

An Interview with
Dr. Elaine Lawless

In Columbia, Missouri

22 December 2010

interviewed by Jeff D. Corrigan



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For further information, contact:

The State Historical Society of Missouri
1020 Lowry Street
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65201

PREFACE

Elaine Lawless was born in 1947 in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. She grew up on a small farm and attended a one-room schoolhouse located south of what was known as Miner Switch at the time, but is now Miner, Missouri. Lawless describes the physical school building and discusses her education, recess, and the alcove in the school where the library books were housed and where her love of reading began to flourish. She also talks about attending and graduating from Benton Elementary and Kelly High Schools in Benton, Missouri. Lawless attended Southeast Missouri State University (SEMO) and was the only member in her family to graduate college.

Mrs. Lawless continued her education at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and received her master's degree in English. Lawless taught American folklore with Bill Ferris at Yale University for two years before receiving her PhD from Indiana University in 1982. She worked briefly at the Idaho Historical Society and Boise State before becoming a professor at the University of Missouri, where she is currently a Curators' Teaching Professor and Professor of English.

The interview was taped on a CompactFlash card, using a Marantz PMD-660 digital recorder and an audio-technica AT825 microphone placed on a tripod. There are periodic background sounds but the recording is of generally high quality.

The following transcript represents a rendering of the oral history interview. Stylistic alterations have been made as part of a general transcription policy. The interviewee offered clarifications and suggestions, which the following transcript reflects. Any use of brackets [] indicates editorial insertions not found on the original audio recordings. Physical gestures, certain vocal inflections such as imitation, and/or pauses are designated by a combination of italics and brackets [/]. Any use of parentheses () indicates a spoken aside evident from the speaker's intonation, or laughter. Quotation marks [“”] identify speech depicting dialogue, speech patterns, or the initial use of nicknames. Em dashes [—] are used as a stylistic method to show a meaningful pause or an attempt to capture nuances of dialogue or speech patterns. Words are *italicized* when emphasized in speech or when indicating a court case title. Particularly animated speech is identified with **bold** lettering. Underlining [____] indicates a proper title of a publication. The use of underlining and double question marks in parentheses [____(??)] denotes unintelligible phrases. Although substantial care has been taken to render this transcript as accurately as possible, any remaining errors are the responsibility of the editor, Jeff D. Corrigan.

Interviewee: Elaine Lawless
Interviewer: Jeff D. Corrigan
Date: December 22, 2010
Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

[Begin Interview.]

[Begin Track One.]

Corrigan: So this is Jeff Corrigan, oral historian for the State Historical Society of Missouri. And I'm here today, December 22, 2010, in the society's conference room, to interview Dr. Elaine Lawless about her experience attending the one-room schoolhouse. Could you tell me, to start off with, could you tell me when and where you were born?

Lawless: I was born in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, at Lucy Lee Hospital, September 29, 1947.

Corrigan: And could you tell me a little bit about your family? Did you have any siblings? What did your parents do for a living?

Lawless: My dad was a farmer. My mom stayed home. Although we all worked in the fields. You mentioned cotton fields earlier. So we grew up working in the cotton. And Dad was in World War Two. And when he came back from the war, he was, God, he was only about 23 or 24. He went in very young. And when he came back, I think they lived near Fisk. And I think that's why I was born in Poplar Bluff. That make sense to you?

Corrigan: Mm hmm.

Lawless: And had an old truck. And I was the second born. I have an older brother who was born right before my dad left, I guess, for the Philippines during World War Two. He was in submarine service. And I have two younger brothers. So I'm the only girl. There were four kids.

Corrigan: And what were their names?

Lawless: My older brother's Larry. Larry Wayne. And my two younger brothers are Stanley, deceased, and Marvin. And he lives down near Benton, Missouri. And my mother is Angie May. And that family was the Dunlap family in Poplar Bluff. And there were like 17 kids. One boy and the rest girls. And she was the middle child in that family.

Corrigan: So when and where did you start school?

Lawless: Well, I guess when I was about three I'm thinking we moved south of Sikeston and near what we referred to as Miner Switch, which now is, I guess, Miner. And the "switch" must have been a reference to the railroad tracks. We lived on a farm that might have been owned by my dad's brother. Did I answer that?

Corrigan: Mm hmm. What was the name of the school? Did the school have a name?

Lawless: I don't know. I don't know. I don't remember.

Corrigan: Did you start, was there kindergarten, or was it just first grade?

Lawless: Just first grade. And my older brother and I went. My other brothers hadn't been born yet. My older brother, we rode a bicycle to school. And I rode in the basket of my brother's bicycle. And I don't know how far it was. It might have been a mile. It might have been a mile and a half. My sweetest memory is that we used to pass, there were two horses that we would pass every day. And we'd stop and talk to the horses. And we named them, oh, Jerry Lewis and who was his sidekick? Who was the comedian with Jerry Lewis? Um, come on, Jeff. Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis because they were really ugly horses. And we thought that both of those men were ugly. But we talked to the horses. So my brother, he's five years older than me. So it was a one-room schoolhouse. It had eight grades. One row per grade. And so that's where I started first grade. And I might have been there through third grade. I really can't remember. And that's, it might have been longer than that?

Corrigan: Could you describe the building, the physical building, both—

[End Track One. Begin Track Two.]

Corrigan: --inside and out to me? Its size, color. Were there windows? Was it, were the bathrooms inside or outside?

Lawless: Bathrooms were outside. And it was either coal or wood heated. And I was thinking about this, wondering which it was. Our family's stove was coal heated. That I know. And I, as I, you know, a six year-old girl, I wasn't the one to bring in the wood or the coal. But I do remember the boys, the bigger boys, bringing in wheelbarrow loads of either coal or wood. And really I can't remember. I remember the stove was a big black stove in the middle of a very large room. That's where all the rows were. Bathrooms were outside. There was one alcove off of the room, off of the big room. And the bookmobile would come every once in a while and bring books to the school. And I spent an awful lot of time in the book room. In second grade, I remember, I got a certificate for reading 102 books that year. So I was already a bookworm. And I would often, as I got older, I would often read to the younger kids who were coming. It was, it probably had, at one point, been painted white. It probably wasn't very white when we went to school there. Something in my mind tells me it had a steeple, which might have indicated it had once been a church, which I don't know. That happened often, that churches and schools looked alike or would be used, maybe, for different things. It did have windows. Nothing on the windows. Wood floor. The kind of desks that were metal on the bottom attached to the floor with a lift-up lid, wooden lid.

Corrigan: Was there a chalkboard in the front of the room? Or did you have individual slates?

Lawless: I think there was a chalkboard in the front of the room. I don't remember individual slates. We might have had them. I don't remember.

Corrigan: How big, you said it was a big room. If you had to guess how big that room was.

Lawless: I'm really bad with dimensions.

Corrigan: What about compared to this room?

Lawless: It was bigger than this room because it had, it had, well, I'm just thinking it was probably wider than this room, because it had eight rows. And I don't know what happened if you had more kids than seats. But my memory was that every row was a different grade.

Corrigan: So wider than this room. So this room's probably about 40 feet by 20 feet. So maybe—

Lawless: So maybe 40 by 30 or something like that. With the one big black stove. And pegs in the back for coats and boots.

Corrigan: And you said the bathrooms were outside. Were they together? Next to each other? Or were they on opposite sides?

Lawless: Opposite sides, boys and girls.

Corrigan: Did the bathrooms move around?

Lawless: (laughs) I don't think so.

Corrigan: Okay.

Lawless: I don't think so.

Corrigan: Because sometimes, after they would be used for a while, they would cover the hole and then move it to a different location.

Lawless: They might. And I don't know. I mean, as a child, I don't even know if I would have noticed. I might have, if I couldn't find the bathroom. But—

Corrigan: So besides the main room, there was this alcove that was used for, the bookmobile would come and you would check the books.

Lawless: Right. Right.

Corrigan: But that was it? There was—

Lawless: I think so. I think the rest was all one room.

Corrigan: Now does the, does the building still exist today?

Lawless: I have no idea. I don't even think I could find it. Maybe my mother could. But no, I have no idea if it's there. My guess is that no, it is not still there.

Corrigan: And do you remember where it was located? You said it was about a mile from your house. But was there anything else around it? Or was it just out in the country?

Lawless: It was really out in the country. It was on a blacktop road. Our dirt road, which we rode the bike on, did, at the end, intersect with a blacktop. And then the school was, we turned right and the school was a little bit down that road to the left. But there wasn't, it wasn't part of a town. There weren't houses around it. It really was in the middle of nowhere.

Corrigan: And in what direction were you from Miner? The actual town that exists today. Were you—

Lawless: We were south.

Corrigan: South.

Lawless: South of Miner.

Corrigan: Do you think it was a five-minute drive? A ten-minute drive?

[End Track Two. Begin Track Three.]

Corrigan: How many miles, roughly, was it from the town?

Lawless: I don't know. It might have been as much as five. Five to ten miles. It wasn't a quick trip into town at all. We were pretty isolated.

Corrigan: Okay. Now do you remember how many students were in your class?

Lawless: However many seats there were in a row. (laughs) No.

Corrigan: Okay. What about in the school at any given time? Are we talking, you know, five, ten, twenty kids in the whole school?

Lawless: No. I think more than that. I think, I mean, if there were six in each grade, that would be 48. I would say anywhere between 30 and 48 kids is about right. Certainly more than just a handful. More than five or ten. It seemed like when everybody was there—and attendance was very irregular, I mean, people would just disappear and then come back. And I remember there being some boys, especially, who were probably 20, who had just never graduated. And would drop out and work and then come back for a part of a semester. So it was very irregular.

Corrigan: Do you remember your teacher or teachers at all?

Lawless: No. I only remember that they were all women. Never had a man. I don't remember names.

Corrigan: Do you remember if they were young or old?

Lawless: They were middle-aged to older.

Corrigan: Because some schools had, it might have been a recent graduate. A girl that was a recent graduate. I didn't know if it was—

Lawless: Didn't seem like it. Always wore dresses, even when it was snowing. Women didn't wear pants. I mean, I guess the kids did. But the women didn't.

Corrigan: Did she live at the school? Or no.

Lawless: I don't think so. I don't remember there being a house nearby. Uh uh.

Corrigan: Okay. And you don't remember how many you had? If you had more than—did you have the same teacher the whole time?

Lawless: I don't know. It could have been. I just don't remember.

Corrigan: Okay. Do you remember, did you learn a lot from listening to the older kids? Because they would, usually the teachers would teach the first grade, then second grade, then third grade. Did you pay attention to what all the other kids were learning?

Lawless: I think sometimes I did. My recourse was to go to the alcove. I spent an awful lot of time in there reading. I think I was probably pretty bored. Because some of the students, as I said, might have been 20. I think a lot of it was very remedial, because students didn't consistently come. So they really couldn't read or write or just do simple sums in arithmetic. So I think I was pretty bored in the main room, so I would go into the alcove and read.

Corrigan: Now were you and your brother, were you there regularly? Did your parents make sure—

Lawless: Yes. Yes. We did go to school. Yeah. And there were, during that, and even when I moved to Benton, we still had cotton vacations in the fall. And we would get out of school, I don't know, a month, anywhere from two weeks to a month to pick the cotton when it was ready. All those kids would be in the fields then, picking cotton. And then we'd get out more than they do now for Christmas, so that we could boll the cotton.

Corrigan: And did you help, did you go out and pick the cotton?

Lawless: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. We grew up in the fields with our parents alongside. Mm hmm.

Corrigan: Now you said you read a lot. Were you able to take any of the books home? Were you able to check them out and take them home and read them?

Lawless: I think so. I think so. Yeah. I think so. Because I read a lot. And I'm pretty sure, especially as I would get beyond, you know, the simple books. Yeah. I could take them home.

Corrigan: So it wasn't just the bookmobile, you didn't just have to read them at school. You could take them home.

Lawless: I don't think so. I think I could take them home. I remember the bookmobile came to Benton, too, when we moved to Benton. Or near Benton. And my mom would take me to meet the bookmobile. I don't think it came down our road or anything. There I would check out, you know, lots of books.

Corrigan: Did your parents encourage you to keep reading or read a lot?

Lawless: They did. They did. They were not educated themselves. They did not have, either one of them, didn't have high school educations. But my mom had great memories of—

[End Track Three. Begin Track Four.]

Lawless: -English and Shakespeare. She loved school. And she, I can remember one time going to the Benton bookmobile. And the bookmobile lady saying that the books I had chosen were too adult for me. This might have been when I was, say, twelve to fifteen. And my mom was just like, "You know, it's fine with me. I'm going to approve it. If she's reading, I don't care what she's reading. I'm not going to censor what she's reading." Which just surprised me. Because we were raised Baptist. Very strict missionary Baptist. Which is part, it's an offshoot from the Southern Baptist, so it's even more strict than the Southern Baptist, if you can imagine that. So no movies. We eventually got a television. But no shorts, no cards, no drinking. So for my mom to say that is kind of interesting that she didn't care.

Corrigan: You could just read whatever you wanted, but it was important for you to read.

Lawless: Yep. Yep.

Corrigan: Now you told us how you got to school each day with a bike. What did you do after, your brother was five years older, so was he still at the school the whole time you were there?

Lawless: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Corrigan: Okay. So you didn't have to worry about getting there yourself.

Lawless: No.

Corrigan: Okay. Do you remember any activities you did at the school? Did you have any type of programs? Was the school used as a social place? A social gathering?

Lawless: I don't remember. But we wouldn't have done it. My family wouldn't have done it. The only thing we did was go to church. We didn't go to community things. They weren't, they weren't politically minded, they weren't anything. We didn't, we didn't even see a lot of family. They were just a real kind of insulated, isolated family.

Corrigan: So you didn't have to worry about preparing for a Christmas program to be held in the school where the whole community would come? Or a pie social?

Lawless: Now that, now that, I don't know. Maybe there were Christmas, maybe there was a program of the kids for, and they might come to that. They might. Yeah. The ones I can remember more are in the church, not the school.

Corrigan: Did you have recess?

Lawless: Sure. Mm hmm.

Corrigan: Do you remember how long it was? Or did you have it morning and afternoon?

Lawless: Mm hmm.

Corrigan: So you did have a morning and afternoon—

Lawless: Right.

Corrigan: Do you remember any games you used to play?

Lawless: No. I was probably in the book room. (laughs) No. They forced, they made us go outside. I do remember that. Yeah, they did. I mean, you had to put on all your coats and your boots. And even if it was snowing or—not the rain, but if it was snow, cold, you had to go outside. You had to be outside for a while. But specific games?

Corrigan: If they were group activities, if they were individual things, you just figured out what to do. That was one of my questions.

Lawless: No, I think the girls congregated, and the boys congregated. And I think that whatever we played, we did, I think gender had more to do with it than anything else.

Corrigan: Okay. But they were outside. You were pushed outside.

Lawless: Mm hmm. Yep. Yeah, we were.

Corrigan: Now you said some of the older boys had chores to perform. They carried in wood or coal, whichever it was. Did you have to do anything, like clean erasers or carry in water, or—was there a water fountain in the—

Lawless: No. There was no electricity. Well, would that be true? There was not a water fountain that, I guess there was electricity. I guess there were lights. I think one of my jobs was to check out the books in the alcove, which would say that they could be taken home. But I think I made cards and checked out books to people, to the other kids. I think that was my job. I don't remember the erasers or anything like that.

Corrigan: Now did you take a lunch? Or was a lunch provided?

Lawless: I took a lunch. Always. There was no, there was no food.

Corrigan: Did you just eat at your desk?

Lawless: Mm hmm. Or outside. We went outside for lunch if we could. But yeah, we just took stuff.

Corrigan: Is that something your mom made for you each day?

Lawless: Mm hmm. Mm hmm. You want to know what's in it? (laughs)

Corrigan: Sure, if you remember what a typical lunch would have been. Was it leftovers from the night before?

Lawless: Yeah, a lot. And cornbread. Always cornbread. She made a lot of cornbread and biscuits. Whatever was left over. Ham. If we had ham, she'd make a biscuit and ham sandwich.

Corrigan: You said ham. Did you raise any animals?

Lawless: We did. We had a lot. Yeah. And we butchered some of, or had butchered, beef and pork. And we had chickens. Maybe boiled eggs? There could have been boiled eggs in that. No drinks. They would never spring for any prepackaged drinks. That would have been—

[End Track Four. Begin Track Five.]

Lawless: --insane. So there must have been water at the school. But I'm guessing there was a pump on the back, I don't remember there being a porch, but there had to have been a pump. We had a pump at our house, I remember. So I'm pretty sure it was just a water pump.

Corrigan: Okay. And you attended that school roughly till third or fourth grade.

Lawless: I'm thinking so. And that would make sense if my brother was still there that we'd probably moved when he, you know, would have been in like sixth grade or something, maybe.

Corrigan: Now this next question, because you moved, this is probably going to affect this answer. But did you ever keep in contact with any of the students you went to the one-room schoolhouse with besides your brother?

Lawless: Nope. No. No. And I don't, there were a couple of families in Miner that my mom and dad were close to, I think through the church. In fact one of them, I seem to remember their last name was Church. There were a couple of people that they knew that I remember us still being close to years later, which was odd, because we didn't do a lot of that. So they had kids. But those kids did not go to the one-room schoolhouse. They lived in Sikeston, not Miner, and not out on the farm.

Corrigan: And then you moved to Benton. And you would have graduated in eighth grade from Benton Elementary School. Is that correct?

Lawless: Mm hmm.

Corrigan: Okay. And then you went to Kelly High School, you said, for high school.

Lawless: Right. And that probably was seventh grade. That, you know, there was no junior high. So I think elementary was through sixth grade. And Kelly is still that way. No, Kelly is everything now. Kelly is maybe kindergarten through twelve. And I've seen it recently. They just kept building it. So it's kind of this amazingly big, U-shaped building. And it houses everything, and it's still out in the middle of nowhere. It's not in Benton. It's outside of Benton.

Corrigan: It's in the country?

Lawless: It's in the country. Yeah. I don't know what, Highway 55, is it on 55? I mean, that's now an interstate. But it would have been old 55. I'm not sure if it is. It's probably three miles from Benton proper.

Corrigan: Okay.

Lawless: And I'm pretty sure Benton Elementary, that we went into town. And Benton High School might have been in town, too. You said you were looking it up. I don't know when Kelly was built. Did you find out?

Corrigan: I didn't look that up.

Lawless: Okay. I'm thinking that there was a Benton High School, too. And that Kelly was built when I was maybe in high school.

Corrigan: Okay. You lived out in the country still then on a farm.

Lawless: Right, we lived on a farm.

Corrigan: And all the schools you always attended were all public schools, correct?

Lawless: Right.

Corrigan: Okay. Now since you were only there so long, of what you remember, do you think you got a quality education there? You said you seemed bored and not challenged.

Lawless: I would say no! (laughs) I would say absolutely not. I mean, I don't remember workbooks. I remember some textbooks, and they were probably outdated. I don't remember Britannica sets or any of the encyclopedias. No. I can't imagine how I would have gotten a quality education there.

Corrigan: Now what about afterwards? What about when you went to Benton and then Kelly High School? Did things improve?

Lawless: Yeah, I think they did. It was still very rural. Still is. Extremely rural. And the Bootheel is about as backwards as you can get. One of my nieces now teaches at Kelly. And she went to SEMO. And I don't think SEMO gives you a very good education, either, (laughs) if I can be honest.

Corrigan: And that's where you, well, I was going to ask you that. But that's where you went for your undergraduate degree was SEMO in Cape Girardeau.

Lawless: Right. Which was a long way away for me. I mean, you're right, it was very close. But—

Corrigan: Today it seems very close. But back then, it probably wasn't.

Lawless: It wasn't. Uh uh.

Corrigan: Now how did, was that always your intention? Or your parents' intention, that you would go to college?

Lawless: No. No. In fact, it was not their intention at all that I went to college. I was the only girl.

[End Track Five. Begin Track Six.]

Lawless: My brother went to Rolla, for a while, actually, and dropped out and moved and went to Detroit to be in the car industry. And he just retired from that several years ago. And they expected him to go to college. And they expected him to graduate, which he didn't. And there was absolutely no discussion about me going to college. It was definitely my high

school teachers. And I do remember them. I remember the principal, I remember high school teachers. And I don't know if I'm going to remember names, but distinctly remember specific high school teachers. Mostly English teachers and history teachers, and the principal, who kept telling me that I could go to college. And I thought, that's what you think. I mean, we were extremely poor. The reason we worked in the cotton fields was because we didn't have any money. My dad, I mean, he had a farm, but I mean, he didn't make any money. We had our own livestock. Whatever we earned in the cotton fields bought our shoes and our clothes for school. We were just really poor. And my dad had, he had just started working in Miner Switch. I guess about the time I was a senior in high school, he got a job, I think the name of it was McGill. It was a feed seed elevator place, which may still be there. I don't know. McGill might be the name of it. And he was probably loading beans and whatever. Maybe weighing trucks. That sort of thing. And he injured his back really badly. And when I announced that I was going to college, which I did do—and I was a girl who did not break any rules. My brothers broke all the rules I did not break any rules. And I didn't drive till I was eighteen. I didn't date. He was very protective of me. Said if he let me out of his sight I'd be married and ruint. Or ruint, not married. You know what ruint is. You know how to spell ruint?

Corrigan: No.

Lawless: (laughs) R-u-r-i-n-t? I mean, it's just a local way of saying "ruined," which means she'd be pregnant, right? Because all the other girls were. So when I announced that I wanted to go to college, I'm sure I didn't announce it that I was. But he was in traction. He had hurt his back and they put a hospital bed in our living room. And he was in traction for maybe six months or more. And it never got better. I mean, he had an injury for the rest of his life. And that's when I announced that I wanted to go to SEMO and go to college. And there was no money. And he thought that it was ridiculous. My mother would tell you that she supported my decision to go to college. And I don't think she supported it loudly. But at any rate, the teachers and the principal talked to my parents. The principal may have even come to my home and said that they were willing, I mean, I got scholarships and I got a job working half time. There was a college dean, a woman that somebody knew. And they really helped me. I mean, they made it possible for me to go to college.

Corrigan: So your parents encouraged going, made sure you had a—

Lawless: High school.

Corrigan: --eighth grade and high school education. That was important.

Lawless: Yeah.

Corrigan: But then it kind of stopped there.

Lawless: Yeah. Right. There was no expectation that I would go further.

Corrigan: And you did. And then you graduated with an English degree, correct?

Lawless: From SEMO, uh huh.

Corrigan: And then did you go directly to Indiana? Or no?

Lawless: No. No. I graduated in three years from SEMO. I went summers, because I would much rather be on the campus than back at the farm. So I just stayed there as much as I could.

Corrigan: And once you were going and continuing and progressing, did your parents' opinion change of the idea that you were, you were already in college at this point.

Lawless: They were, I think they were pleased and proud of me. And I think also they appreciated, even valued, my determination to do it. But, you know—

[End Track Six. Begin Track Seven.]

Lawless: That was impressive, I guess, to them. And I think they could kind of brag on the fact that their daughter was at school. So I just went, I just went through summers and everything. And I had a job in the biology department. I worked half time in biology and got to know all of the biology professors at SEMO really well. The ornithologist and, I mean, they were great to me. So in the third year, when I graduated, I also married a young man who was a biology major, who had seen me working in the labs. So he went to graduate school at University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana. And he got drafted out of graduate school during the Vietnam War. And so I went to Alaska with him for two years during the Vietnam War. He put in for Alaska and Germany, hoping not to go to Vietnam. He didn't want to go to Vietnam. And because he was a biologist, they stuck him in a hospital doing lab work. Which worked out fine. Alaska was safe. And Alaska, Elmendorf Air Force Base was the place where they sent a lot of Vietnam vets who weren't going to make it back. They knew they weren't going to make it. And they landed them in Elmendorf and they had to take care of them there. So I did my student teaching in Potosi, Missouri. The last, in fact, my husband at the time, Ray Keller, Raymond Keller, who was from Dutch Town, which is right, it's a part of Cape Girardeau. It may still be on the signs as Dutch Town, is a very, very German enclave. Lots of Kellers and lots of German names in there. And most of those people still, did at that time, still spoke, I guess it's low German. They were all Lutheran. My family was, as I said, Southern Baptist. And I might as well have been marrying, I mean, they would not have allowed me to marry a Catholic. But the Lutheran was not good, but they weren't opposed to it. So he went on to Alaska and I did my student teaching in Potosi in the lead mine area. That was very interesting. I lived in a house with a single woman. And then I taught school in Perryville for maybe half of the next year. So when are we talking here. '69, okay, I graduated from SEMO in '68. I graduated from high school in '65. I graduated from SEMO in '68. I got married in '68, in August of '68. We moved to Champaign-Urbana for him to go to graduate school. Then he got drafted in, it must have been '69, '70, in there. '70, '71, maybe '72, we were in Alaska. We came back to Champaign-Urbana and he finished his master's degree and his doctorate degree. And I got my master's degree in Champaign-

Urbana, in English. At University of Illinois. And then he had a post-doc at Yale for two years. And I went there with him. And our, we had a child born in Champaign-Urbana. Alex was born in Champaign-Urbana. So we went to New Haven. We lived in Cheshire, which was about 30 miles north of New Haven, because New Haven was very expensive and very dangerous. But I, that is where I met William Ferris. I went down to Yale just to check it out and go in the library. I spent a lot of time in the Beinecke rare book rooms at Yale. It was the first time I ran across Zora Neale Hurston's work. I just taught a course on Zora Neale Hurston. But I remember reading her letters in that Beinecke library there. And I went down to Yale and somehow, I don't know how, I met some people in American Studies. And I met Bill Ferris, who was teaching American folklore in the American Studies Department—

[End Track Seven. Begin Track Eight]

Lawless: --at Yale. And I asked him if I could sit in on his courses. Because I had, I'd done my master's in English. But there were several folklorists at Urbana that were very, very influential on me and I actually changed my major to folklore while I was at Illinois, even though it wasn't a major. But one of my teachers at Urbana was Archie Green, who actually started the American Folklife Center. He was a lobbyist. He was also in labor and industrial relations because he had worked in coal mining early in his life. And he was a miner himself. And he's very famous, and that name may mean something to you. He was one of my teachers. He taught me ballad and a couple of other courses. And I still kept up with him until he died recently. But I went to Bill, because he was a folklorist from Mississippi. And I asked him if I could sit in on his classes and he said he would rather I helped him teach some of them. And so I taught American folklore with Bill Ferris at Yale those two years. So that, I don't know, now we're probably talking about '73, '74. And Bill Ferris, just so you know, ended up being the chairman of the NEA. That's the Bill Ferris I taught with. That's pretty cool. So after that, after teaching with Bill for about a year and a half, I decided, I mean, how idyllic can you get. You're sitting in these courtyards at Yale teaching elite Yalies folklore. It was so cool. And with Bill's encouragement, I decided I was going to go get my PhD. And so by that time, I did not particularly want to be married to this person I was married to. So I started applying for graduate schools. And I got in several schools. And without doubt, IU was the favorite to go. And I ended up going there. And the rest is history.

Corrigan: And that was in what year did you start in Indiana?

Lawless: 1977, I think. Fall of '77. And I graduated in '82. And I took this job in—no, that's not true. It wasn't that much. I did divorce Ray Keller in 1979. And in 1981, or '82, I remarried a folklorist that I met at Indiana, Sandy Rikoon, R-i-k-o-o-n, who's on the faculty at MU now. He's dean of HES. And he's in rural sociology. He got a job in Idaho. That's why you found Idaho. He got a job as the associate director of the Idaho Historical Society in Boise, Idaho. And I wrote my dissertation there and had a baby, Jessica. And I worked for the Idaho Folklore Society. Folklife, I don't know, society. And that's why I think both Sandy and I worked on the Idaho, what did you find? Idaho archive?

Corrigan: I think it was the guide to using the Idaho Historical Society.

Lawless: Okay. Yeah. So that's something like that that we worked on together. Yeah. So—

Corrigan: What was your dissertation on?

Lawless: Women's testimonies in a Pentecostal religion, or something like that. It became my first book, *God's Peculiar People*. And it was all fieldwork that I did in Indiana while we were there, south of Bloomington, I did, and I made a film with Betsy Peterson called *Joy Unspeakable*, which is still available online. It's available under Folkstreams, which is a—

[End Track Eight. Begin Track Nine.]

Lawless: --maybe a streaming video site. That I made in 1982. No. It must have been '80, because I was in Idaho, right? I came here in '93. I finished my dissertation in '82, graduated in '82. This, yeah. And I taught at Boise State one of the years I was up there, too. And then this job became available and I applied and got it in '83.

Corrigan: Now curious to know about your mother and father. So you graduated SEMO. Did they think you were done? And then you went to Urbana-Champaign and got a graduate degree. Did they think you were done? At what point did they decide she's going to be going on forever, and she's going to get a PhD?

Lawless: They wouldn't even know what a PhD was. I'm just such an anomaly that they don't—they have no idea what I do, you know.

Corrigan: But they know you have all these degrees. Well, your mom's still alive, you said, and she knows you're a professor here.

Lawless: Yeah, and they know. Yes, they do. They know, yes. But it was a world, and it was a world that I didn't know, either. When I married Ray Keller, he was a biologist and he was summa cum laude at SEMO. And he got fellowships to go to Champaign-Urbana. And he said he was going to graduate school. And their dream for me, my parents' dream for me, was to marry the good Baptist boy who lived not very far away and live happily ever after. I mean, that was their dream. And they were not happy that I'd found somebody else at SEMO, a Lutheran, to marry. But they were glad I was getting married. I, you know, that all was normal. So they were okay with me—I'm, what I was thinking was that he was a ticket out of the Bootheel, frankly. And graduate school seemed like so exciting. I didn't know what graduate school was, and certainly my family didn't.

Corrigan: Were you the only one out of your siblings to go to college? To graduate college?

Lawless: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

Corrigan: You said one of your older brothers went, but for two years.

Lawless: One did, yeah. None of the others. In fact, they may not have finished high school, my other brothers. I don't know. One got his GED years later. But Stan and Marvin, I don't

think they even finished high school. Got married at, you know, sixteen, their girlfriends were pregnant. I mean, they did follow the script.

Corrigan: So, because one of the other questions I have is—

Lawless: I'm trying to think what you're getting at here.

Corrigan: Well I was curious to know what influence, if any, did this experience as a one-room schoolhouse, you went to a one-room schoolhouse, have on your life? I mean, do you think, I'd just like to know your impression. What influence did that have? Even looking back on that now. You said it wasn't a good education. Did that drive you further? Did it drive you to find out what was out there? Did it do the reverse? It's just an anomaly, you went there—I'm just curious, you know, what influence did that have on attending—

Lawless: I think it is an anomaly in some ways. But of all the things we've talked about and that I've thought about since you even mentioned this is probably that book alcove. I mean to me, that is something that really stands out to me. We didn't have books in our home. We had a few old battered *Reader's Digest Condensed Books* that no one, no one read. They were musty. And the Bible. We had lots of copies of the Bible. And we did read the Bible. That's what we read. No one was a reader. There just wasn't, in my house. So being introduced to books, I think, was probably the thing more than anything.

Corrigan: Because what I'm wondering is, if you were in a school in town with lots of other kids just in your own grade, you would not have been reading all those books. You would have been doing book work. I'm curious to know that you would not have had the same reading experience to just be able to go off and entertain yourself.

Lawless: I knew you had a thesis in here somewhere. (Corrigan laughs) I knew there had to be something.

Corrigan: Because that's what I'm wondering, because if you were in a classroom with kids your own age, with a teacher dedicated to teach you, or maybe a couple of grades, maybe a three or four or five-room school, that you would have had a much more strict, you wouldn't have had to worry about the 20 year-old boys, the 18 year-old boys that come back every so many semesters. You wouldn't have been, it seems like you were able to entertain—

[End Track Nine. Begin Track Ten.]

Corrigan: --self in the corner. You weren't a nuisance. And you were allowed to read and read and read and whatever you wanted. And I'm curious that that would not have been the same experience you would have gotten at a school in—

Lawless: Right. Benton. Yeah.

Corrigan: Benton. You would have had textbooks, you would have had workbooks—

Lawless: Workbooks. Structure. Much more structure. Yeah. Wow.

Corrigan: You would have been reading, writing, arithmetic. It would have been very structured. It wouldn't have been, "Elaine, you can go over there and just read whatever you want." So that's what I was curious to know. If anything out of that experience it was that you, from what I gather, is that you obtained a love of reading and finding out more.

Lawless: Are you finding this to be a trend? You've done a lot of these interviews.

Corrigan: Well, it's funny. It just depends. People all had different experiences. And sometimes it was a teacher, a great teacher. It seems like it could go either way. If you had a bad experience, you might have said, "I'm going to change this experience myself." Or vice versa, you had a great experience. So I think it's split. Some people feel that they were happy to have that experience, they were able to—there's another professor here on campus who has a PhD. And he felt like he, and what's strange about his school, he was in central Nebraska, is that he, out of the 57 kids that went to his school, 19 ended up with PhDs.

Lawless: Oh my word! Wow.

Corrigan: And are lawyers and architects and so he felt it was a community that was built around this school that encourages education. So that's one aspect.

Lawless: That's great! That's great.

Corrigan: But there's other ones that, you know, it was just something you did, and it was an anomaly. Or—

Lawless: I don't think, I think that's a really different case.

Corrigan: Yeah, well I think his is a complete anomaly that—

Lawless: No kidding!

Corrigan: --there were so many, and that they were all first generation college graduates, too. They were all children of Nebraska farmers. So very different. But there's other people that, you know, they remember and they have fondness of it. Some people, what they look back on is that the ability to know what was coming up was exciting to them. What were the eighth graders learning? What were the sixth graders learning? So some people found that, to know that wow, there's all this stuff I get to learn here, and they started paying attention to that. And other people it's just, I mean, you have a completely different experience. But I was wondering that because you would not have been able to sit and just read all day at a regular school.

Lawless: It's fun to think about. It really is.

Corrigan: And we're just speculating now.

Lawless: Right.

Corrigan: But I'm curious to know, because that, that's kind of what I was getting is you were reading and going on and on and on. If you were in Benton Elementary, you would have had some spelling lessons, you would have had some grammar lessons, you would have had math. And you didn't talk about any remembering learning math. And you didn't talk about that.

Lawless: Now I do remember reading in Benton. I mean, spelling. And I was always good at spelling. And I remember I was good at math, and I remember that when I got to Benton. But you're right. There was probably very little structure for me. I wasn't a troublemaker. I was quiet. And you're right. They could just say, "Well, you just go." And I do remember reading to even younger kids, that that was a way—because the teacher had so much on her hands. So if I could read to the even younger kids, I guess I—

Corrigan: Well, your schools seems much bigger than a lot of the people I've interviewed.

Lawless: And who knows if my memory is a good memory, either.

Corrigan: But I mean, some of them remember, I had three kids in my class, there was a couple of grades that had no students. We're talking 15 people, 10 people, 20. I mean, the fact that you think it was even 30 to 40—

Lawless: Well, I think that's at its top level. I think there were days when there were just whole rows empty, too.

Corrigan: But that's still a lot for one teacher to teach eight different grades for.

Lawless: Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. That's my memory, too, is that she had so much on her plate. And they were rowdy. These are farm kids, you know, and they're not respectful. Just discipline, just little things about that. So I think my retreat into the alcove is important. And I'm still a vociferous reader. I'll have eight books going at once. I'm just, I never go home from the library without more books to read. And I read all over the map. So that, that has stayed with me.

Corrigan: And then, the last thing I was going to ask you, is there any other stories that have popped up in your memory about that school at all since we've been talking? Or is there any other thing that you remember that we didn't talk about or you'd like to add? Just anything that popped into your head about that?

Lawless: Now when I was saying about the boys being rowdy, I do remember a lot of fights. She always had to break up fights. There were always boys fighting outside. Not particularly inside, but there was always boy, you know—

Corrigan: Do you remember a lot more boys than girls? Was it just very disproportionate, or was it—

Lawless: You know, I don't—I keep mentioning the boys. And it may be just because they loomed kind—

[End Track Ten. Begin Track Eleven.]

Lawless: --kind of big to me. Maybe I was afraid of them, because they were bigger. And the fact that they were older, a lot of them. If I'm only six and seven and eight, these really seemed like huge people to me. They were like adults, you know. I do remember girls being there, but maybe, I don't know. I don't know why I'm just--

Corrigan: But maybe it's sticking out because they were fighting, they were causing problems. They weren't doing what they were supposed to be doing, so—

Lawless: Right. Right. Yeah.

Corrigan: Okay. Well that's all I have for this.

Lawless: Okay.

Corrigan: So I'll shut off the recorder if you don't want to add anything else at this moment. So I'll just go ahead and shut off the recording.

[End Interview.]