my husband had learned watch repair after WWII. And so...we wanted set up our own business and so we did in Osawatomie and then moved to Fort Scott. And he broke his back...we had a car wreck and he broke his back; well, we had three children and a niece at that time when we lived in Fort Scott and he broke his back. And so mother and dad said well...the house...the farm house isn't big but you are welcomed to come home. So we did. Jim broke his back In December and in March we moved back to Olathe...to...to...And after we were out in the country we didn't want to take the kids back to town. And so that is when we built our house down where Wal-Mart sits.

So how did...you have live here in Olathe 83...84 years...how do you think it has changed over time?

Well it's a cosmopolitan community now. You know, but I think Olathe has worked really hard to keep small town feeling, may not mean much but even though you go to town and you don't really see anybody that you know even at the grocery store. If you know somebody in that trip to town: a cashier, a fast food, or whatever—it still gives you a home town feeling that you not...120,000 is what it is now plus and that's hard to keep that feeling going that...we want to be neighborly maybe that sums it up.

So how did it progress from...like...were there certain times that the city grew because...?

WWII huh...huh...that's when we had the Navy airbase and a...they had to provide housing for those people. And that's when Navy Hill started...you probably know where Navy Hill is...its off

of Mahaffie Street and south of Santa Fe sort of up on a little hill. A...they built a...several good size homes up there. Most of them are duplexes and that's the first time I ever remembered seeing a duplex in Olathe. But they had to...and until they got those made...a...people just a...would move their families around...because...we were just coming out of depression money still was a...everything revolves around money...sorry it is...that's the way the world works and so a...if they had someone that needed a place to live they would sort of...move their families around and maybe rent out a bedroom to a Navy wife and everybody just adjusted. So I think that just really...and then the Sunflower Ordinate Plant west of town when that was...when that was done.

I have a silly question about the Naval Air Station...I read somewhere that Bob Barker from the Price is Right that he was actually stationed, was he? Un huh...John Glenn was...John Glenn learned to fly out there huh...uh...uh huh...

Well it is...you know...and a...gosh it is all commercial now. I have...one of my sons works there and flies for a commercial place. But a...it...it I would say the Sunflower Ordinate and the Navy Base were the big push as far as the big change in Olathe was concerned.

And then when did the Delco Battery plant come?

Ohhh...my...a...I think it was a little bit after WWII. Along in that era...yeah it was because hmmm...I can remember people that hmmm...came here to work and came to church and we got acquainted with some of them. And of course another interesting thing about the Navy Air Base...a lot of families who came and the guys served here they stayed! They became Olatheans. So...that's interesting too. And a...I think that speaks well for the surrounding area. They felt like it was a place where they wanted to rear their families...may not have that feeling if you are going to move into a big city.

So all your sons when to Olathe schools?

Um huh...yeah....

Do you think they've changed much, obviously they are going to be more since your sons have gone?

Oh...much change...much change

What do we have 30...30 some elementary? And when I came into town to school for 3rd and 4th grade there were two elementary *(she laughs)* little bit of a change. *(She laughs)*

Did you think the Olathe School District was good?

Oh it's super...it's super! *(She smiles)* I get very irritated when somebody starts downgrading it. *(She laughs)* Well, I work on the Olathe Alumni Board, I like to do that and then I am on the Board for the Retired Employees Association for the school district so... *(She shrugs her shoulders)* It's part of my life! Yeah! *(She smiles)*

Everyone talks about urban renewal.....

Mm huh...mm huh...

Some person think it was good and some person think it is the worst thing that happened to Olathe.

Well, they did away with a lot of things. And for we who grew up here that was...that was sort of hard, but you gotta think history verses progress...you're not going to stop progress one way...good or bad...it's going to come good or bad there are going to be changes. And so you go with the flow. *(She laughs)*

Do you think Olathe has done a good job with controlling the population growth?

As well as anybody could. Gardner and Stanley and Stillwell and all those areas are now going through what we have gone through and I don't think we are through yet. We are going to be land-locked one of these days. *(She laughs)* I don't know...but when...when I talk to the school kids...I do one room school talks...and when...and I have a whole bunch of memorabilia...that I take for them to look at and a...what I say to them after we have discussed what a one room school...and we have five, one room schools in Johnson County that have been saved and that's rather unusual. I am finding when I go into other parts they may have one that they have saved but we have several and a...the thing that I say to them is you can look at these things that I have brought and I know you live in a throw-away world but think about saving one thing from either your childhood or teen years so that in years to come your family can see what it was like back then, because as I tell them, if my family had thrown away everything there wouldn't have been this chalkboard and slate and these different things for you to look at to sort of see what it was like back then.

Is there certain thing that was lost through time in Olathe like a field that you wished were still here today?

Well, I know the Carnegie Library was probably ready to be demolished, but it was hard to see it go. Because that was something that had been given to the town by Andrew Carnegie. And a...if I ever hang out any place that's where I hung out! *(She laughs)*

Was it two stories?

Un...huh...un...huh. Really it was one story and a basement. It wasn't a tall...*(she raises her hand to show it was tall in height)* a...tall building.

When was it built?

You know 1800s probably I am guessing I don't know really. I can't visualize Andrew Carnegie life.

What about one thing today; if you could change one thing, what would it be?

Nothing really comes to mind. No...I think we've done and are doing a good job of saving some of the things. We finally have a museum...that's comin'. It's going to be dedicated this week. And so a...the fact that we now have a place where we can put some of the things from the past for the school kids of today go and see...oh well...this is what it was back then. And so...that to me that is important. To save that.

When you were first married what was it like to be a young couple living in this area?

Well...we got married and knew Jim was going in the service so I was with him several different times as he was in the United States. A...here again we made do with what we had. A...I know one time when we needed to get back to Olathe because Jim was going to be stationed in Texas and we had this old '30...'34 Ford...I think it was, and we...he knew it needed a new engine but we didn't have money to do an engine so we had to stop every 50 miles to put oil in it all the way from Florida. *(She smiles)* That was something that we didn't want to repeat again. But a...we knew that was the way we had to travel. We had probably a couple hundred dollars invested in that car but we didn't have money to buy an airplane ticket to bring ourselves...a...and as the children came along a...here again we...we...did what with we had.

And if...if...the kids friends had a camera and they didn't have a camera well, why can't we...well because that's not in our budget that's just something we're not going to have. When you get older maybe you can but...it was a lesson for them because not very many people can have all their wishes all at one time. And so they needed to learn that. Learn that lesson.

What did your kids do going up for fun?

A...what they'd do for fun? Got out and made mud pies *(she laughs)*...when they were little. They loved that. But a...since we lived just a quarter of a mile from my mother and dad a...they were often up at my folks to do different things. Follow grandpa around or ride the horses grandpa would put them up on the old team when he went out to plant corn...just to get the energy out of them so that they would know that it wasn't all just fun out there. A...as they got

older they had 4-H projects and a...primarily in crops and then the youngest son things were a bit little easier financially for us and so we allowed him to have some sheep. But a...I think it was a lesson of just going along...of course a...when Jim broke his back the two oldest boys were just about school age and so...that was a lesson for them...that definitely you can't get on dad's back and ride piggy back because dad's back won't handle it. And so...they just learned as they went along and they were in 4-H too so...there was a lot...where our social...that and church our social life.

Where did your children go to school?

A...the first Countryside where Bentwood is...no kindergarten...yeah. *(She smiles)*

What about so...were there any other obvious, I mean obviously there are going to be changes any other differences than today?

Well for them, no, I don't think to...so much...yeah...they a...the oldest boy a...lives with me a...and that's been nice since I lost my husband. But a...they just have taken on the...the two older boys are on...have to do with airport...airlines...planes and then the third boy is in construction he lives in Ottawa now. They were gone for 20 years to California but he and all his family came back. And then the youngest boy is a pastor up near Atchison. So a...I think the way we reared them prepared them for the lives that they have now.

What is the age difference between your oldest and youngest?

Let's see Allen is sixty-two and the youngest is fifty-three.

Nine years?

Nine years...unhuh. *(She smiles)* So growing up they had a lot of sharing to do. *(She laughs)* And they...when we moved back to my mom's and dad's and lived in the farmhouse with them a...we didn't want to take the kids back to town and so a...my dad said well would you want to build some...a house on the farm and so out of that evolved without going into all the details...we bought two acres down on the corner where...where First National Bank is down on the corner by Wal-Mart and that's where we built our basement and lived in there first several years and then went up with the super structure and so...the kids knew what it was to pound a nail...*(she laughs)* and carry wood. *(She laughs)*

What about civil right and how did it affect the city?

A...It's has been a gradual process. Not as rapidly as I think it ought to but a...we were not as prejudice in Olathe as Gardner was even a...and Spring Hill. A...when I was in school there were no black boys that were in my class. We had four girls that were in our class who graduated

with us. But of course going back in education there was a school for blacks a...off of Spruce Street I think off of Spruce Street where there's a park now. A...so a...integration came very...very...very slow. A...we have had a...black principals...Black Negro principals through the years and that's good and a...so...a I think we've been fortunate that we haven't has any real severe animosity which would wreck a town. I don't care what size. It would wreck a town. But a...I don't know we've got a long way to go. *(She smiles and shakes her head)*

So when did you move out of your house where the Wal-Mart is?

A...20 years ago.

And then you moved to where you are living now?

Mm...huh.

On the west side of town. In the progress of different places a...small towns, big towns or whatever, when you have more people you have to have utilities. And so...I know some friends of ours that lived off of 111th Street they were dairy farmers and a...that part started to be...have more houses and everything so they had to have utilities put in so they couldn't farm and have cattle anymore because they could not afford to pay the cost of the utilities being put in and usually that's spread over a ten year span that you can pay, but still when you have a lot of acreage and they do it by that...that's a difficult thing to handle. So they had to give up their dairy business and move to town. So that is just a part of progress as you go along.

Do you kind of wish that you could lose some of the bigger business and maybe have some of the smaller shops again?

Oh...I don't know. It's hard on a small business person. It was hard on us when we had the jewelry business because...after Jim broke his back and he couldn't go back to the watch repair bench anymore a...we had a friend that was that had called on us and a...when we had our jewelry store and a...he was going to retire and so he asked Jim if would be interested in buying the business; well the business was...Jim had about ten cases that were oh probably 2½ feet long and could be expanded to be maybe 2½ feet tall and that was the store that he carried with him in the car and so he traveled. And he did not call on large stores because they could buy things in gross-lot much cheaper than Jim could sell to a small jeweler in a small town so he traveled and called on businessmen that were in small towns like Gardner and a...Raytown in that time was smaller and that's the way he earned our living for quite a few years.

And so that...and...and...salesmen still do that they still call on small places but what I am saying is it's hard for a small businessman no matter what of a business you are in to buck the discount stores and everything. Where they can do things and where a...stores like Wal-Mart have come

in and a...that's been the ruination of a lot of towns. Because mom and pops stores can't...can't exist. And so that's been a big change for a lot of people.

Did you have a favorite mom pop's store in Olathe?

...well most of them were pop and mom's store *(she laughs)* back then.

Was there one you liked the most?

A...no not especially.

Can you just tell me just a few of them?

Well, there was around the courthouse: there was Carver's Grocery Store that's where we usually got our groceries when I was younger and then Kroger's came in and I think. And a...when we finally had a food locker in town...a frozen food locker and we could have our meat butchered and frozen and kept in a big bin in the frozen food lockers...didn't have a freezer at home. And a...that helped the...our protein count *(she laughs)* you know...because we could have...we didn't have to can at night and didn't have to can meat. But a...there was a Tuttle's Variety Store that was definitely a mom and pop and that probably...and there was two jewelry stores not that we had money to go there, but a...anyway that was for the access of people that could. So really there wasn't a large selection of that type of thing.

If you could choose one thing in Olathe that you liked a lot was there anything? What made Olathe the place you wanted to live here for so long?

The hometown feeling...neighbors.

And do you think any of that was lost through the years?

Some, but I think we've done a pretty good job of retaining it. A...and I think most small towns that have gone through growth spurt have done that...I think Spring Hill and Gardner have done a good job of keeping that feeling for people and so a...where...where you have different nationalities coming in that has been a big change for all the towns for the whole world...the United States. *(She laughs)* But you know...everybody's a person and we have to respect that. Yeah. *(She smiles)*

Is there anything else in particular...? Oh I don't think so...

Ok so...oh we are almost out of tape...Oh ok...thanks so much your video will be archived in the new Olathe Museum...

Ok great! Ok...ok good. Thank you!