



## ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

### INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Susanne Eldridge

DATE OF BIRTH: June 10, 1946 GENDER: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: May 18, 2008

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Consultant's home in Ft. Sumner, N.M.

INTERVIEWER: Diane Williams

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMFRHM \_\_ OTHER: Taiban Comm. History Project

TRANSCRIBED: No

NUMBER OF TAPES: Two

ABTRACTOR: Donna M. Wojcik

DATE ABSTRACTED: June 26, 2008

RECORDING QUALITY (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Rural living in Ft. Sumner, N.M., and family grocery business

DATE RANGE: 1946-2008

## **ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):**

### **TAPE ONE, SIDE A:**

Eldridge's mother was born in Taiban, N.M., and her father was born in Taft, a small community northeast of Taiban. Her parents were married in Clovis in 1941. Her siblings are discussed.

Eldridge's paternal grandparents moved to New Mexico from Oklahoma in 1906. Her maternal grandparents came to the Taiban area from Texas in 1906. Her grandfather worked for the railroad and worked on the Belen Cutoff. He lost an arm working on the railroad.

Her maternal great grandfather was born in France. He ran away from home, found work on a steamer, and sailed to New York, where he married and eventually moved to Texas. Eldridge does not know much about her maternal grandparent's move to New Mexico, but does know that her paternal grandparents came to New Mexico as part of a wagon train. Her grandmother's family settled north of Taiban. They lived in town and did improvements to the homestead during the summer months. Her grandfather's family had a homestead close to the town of Taiban. Other details about her grandparents are discussed.

The closure of the school had an impact on the community in Taiban. High school students began taking busses to school in Ft. Sumner in the 1940s, while grade school continued in Taiban into the 1950s. Higher education was important in her family, although Eldridge did not attend college or university. She married "right out of high school." Over the years the graduating class numbers have steadily declined.

Eldridge's parents owned a grocery store, which she and her brother now run. Her grandparents also had a combination mercantile/garage business. Her maternal grandfather dug wells to supplement income. She tells the story of how her mother got to sign both sides of her own diploma, first as a student and then as a school board member.

The local church was originally built by the Presbyterians, but the Baptists and Methodists also used it. Most residents attended church no matter who was preaching.

Both her great-grandmother and her grandmother were involved in the Democratic Party. Eldridge says that she is not involved in politics. She recalls that her grandparents were "very uptight people." She and her siblings were not permitted to play with a lot of children in town because they "were not quite up to standards."

Social activities in the community were attended by most residents and were important to them. Up until the 1960s the town hosted the Taiban Reunion, and there was always the Fourth of July parade and picnic. Dancing was not permitted when Eldridge's mother was young. There were school plays but they were not allowed to go to the movies. Cards were considered "as bad as dancing."

Taiban was considered a "wet town," in reference to the availability of liquor in the town. There were several bars in town, and during the 1940s and '50s Taiban had a reputation. Eldridge and her siblings were not allowed out after dark. There were chicken fights, wrestling matches, shootings, and bootlegging into the dry counties to the east. Planes would land on a dirt landing strip located behind the church to load up with booze and fly it to the dry counties. Taiban was known as the "bootlegging capital" of eastern New Mexico and west Texas, and even into western Oklahoma.

## **TAPE ONE, SIDE B:**

Eldridge does not know if her family had any supplemental income. She does not know how to can vegetables, fruit, or anything like that. She recalls that her grandmother always had help with the housekeeping because she taught school during the week.

There is a brief discussion of churches in the area. When asked if she recalled any memorable townsfolk or neighbors, she replied that she knows everyone in the county and does not recall anyone being more special than anyone else.

Eldridge recalls selling candy door-to-door, school plays, rodeos, and participating in the dance club. It was here that she learned different dance steps. Most area residents came to town on Saturday and stayed until late evening. Her father kept the store open late on those days to accommodate the shoppers.

When Eldridge was in her pre-teen years, she recalls that Ft. Sumner had “fifteen grocery stores, several dry good stores, a couple of drug stores, two appliance stores, and three car dealerships.” She added, “Now you can’t buy a pair of socks in Ft. Sumner. You have to go somewhere else to buy.” There are still two grocery stores, two convenience stores, a few restaurants, and three motels in Ft. Sumner. During the mid-’70s and ’80s businesses started closing. Young people left the area in search of work resulting in a population reduction.

When Eldridge was in school there were no intramural sports. Girls played badminton and tennis in physical education class, and basketball was played on a half court because “girls were delicate.” Although there was a town pool, swimming was not part of the school curriculum.

A typical date was to go to the movies or have a group get-together at the river. There were spots on the river where you could swim, but most of the time they just waded in the water to keep cool. Dates were generally not monitored, however some activities such as the dance club were. Eldridge recalls that she had a curfew. When asked about spouses and marriage, she replied, “marriage never worked out for me.”

The Homestead Act was in place at the time that the railroad came in the area. Residents realized that they could not farm the small acreages and make a living, so the women generally stayed out on the homestead while the men went to work in other areas. People slowly moved out of the area. The Great Depression did not have much of an impact in Taiban because “people did not rely on the outside world. They had their own systems and networks.” Taiban was a coal and water station for the Santa Fe railroad; by 1938 there was a depot in Taiban.

There is a discussion regarding her grandparent’s business. “They put in long hours,” Eldridge says. She does not recall if they ever needed to obtain credit, but they did extend credit to their customers. Her parents ran the store after her grandparents retired, and Eldridge and her brother now run the store. She says that she has never borrowed money for the business. Credit is still extended to customers in hard times, but no new credit accounts will be opened. The store has about six hundred credit accounts that are maintained, and interest is charged if payments are not made. The store employs approximately eleven workers. She says that it is difficult to find employees because a lot of people do not want to work when they can make more money on welfare. “There is still a workforce in Ft. Sumner that needs to work,” she says. One of the outstanding employees she has is the butcher. He has worked at the store since he was eleven years old and started working there because his father had a credit bill that had to be paid off.

Eldridge likes the people in Ft. Sumner. She knows everyone in town and feels that it is a nice place to be from. There are no stoplights in Ft. Sumner, so when Eldridge goes to a bigger town she has a lot of

problems with them because she is not accustomed to them. People are close, and the people in her neighborhood often have block parties and ice cream socials. “We know each other’s habits,” she says.

Eldridge believes that rural life will still be possible in the next fifty to one hundred years. “We still need ranches, but you may have to go further to get supplies as the smaller towns are abandoned.” She feels that Ft. Sumner will survive because it is the county seat.

### **TAPE TWO, SIDE A:**

Eldridge does have some documents and photos that she would be willing to copy for the Museum.

When asked what she remembers of, or has been told about Taiban since its establishment in 1906, she says that there were not any paved roads. Once, she recalls, her grandfather wanted to move the house from town to just east of town. There was a creek there and the house got stuck in the bottom of the creek. The family lived in the house--in the creek--until they could get it unstuck.

When Eldridge was growing up, Taiban was a “wild and wooly” place. She was not allowed outside after dark for fear that she would get shot or run over by a truck. When she would visit her grandmother, there was a planned project for them to do which kept them inside the yard, store, and house. They did not socialize with many people.

Trains, the depot, and the railroad are briefly discussed. Eldridge recalls that the family always took a vacation and stayed in motels. Her father would “always check the room” before the family was allowed in.

The interviewer mentions that US 60 was a migration route during World War II, and that after the war Afro-Americans traveled it west to Arizona and California. An article she had read in the New York Times stated that businesses along US Route 66 did not serve blacks, so they traveled along US 60 instead. Eldridge does not recall ever seeing blacks in the store except for the man that worked on their ranch. She called him the “green man” because she did not know what color he was.

Eldridge and her brother now run the store. Eldridge has worked in the store since she was seven years old. She would stand on two pop cases and operate the register. She still delivers groceries to some of the customers who are confined to their homes. “Smaller communities have the support for its residents that larger towns don’t have,” she says.