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### Interview with Helen Smith

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*Fort Hays State University*

Helen Smith

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CHAPTER II  
ORAL HISTORY OF HELEN SMITH  
ONE-ROOM SCHOOLTEACHER

Shelia: This afternoon we are visiting with Helen Smith, my maternal grandmother and she taught in a one-room country schoolhouse in Pawnee County, Kansas. She taught in 1927, 28 and 1929. This afternoon we're going to refer to her as grandma instead of Helen because I've never called her Helen. Grandma, what is your full name?

Grandma: Helen Sarah Atwater Smith

Shelia: Your age today is?

Grandma: 87 years old.

Shelia: The schools you attended were?

Grandma: I went to two country schools in Barton County and I went to the Great Bend grade schools and then to the Great Bend High School. Then I went to Emporia State College.

Shelia: You graduated high school in 19?

Grandma: 1919.

Shelia: 1919. You taught school beginning in 1919 and how many years did you teach?

Grandma: I taught 8 years, but they were not consecutive.

Shelia: During that time, were there any awards given to you for outstanding -

Grandma: No.

Shelia: How old were you when you began your teaching experiences?

Grandma: In 1919.

Shelia: And how old were you then?

Grandma: 19 years old.

Shelia: Your name at that time was?

Grandma: Helen Sarah Atwater.

Shelia: You were single at this time?

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: You taught at the rural schools and how many years were you at the Brick School?

Grandma: Two years.

Shelia: Where did you live when you taught at the Brick School in Pawnee County?

Grandma: With the Arthur Smith family.

Shelia: Do you know when the schoolhouse was built?

Grandma: No.

Shelia: The materials that were used for the schools, do you have any recollection of that?

Grandma: No, I don't.

Shelia: The actual building itself was built of brick that was brought in, is that correct?

Grandma: That's right.

Shelia: They had a special type of heating that we were talking about. Can you tell us how that school was heated?

Grandma: It had a floor furnace and we burned coal.

Shelia: Were you responsible for the coal?

Grandma: No, the school board brought the coal in and put it in

the basement.

Shelia: What kind of lighting did the school have?

Grandma: Window lights. If we had a special program, people brought the lamps in and we used those.

Shelia: How about the toilet facilities?

Grandma: Outside toilets - two, one for the boys and one for the girls.

Shelia: How did the school get it's water? The water that you drank.

Grandma: We had a windmill. When it got too cold, it froze up then we didn't have water.

Shelia: Then you brought the water from the windmill into the school?

Grandma: Yes, we had a earthen water fountain they called it. Just with a faucet on it and they could drink from the faucet or put water in their cups.

Shelia: Did everyone have their own cup?

Grandma: Oh, yes.

Shelia: Did they bring their cups from home?

Grandma: Yes, they brought them the first of the year and kept them all year.

Shelia: What significance does the Brick School have? Can you tell us maybe a little bit about the first Brick School?

Grandma: I don't know.

Shelia: Let's talk about the first Brick School being built out of clay off the riverbanks that people had told you about.

Grandma: Well, that's just heresay. I heard that the first building built was made of clay from a deposit on the Sawmill Creek probably a mile from the schoolhouse.

Shelia: And that building didn't hold up because of the clay content?

Grandma: Yes, it didn't stand up.

Shelia: So then the new Brick was built?

Grandma: That's right.

Shelia: What did the inside of the schoolhouse look like?

Grandma: It was very attractive. The way I remember it had wainscotting around the bottom and then the upper part was painted a real pretty green and the ceiling was white. I don't remember the kind of curtains we had at the windows, but there were curtains at the windows .. there were shades.

Shelia: How many desks were inside?

Grandma: I had 24 pupils that filled the desks.

Shelia: Did you have a recitation bench?

Grandma: Yes, we had a bench up the front but I think we moved it to the back part of the room where the register from the furnace was. It was comfortable to sit there and then to I could group the children in their seats pretty well.

Shelia: We were looking at some old state superintendents records a while ago for the years 1927 and 1928 and it said that in Pawnee County there were 44 libraries in the one-room schools. You mentioned that you had books, but you did

not call it a library. Is that right?

Grandma: Well, I think so but I expect we had what was an average library in the school, in the rural schools.

Shelia: Do you remember how many books you had? 20? 30?

Grandma: Probably 4 shelves.

Shelia: Maybe 100 volumes?

Grandma: I expect.

Shelia: Who was in charge of the upkeep at the Brick School?

Grandma: The school board.

Shelia: Was there anything special that they did?

Grandma: Well, they always gave the schoolhouse a thorough cleaning before school started. If we had storms or something, sometimes someone would come and help, but usually the kids shoveled the snow off the walks and steps.

Shelia: During the year did you have any special events that went on at the Brick School? Did you have any special picnics or events?

Grandma: Not very many. We always had the Christmas program, last-day-of-school dinner and we usually had box suppers probably one a year.

Shelia: Did the community come in?

Grandma: We advertised it in the paper and everybody came in and of course everybody brought a box, and sometimes families ate together. The boxes were sold and sometimes the boys bought the girls boxes.

Shelia: What did the money go for?

Grandma: Whatever the teacher felt like she wanted to use it for. One year we had about \$80 from our school from the box supper. We didn't always do that well.

Shelia: While you were teaching there, were there any physical changes in the school? Did they paint it or add on?

Grandma: No.

Shelia: Do you know what happened to the school today?

Grandma: No, only that it's still standing. But it looks pretty well shot.

Shelia: It's still owned by some of the children that were from around that area?

Grandma: I don't know.

Shelia: Let's look now at some of the subjects that maybe you taught while you were there. You had how many grade levels?

Grandma: I had eight grade levels most of the time. I think one year I didn't have any sixth grade and another year I didn't have a ninth grade.

Shelia: It was first grade through ninth grade at the Brick School?

Grandma: That was what the school provided for.

Shelia: Do you remember the subject you taught?

Grandma: We taught reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography and anything else the state school board, course of study required.

Shelia: The ages of the children that went to school were?

Grandma: Well, they could start to school when they were 5½ years old and they were all grades, all years.

Most of them finished by the time they were 14, some of them were 15. I even had a couple of boys that were 16 while I was there.

Shelia: What time in the morning did the school usually start?

Grandma: Well, the school class really took up at 9 o'clock and then you had an hour off at noon and your school closed at 4 o'clock. A lot of kids even came at 8 o'clock in the morning. We had to be responsible for their conduct and then of course a lot of the kids rode horses and you had to watch how the kids took care of their horses. Most of the kids were very good about it. The older boys were always good about taking care about all the little folks who had horses. Sometimes there would be first and second graders who had horses and the big kids get the horses out and saddle them for them or do whatever needed to be done.

Shelia: I think you mentioned there was a barn on the school grounds?

Grandma: There's a barn big enough for eight horses on the Brick School because we frequently had eight horses at school every day. Some of the kids came with horse and buggy, some of the kids walked.

Shelia: They were in school from 9 to 4 with an hour off for lunch?



Grandma: That was their required hours.

Shelia: You ate lunch with them?

Grandma: Everybody brought their own lunch and in the early fall and late spring we would eat outdoors and sit on the ground or steps. In the cold weather they sat in their seats, usually two would sit in a seat together cause they'd have to visit.

Shelia: What month did school usually start?

Grandma: They started in September and lasted till April with time off at Christmas-time and a couple of days at Thanksgiving and we were allowed time for state teachers meeting and counties teachers meeting.

Shelia: Did you ever dismiss for weather?

Grandma: Sometimes.

Shelia: How did you contact the children if you dismissed school?

Grandma: Most of them had telephones.

Shelia: You were teaching and as the day went on what were some of the teaching methods you were using? How did you set up your day? What was one group doing while the other group was . . .

Grandma: Well, you had a schedule for all your classes. Then the children that weren't in a class were supposed to be studying or preparing for their class for the rest of the day.

Shelia: Did it usually work that way?

Grandma: Yes. That's the way it worked.

Shelia: In your school room, did you have any teaching aids that helped you to do your teaching? Maps?

Grandma: Oh, we had maps. I think we had maps of U.S. and the world, blackboards and an organ, books, games for the primary children and sandboxes.

Shelia: The idea of the sandbox was interesting. This was just the lower primary grades?

Grandma: Well during wintertime the kids couldn't go outdoors to play, they got a lot of pleasure out of doing things with the sandbox. Even the grown up kids, the seventh and eighth graders.

Shelia: In the report from the state superintendent that I was reading it said that the sandbox was not a time-killing toy - that it was to be used as a learning tool.

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: Your maps were all big maps on the wall?

Grandma: Most of them and they would roll down.

Shelia: Your blackboard, was it slate?

Grandma: We had good blackboards at the Brick School.

Shelia: Did you have any special classes or did you have any need for any special education classes?

Grandma: We didn't have any. We didn't have time to think about special education -- by the time you had 25 or 30 classes and took care of that many groups in six hours or 5 1/2 hours.

Shelia: Let's go back and look at a typical school day and

say it's nine o'clock and you had the children lining up outside. Was there a bell you rang that got them in line?

Grandma: The bell rang and they got in line. At the Brick School we nearly always marched in. To begin the day we had the Lord's prayer, the flag salute and usually we had ten or fifteen minutes of what we called opening exercises. Sometimes I would read part of a book, sometimes we'd sing. That was when we had our music. If we had any time for music, it would be during our opening exercises. We started our classes, usually it was reading, first grade then through all the grades. And then by that time it was probably recess time. And then after recess, arithmetic classes usually came. We didn't have quite as much time as we had before recess so we combined some of the classes, then the noon hour. In the afternoon there was language and grammar, maybe for the little folks there was more reading and probably after recess we had geography and I don't remember what else.

Shelia: Was there any special way to end the day?

Grandma: Sometimes we were lucky to get through at four o'clock. But we usually were nearly always done by four. Sometimes there were some children that needed some extra help and they would stay after four and they would get special help.

Shelia: Was there any special thing that you would have to do by yourself to get prepared for the day?

Grandma: We swept the floor, we got the coal fire fixed for the night and frequently cleaned the blackboards, at least once a week and then sometimes if we had a few minutes at the end of the day, we'd sing a song. But usually the kids were dismissed when we were through with classes.

Shelia: We were talking earlier about this Course of Study from the state superintendent and they instructed you about things that had to be completed. Would you go over again about the tests that were given every two months?

Grandma: The county superintendent sent us what we would call bi-monthly examinations and we would get one copy of those and sometimes we would have 3 or 4 kids taking the same test. So then we had to make extra copies or else write the test on the blackboard for those children. If there was just one in the class, then they got the printed copy. When we got through with those, the teacher had to grade them. If I remember right, the 7th and 8th grades had to go into the county superintendents. I'm not sure about that.

Shelia: Were there any special tests given at the end of the year to see if they were promoted or not? Was it just your decision?

Grandma: Well, the 7th and 8th grade had to go in to another school and take a final examination. Usually several schools would go to this one school and have examinations. I remember one time, this was not in Pawnee County, but I helped give those examinations at the end of the year and there were about 150 kids there and about 5 teachers. Usually they did not have a teacher that had kids in school, but at that time I did. Now, that was at Elmwood. That was my one experience with that (the final examinations). Now the Brick kids went to Burdett and took those exams. There were two, on Friday and Saturday on two consecutive weeks at the end of the year.

Shelia: Did you ever retain a student from going on to the next class?

Grandma: Yes. You have to do that sometimes. At that time, if the child wasn't able to do for himself pretty well, he didn't get the courses because we did not give individual instructions very much if we had a big school.

Shelia: So they had to learn on their own a lot?

Grandma: They had to learn a lot on their own.

Shelia: How did you decide on the textbooks that were used in the Brick School?

Grandma: The state decided and then they were sent to the county. At institute time we were instructed as to different books were needed in different classes.

At the Brick School the school board bought all the books, all the equipment, pencils, tablets - everything. You never had a child say "I don't have this book" or "I don't have material" because the school board was responsible for it.

Shelia: Did they change textbooks very often?

Grandma: About every five or six years.

Shelia: So you could pass the textbooks down?

Grandma: Um-hum. Sometimes at the Brick School the old textbooks were still there in their library and we could find uses along with the new textbooks.

Shelia: That's called being resourceful.

Grandma: Um-hum.

Shelia: You've mentioned institute time, when was institute time?

Grandma: Institute time, after I was teaching, it was usually one week and it was the week before school started and it was at the county seat. All the teachers from all the rural schools in the county were there. It lasted 5 days. We had lectures and we had instruction on... If there were new textbooks handed out that year we looked those over and decided how we wanted to use them.

Shelia: Would you say you were a strict teacher in your classroom or were you pretty easygoing?

Grandma: Well, I think some kids thought I was strict and some thought I wasn't.

Shelia: I can understand that. Personalities, you can't get along with everyone, can you?

Grandma: No.

Shelia: Did you have definite rules that were set in the school that perhaps you and the children decided together, or that were just set?

Grandma: Oh, I don't know. I think it came from just habit more. The teachers habit and how she had done it in other schools or maybe the pupils and the way they had teachers.

Shelia: Do you feel like you needed rules? Did you have discipline problems?

Grandma: Oh yes. You always have discipline problems. If you put 20 kids, all different ages in one room you can't . . .

Shelia: We talked earlier about special programs, like the Christmas program and the end-of-the-year program, did the parents all come to the school for the evening?

Grandma: Oh, yes. Usually some of them would come and help get the Christmas tree decorated or maybe they would bring material that we needed in our program. Like they would help furnish costumes.

Shelia: The children put on the program then all by themselves?

Grandma: Yes, with the teachers help.

Shelia: Do you remember a certain program that you did anytime?

Grandma: I don't know.

Shelia: Were they basicly religious programs?

Grandma: Not especially. They were Christmas themes.

Shelia: Did the Brick School have a special graduation exercise?

Grandma: No.

Shelia: What did the children do for their graduation.

Grandma: Well, if they graduated from the Brick School, they went to the county graduation in Larned.

Shelia: After the students graduated, where did they attend school?

Grandma: Several of them went to Hays.

Shelia: For high school?

Grandma: For high school they went to Burdett. I don't know if any of them went anywhere else.

Shelia: So after high school, if they went on to college?

Grandma: Then most of them went to Hays and some of them went to Manhattan, cause it was an agricultural college. I think some of them went to Garden City cause it was close and Dodge City had a Junior College.

Shelia: We've already talked about the usual age that a child began school. I believe you told me it was 5 1/2?

Grandma: 5 1/2 to 6 years.

Shelia: Is that what most of the age was?

Grandma: I think so. That was the state law, that they could start when they were six. Years ago they used to start when they were 4 or 4 1/2 and the state decided that



wasn't good policy.

Shelia: During the course of the school year term, did many of the kids move into or out of the school district?

Grandma: Not at the Brick. Most of them were farm people. They were permanently located.

Shelia: We talked about having a barn at the Brick School. Most of the children rode horses to school. Was there any other ways of travel the children got to school?

Grandma: Well, some of them came in buggys, a few, the parents would bring them and they usually came in a car, and of course, some of the kids walked.

Shelia: Tell me about your nine year old.

Grandma: Oh, while I was there, one nine year old boy drove a small car which was against the law. He didn't do that for very long, but he did do it for awhile.

Shelia: The first year you taught at the Brick School, how many children were in the school?

Grandma: The only number that I can remember is that I had 23 pupils and there were some of those that graduated that year and there were some more that started the next year. So I had about the same both years.

Shelia: Of those 23, how many families were represented?

Grandma: One year there were five families of Smith's and two families of Crockett's and Howell's one and one family of Foss's. I guess that's about it.

Shelia: About 4 or 5 families filled the school?

Grandma: There were 5 families of Smith's.

Shelia: That filled the school.

Grandma: Yes, some families were only one pupil. Now in those five families of Smith, there were ten Smith's in school that year.

Shelia: You and I know there are a lot of Smith's though.

Grandma: Yes. Well the Smith's still own a lot of that ground in that . . .

Shelia: I think the schoolhouse is sitting on Smith land, isn't it?

Grandma: Yes, but that was Notestine land but now I think Clinton Smith own's that.

Shelia: We had talked earlier that there were nine grade levels?

Grandma: There was a possibility of nine. I never did have all nine grades. Sometimes there would be one class where we didn't have any pupils and sometimes we would combine two classes. Sometimes we could have the 5th and 6th grade all in one class.

Shelia: Did you call the 9th grade, ninth or freshmen?

Grandma: Ninth.

Shelia: When they went to high school, was is just 3 years of high school?

Grandma: They became freshmen. You see, when you finish the country school, you went in as a freshman. They had nine grades in the one teacher schools because we only had 8 months of school and the city schools had 9 months of school in a year, so it was just about the same number of months.

Shelia: Whay type of occupations did the students take up after their schooling?

Grandma: I'd say most of the Brick kids were farmers. Later some of them became teachers and some of them went into business in different places. One of the Brick School pupils owns and operates a filling station a long ways from here.

Shelia: Are you in touch with many of the students today?

Grandma: I can name some of them. I have contact with Bob and Lewis, Roena, I hear about Beulah Selfridge quite often, Pearl Howell's wife, I talk to her quite often and I see some of the others once in a great while. Quite a few of them are dead.

Shelia: Did any of these go on to college?

Grandma: Bob went clear through college, but Lewis only went one year. I don't know about the others. I think Clinton went to Hays for two years and I think Clara Maude went up there but she didn't go to the Brick School.

Shelia: You mentioned that most of the children attending the Brick School were from a farming community.

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: What was the average number of years that a student stayed in school, if they were held back or were they there just the nine years?

Grandma: By the time I was teaching at the Brick, nearly all of them went on to high school. There were some that didn't but I'd say at least 50% of them went on to high school.

Shelia: Was there a state age? Did they have to attend until a certain age?

Grandma: If they finished the eighth grade they didn't have to attend any longer. If they didn't finish the eighth grade they had to keep going until they were fifteen I believe, maybe fourteen.

Shelia: Did the Brick School produce any outstanding students? Or did anything wonderful for society?

Grandma: Bob became a college professor.

Shelia: That's referring to Robert Smith who worked at the Fort Hays library?

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: Let's talk a little bit about the cost of education in 1927, 28 and 29. Was there any cost to the students or the families?

Grandma: Not in the grade schools. Not in the high schools. If they went on to college they usually had to pay tuition, their living expenses.

Shelia: We talked about a school district tax.

Grandma: Well, I think so, the general land tax took care of that.

Shelia: The school board was allotted so much?

Grandma: They had to levy how much they needed.

Shelia: You first started teaching in 1919 and you were paid how much per month at that time?

Grandma: Well, I was paid \$80.00. Most high school students that went to teaching only got \$70.00 but I was very fortunate, only that I had a bigger school.

Shelia: That was in Barton County?

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: Several years later you furthered your education in Emporia.

Grandma: Yes, I went one year and two summers to Emporia and that's all the advanced education.

Shelia: From that is what you were granted your teaching certificate?

Grandma: Yes, I was granted a state certificate when I went to Emporia and I was able to teach in any county in the state.

Shelia: This is when you started teaching at Brick School. How much were you paid when you were teaching at Brick School?

Grandma: I was paid \$120.00 a month.

Shelia: Who determined how much you were paid?

Grandma: A decision between the school board and the teacher. The school board usually met at their annual school meeting and decided how much that district would pay.

Shelia: Did you get to say much on deciding how much you got paid?

Grandma: No - I was just glad to get the school.

Shelia: How did you receive your paychecks? Once a month or once a year?

Grandma: Once a month and usually the school clerk or the treasurer, usually whoever I was boarding with. I usually boarded with somebody who was on the school board and they usually met and got the check and gave it to me.

Shelia: You said you boarded with different people when you were teaching. In the homes that you lived in, were you just given a room or did they expect you to do anything else? Did you pay to live there?

Grandma: I paid my way. Sometimes it was high and at other times I thought it was very reasonable. They not only gave us board and room but if I needed to go to town or got sick, they helped me take care of those situations.

Shelia: How did you get to school?

Grandma: Most of the time I walked. I walked to the Brick School. One school in Barton County I was 2 miles and the lady wanted to board the teacher and she agreed to take me to school.

Shelia: How do you feel that teaching habits and the way we teach today are different than the way you taught?

Grandmq: Well, I don't know. I haven't been associated with schools very much in the recent years and I don't know much about it or how you do it.

Shelia: Maybe I need to bring you to school with me some day. Were there certain expectations in the community that you were expected to...like your morals and such? Were you highly watched in the community?

Grandma: Well, a teacher was expected to conduct herself morally well.

Shelia: Did they require you to attend church?

Grandma: No, but if you boarded with people who went to church, they always invited you to go along. The Brick School, well of course there were churches at Burdett, but there was a Sunday School over at District 64 and the people where I stayed went there to church part of the time or to Sunday School.

Shelia: So you went to another schoolhouse for Sunday School?

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: At the Brick School, was there any extra-curricular activities? I think you showed me a picture of a basketball team.

Grandma: Well, the kids played basketball, but they didn't play with other schools very often. One time we went over at District 64 but that's the only time. It was 3 or 4 miles over there which was quite a ways to go. Some of the kids rode their horses, some of the parents furnished cars and took them. They always saw that the teachers had a ride, but I don't think we went over there but once.

Shelia: So it was just kind of between themselves. They had a basketball hoop outside?

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: Do you remember any of the other games they played?

Grandma: Annie-over. Do you know what that is? That's throwing a ball over the schoolhouse, then a group on the other side catch it and they run around the schoolhouse and try to touch somebody on the other side.

Shelia: Did you have swings and merry-go-round?

Grandma: They did at the Brick. Some schools had swings and merry-go-rounds, or something of that type. Our Brick School had a basketball court. Not a very big one or a very level one or anything of the kind. Of course they didn't have anybody to teach basketball.

Shelia: Were there any clubs that the kids formed?

Grandma: Not clubs in the schools. There were cliches and we had boy and girl sweethearts. I think you have that in any school.

Shelia: When we talk about teacher turnover, that's how often they hire a new teacher. Was there a turnover problem at Brick School?

Grandma: It depended on how well the teacher was accepted. Mr. Rupp taught there about six years. He came from the Hanston neighborhood. His daughter was Bessie Smith. I think he rode horseback or something. Maybe he was from District 64 but I think he was from around Hanston.



Then I taught there 2 years and I stayed with Arthur Smith family. Charles Collins taught there 1 year and he stayed with the Frank Smith family. Bertha Merrimay was county superintendent. The school was closed probably 7 or 8 years after I was there. Let's see, I was there till 1929. Arlene...I was trying to think when she (Arlene) started to the Burdett school before I was married. I was married in 1938, she was up there probably in '34 maybe '35.

Shelia: So the Brick School was open then?

Grandma: No, the school was closed at that time. It got so that it was just Arlene and Maureen Whitake and somebody else. I don't know who. I think there was three kids going to school up there. George and Lena decided they would send Arlene to Burdett.

Shelia: She had older brothers going there anyway?

Grandma: Yes. They were all going there.

Shelia: Was there ever more than one teacher at the Brick School?

Grandma: No, not that I know of.

Shelia: You mentioned the county superintendent, who was at this time. . .

Grandma: Mrs. Chaddick was there when I went there and then Mrs. Ada Collins.

(turn tape over)

Shelia: How often did the county superintendent visit the school?

Grandma: If they visited once a year, that was customary. They

were expected to visit at least once a year unless there was trouble in the school, they didn't.

Shelia: Did the school board ever visit the school?

Grandma: Yes. This Arthur Smith that came in and sat down, he was on the school board. That was the school board visit.

Shelia: They just came to check and see how you were doing?

Grandma: Oh yes. The law required the school board to visit once a year. But they didn't always all come.

Shelia: Was that the type of evaluation then that they used for you?

Grandma: Yes.

Shelia: Did you ever involve parents with the discipline process that you had at school?

Grandma: Oh, sometimes I would talk to them about it. I very seldom discussed any particular thing.

Shelia: Do you feel that female teachers had more of a discipline problem than a male teacher would have had?

Grandma: If there was lots of boys, especially big boys in the school, a male teacher got along better. Usually the boys liked a male teacher.

Shelia: Is there anything interesting about the Brick School you can share of your memories about the school? When you think of the Brick School, what do you think of?

Grandma: I think of the fact that I acquired a family, a home, and my life after that.

Shelia: Well, I'm glad you did. It makes it kind of special too, doesn't it? I've enjoyed this this afternoon. It's been interesting sharing with you and I think as we get into biography, a lot of this tape will make more sense to other people that listen to it. Thank you very much.