



ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM
INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

CONSULTANT: Bobbie Sanders

DATE OF BIRTH: September 4, 1916 GENDER: Female

DATE(S) OF INTERVIEW: June 19-20, 1997

LOCATION OF INTERVIEW: Mrs. Sanders's home in Carlsbad, NM

INTERVIEWER: Jane O'Cain

SOURCE OF INTERVIEW: NMF&RHM X OTHER _____

TRANSCRIBED: Yes: January 12, 1999

NUMBER OF TAPES: Four

ABTRACTOR: Jane Allen

DATE ABSTRACTED: October 25, 2000

QUALITY OF RECORDING (SPECIFY): Good

SCOPE AND CONTENT NOTE: Touches on childhood in Arizona and the return to New Mexico after involvement in a dispute between homesteaders and cattlemen. Relates childhood experiences on the family farm in Portales and helping with harvest of sorghum and broomcorn. Relates experiences as a teacher in rural New Mexico Schools between 1937 and 1979. Mentions her husband's Civilian Conservation Corps work and her experience as wife of a serviceman during World War II.

DATE RANGE: 1858-1997

ABSTRACT (IMPORTANT TOPICS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE):

TAPE ONE, SIDE A:

Jane O’Cain interviews Bobbie Sanders, a New Mexico schoolteacher, at her home in Carlsbad, New Mexico, on June 19 and 20, 1997.

Bobbie Sanders was born Lillian Robert Richardson on September 4, 1916, in Cochise County, Arizona, to Lillian Ava Merrick and Robert Fiske Richardson, who married near Lakeview, Floyd County, Texas, on July 9, 1905. Robert Fiske Richardson was born in Russellville, Kentucky, in 1887, to Jessie Richardson and Georgiana Briggs, who married in 1858. Robert Fiske Richardson left Kentucky for Texas when he was eighteen because he had tuberculosis; he lived to be almost ninety.

Mrs. Sanders relates that she was the youngest of four children in a family of one boy and three girls. The oldest girl, Georgiana, was born in 1906; the second girl in 1914, and the boy in 1909.

The family moved from Texas to Arizona where the mother taught in a small rural school. The father ranched and occasionally taught school. Asked about their preparation for teaching, Mrs. Sanders indicates that her mother attended summer school and took an examination for a teaching certificate.

The family moved from Arizona to Causey, New Mexico, in 1920, where the mother again taught school. The move to New Mexico was precipitated by a dispute between Arizona homesteaders and cattlemen that involved a shooting. Immediately after the shooting, the father packed up his family of six, leaving behind an adobe house he had built from his own handmade adobes, animals, camera equipment, and a gun collection, and traveled to New Mexico in a 1915 Model T Ford. Mrs. Sanders had her fourth birthday on the trip to New Mexico; her father celebrated it by stopping in a small town to buy cupcakes—four cupcakes for four children. Mrs. Sanders also tells about difficulty they had getting the Model T to climb Picacho Hill in the Hondo Valley. She explains that the Model T didn’t have a fuel pump and gravity caused the gasoline to run to the back, so the cars were sometimes put in reverse and backed up a hill. However, roadwork prevented their getting up the hill without help from the road crew who let them use a team of horses to pull the car up the hill. The family finally sold the Arizona property “for very little”; twenty years later Mrs. Sanders returned to find part of the house still standing.

In New Mexico, the family lived in a house on the maternal grandmother’s property in eastern New Mexico for three years until the father bought a place near Portales. The mother taught at Roebuck School, a small school near where they stayed with the grandmother whose family farmed and raised cattle and burros. After moving to Portales, the mother taught for a year at Garrison in the southern part of the county and boarded with a family near Garrison school.

The discussion turns to Mrs. Sanders’s own experience in her first teaching job at Horse Springs between Reserve and Quemado, in Catron County, where she moved assuming she would be boarding with a family only to find that she would be living alone and had arrived without any of the essential housekeeping equipment.

Asked if her family had found economic conditions more favorable in New Mexico when they moved from Arizona, Mrs. Sanders replies that everyone was having a difficult time, even though it was before the Depression hit, that the family arrived in New Mexico with nothing and stayed

that way. Asked if her family considered education important, she responds that they considered it very important.

TAPE ONE, SIDE B:

Though her parents said little about it, she and her siblings understood that they were expected to finish high school and find a means of self-support. Mrs. Sanders notes that she graduated from high school in 1935 and went on to college at Eastern New Mexico University, which was under construction, and that classes were held in various places, including barracks buildings and at the Methodist Church. P. E. classes were conducted in a downtown skating rink and students could get an hour of credit in roller-skating. Mrs. Sanders notes that she took a course in archery.

Asked if her oldest sister had also become a teacher, Mrs. Sanders answers that both sisters had become teachers and that both had attended college, taking courses at the Normal School in Las Vegas, New Mexico, and in Lubbock, Texas. She notes that four of her graduation certificates were signed by Floyd Golden, who was superintendent of schools in Portales. Golden signed her junior high and high school diplomas; then after becoming president of the University, he signed her junior college diploma and her diploma when she received her bachelor's degree. Mrs. Sanders also notes that she got her master's degree in Portales in 1966.

Mrs. Sanders comments that her parents had moved around quite often, always in search of a better place for the family, and that one sister had been born in Elida, New Mexico, before the move to Arizona, and that a brother had been born in Toyah, Texas. There was some homesteading going on in Portales when the family moved there in 1920, but her father did not homestead there because he had already used up his homestead allotment.

Asked what her father did for a cash crop, Mrs. Sanders says that he raised sorghum and made sorghum molasses. Mrs. Sanders, referring to photographs, explains the process of making the molasses using an old mill turned by horses. Her father was the only person in the area who made molasses so other area farmers brought their cane to him for processing and would either pay him for the processing or give him a percentage of the processed cane. The father marketed the molasses in stores in Portales where it sold for fifty cents a gallon. Mrs. Sanders notes that the children helped with processing the cane, putting the stalks into the mill, and that they also enjoyed chewing the cane as they worked. The mill, she says, was sold by her father during World War II.

Mrs. Sanders relates how the cane was processed in the fall of the year when it was ripe and before it froze. The harvesting process involved children going down the rows of cane that towered over their heads and wielding paddles to knock the leaves off. The cane was then cut close to the ground with a machete tool and piled on a sled for transportation to the mill.

Mrs. Sanders also tells about her father's raising broomcorn, of how the children helped in the harvesting by "tabling it"—going down the rows of corn, bending the stalks and breaking them off—and of the itching caused by the seed pods that tended to get inside shirt collars. The corn was then taken to one of several broom factories in Portales where it was sewn into brooms.

Mrs. Sanders indicates that the father's farm near Portales was an irrigated farm when they first moved there and that the water table was close to the surface. However, the drought that preceded the Depression caused the water table to shift so that farmers could not irrigate, forcing farmers to plant crops that would grow without irrigation. Her father refused to plant cotton. The family always had a garden where they grew asparagus and Jerusalem artichokes. The farm, 160

acres when her father bought it, was reduced by half when he sold part of it during World War II. The father built a two-room house on the part he didn't sell. Shortly after the war began the mother had a stroke from which she never fully recovered.

The conversation turns to Mrs. Sanders's experience as a student in Portales schools. She relates starting in a grade school in first grade and that a new red brick junior high school building was built as well as a new high school building. She tells of having to walk a mile to the highway to catch the school bus until she was in the fourth grade and the bus route went past the farmhouse. She tells how she and her sister Ruth, anticipating a Christmas party at school, walked the mile in extreme cold one morning to meet the bus only to find that the bus did not come because there was no school that day. After a long wait they walked to a teacher's house, where the teacher warmed their feet and bundled them up again and sent them walking back home.

Mrs. Sanders describes the bus—"an old stake-bodied bus with canvas curtains on the sides" with an exhaust pipe running down the middle inside the bus, on which she burned her leg one day while scuffling with a friend.

Asked to describe the clothing she wore in primary school, Mrs. Sanders tells of wearing long-handled underwear tucked into brown or black cotton stockings, brown cotton gloves, high-top lace-up shoes, and overshoes. Saying that she thought it got colder in those days than it does now, Mrs. Sanders tells of experiencing minus-thirty-degree temperatures and how she and her father once worked to keep a newborn calf alive under those conditions.

TAPE TWO, SIDE A:

Mrs. Sanders tells about how an aunt who lived in California had a daughter about the age of her sister Ruth, and that each year the aunt would send a large box of her daughter's outgrown clothing to the family in New Mexico. Some of it was not appropriate for wear as received, but the fabrics were beautiful and Mrs. Sanders's older sister was able to remake the clothing on their treadle sewing machine so that it was suitable for the Sanders girls to wear.

Asked when electricity became available, Mrs. Sanders said they first got electricity when the REA came in in the thirties. She then tells a story about an incident when an REA electrical repairman wired electric lines into the telephone line causing her telephone to become hot and give off sparks.

Asked about conditions during the Dust Bowl and the Great Drought, Mrs. Sanders tells about an incident in Whitharral, Texas, when she was teaching there in the fifties when a cloud of dust rolled in and enveloped the area. These clouds of dust came in from the north and stretched from Kansas to New Mexico. To cope with the dust, residents stayed indoors as much as possible and wrapped wet cloths around their faces to keep from breathing the dust. Mrs. Sanders also tells of a storm one Thanksgiving Day when she was a child that blew bricks off their chimney causing a fire risk that prevented their cooking the Thanksgiving meal.

The talk turns to the difficulty of growing crops under drought conditions and whether Mrs. Sanders worried about the conditions. She says that she knew they were poverty stricken, but that she thought everyone else was poverty stricken too. She says she knew her parents worried about making ends meet and how they would pay the mortgage, but that each year her father would go to the bank to make arrangements to extend what he couldn't pay, and the bank was cooperative because they didn't want the land back.

Mrs. Sanders describes the L-shaped house that existed on the land when her father bought it. There was also a garage, she says, but it was not used for a car because by now the family's Model T Ford had "fallen into rack and ruin." For several years the family had no car to drive.

Asked whether the children she went to school with in the early grades continued to go to school together over the years, she says that the group that graduated from high school and went on to junior college was for the most part the same group that entered the eighth grade together.

Asked about the number of churches in Portales when she was a girl, Mrs. Sanders replies that Portales "was the original WASP town." There were no black people there and few Spanish-speaking people, and there was no Catholic Church until after the University was established. Churches in Portales included Baptist, Campbellite, Methodist, Christian, and more than one Church of Christ. Her own family belonged to the Campbellite Church; her maternal grandfather was a Campbellite preacher. Mrs. Sanders talks briefly about the important social role of the churches and mentions that she and her sister always made it to Sunday school, sometimes on horseback.

Asked if she felt disadvantaged living in the country, she says to the contrary, that Portales didn't have a public swimming pool for many years, and the kids came out from town to swim in her family's horse tank. With regard to her family's social life, Mrs. Sanders said they definitely did not play cards, but they did play dominoes and checkers. She says that when her brother went to work for the railroad he brought home a deck of cards and taught her to play solitaire, but that her parents looked upon the cards with disfavor. Dances were off limits, but the children had "swing and play" parties that included their own singing voices as they "do-si-doed or whatever you did." These parties held at home when they were teenagers sometimes included a "sing-along" (music limited to their own voices) and nonalcoholic refreshments. This she says was the custom in the crowd of which she was a part. There was, however, another "fast" crowd, and, she says, several girls in her graduating class "were wearing hatchin' jackets under their . . . gowns to get their diplomas."

Mrs. Sanders says that she did not work outside the family farm while she was in high school. On the farm she helped feed the animals from a very early age.

TAPE TWO, SIDE B:

Mrs. Sanders worked mostly outdoors and her sister, who preferred the indoors, worked at chores indoors. The older sister left home to teach in small schools in West Texas and eastern New Mexico while Mrs. Sanders was still quite young, and the brother soon after he finished high school went to work on a railroad signal gang and was away from home.

Mrs. Sanders says that the family had a garden and canned a lot, canning beef as well as vegetables in a pressure cooker. Pork was cured by rubbing it with salt and hanging it to dry. The family kept and milked several Jersey cows and also kept chickens and turkeys so that during the Depression they always had plenty to eat. Excess milk and eggs were sold in town. They used a hand-cranked separator to separate milk and cream and pumped cold water from a windmill over a trough in which it was stored to preserve the milk and cream. The water used for cooling then went into the horse tank or was used to water the vegetable garden. The family churned butter and made cottage cheese from the milk.

TAPE THREE, SIDE A:

Tape Three begins with the interview on June 20, 1997, again in Bobbie Sanders's home in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

The discussion begins with her experiences at Eastern New Mexico Junior College in Portales in 1935. Most of the students were preparing to become teachers or for other academic positions.

Mrs. Sanders tells of attending college while continuing her job at a Portales bank. At the time one could teach in Texas without a degree, but New Mexico required their teachers to have a bachelor's degree. She taught six years in Texas and got her B.S. Her first teaching job in New Mexico was at Horse Springs in western New Mexico where she met her future husband.

[The tape and transcript contain a contradiction here: Mrs. Sanders seems to be saying that she went to Texas to take a job in 1937 because New Mexico didn't hire teachers without the bachelor's degree; she also says her first New Mexico job was at Horse Springs in 1937. Later in the interview, she indicates that the years in Texas were post World War II, after returning from Oregon where her husband worked after the war.]

Mrs. Sanders says that her living quarters in Horse Springs consisted of a two-bedroom wooden building plastered with adobe dirt between the studs, intended for shepherders, that she rented for three dollars a month. She paid ten dollars for a load for firewood that she then had to chop herself. However, after she met her husband, who was working at a nearby Civilian Conservation Corps camp (CCC) camp, he would send men from the camp in to chop her firewood when the weather was bad.

Mrs. Sanders's beginning salary at Horse Springs was eighty dollars a month for eight months; the next year she earned eighty-five dollars a month for nine months. Her mother's cousin who lived in Collinsville helped her secure the job.

The Horse Springs school was a two-room school. Mrs. Sanders taught grades four through eight; another teacher taught grades one through three. Most of the students, she says, were Hispanic. The other teacher was engaged to a Japanese man who imported Japanese-made products.

Asked about her student-teaching experience, Mrs. Sanders says that she did her student teaching in Portales. She indicates that she had a very good relationship with students' parents at Horse Springs, but relates having to clean up tobacco juice spit on the floor at a party by one Anglo mother. She tells of one occasion when an older Hispanic student caused some trouble and his father brought in a quirt for her to use. After that she had no problems with students. Overall, she says, she had very few discipline problems. Nor did she find her students' welfare a matter of concern, noting that they all seemed well fed, perhaps because it was sheep-raising country.

Mrs. Sanders's day began early in the morning when she started the fire in the schoolroom; children brought their lunch with them to school; there were no breaks at lunchtime or recess.

Mrs. Sanders interjects a story about her experiences teaching at El Paso Gap, when she had a group of students from several grades. She assigned work to be completed over a period of time and put the teacher's manuals out so students could correct their own papers.

Mrs. Sanders taught for three years at Horse Springs. She married in 1938, and her husband who was still with the CCC moved to Magdalena and then to Roswell. When he was transferred to Roswell, she left Horse Springs.

TAPE THREE, SIDE B:

Mrs. Sanders explains that the Civilian Conservation Corps was a government program to provide jobs for young men. She says that twenty-five dollars of their earnings was sent home to their parents; room, board, and clothing was provided; and the men kept five dollars a month for spending money. The camp her husband was in charge of was building fences from the state line to the railroad at Magdalena to facilitate driving cattle to the railroad. The men involved came from all over the state, but many of them were local. Most were Hispanic. Her husband, who was a little older than the others, she says, became an enlistee when his father intervened and then was put in charge of the camp.

When her husband was in Magdalena they bought a car. She tells of an incident one day when they were going to Albuquerque with another couple. She drove the car to the ranch to pick up the other couple and a swinging gate scratched the car. Then her husband hit a calf that went over the hood of the car. He attributed the scratches caused by the swinging gate to the calf incident but couldn't figure out how the scratches showed up on the side of the car that the calf didn't touch. Years later she confessed.

Mrs. Sanders's husband grew up on a cotton farm in East Texas, in a town named Reklaw.

After the move to Roswell, Mrs. Sanders worked for the gas and electric company. The CCC was discontinued, and Mr. Sanders worked in Hobbs in the oil fields. Mrs. Sanders tells of remembering when her neighbors knocked on the door of the room she was renting in Roswell to tell her that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Mr. Sanders served in the armed forces and was stationed on Guam and Iwo Jima. Their first child, Butch, was born August 25, 1943, and Mr. Sanders enlisted ten days later. Mrs. Sanders tells of receiving a post card from him that he handed out a window to someone to mail as he came through Clovis on a train. She says they were living in Dodge City, Kansas, where he worked for air base construction, when she got pregnant. She tells of living in an apartment in Dodge City next door to a man who skinned skunks for a hide and fur company.

Mr. Sanders was stationed in Florida before he was shipped overseas, and Mrs. Sanders, who was living with her mother-in-law, tells of getting on the train with baby Butch, a nursing baby, to go to Florida because her husband had written that men whose wives were with them in Florida were getting leave to take their wives home.

Asked about Mr. Sanders's full name, Mrs. Sanders explains that it is Seldon Ellis Sanders and that Butch is Seldon Ellis Sanders, Jr. Mr. Sanders got five or six weeks of leave to take his wife home before he shipped out from the West Coast to the Pacific Coast.

Mrs. Sanders, dissatisfied living with her mother-in-law, then moved back to Portales where she went to work operating a posting machine at the First National Bank in 1945 just before the war ended. Seeing that teachers' salaries were higher than what she was making in the bank she decided to return to teaching. She was also unhappy to find that men with less experience than she had were receiving higher pay. When she complained, the bank president told her that the

man in question “has a family to support.” While she worked, her parents, with whom she was living, cared for Butch.

Mr. Sanders returned from the war with the notion that he wanted to move to Salem, Oregon, to work for a concern that handled welding supplies. Mrs. Sanders tells of their hazardous trip in the rain over the mountains to Oregon. In Oregon, a second son, Jack, was born in October of 1947. Within a short time the family packs their belongings in a two-wheel trailer and returns to Portales, where Mrs. Sanders goes to work in the bank.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE A:

The discussion turns to Mrs. Sanders’s teaching and finishing her education. She talks of teaching six years in Texas, three years at Whitharral and three years at Sundown. During this time she took courses at Texas Tech in Lubbock and in Portales to finish her bachelor’s degree in elementary education. Later she moved to Carlsbad and when her younger son was entering college, she decided to get her master’s degree (completed in 1966), which would qualify her for higher pay.

Mrs. Sanders returned to teaching in New Mexico in 1960 at Malaga, south of Loving. There she taught grades one through three and commuted in a car pool from her residence in Carlsbad. She describes Malaga as a community where vineyards had been planted with hopes of turning the land into wine country, but alkaline water prevented the making of good wine. She also notes that since Malaga was part of the Carlsbad school district, she received good retirement benefits.

Mrs. Sanders notes that the Malaga and Otis schools have since closed, and most of the buildings have been demolished. Children from the schools are now bused into Carlsbad. The gymnasium at Otis still stands, however, and a new addition built while Mrs. Sanders was there still stands, and these structures are used for community services. The school grounds have turned into a community park—the Tillman Bannister Park.

Mrs. Sanders relates that after teaching at Malaga, she taught at Otis and at El Paso Gap. At El Paso Gap she received her regular salary as well as additional pay for bus driving and janitorial work and did not have to pay rent. She tells of some administrative confusion related to her El Paso Gap assignment that resulted in her teaching at Otis for a time, moving finally to El Paso Gap in 1965.

After a few brief comments about her two sons’ education, she returns to a discussion of her teaching at El Paso Gap, where she taught grades one through eight, with the number of students ranging from twelve when she first started down to five when the school was closed and she left in 1969. She tells of the community’s efforts to keep the school going by bringing in relatives to attend the school, and of how the State Department sent a man out to verify that there was indeed a school at El Paso Gap. She tells of remembering the use of television while she lived there as opposed to a radio and that her living quarters had a flush toilet, though she often used the outdoor toilet to save water because water had to be trucked in.

Asked what she found to be the greatest challenge at El Paso Gap, she replies that it was “gettin’ up and seeing that the school bus [a 1956 Chevrolet station wagon] started in the mornings.” She mentions that one student who lived at a distance stayed with her during the week and that the parents paid for her board. Sometimes when water was running in the canyon all of the students remained overnight at school. And she often kept children for families who went “to town” for the weekend. Her groceries she says were bought in bulk and kept in her deep freeze.

TAPE FOUR, SIDE B:

Mrs. Sanders tells of an incident at the beginning of one year when she arrived in El Paso Gap with a car load of groceries for her deep freeze to find that the freezer had thawed and was infested with bugs because high school boys who had been painting had turned off the electrical switch to paint around it and forgotten to turn it back on. As a result she had to seek out a neighbor who had freezer space for her groceries.

After the El Paso Gap assignment, Mrs. Sanders says she taught in Otis until the school was closed and then taught in Carlsbad. She retired from teaching in 1979, taking early retirement at age sixty-three after having cancer surgery.

Asked about improvements she has seen during her years as a teacher, she comments about the archaic equipment and lack of library books while she was at El Paso Gap, noting that one of the teachers let students read books from his personal library. After he left El Paso Gap, she arranged for the use of bookmobile books from the Carlsbad library.

Asked if she thought El Paso Gap parents were interested in making sure their children were well educated, she said that they were and that they took them into Carlsbad for high school.

With regard to school equipment she tells of attempting to get a stereoscope that the Carlsbad school system owned for a local museum. Unfortunately it had been taken to a dump and buried along with other extraneous equipment.

Asked if she found that students became more difficult to handle over the years, she says this was not true in the lower grades and that they still wanted the teacher to love them. She tells of one young man who lived with her and her son in Carlsbad for a time because his father had to move in the middle of the boy's senior year and comments on how she heard he got three girls pregnant at the same time. She tried to locate him some thirty years later and found that he had been killed in Vietnam.

Asked if over her career she had received a lot of support from her principal and county superintendent, she says no one ever came from Reserve to Horse Springs, that the only time the school board came out was during deer season. Then school would be cancelled and she would turn her apartment over to the visitors and stay with neighbors. She also notes that she had little support from outsiders when she taught at El Paso Gap.