

An Interview with

Beatrice L. Norton

at the Daniel Boone Regional Library in
Columbia, Missouri

19 September 2008

interviewed by Jeff D. Corrigan



Oral History Program
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PREFACE

Beatrice Norton was born in 1930 in Green Ridge, Arkansas. She grew up on a small diversified farm, that her mother ran, and attended a one-room schoolhouse. Norton was the youngest of five children. She describes the physical school building and discusses her education, recess, and growing up poor, before there was welfare, and learning to become a survivor. Norton also talks about attending and graduating from Waldron Schools in Waldron, Arkansas, and attending college after she retired.

The interview was taped on a 1GB 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: Beatrice Norton
Interviewer: Jeff Corrigan
Date: September 19, 2008
Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

[Begin Interview.]

[Begin Track One.]

Corrigan: This is Jeff Corrigan, oral historian for the State Historical Society of Missouri. And I'm here today on September 19, 2008 with Beatrice Norton. And I'm going to discuss with her going to a one-room schoolhouse. Beatrice, could you tell me when and where you were born?

Norton: In Green Ridge, Arkansas, in April 25, 1930.

Corrigan: Could you describe your home situation? Where you lived. Did you live in the country? Did you live in town? Did you have siblings? Did you, any kind of general information.

Norton: I lived in the country. And I was the youngest of five children. And my parents were divorced when I was two, so I, after that, I lived just with my mother and my siblings.

Corrigan: Did your mother work?

Norton: She worked on our little farm. She did, she raised crops and stuff just like the men did. And my, I have, like I said, I was the youngest. I had my oldest sister was like fifteen years older than me. And I had one brother that was twelve years older than me. And he helped Mama a lot in the farm. But all my kids worked in the farm. And my grandparents, my mother's father and mother and her brothers stayed with us a while during crop season. And they would work in the farm. And I don't remember everything that we raised, but I know we raised cotton and even, I helped pick cotton with my little small bag that I put over my shoulders. But all the kids worked in the farm. We raised corn and we had hay and we raised some feed crops. But I don't know the names of them.

Corrigan: Did you raise any animals?

Norton: We had very few. We always had some cows, but just usually maybe three or four, five. We didn't have a lot of cattle. But we did have some to sell sometimes. So maybe we might have had close to half dozen or a dozen, I don't know. I know the later years we just had two or three. And we always had a pair of mules. We didn't have any horses, but we had mules. And they worked the crops with the mule and the plow and so on.

Corrigan: Great. When and where did you go to, when and where, sorry, when and where did you start school? Did you go--

Norton: I started in Green Ridge. And when I say Green Ridge, it was more like a community than it was a town. But there was a post office there at one time. I believe that it was maybe even gone before I was born. But Green Ridge is where I lived and went to school, where I was raised, is about eight miles east of Waldron, Arkansas. And that's, Waldron is 45 miles south of Fort Smith. So that gives you a general idea of where it is.

Corrigan: And where was the school located at in that general area? Was it out in the country? Was it next, were there any houses nearby? Or did everybody kind of come from afar?

Norton: It was out in the country. And we walked like two miles. And some people walked a little further than that. Some were a little closer. But it was out in the country. And it was near a dirt two-lane road, the same road went by our house, too. But we changed houses a lot, because we rented and farmed. But when I was going to that school, that's where it was.

Corrigan: Could you describe the school—

[End Track One. Begin Track Two.]

Corrigan: What did it look like?

Norton: It was a white building. And it had, it was wood. And it had, I think, two or three wood steps to go up to the front, the main door. And there was a window on each side of the main door. And it had, the school sat between, there was a church, that church is still there. It's a historical building now. But it was next to the church. And there was also a cemetery near it, too. Then our playground was kind of between the schoolhouse and the church. And inside the building, there was a few double desk, but we each had our own little inkwell. But most of the kids had just single desks. And usually the smaller kids sat toward the front, and the larger kids sat toward the back. There was a wood fireplace kind of toward the front, but close to the middle. And one of the older boys and the teacher got there early, and I think older boys started the fire. And that's how we heated it. And there was, some of the men in the community were responsible to keep wood cut in there for the school. And we always had a, I just remember us having a woman teacher. I know sometimes they had male teachers. But the teacher lived in the, she always boarded at one of the homes in the community.

Corrigan: Okay. Do you remember how many kids were in your class or in your school?

Norton: I don't. If I was just guessing, maybe, I know it went from, when I started, the year I started, I guess that would have been in 1936, when I was six years old, we had a primer, grade called primer. And everybody started the primer when they were six years old. And then when they were seven, they started the first grade. We didn't have a kindergarten or anything like that. But if I was just—and it went to the eighth grade, through the eighth grade. And I would just guess maybe 15 or 20, something like that.

Corrigan: Okay. Okay. Can you describe your teacher? Do you remember them? Or did you have several of them during your time there?

Norton: I don't remember them. I went to primer and first grade at the one-room schoolhouse. And then we moved on a different highway and on a bus route when I started to second grade. And so I went to town school then. And then later, I believe I was in fifth or sixth, we moved back into the Green Ridge community. And then I went to school, I believe it was maybe either the fifth or sixth or right in there, I went there for like maybe another year. But then--

Corrigan: Back at the one-room schoolhouse? Okay.

Norton: Back at the one-room schoolhouse. Then I went back to, moved again, like I said. Then we went back to the, to town, to Waldron School. And that's where I was, I know I was there in seventh and eighth grade. So this would have been maybe fourth or fifth or sixth when I went back there. So my memory is kind of sketchy. But—

Corrigan: But mostly women teachers, though?

Norton: We only had—

[End Track Two. Begin Track Three.]

Norton: --women that I attended. It was just women. But I know that some of my other relatives have said well, there was also men at other times, too. At sometimes, but not my time.

Corrigan: Okay. And you said you got to school every day by walking. Is that correct?

Norton: Mm hmm. Mm hmm.

Corrigan: Is that pretty much what everyone did?

Norton: Yes. Yes. There might have, I'm thinking that it seems like one or two kids may have rode a horse to school. But there was no cars or transportation or anything like that.

Corrigan: Okay.

Norton: It was very rare to see, I told you this was a two-lane dirt road in front of the schoolhouse or near the schoolhouse. But it was rare to see a motor car on that, any motorized vehicle, on that road. You'd occasionally see a wagon and team of mules or a horse and rider. But you never saw, rarely saw a car. And so there was no rules against us playing in the road or going across the road to the woods. And our school sat in the midst of a lot of trees. There was a lot of, a lot of pine trees. But there was also oak trees and hickory trees and sumac and just different, different trees. And it was just like a clearing for the buildings to be. And then we had two outside toilets. One was across the road and in the

woods for the girls. And then there was another one back in the other direction in the woods for the boys. And our toilet, the best I remember it had like, it was either four or five holes. And it was, they were graduated. Like from real small ones for the real young children on up to adult size. And there was a little step that the younger children could step up on to get up to the stool. And we always had Sears and Roebuck catalog in there. That's what we used for toilet paper. Everybody had those.

Corrigan: Okay. Did you have recess?

Norton: Yes.

Corrigan: Do you remember, did you have it morning and afternoon? Do you remember how long it was? Was it 15 minutes or—

Norton: I don't remember how long it was. And I don't remember for sure if we had it morning and afternoon. But I know we had recess. And we had a lunch break. And everything brought their lunch.

Corrigan: Everybody brought their lunch?

Norton: Everybody brought their lunch. Most of us, this was in the '30s, after the Depression. So no one had much money. And most of the people out in this country school where I went, the one-room school, they were about the same situation we were in. We were very poor. And usually our lunch would consist of something left over from the night before. And it might be a biscuit with some fried potatoes, cold fried potatoes. Or it might be a little jar of beans with a piece of cornbread. And we had usually, Mom canned lots of fruit. And so we'd have maybe a little jar of berries or peaches or something. In a paper sack. It just was not real, I'm mentioning this because when I went to Waldron School, like when I was in second grade, everybody there was different. They had sandwiches with light bread wrapped in wax paper in little metal lunch pails and everything. And I felt kind of inferior to them because I still had my lunch like I'd taken to the country school. But we had, we didn't, I didn't know we were poor then, because everybody else was in the same situation—

[End Track Three. Begin Track Four.]

Norton: And we had, we didn't have any swings or slides, any of those types of things. But we had a, I remember we had a basketball hook. It never did have a net in it that I can remember. But we had this basketball hook, and we would play basketball there, just mostly just throwing the ball and trying to hit it, not organized games. And we would play like softball or baseball or some kind of ball. We would just make our own little diamonds, you know, putting a rock here. We didn't worry about the distance or anything. We would just run, make our own rules, kind of. We played a lot of games like, group games like "Drop the Handkerchief" and "Ring Around the Rosie" and those types of things where we all took part, little kids and big kids, everybody played together.

Corrigan: So you all, so everybody from the little kids to the eighth graders, everybody played together.

Norton: Yeah. Yeah.

Corrigan: Okay. Did you have a chore to perform at school? Or did other kids? Did you have to clap the erasers? Or did somebody have to bring in wood or water or coal?

Norton: We did, but I don't remember me specifically doing that. But we did have to bring in wood, definitely. But I think the older boys usually did that. I do kind of remember clapping the erasers. And that was kind of a privileged thing that you got to do. And we, later years, like when, I believe by the time I went back there when I was in fifth or sixth or something, we had a well with a pump.

Corrigan: Pump?

Norton: But when, in the earlier years, we had to go carry water from someone's home. And it seems like it was maybe a half a mile away or something. And usually two people would go. And my cousin, my older cousin, told me that that was a real fun job to get to do. And you could take as long a time as you wanted, and you'd miss some of the school work if you was going to get water. So that's how they did it. I know that we, now I do remember, we had a wooden bucket with a dipper. And everybody shared the same dipper to get the water. You know, for their drinking water, when we had a bucket.

Corrigan: And did you graduate eighth grade, then, in the one-room schoolhouse?

Norton: No. I graduated eighth grade in the Waldron School.

Corrigan: Okay.

Norton: Because that's when I can't, I went to the one-room school in primer and first grade. And then to Waldron town school in the second grade. And continued, until I believe it was maybe the fifth or sixth grade that I went back to the one-room school. But it was just for the one year. And then I went back to the town school again.

Corrigan: Okay. So you graduated in Waldron, then.

Norton: Uh huh.

Corrigan: Okay. What do you think, what influence do you think attending a one-room schoolhouse had on your life?

Norton: Uh, I think the whole, I guess I've not thought of it separately, but the, that whole time of going to the one-room school, of helping in the fields, of everybody did their share, everybody worked together, everybody played together, we didn't have television or most of us didn't even have a radio—

[End Track Four. Begin Track Five.]

Norton: And so it was. We didn't have telephones. It was, I think I learned to be a survivor. And I also learned the importance of working together and cooperating together and doing things together. Sharing our lives together.

Corrigan: And on the other end of that, by doing all those things, do you also think later you might have been more independent? Because you knew all the things that had to be done, and that things weren't just done for you? Do you think that at all?

Norton: Yes. Yes. Absolutely. When I went to, I went to college after I retired. And so I was in a community college with a lot of young people. And I remember in a sociology class, and we were talking about welfare, things being, people expecting all these things to be done for them and so on. And I remember bringing up well, we never, didn't have any of that when I was growing up. And we all, us kids, everybody, we picked blackberries. We went with Mama to pick huckleberries or blueberries. And wild fruits that Mama knew where they were and we would go pick those. And help with the canning. We'd wash the fruit jars and stuff where she canned all these things. And if we didn't—we raised the garden. If we didn't do this, then we didn't have anything to eat. You know, this was a part of it. And I remember the teacher saying, "But Bea, in Oklahoma City, there's not the wild things to gather to take care of yourself." So it's still, I think I have this idea that people need to, I know that some people can't, but those who can, I think need to provide for themselves, you know. Back in our day, you either worked or you starved. You didn't just—somebody take care of you. Does that answer your question?

Corrigan: So you definitely think that that had an influence on your whole life after that, because you knew, you had seen, and you had worked on each and everything. Each and every project, each and every, whether it be meals, money, for the farm, working on the farm. So no, I think that, I think that all plays together on how it—

Norton: And it definitely had a, and I'm trying to, and I still have the idea of now it's, I don't have to scrimp and save like we did then so much. But I still look for a bargain. I don't just spend. I get the things I really need and some of the things that I want. But I can't see just throwing money away, wasting it.

Corrigan: So do you think you make a conscious decision each time? Do you think that's all because of that, growing up poor?

Norton: I think so. I think so. And it bothers me when I just see oh, if my grandkids are just, you know, don't bother to pick up their change if they drop it or something. I caution them about that, you know. (laughs)

Corrigan: Is there anything else you'd like to add about the one-room schoolhouse that we didn't talk about or maybe didn't cover?

Norton: Well the one thing that I didn't realize until we were talking about it earlier, that it was a fundraiser. But I remember the pie suppers and also box suppers. And my older sisters were more involved in that than I was, because they were like of a dating age and so on. But they would make these, everybody had to take pie or box supper. And they decorated them very elaborately with crepe paper and so on. And they, everybody went to this supper. And then the men and boys bid on the—

[End Track Five. Begin Track Six.]

Norton: --boxes or the pies. And then they, and whoever had the best price got to eat with that person. And I remember, so that was more important to, we all had our pies, but it was more important to my older sisters, Maureen and Mildred, because they wanted, hoping that someone they liked would buy their box or their pie and they'd get to eat with them.

Corrigan: And that was a school fundraiser, right? To raise money?

Norton: That was a school fundraiser, yeah, yeah. And we, I'm sure we had other things like that. But I just mostly remember those.

Corrigan: No. Well, that sounds great. Well I really appreciate you coming today and sharing your story. I think this is great information.

Norton: Thank you. Thank you.

[End Session.]