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Interview with Jean Wyatt

Rachel Keller

Jean Wyatt

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Interviewer: Rachel Keller
Interviewee: Jean Wyatt
Date: 24 February 2012
Location: The Weathervane, Gambier, OH

JW: Jean Wyatt
RK: Rachel Keller

RK: This is Rachel Keller speaking with...

JW: Jean Wyatt

RK: and we're here at the Weathervane and its Friday, February 24th, about 3 o'clock. Thank you for agreeing to do this so last minute.

JW: You're welcome.

RK: So will you describe your involvement with the county fair?

JW: With the county fair, with 4H, I was involved from the time I was 9 years-old when I joined 4H, learned how to sew cook and I took child care projects and made toys and the highlight of the year was always going to 4H camp. Because living on a farm with 4 brothers, I didn't get out much, especially in the summer, I was stuck on the farm and 4H camp was a huge deal, it was 3 days away from the farm so kids got homesick but it was always so much fun. It was just the big, big three days out and that was always a highlight of my 4H, as well as going to the state fair with honorable mentions in sewing projects and stuff like that. And that's how I got interested in clothing, and in textiles and working with fabrics and such and then when I grew up, I had 3 children and I was a 4H leader with Green Valley Adventures and we had boys and girls and we taught them again, how to sew and... projects had changed a lot in 20 years so things had gone from really making things from scratch to projects they could do like put together outfits from going to Goodwill...[laughs]...anyhow, it didn't promote the sewing as much as it should have. As society changed, there were not as many mothers home to teach daughters how to sew, and in 20 years, fabrics went from \$1.99 a yard to \$10 a yard so it wasn't cheaper to make something than it was to buy it. And so you saw the coming of Wal-Mart and things like that that made it cheaper to buy clothes rather than sew them. But it was still great experience and all the kids learned a lot, we got together to make mac and cheese and pizza or something or how to measure ingredients, you know I felt like they were learning something and several times we would do uh just life skills we called them...I'd bring 15 hammers and nails and I'd have the kids pound a nail in a board and I was shocked out of 15 kids, the only one that could do it was my daughter because even the boys had never done...never held a nail. So we put it inside a little 6 inch cone so they wouldn't smash their fingers and they wouldn't have to run to the emergency room and then they held the nail with the cone and then...[laughs]

RK: Did they not grow up on a farm?

JW: Well some of them did but...it's just the... it's a new generation of kids who sit in front of TVs and play video games instead of being out beneath their fathers' wing uh building things...and uh farming's changed too, with a lot of crop farmers instead of dairy farmers. You know you don't fix machinery the way you did when I was growing up, you just go out and buy a new one...you know, it's just a different world.

RK: What do you think drew those kids to the club?

JW: oh, camaraderie, friends, you know if your friends join then you join and of course a lot of them wanted a free pass to the fair because if you were a club member, you got a band that you wore to the Knox County fair. Free seven days at the fair was a ton of entertainment so that was more fun then you could come up with all summer long.

RK: Is that—

JW: Your friends from high school and junior high and whatever so you'll see the kids walking around every night and its really cute.

RK: Do you remember that being a big reason why you did 4H?

JW: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. It was the only time during the summer that you'd get to see all your friends from school so um parents didn't run children around for play dates as I did with my kids but uh that's a big difference too but even so, I think kids love going to the Knox County fair and meeting all the other kids from the other counties and different schools and stuff.

RK: In what ways have you noticed change in the fair as a whole, aside from the 4H activities?

JW: Well, its dwindled.

RK: Reall?

JW: Well yeah as the farming the farms have been poached by all the housing it's such... its gotten smaller and smaller, there's fewer farmers farming a lot more land so you have fewer farm families so I mean I think that makes a huge difference. Even from the difference of 19—my daughter was born in 1975, she's 32 now—when she did “Joyful Jumper,” and that's just a project of clothing, there were 160 girls that modeled their outfits in front of everybody in the Memorial Theater and six years from my oldest daughter who was born—I'm sorry she was born in '79, and then my second daughter was born in '85, in six years it went from 160 girls modeling down to 82. So that's how the sewing kind of completely disappeared within 6 years and now um it makes me so sad when I sponsor or uh—I sponsor the trophies for the reserve and best of sewing—and I went to present it a couple of years ago and I was just shocked, there were 19 girls who modeled, that was it. In every category, all the categories together only 19 girls. I mean it was just heartbreaking so...to see how it's just...died out so...nobody thinks they will

ever have to sew on a button, that's why they pay me \$5 to sew on a button, which blows my mind.

RK: So, but it definitely positively influenced your life

JW: My life, yes it was a wonderful experience and wonderful adults who were great role models and all the other—camp counselors and people like that—you looked up to them and they were, they were great role models growing up.

RK: Do you have any memories of going to any particular event at the fair?

JW: Well, I was Knox County Dairy Princess, so I had to hand out—

RK: Stop it! What year?

JW: Woo-woo [laughs] I don't know what year, probably 1970.

RK: So when you were younger?

JW: Yes, yes you're 16 or 17 when you do that craziness

RK: What does that entail?

JW: it entails being teased by everybody. You're called the Milk Queen and all kinds of funny things

RK: But isn't it, it's an honor isn't it?

JW: Oh, it's an honor...it was quite an honor then. They probably have three girls try out. Back then, they had 12-15 of the dairy farmers' daughters would try out for this Knox County Dairy Princess and then you'd have to hand out ribbons at the Knox Count Fair during Dairy Day.

RK: What would you do as your...how did you try out?

JW: Oh just an interview, you had to write an essay. You had an essay and an interview. It wasn't like a pageant or anything.

RK: Oh that's neat. They have a Miss Equine don't they?

JW: Yes, there is the Pork Queen, the Sheep Queen...there's and they called me the Cow Queen...Dairy Princess sounded a lot better.

RK: Are there Dairy Princesses still?

JW: Yeah yeah my niece was the Dairy Princess about six years ago

RK: Oh cool! What else...so when you go to the fair now what do you always make sure you do?

JW: Well, I always go through the dairy barn because I grew up on a dairy farm, I love the horses because I have nieces and nephews who do the horses and it always makes me so sad, I always go through the booths where they hang the sewing projects you know where there's 19 instead of 200 to look at. It just is such a difference.

RK: Yeah, it's too bad. I think that's happening in so many areas, you know as things change.

JW: Yeah, it is

RK: Did you receive ribbons for your sewing projects?

JW: Uh-huh I sure did, I got an honorable mention every year.

RK: At the state fair

JW: Knox County fair, and if you got an honorable mention you got to go on the state fair. That always mind-blowing because then you saw the girls with the nine-paneled formals that looked like they had sewed for two years. You know, and I made mine in three weeks, you know so it's always shocking to see how much better they were. But that's always happens when you go the state level. But it was still a great experience, and again we always have kids give demonstrations at meeting and there they learned public speaking and we took kids that would never stand up in front of a class but they could stand there and demonstrate how to take apart a battery or lawnmower or you know something and do a little demonstration in front of twelve friends and that often times build their confidence to do better in school and I think that helped them. And for those kids, some went on to regionals to do state demonstrations and stuff so...

RK: Well, from what I've just kind of seen, sitting at the club meeting and from talking to Larry, its just a great opportunity for kids to develop leadership skills and—

JW: It is, so often they are appreciated for what they are good at. You know, in school, so many kids can sit for twelve years and feel like they are worthless because they are not an A student and 4H has nothing to do with that. If you're a good sewer, or you're a good baker, or you're a good...you know, there's rocketry...the boys love to do rocketry, things like that. If they can do well in that and excel in that and get a trophy, it's a huge boost to their ego. It's more than academics, though of course they still have to fill out their book, which some of the kids do on the way to judging but [laughs] that's happened before.

RK: [laughs] Did you feel like, did your kids feel like the community was really supporting them?

JW: Oh, at the fair? Oh yeah, I think especially when the kids show pigs and they would get lots of money sometimes from some of these feed companies and grain companies would support them. Companies here in the county, they bid on the livestock—some of those kids get their college money from doing this for years. Now sewing is different, you get a trophy or a placque—woo-woo which is too bad because you know sometimes they've got \$90 and some patterns and a roll of fabric and whatever so they should get some money.

RK: Well it is so cool that it kind of brought you here, to working in a clothing store.

JW: Well yeah, I wanted to be a home-ec teacher but I didn't have enough money from bailing hay and babysitting to go to Ohio State for four years because it was \$15,000 a year believe it or not back in the olden days. But uh my home-ec teacher said 'you will go to college' so she hooked me up to this Patricia Stephens Career College and it was a fashion merchandising college and so I went to classes from 8 in the morning to 5 in the afternoon and I had course all day long for 9 months and came out of it with an associates fashion merchandising and so that's how I got into this. But who know?

RK: And now you're know for...so you're the owner, then? Everybody knows Weathervane on campus.

JW: Yes, well good. Did you have 4H in Kansas?

RK: You know, I lived in the downtown area and I didn't grow up knowing about it but when I went to high school there were students that had done 4H um and we had FFA, um my granny and I—my granny lives in Colorado—and we've participated in the Routt County Fair several times and um with our cooking, we would make stuff together and we got a couple of rewards and it was really fun

JW: So you got a taste of it, yeah

RK: Oh yeah, it is so fun! You walk in and see what everyone got and—

JW: 'why did that jam out-do my jam?'

RK: Yeah, 'that didn't look good'

JW: Well you spoke of FFA, I have to tell you a story about uh Future Farmers of America actually started in Fredericktown, Ohio and my father, who's passes away now, had the very first FFA jacket it was designed and produced out of Fredericktown, Ohio

RK: I had no idea

JW: Yeah and so they went to Kansas City to the national FFA convention and uh played, they were in a little a little band, they had horns and drums and he only played trumpet

RK: Yeah, I know it's a national club. When I was in DC this summer, I saw a huge group of kids that were all FFA representatives, a huge group of kids so...

JW: They send delegates to FHA, Future Homemakers of America, I was president of that too, and I got to go to the state and was elected state officer and I had never been out of the state of Ohio, you know growing up as a dairy farmer and at 16 they flew me to Kansas City you know

to be part of the national FHA convention. It's always amazing to get out of your little realm of the world and see the rest of the world. It certainly brought me opportunities through 4H, FHA and the sewing and so...does that tell you what you needed to know?

RK: Yes, thank you very, very much, I'm glad that it was such a positive influence. I really wish I had done 4H.

JW: Now, I'll show you a funny picture...oh my car is not here I forgot.

RK: Well, that's OK. Thank you again.