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HIST 155, Fall 2015 / Kevin Hughes

Student Interviewer's Name: Kevin Hughes

Interviewee Name: Louise McDonald

Time and Location of Interview:

The interview was conducted in two sessions on October 16, and November 3 and lasted approximately 10 minutes for the first interview, and 32 minutes during the second interview. It was conducted at Morning Pointe in Collegedale, TN. Only Ms. McDonald and I were present at the table.

About Louise McDonald:

Louise McDonald was born in Yancey, Texas in 1928 and has moved around a lot during her life. She was young during the Great Depression, but remembers many hardships from it. She was one of six children in her family, which was hard for her parents to keep up with. Her husband was drafted into the Korean war, and she had a child while he was away.⁵ This interview covered topics ranging from the great depression to life with her husband in the army, and was conducted on November 3, 2015 at his home in Chattanooga, TN.

Interviewer: Kevin Hughes (KH)

Interviewee: Louise McDonald (LM)

KH: When were you born?

LM: November 19, 1928

KH: So you were around two years old when the depression started?

LM: Well yeah, yeah

KH: What was your family like before the depression, how many siblings did you have at the time?

LM: Do you mean all together?

KH: When the depression started.

LM: I think it was the 30s.

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KH: Yeah, how many children did your family have when the depression started?

LM: Well we had, well there were six of us kids

KH: Okay, and was your family middle class?

LM: (Fumbling to get word out)

KH: Like, were you lower class, middle class or higher class. Did your family have a steady means of income during the depression?

LM: No, no...we had to be, the government had to feed us.

KH: Okay. Did your family have anything invested in the stock market when it crashed?

LM: I don't think so, I don't think so.

KH: Okay, and when did you first remember hearing about or recognizing what the great depression meant? Did you understand what the great depression meant at the time?

LM: Well I was about five years old. No it didn't bother me (chuckles)

KH: (laughter) so you were just playing and having fun?

LM: Yeah, just playing and having fun? (laughter)

KH: And where did you live at the time of the great depression?

LM: We lived in Texas. It was a...It was a...Yancey, Texas. Y-A-N-C-E-Y, Texas. A small little place. There was just a store and a post office.

KH: and you lived there most of your life, or did you move around a lot?

LM: No, we lived there...I'm not sure how long we lived there.

KH: Alright. And what type of transportation did your family have, did you own any cars?

LM: (Laughter)

KH: Or did you take the bus?

LM: No, we had an old car.

KH: Okay, and do you remember, was your clothing usually store bought? Hand-me-downs from your older siblings?

LM: I only had one dress.

KH: That's interesting, was it a hand-me-down? Or was that YOUR dress?

LM: Well my mother, she made our clothes.

KH: Oh wow, she sowed?

LM: Yeah my mother, she did a lot of sowing.

KH: Did you do a lot of home cooking as well?

LM: Yeah, yeah. She was a good cook.

KH: Were there any kinds of goods that were hard to find?

LM: Well I didn't have any shoes to wear. I had to wear...I had to go barefoot to school. (mumbles) they bought me a pair of shoes that cost fifty cents. That was in the days when a yarn was only 6 cents a yard. And my mother she had to help make the extra money by picking pecans. There was a pecan place there. I would go there and help pick um', and she would weigh them. They would pay her so much a pound, you know? And my father was a farmer. He grew...watermelons and different things. That was about...a lot of our food back then. You know, the field?

KH: Yeah, so you lived on a farm?

LM: Yeah

KH: Did your family have a lot of land?

LM: we, we...it belonged to someone else. And we had to pay them so much.

KH: Okay, and the depression, how much did it affect your family's financial situation? Did it plummet, or stay the same?

LM: Well...no. We just didn't have a lot of food, but we didn't starve. Ya know?

KH: Yeah. So you lived on a farm with another family as well?

LM: No, we rented the house and the land, and my father grew things on it. And we had to pay the person who owned it so much.

KH: Yeah, so the owner lived around where you lived.

LM: Yeah, nearby. Yeah, um huh.

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KH: So how did you conserve and save, and make things last during the depression? Like was there any extra cutbacks that you made? Did you have electricity and running water the whole time?

LM: We didn't have running water. We had a well that we had to get water from. We had to bring a bucket and put it down in the well and draw it up.

KH: Okay, was that a big chore?

LM: It didn't bother me! (laughter) I was only five years old.

KH: Oh okay, (laughter) You just had your older siblings do it then?

LM: No, I don't know who did it! We had five of us girls and one brother. Five sisters. I was one of the five.

KH: Okay, were you one of the youngest?

LM: No, I was right in the middle.

KH: Was your brother older or younger?

LM: He was about 3 years older

KH: Okay so did you make you girls make your brother do most of the work?

LM: I don't know, I think he got by quite easy. I know my sisters had to be a horse for the garden, my father would have a plow. (Laughter) They would get hooked up and had to pull it! (laughter) When they went to college, my next oldest sister, she would tell those stories to the kids, and they thought it was funny. Embarrassed my sister to death for her to tell those stories.

KH: So what was your typical day like? As a five year old during the depression?

LM: I played a lot.

KH: Did you take the bus to school?

LM: No, I just walked to school.

KH: Was it a long walk?

LM: Ehh, no it was probably about a mile.

KH: Oh wow, and you did not have any shoes?

LM: No, I went barefoot.

KH: Wow, did you walk with your siblings to school?

LM: Well, no...well we lived in one house, and had a vacant house, so we moved to that one. And that was quite a ways. I walked by myself. I had had shoes at that time. No, I just walked by myself. My mother told me to go to school! (Laughter) I didn't think a thing about it.

KH: Wow, (laughter) times were definitely different weren't they?

LM: (laughter) Yeah.

KH: So what was your favorite thing to do in your free time?

LM: I liked to play ball. I would kick the ball, and throw it against the wall. I hit the window one time, broke the window.

KH: Oh my.

LM: I knew I was in for it, I ran into the house and jumped on my bed and hide under the covers. I thought I would be safe there. (Laughter) But I didn't get the spanking I thought I would get.

KH: (laughter) So you were a little bit mischievous?

LM: (laughter) Yeah. I liked to play marbles too. We had dirt, we didn't have any grass. You go out there and (hand motions of making a hill out of dirt), and you shoot the marbles from the top and knock into them. That was a game we liked to play.

KH: What was your biggest fear and your greatest wish?

LM: My biggest fear?

KH: Yeah, as a little girl in the depression, were you afraid of anything happening?

LM: (pondering) I can't remember...I was just a happy go lucky little girl. We lived in the country you see; we didn't live in the city so we just had that one little store. I didn't know any better. It was just little old me. I set the barn on fire once...

KH: Really?

LM: I had to put it out. I lit a match, and it just caught fire.

KH: Did it burn the whole thing down?

LM: No, it didn't burn any of it down, I just remember that's what I did

KH: Wow, you were probably about ten when the depression ended, did that affect anything?

LM: well we moved back to Texas, and that was a little place with just a post office and a bank. Not too much.

KH: Did you move to a bigger house with more land?

LM: No, it belonged to somebody. I think it belonged to my uncle. Then one day my mother went out to pick grapes in the garden you know. And she was working and someone came up to her and asked if she had kids and she said yes, and he said I think your house burned down. We had to move. He was a reporter

KH: So your house burned down?

LM: Yeah

KH: Did you lose everything to the fire?

LM: I think maybe they saved a mattress. The people there they were real good. They gave us clothes. This one girl, she gave up one of her dresses so I could have something to wear. And uh, but those didn't bother me at all.

KH: How old were you when that happened?

LM: I was about nine years old.

KH: So you had to start from scratch?

LM: Yeah we had to start from scratch, my father was still gardening at the time. My mother she had to go to the field and work. He had sweet potatoes around Christmas time, my mother had to go out and pick them up you know, she had a basket and picked them. Yeah it was just a little shack that we lived in, out in the forest. It had one big room, that's where we slept (Pointing on the table) my dad was here, my mother here, my brother here. But I went through it, I didn't know any better.

KH: That's interesting. So how long did you live there?

LM: Oh...A couple years

KH: Having survived the crisis of the great depression, what advice would you have today in this crisis?

LM: It'd be altogether different, yeah it would be altogether different. You know, it

got better. You know we got a better house. We moved to a house we rented, it had a kitchen, and a living room, and we had a fireplace. It had two other rooms. By then my two older sisters went to college, you know. That's when my father had a nice garden and he raised watermelons, and we kids had to go out in the fields and I hated that. I hated for summer to come, I'd have to go out in the field and I didn't like it. The watermelon had vines you know. And we had to stick long sticks and get the vines out of the way. My older sister, she would hit her head against the wall so that she would get a headache and wouldn't have to go to the field to work. (laughter) but she didn't tell them those stories until later. She lied, you know?

KH: Yeah, so your whole family worked out in the field?

LM: Yeah

KH: What did your mother do at the time?

LM: She had a job working for a doctor as a nurse, he taught her how to give shots. Then of course later on we moved to Sinton, Ohio which maybe was thirty miles away. She got a job in another hospital and then she took a course in license practicing nurse and got paid a little more and then in Sinton we moved to what wasn't a real house. It was just a building that had a kitchen, and we had a refrigerator and we had never had one before. Us kids would come home and eat ice cream. (laughter) which we liked very much. I was in the 8th grade, and my mother she was the go-getter, we moved to another house. It was a yellow house, and it was a little bit nicer. And then my mother she bought another house and it was a little nicer as well, and we thought we were really up in the world. (laughter) now that we had a nicer house to live in.

KH: You were in 8th grade then?

LM: I was in high school at that point.

KH: Then you went to college, correct?

LM: Yeah, my older sister she went to be a nurse, then my older sister who was younger went to be a nurse at the same place. Then I came along and I went to be a nurse, and my younger sister, she's three years younger than me, she went to be a nurse. Then my younger sister, she didn't want to be a nurse, she wanted to be a medical technologist. She went to college to be that. So all five of us girls got an education, my father was real proud of us, that all of us girls were able to get through. We paid and when I graduated college all I owed was \$30. You only got ten cents an hour, ya know.

KH: That's amazing, and what did your brother do? Did he go to college?

LM: He went to be a nurse but he changed his mind, he didn't really like it. He went

back home and became a mechanic. He was good at it, he became real known in that little town. But he was very honest, very reasonable in how much he charged. They liked him very much. That's what he did.

KH: So he stayed in town?

LM: Yeah, he liked that little town. Yeah that's where he lived. He wasn't married at that time.

KH: So when did you meet your husband?

LM: I met him at Madison College in Tennessee. We got married about ten months later in Nashville, Tennessee. His parents lived there and they would have me come up for dinner on Saturdays. And I liked his parents very much, they were wonderful people.

KH: So you met your husband while you were training to be a nurse?

LM: Yeah, uh huh. And we got married after I graduated in 1950 I think. I went to college in 1946 and was there four years so 1950, but I didn't have a B.S.

KH: Okay, so then shortly after you got married, when did your husband get drafted.

LM: Well we got married after I finished in 1950, we were married October 1, 1950. And he was in Florida working at Florida Hospital and he came back and we got married then we went back again, then in 1951 I guess it was, he got drafted in January. I had to have my parents take me back to my home and I found out I was pregnant, vomiting every morning. Then he went to Korea for one year then he came back but was still in the army and he got a job at a hospital back in Madison, Tennessee, that's where we went to college. He's a medical technologist and he worked in the hospital out there.

KH: So you had your first child while he was away?

LM: Yeah, he didn't see her until she was nine months old, and she was afraid of him. Because she was living with my parents, she was around them all the time and it took her a while to get used to him, she would cry a lot, she got used to it but he was different to her.

KH: Then so he came back from the war and he stayed here, he didn't go back?

LM: Well he was still in the Army you know, until he was released. I can't remember what month it was.

KH: when did you have your other children?

LM: They were all three, three months apart.

KH: was it ever hard for you to find work?

LM: No, it wasn't. I worked there at Madison until I had my second child then I was home for a while. Then I went back to work there and worked pediatrics. Then I had my third child and I worked at Midstate Babtist. I drove 10 miles to work, I worked 3-11 and would get home about midnight, go to sleep and get up early in the morning. I was young and had a lot of energy. I couldn't do that now! (laughter) I don't know how I did it then.

KH: Who were some major influences and why?

LM: My mother-in-law was a major influence in my life. She was a wonderful cook. I wanted some of her recipes so she wrote me a book and wrote them out, and to this day she didn't remember writing this but it was her handwriting. My mother was a good cook as well, she had a lot of mouths to feed! (laughter) We ate a lot of pinto beans, that's what we had to cook.

KH: Growing up with your siblings becoming nurses, you always knew that you would become a nurse?

LM: I just followed in their footsteps, we didn't know any better! (laughter) now my older sister she went first, she said she had to work 18 hours, she was so tired. Then we all worked our way through, it was the only way that we could make our way through. My sister next to me, she didn't like nursing, she wanted to be a seamstress. She wanted to go to New York and design dresses, because she started sowing when she was ten years old, she didn't have any training and she would go into my mother's room and take her material and make her own dresses, finally she got her own stuff, and my little sister started sowing as well, she didn't like all the attention my other sister got for her dresses so she did it as well.

KH: You didn't like sowing?

LM: Well I didn't know how, and I wasn't too concerned. There was a nurse that I rode with at Midstate hospital and she went to a sowing class and she wanted me to go, and I did and I learned how to sow.

KH: So now you enjoy it?

LM: Well yeah, I don't do it as much anymore. But I can sew.

KH: As you look back at your life, do you see any turning points or key events in your life?

LM: No, I don't regret going to be a nurse, I think I did the right thing.

KH: What do your children do?

LM: I have three grown girls, Patricia is the oldest, we don't hear from her. She lives in Florida, she doesn't write us, she used to. I can't remember what she did in college. My next daughter, Sherrill, she went to college for music she worked...I forgot where she worked. She worked, she gets pension, she gets it for the rest of her life, and she got another job in Georgia, about an hour away from here. My youngest daughter, she lives about three minutes from here. Real close, she is a medical technologist, she works at Memorial Hospital at the lab there. She didn't want the job, but they gave it to here anyways. She works long hours and stays overtime but she doesn't complain and that's probably the main reason they hired her.