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Oral history interview transcript with Janet Anderson

Janet B. Anderson

Troy Prah

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JANET ANDERSON
INTERVIEWED BY TROY PRAHL
EWU Women's Oral History Project
EWU 984-0094
Tape No. 3
FEBRUARY 22, 1983

T. PRAHL: This is Troy Prah interviewing Janet Nelson from Cheney Women's Oral History Project. Her topic concerns Title 9 and her work on the Cheney Free Press. The date is February 22nd, 1983.

T. PRAHL: Hi Janet.

J. ANDERSON: Hi.

T. PRAHL: How was your weekend?

J. ANDERSON: Just fine.

T. PRAHL: Did you do anything exciting over the weekend at all?

J. ANDERSON: Went to see "The Man from Snowy River".

T. PRAHL: Was that good?

J. ANDERSON: Yeah, it was, lots of macho men in it.

T. PRAHL: Oh, really?

J. ANDERSON: It was pretty good, yeah.

T. PRAHL: Well good.

J. ANDERSON: Not much other than that.

T. PRAHL: The purpose of the interview today is to obtain a little relevant information about your contributions and well, mostly your contributions toward the growth and development of Cheney. What I'd like to do today is ask a few questions pertaining to your past experiences and accomplishments and how they related to the development of Cheney.

J. ANDERSON: Fine.

T. PRAHL: Okay. Janet, how long have you lived in Cheney?

J. ANDERSON: Let's see, we came in six. . . we came in '71 so it's been 12 years.

T. PRAHL: 12 years?

J. ANDERSON: 12 years, 11 years, somewhere around there.

T. PRAHL: Have you enjoyed it?

J. ANDERSON: Yeah, yeah. I like living in Cheney. It's fun because . . .

T. PRAHL: What brought you and your husband to the Cheney area?

J. ANDERSON: My husband applied for a position here. He teaches at the university and a position in Geography opened, and he wanted. . . we were living on the East Coast at that time to be in Massachusetts, and he wanted to come this direction, because his parents and my parents are on the West Coast. So the west coast has been both of our homes more so than the east coast so we were anxious to, and Cheney was. . . it looked right for us because it was a small town which we were looking for but it was also close to Spokane. It was a more interesting site than Ellensburg, which is a small town but in

the middle of nowhere, and more interesting than . . . neither of us wanted to live in Seattle, so it worked out just fine.

T. PRAHL: So you were looking for more or less a place with opportunities for you and your husband yet not out in the boondocks or not also in a big city?

J. ANDERSON: Right. We didn't want the stress of a big city.

T. PRAHL: All right. I'd like to turn to some of your accomplishments. I noticed that you used to work for the Cheney Free Press. How did you come to work for the Free Press?

J. ANDERSON: Well, I was . . . let's see, I had always worked before I was married, and then after we were married and had a child and so I spent most of the early part of my marriage you know, being mother and housewife and I was anxious to do a little something else. So when my son started nursery school I noticed I . . . So a friend of mine had told me that there was a position on the Cheney Free Press, and I had written some things for the Cheney Free Press before. I had written since I was in a couple plays on campus. I had written Drama reviews because no one on the Free Press wanted to do it. And so they did know me and they were pretty desperate. So I went in and said, "Why not me?" and he said, "You're hired." So I started to work there. I just worked half time. I'd never had any journalism experience, but I'd done a lot of writing, technical writing mostly. And I had some interviewing skills that I'd gotten with jobs I had been doing. So that was a good job for me because it was just part time. The pay was terrible.

T. PRAHL: Oh?

J. ANDERSON: I think I got \$4.25 an hour, which is really pretty poor, but pretty standard for weekly newspapers.

T. PRAHL: What did you find most fulfilling about the job?

J. ANDERSON: Well, the most exciting thing about the job was it gave me a real opportunity to know a lot more about Cheney than I would have before and gave me a little extra money, but not much, and it gave me something to do. We had lived in Cheney for several years, this is '74, I'm not sure, '75, and as a faculty wife, I was pretty much just involved with other faculty related people in the college and I had very little to do with the rest of Cheney. I knew very little about it. I'd been on some . . . oh we'd been members of the church and I'd been on some little commitments but nothing that really would get me interested in Cheney. So the most interesting thing I did when I was there, in addition to writing up things like the Girl Scout news and the church bake sales and those kinds of things that are pretty standard, I made a point of doing a feature article each week of people in Cheney. That was about as exciting . . . and I've got some of them here. If you want I'll just set them along here. Here's a Norwegian woman who teaches nursery school at the college and she, I've got her baking Norwegian bread. I interviewed some old timers about Thanksgiving. I tried to split it up about 50/50 between college people and town people. This is the costume site at the parlor bar, and here's one on a woman who runs a goat farm. There's one on a lady who grew Aleras. I, my goal in this was to try to get people who live in the town and people who are related to the college to get to know each other. So I really felt quite good about that. I worked much harder on it than I was paid for, you know, and spent many more hours than I actually could charge them for. But it was fun and people appreciated it. I think the best

one I did was on an Italian plumber whose name is Homer, he's a character. That was a very good one. But I did. . . I try to do almost one a week. The Free Press hadn't done that before and they haven't done it since, so that was really fulfilling because I learned an awful lot about the history of Cheney and what was going on in Cheney.

T. PRAHL: You mentioned before, you learned a lot about Cheney you said.

J. ANDERSON: Right.

T. PRAHL: What were some of the things that you did learn about.

J. ANDERSON: I learned a little bit about the animosity that takes place between the people who are not involved with the college and the people who are involved with the college the "town-down" controversy, and all about, I learned how the school system worked. I learned a lot about the backgrounds of some people who I never would have known who own some of the small businesses, business owners around town. Just things like that. What makes it tick.

T. PRAHL: Yeah. What did you find most frustrating about working for the Free Press?

J. ANDERSON: Most frustrating was you know, I had a real. . . I took the job very seriously and I would try to do things like promote music and drama at the college which never seemed to make the local paper. Sometimes I would never. . . the college wouldn't particularly cooperate with it, and then of course sometimes I would print things wrong and people would get angry or I would get a date wrong or make some mistake and people would get very, very upset. I also, as I said to you before, I realized I was working too hard there for the pay I was making. So there were times that I really felt put upon, but it was my own standards that were doing it.

T. PRAHL: Okay, now we've talked a little bit about some of your experiences with the Free Press, I'd like to move on. What were some of the things that you did that really stand out in your mind, in, say the past eleven years.

J. ANDERSON: Well, I've been on lots of committees and boards and things, but one thing I did was working with the school district for affirmative action and Title 9 and this was in '70, must have been 1974. My son, he was a seventh grader, and he came home from school with a list of courses he could take, and I had another son already go through the Cheney High and never even noticed it, but Eric brought home this thing, I saw that the boys were going to sign up for Shop and the girls were going to sign up for Home-Ec. The boys could be hall monitors and the girls could work in the office, and I began to think about that and it really kind of made me mad because I guess at this time, I was beginning to think more and more about the women's movement. So I called the Junior High, and they said, "Thank you very much for calling," and they said, "Well, we've always done it." So, not getting any response there, I called the Superintendent of Schools, and he knew who I was because I was working on the Cheney Free Press, and so I think it made this a very political animal, and it made him a little nervous.

T. PRAHL: Right.

J. ANDERSON: So, he's also a very bright man in terms of public relations. So at the same time I was concerned about these sexist issues, the school district had to come out with an affirmative action board. So, Gail Morris asked me to head a committee of citizens to put out the affirmative action report in the town and make some statements about Title 9. Now, maybe I should explain to you the difference between the two.

Affirmative action is legislation that came out in the early 70s which was to counteract the problems in employment because of race, so to be an affirmative action employer; one had to seek out women and minorities for hiring purposes. It didn't mean you had to hire a quota. It had to mean that you had to show that they were treating everybody equally. So, the school assistants, if they did not have an affirmative action plan then they would lose federal funds. So the state of course pushed the local districts into coming up with an affirmative action plan. So that was part of the committee's responsibility was to produce affirmative action plans. The thing that I was concerned with was going on at the same time, was Title 9 legislation. Title 9 is tacked on the edge, the end of some other federal law, which, I can't remember what it is. That is, Title 9 legislation has to do with the equality of the sexes in school systems while affirmative action is mostly in hiring faculty, staff, and classified people, Title 9 had to do more with student's rights, rather than with hiring. So the committee which was picked by Mars and was fairly representative of the community put together a policy statement on affirmative action. That was fairly simple because if we only had to hire or we were only expected to have the same number of minority people that there are in the portion of the county present a problem because the Spokane area has very few minority people. So it was. . .we wrote the report. It was pretty straightforward. I don't know, I think that the school district follows it pretty much, but that was sort of a nothing. Title 9 was something else, and my concerns with Title 9 were, as I mentioned, the hall monitors and those kinds of things. As we got into it also, we had the equality of the sexes in public education in Cheney. We found very few problems at the elementary school level in Cheney, but we did find a number of problems at the high school level. Now, some of these were being worked on at the same time the committee was meeting. I don't know if it was the committee that spurred the feelings or it was the national legislation that they knew they had to deal with or what spurred it, but we did make some recommendations to the school board. The kinds of problems for us were the Home-Ec and Shop thing. That was pretty well straightened out. It used to be the girls in the high school. Girls would take Home-Ec, boys would take Shop. Girls could take Shop if they wanted to but they sort of had to ask for it specially or it wasn't too good of plan for them. Boys could take Home-Ec but when boys took Home-Ec they called it Bachelor Living, which really galled me because that assumes that the only time a male needs to know how to cook is if he's a bachelor.

T. PRAHL: Right.

J. ANDERSON: Once he gets married, somebody else is going to do it for him, you see, so that was an insane thing to call a course. So those courses are now integrated and there's boys taking Home-Ec and girls taking Shop. I don't know in what numbers, but there are enough now so that there's not much stigma for boys to take Home-Ec or girls to take Shop. Also the PE Classes are combined. I don't know if that's a good thing or not, but they are. The other problem was the use of the gymnasium especially in the high school and the junior high. We had a real problem. At that time, there was not a new junior high. There was only the Fisher Building down here where the administration is now. Because the junior high was one gym in that, and the little area, where the weight training and gymnastics kinds of things could be held at, but that wasn't very big. Then at the high school there was only, I think there was only one gym plus a weight training place. So then when it came time for girls and boys after school sports, the varsity boys

team always got the gym for the prime time which was just after school when the activity buses could run and that kind of thing, and the girls ended up practicing at 7 AM in the morning before school or on Saturdays or in the evenings. So during the time the committee was meeting, the coaches did get together and did have to hammer out a fair use of the limited gym spaces that was available, which meant that the varsity basketball team for example would have to practice sometimes on Saturdays. You couldn't automatically get it after school each day. So the girls would have a chance or some of the other activities would have a chance. I was trying to think, those three areas I think. . . .the other problem was funding for girls and boys sports. Now, when you start adding up football, which is a boy's sport, and a very expensive sport, you really get into some problems with that, but generally, it's worked out much better so that at least now the female coaches are paid the same as the male coaches and previously they had been paid less for after school sports because it wasn't as important. So that's basically what we did. Then we recommended these things officially for the school board. The school district really had sort of gone ahead with it during the. . . . so I think that that was. . . . that was a contribution. It may have happened if I had never called, I'm sure it would have, but you know, it was kind of fun to be part of that process.

T. PRAHL: So, do you think you accomplished what you set out to do with Title 9?

J. ANDERSON: Oh, yeah. Oh, I think so. Oh, sure. Well, it was the law of the land anyway, you know. But I think we did it with a reasonable amount of goodwill. Because there was another woman on the committee with me who was an ardent feminist, and I'm a pretty strong feminist, but we both agreed before we went to the committee that we would really try to tone it down because we didn't want to alienate the other people on there. So we really pushed and pushed and tried to work things through so that it would not become a feminist sort of battle.

T. PRAHL: Okay. If I could summarize, it seems that you were in. . . got involved. . . it's all started at home more or less with your sons coming home with their schedules and then you saw an injustice, or what you thought was an injustice and you wanted to get involved and try to alleviate the problem, and with the affirmative action and the Title 9, and you think that you really did accomplish what you set out to do.

J. ANDERSON: I think so.

T. PRAHL: Okay. Now, if I may, I'd like to move on to how you feel other women may have contributed to Cheney and its development. What women do you feel are most influential in Cheney right now?

J. ANDERSON: Right now that's really hard to say. Two women who are in positions of importance are Roberta McNeil who's on the school board and Karen Nibower who's on the city council. They have official places of importance. There are definitely some women on campus who do, but I'm not sure that they're particularly related to Cheney. Then there are also some real behind the scenes women, and if we go back a little bit, what's a good name, Virginia White who's written a history of Cheney and has been active, and she was the first woman on the city council too, not too long ago as a matter of fact, a couple of terms before. Dede Gammon, who has always served as Cheney's social conscious, she's always in there fighting for some injustice or other. I'm trying to think of the women that I knew when I was here, there were some women who spent a lot

of time just working with Campfire, Girl Scouts, Boy Scouts, Cub Scouts, all those kinds of things, who without them, the organizations would have just gone by the wayside.

T. PRAHL: So do you feel that a person's influentially comes with their official capacity, more or less their position, say on a city council or on the board of directors, say something like that?

J. ANDERSON: No, not really because there's so many behind the scenes people. Sometimes I think women in the past have had to rely on being behind the scenes to make their influence felt. Women like Dede Gammon for example or some of the women who have worked for all the community service councils and those other kinds of organizations, have pushed city council members, and school board members around to their point of view, you know, lobbying or whatever. These women have had to take that role in the past and many of them were quite good at it. It's just recently that we've had women in official positions of importance.

T. PRAHL: Janet, how do you feel women were important historically on the job near Cheney?

J. ANDERSON: Oh my, well really it's from what I read because I haven't been here that long. Oh, let's see, historically, well, there's the old idea of holding the home together so the men can go out and plow the fields, etc., there's always that. Women were very strong temperaments living in Cheney, and during WW I and WW II, in terms of rolling bandages and raising money and bake sales and all those kinds of things for the war efforts. Most of Cheney's social help kinds of organizations really wouldn't happen probably without women. The Cheney city library was organized by women. The Community Service Council which is help to the poor was run by a woman. Of course one of the most interesting things to happen to Cheney is the start of the environmental action committee, now the recycling center, which was all done by women. Now of course, there are men on the board and men are involved there, but that was started by women who wanted to get a recycling program going, and it's really fueled the state. It's volunteering now and the money made from the recycling department for the city goes right back into the community, you know, city community activities. So those kinds of things, social things, it was the women that got them going. It was women that got the Planned Parenthood out to Cheney. Certainly a lot of the medical staff here would have never considered having a Planned Parenthood come out, but it's women who got that started and found a place for it to be here. As those kinds of things, the immunization clinic was started by women.

T. PRAHL: So you feel that women did play an important role in Cheney's development with such things as the library, service council, environmental action committee and the Planned Parenthood?

J. ANDERSON: Yes.

T. PRAHL: Okay. Having been a resident of Cheney for the past 11 years, what local events or issues most marked would stand out in your mind?

J. ANDERSON: Well, there are two or three. One of them is the arterial running through Cheney. Cheney wanted it, the city wanted to get some money for paving the street. The only way they could get money for paving the street was to call it an arterial which means that it has to be straight through, no stop signs. So they decided they would make an arterial out of 6th street and 5th street. 6th street from Washington to F and then

they were going to curve it around Showalter Hall which they did, and then down 5th. Okay, when we came, those streets looked the same as the streets between 5th and first now, they were just all square cornered with the stop signs here and there and kind of run down curbs. To make it an arterial though it had to be so wide, to make it so wide that meant they had to cut down trees. So there was a great group of mostly faculty people who were opposed to the arterial and there were many, many meetings and it was sort of a repeat of the old Civil Rights Movement that we'd all done before, you know, we all kind of wanted to get involved again.

I mean they made meetings, and we lost. They put the arterial in and cut down the trees. Now it doesn't look so bad as we thought it might, but we just thought it was kind of gimmicky. But that was a big battle. The other thing that happened to Cheney was George Frederickson. That has made a real change of pace at the University, and real different feelings about that faculty have for the university, which I look at as Cheney more. The fact that there's a push now, the faculty at the university is becoming more and more in Spokane, pushed toward the Spokane Center rather than the Cheney Center. So I think in the long run, putting in George Frederickson is going to make a big difference to Cheney because it's a whole different campus. What else, the environmental center, or the recycling center. I don't know if it's an issue, but that was an event. We'll call it an event, is that okay?

T. PRAHL: Okay.

J. ANDERSON: That was an event that, that's made a difference in Cheney. Oh, the other one that was exciting for me was when the field house burned down. Now, I was working at the Cheney Free Press one morning and I had some coffee at about 8:30, and they said, "The field house is on fire." So that same morning, the editor of the paper had been called. There was a burglary, no robbery at the Farmers and Merchants bank. Cheney never has a bank robbery. So we charged off at about 8:15 and this bank robbery was over and about 20 minutes later the field house burned down. The field house was up across from the Phase. Do you remember it?

T. PRAHL: No, I . . .

J. ANDERSON: That's right, you weren't here. Well, it was a big barn of a building that had been brought in from the air force base, and many years ago they had wanted to get rid of it. The college wanted to get rid of it and they had finally gotten the fire department to condemn it. Because if the fire department condemned the field house, then they could gather the legislature for more money to build Phase 1, Phase 2, Phase 3 and all that sort of thing.

T. PRAHL: Right.

J. ANDERSON: Okay, the fire department in Cheney condemned it. So then they hired somebody to start tearing it down. Well, it was my understanding that there were a number of . . . while they were taking it down, they were using acetylene torches to undo the screws or, I don't know.

T. PRAHL: Bolts and stuff?

J. ANDERSON: I don't know, whatever, take down the metal part of it, right? And there had been a couple of calls up there because evidently, the people who were taking it down were really pretty sloppy. But the thing did catch fire one morning and of course by that point it was just sort of like a big empty hall, and the fire just raged through it. I don't

think the fire was out until noon or one, and there were all sorts of problems. They were afraid the Art TV and the Drama buildings were going to get burned and the ROTC building got singed. Now, where there should be windows in the ROTC building, it's been bricked and so they're remodeling. So I charged up with my camera and I wasn't, you know, a great fire reporter I was just covering the girl scouts, but I had a lot of fun. Took lots of pictures and it was dangerous. . . but that fire could be seen from long, long distances away and they called in the Medical Lake fire department for what it's worth and the Spokane fire department, so they had everybody rushing in to that fire because it looked really, really quite a sight. One thing that was funny was to see the ROTC people evacuate the building and taking out all their rifles and all their ammunition.

T. PRAHL: Oh, man.

J. ANDERSON: All that was sort of just lined up on the sidewalk with one poor kid guarding it. So that was an event. I remember that was an issue.

T. PRAHL: Okay, I'd like to take a couple of them that you mentioned such as the arterial and H. George Frederickson coming to Cheney and becoming president of the university, what effects do you think these have on the community of Cheney, positive or negative?

J. ANDERSON: For the arterial?

T. PRAHL: Take the arterial first.

J. ANDERSON: I think the arterial was a real town gown fight. Because it was the people on campus who didn't want to see the trees cut down and the people in town wanted the wide roads. So I think that was one of the last of the town gown arguments that there was. Of course it wasn't even. Not everybody on one side was active or the other.

T. PRAHL: Right.

J. ANDERSON: But it was a good fight and it was kind of fun. What effect it had on the town? It got the arterial built. I don't think there's much animosity remaining after that. Not like there had been for some other issues that had happened before we came.

T. PRAHL: How about President Frederickson?

J. ANDERSON: Oh, I don't know if I can really comment on that.

T. PRAHL: You don't really have a viewpoint one way or the other?

J. ANDERSON: Yeah, I'd just rather not comment on that.

T. PRAHL: Okay. All right, I'd kind of like to wrap things up.

J. ANDERSON: Okay.

T. PRAHL: Do you have any questions or anything you'd like to add?

J. ANDERSON: I don't think so.

T. PRAHL: Okay. What's going to happen is the tape of this interview will be turned in to the Women's Center here in Cheney and a permanent record will be kept in the library on campus. I'd just like to thank you for your time and your input.

J. ANDERSON: Thank you. You did a good job.

T. PRAHL: Thank you. We'll probably be getting back a hold of you, or the Women's Center will be getting a hold of you and let you know if there's any more information or anything like that.

J. ANDERSON: Okay, fine.

T. PRAHL: Okay?

J. ANDERSON: Good.

T. PRAHL: Thank you.