

An Interview with

Norma Tolbert

at Greene County Extension Center in
Springfield, Missouri

23 March 2012

interviewed by Jeff Corrigan



Oral History Program

The State Historical Society of Missouri

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Collection C4051

One-room Schoolhouse

CD 25

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PREFACE

Norma Lee Breshears Tolbert was born in 1942 and grew up on her family's small dairy farm in rural Springfield, Missouri. She attended Liberty School, a one-room schoolhouse, from 1947 to 1951, before the school was consolidated into the Fair Grove School District. Tolbert describes the physical appearance of the school, her education there, what the students did for fun, and a memory she has of receiving her small pox vaccination. Her transition to Fair Grove Elementary School was awkward at first, but she believes that the one-room schoolhouse provided a higher quality education. Tolbert also discusses her contributions in the efforts to move and restore the Liberty School building.

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, Sean Rost.

Narrator: Norma Lee Breshears Tolbert

Interviewer: Jeff Corrigan

Date: March 23, 2012

Transcribed by: Teresa Bergen

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[Begin Interview. Begin Track 1.]

10 Corrigan: Let's go ahead and start here. This is Jeff Corrigan, oral historian for the State Historical Society of Missouri. I'm here today, March 23, 2012, in Springfield, Missouri, at the Greene County Extension Center, at the Springfield Botanical Gardens, to interview Norma Tolbert. Is that how you pronounce it?

15 Tolbert: Yes. Mm-hm.

Corrigan: About her experience attending a one-room schoolhouse. Could you start off by telling me when and where you were born?

20 Tolbert: I was born April 25, 1942 in rural Springfield, close to the location of where I went to school at Liberty School. Which is now by Fellows Lake. It's considered Springfield Route 10, right on the border of the Springfield/Fair Grove and Strafford line.

Corrigan: Is the school in its original place now, or no?

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Tolbert: No. It has been moved about a mile down the road.

Corrigan: Okay. So where's the original place? How many miles from like the nearest main highway or something? Could you kinda give me a specific location to it?

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Tolbert: From the main highway now it would be about three miles.

Corrigan: And what's the main highway?

35 Tolbert: Highway 65.

Corrigan: Okay, Highway 65. So it's three miles from there.

Tolbert: Right. It is just south of what is State Road KK.

40

Corrigan: Okay. Okay. And so you're born outside, just outside of Springfield here.

Tolbert: Yes.

45 Corrigan: Okay. Could you tell me a little bit about your family? Did you have siblings? Were your parents farmers? Could you just tell me a little bit about that?

5 Tolbert: Yes. My mother and dad, Velma and Clifford Breshears were farmers at that time. And lived, as I say, on a farm, which now has been purchased and the house has been torn down because of the Fellows Lake city water supply. So it was right on that line where Little Sac River came through and has now been dammed up with the Fellows Lake Dam. And the school was sitting about two to two-and-a-half miles from the house at that point. It was there until in the 1950s, when the city of Springfield purchased the land to make a city water supply. It was moved across the road and down the road about a mile, where it still sits.

10 Corrigan: Okay. Okay, yeah. That's right. Because it still exists today.

Tolbert: The building is there.

15 Corrigan: Okay. Velma and Clifford. Can you spell Breshears?

Tolbert: Yes. B-r-e-s-h-e-a-r-s.

Corrigan: S-h-e-a-r-s. Right?

20 Tolbert: Yes.

Corrigan: Okay. And what kind of farm was it? Did you have livestock?

25 Tolbert: Dairy farm, yeah.

Corrigan: It was a dairy farm. Was it, did you have Holsteins, Guernseys, Brown Swiss, what did you have?

30 Tolbert: I think they were just a mixture. But mostly I remember Jerseys.

Corrigan: Jerseys? Okay.

Tolbert: But it was a mixture.

35 Corrigan: How many head of cattle were there?

40 Tolbert: Well, at that point, my father did a cream route. And they moved from that house to his original house before I actually started school, which was probably another mile. And it, I remember 15 or 20. It was a small farm.

Corrigan: Okay. Did you have a big garden?

45 Tolbert: Yes. We had the garden, the chickens, the pigs, sometimes. Just typical raise your own food kind of family farm. (laughs)

Corrigan: So you were self sustainable?

Tolbert: Self sustainable in those years that I remember. And then things got a little tough and my father did start working. But it was later on when he started working in Springfield.

5 Corrigan: Okay. Did you have any siblings?

Tolbert: I do. I have a sister, two years older. Mary Frances. And then I have a younger brother, William Clifford, Bill Breshears. He was eight years younger.

10 Corrigan: Okay. And so the school you attended was Liberty School.

Tolbert: Right.

Corrigan: Was it always called that, to your knowledge?

15

Tolbert: Yes.

Corrigan: Okay. And when did you start school there?

20 Tolbert: 1947.

Corrigan: And was that first grade?

25 Tolbert: It would be, yes. It was kind of like kindergarten for me because I was only five. And I finished, actually, before I was six. Because school was out [in] early April. And my birthday's the end of April. So I was actually out of the first grade before I was ever six. So I call it kindergarten, but they didn't have such a thing then, so it was technically first grade.

[End Track 1. Begin Track 2.]

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Tolbert: A friend, Celia Miller, Celia Miller Sutherland now, our mothers were friends. And it was a small school. And Celia was going to be starting. And she was gonna be the only one in the first grade. And so it was agreed with the teacher that I could go ahead and start. I had been visiting with my sister anyhow as much as possible. I liked going. (laughs)

35

Corrigan: So Celia Miller Sutherland is her name now.

Tolbert: Right.

40 Corrigan: Sutherland.

Tolbert: Yeah. Miller was her maiden name.

45 Corrigan: Did you—well, could you describe the building for me? Could you describe it inside and out, what you remember? You know, was it a white building? Did it have a

cloakroom? Did it have a pump outside? Can you just tell me a general description of everything?

5 Tolbert: Yes. It was a white board building. Had a front porch, a long front porch. Had a, there is, there are pictures of it with a bell on the roof. I'm not so sure that the bell was there when I was there, because I think the pictures now don't indicate that. But there was a large—you know, it seemed like a big building then. I'm looking at it now, it's only twenty by thirty. So it wasn't so large. But it had a large woodstove or wood furnace sitting in the back corner. And I remember that. Of course, the full front was a blackboard and a stage, a little step-up stage where the teacher's desk was. And we were just in the typical, you know, 10 one through eight kind of format as far as desk and layout inside.

Corrigan: Was it the single desk or the shared desks with somebody sitting right next to you? Was it like a little shared bench or—

15 Tolbert: The best I remember it was a single desk but, you know, my desk and the back of my seat would be connected to the desk for the next person. That's kind of my picture of it.

Corrigan: And was that the little kids up front and the older kids in the back?

20 Tolbert: Yes. The little kids started on the left and the older kids were graduated to the right, to the back, yeah.

Corrigan: Are there windows on both sides of the school?

25 Tolbert: There are window—no, not now.

Corrigan: Not now, but back then were there—

30 Tolbert: It indicates, well, not even when I went, there weren't. I remember windows on the left. Long windows on the left, and small transom windows on the right. And basically you can look at the building now and see where they blocked out those windows on the right. You can see where there had been windows on both sides, probably. But no, I remember the, you know, just the windows on the left. So you were facing the teacher and the light was coming in on your left. 35

Corrigan: So the left, was that west? Or east or west?

40 Tolbert: It woulda been, it woulda been east, actually.

Corrigan: East, okay. You said there was a big blackboard up front?

Tolbert: Yes.

45 Corrigan: So you didn't have like the individual slates or anything?

Tolbert: No.

Corrigan: Okay. Teacher stood up front. Do you remember the inside? Was there a flag? Maps? Was there pictures up?

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Tolbert: Oh, yeah. There were flags on each side, best I remember. And we did the Pledge of Allegiance, those types of things. And we raised the flag outside at the flagpole. There was not water in the building. I mean, as far as running water. There was a pump outside. And there was an outhouse outside for the buildings out there. But inside, mainly what I

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remember is the stove, the blackboard and the desk. And, you know, the flags. And yes, there was a large map that I remember. Seems like it was a pull-down wide map.

Corrigan: Was there like, was there a cloakroom? Or was there just hooks or something for, where to put lunches and coats in there?

15

Tolbert: Right. Seems like there were hooks in the back. But no, I don't remember any cloak room.

Corrigan: Okay. Was there any section for like a little library or anything? Books or anything?

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Tolbert: Not particularly. Just bookshelves. I mean, temporary bookshelves. Nothing permanent that had been built in.

Corrigan: Okay. So the pump was outside. Somebody carried in water. Did you have like the individual cups or dippers? Or did you all share a dipper? Do you remember that?

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Tolbert: You know, I don't really particularly remember it one way or the other. I was there, you know, the last four years of the school. So it was probably up to date as much as it's gonna get at that p--

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[End Track 2. Begin Track 3.]

Tolbert: --oint. (laughs) I do remember stories about others talking about it more. But as far as my memories, not so much that. We took a lunch. We—I do remember in the winter when the fire was going and the coals were hot, we would take potatoes and put them in the coals and bake them for our lunch. That was always something nice, you know, just to look forward to.

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Corrigan: Yeah? So you'd actually, so you'd take some just warm potatoes, you'd warm them up throughout the day?

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Tolbert: We just took a potato and put it in the coals. And it would be, if you put it in in the morning, it would be done by lunchtime. And so.

45

Corrigan: Now did you take your lunch? Was it in like a cigar box or a little tin or something, or?

5 Tolbert: I don't know that I can tell you exactly. Probably just a sack or a little tote bag. But I probably did have a lunchbox. I can't remember that I did.

Corrigan: Can you tell me what a typical lunch would have been? Like what would you have taken from home? Would your mom prepare it?

10 Tolbert: She would have. And I asked her the other day. And she couldn't remember other than, she said, "Whatever I had." (laughs) So it was probably peanut butter and jelly part of the time. And, you know, maybe some leftover from the night before. Chicken or something. But I can't recall particularly what it would have been.

15 Corrigan: Okay. So just whatever was from—

Tolbert: Yeah.

20 Corrigan: Well, did you take milk from home, since you had a dairy? Did you have a thermos of milk or something? Or a jar?

Tolbert: We took drinks and it would have been, yeah, and I do think I remember having a thermos, so I'm sure I took some kind of, you know, whatever the day. If it was a hot day, it was probably something cold. If not, it was probably something hot.

25 Corrigan: Did you have—at that time did you have like an icebox at home that you could take things cold? Or?

Tolbert: Yes, I think so. Best I can remember.

30 Corrigan: Okay. Was lunch, was it like a half an hour? Did you play afterwards?

Tolbert: Probably. Yeah, it seems like we had recess after lunch. I'm not positive that I can say that it was exactly a half an hour, but I'm sure that's kinda what the teacher set aside.

35 Corrigan: Okay. Could you tell me how many students were in your class, your age?

Tolbert: Only two in my class.

40 Corrigan: And was that Celia?

Tolbert: That was Celia and I.

Corrigan: And roughly at that time, how many kids were in the school?

45 Tolbert: Well, during the four years, of course it varied a little bit, but twelve to fifteen.

Corrigan: So fairly small.

Tolbert: Yes.

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Corrigan: Did you have the same teacher each year? Did you change?

Tolbert: I did. I only had one teacher, the first, the four years that I attended there. And it was Mrs. Myrtle Hughes.

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Corrigan: So, Mrs. Myrtle Hughes.

Tolbert: Right. M-y-r-t-l-e. And before she came, I have a vague memory of the previous year, I guess. It was probably her first year in '46. And they needed—she **was** married. In some cases, you know, in earlier years I don't think the teacher could be married. But she was. And they needed a place to live. And so my parents shared our house with Mr. and Mrs. Hughes for just a few months, short time, until a house became available. And actually it was on the little road behind the school. So it was handy for her. She and her husband rented it from Mr. and Mrs. Wommack, who had a house behind the school. And the Wommacks had been very involved on the school board and different things. The school sat right next to the Liberty Church, which was organized in 1845. So we feel fairly sure that there was a school not too long after that. But the documentation, I think it's on the records as 1876. We have a deed that shows 1895. So at that time, my understanding is the school was down the hill more on the Little Sac River. It's been now, I mean, in the 1920s or something, it was moved up. And there's a cemetery between the church and the lake. So the Wommacks and the Hughes—there was a little path back there. And it's still a walking path. But the houses are not there because of the lake. So that was where Mrs. Hughes lived.

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Corrigan: Do you remember Mrs. Hughes' husband's name?

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Tolbert: Oh, dear. I can see his face. (laughs) It may come to me later.

Corrigan: It may come to you. And the Wommacks, do you know, did they spell that, was it like W-o-m—

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Tolbert: I think it was W, Burley Wommack. W-o-m-a-c-k. I think was [Wommack is the correct spelling]—

Corrigan: What were their names? You said Burly?

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Tolbert: Burley. Mr. and Mrs. Burly Wommack. B-u-r-l-e-y.

Corrigan: Do you remember her first name?

45

Tolbert: No.

Corrigan: Okay.

Tolbert: I could probably research it and find it but I can't remember it now.

5 Corrigan: No, no. That's okay. So di--

[End Track 3. Begin Track 4.]

10 Corrigan: --Did you—that's the only teacher you knew, but did you like her as a teacher?

Tolbert: Oh, yes. She was, she was excellent. I mean, I can't remember that she had any problems, but I'm sure she probably did. But it seemed to me like she tackled everything that came up. So she could teach one through eighth grade, sorta keep us going.

15 Corrigan: Do you remember, were you paying attention to what the older kids were learning? Or did you learn by listening and watching the others?

20 Tolbert: Oh, yes. Yes. Of course, I mean, I thought that was what you were supposed to do, I guess. But I honestly really, of course, your first four years are probably your most critical anyhow. But I feel like I learned as much in those four years as I did in the following eight. But it probably was just because I was listening and hearing what the other classes were saying and doing. And if it had a, if it made a problem with me paying attention to my work, I don't remember it being a problem. But I was listening.

25 Corrigan: You said the school was about two and a half miles from your house. Is that right?

Tolbert: Right. From where I was born. Now from where I actually lived when I went to school, it would be close to two miles.

30 Corrigan: Two miles. Okay.

Tolbert: One and a half to two miles, yeah.

35 Corrigan: And did you walk to school each day?

Tolbert: We did walk a lot. We did walk a lot. We did get a few rides once in a while. But most of the time we walked, whenever the weather was so we could.

40 Corrigan: Was it a dirt road?

Tolbert: It was gravel, yeah.

Corrigan: Gravel, okay. Gravel, okay.

Tolbert: And we picked up other students along the way. I mean, as we started and just made the way to school. Others would, of course, join us. And we all ended up getting there about the same time.

5 Corrigan: So, okay. So it kinda—maybe the furthest kid kept walking and probably pick up kids along the way.

Tolbert: Right. (laughs) I remember it ‘cause I was young at that time. Some of the older, there was an older neighbor boy that sometimes would help carry my books because they just got a little heavy after a while. So. (laughs)

10 Corrigan: Do you remember any activities held at the school? Could you describe to me like did you have a Christmas program? Did you have a end of the year picnic? Did you ever have pie suppers or anything? Could you tell me about any of that?

15 Tolbert: We did. We had pie suppers. And that is, you know, that’s something that I do remember. It was a fun time because it kind of brought the community together. And of course it was also to raise some funds for the school. Yeah, we had pie suppers and Christmas programs. Santa Claus, you know, was there, and those types of programs. We had graduation at the end of the year, eighth grade graduation. And I remember, again, I only was 20 nine at the time when I left, let alone when I started. But hyacinths were blooming and that’s what we used for corsages those days, you know. Whatever was pretty and available at the time. And the pie suppers, the programs, the community, of course, used the school for 25 different get togethers and activities. But the church was right next door. So it was also part of the community. I remember recess outside and some of those types of things.

Corrigan: Could you tell me about, did you have recess in the morning, afternoon? Could you tell me about some of the games you played? Well, could you first tell me, was there any playground equipment?

30 Tolbert: There was a teeter totter. And a swing. And the teeter totter[‘s] actual brace is still on the yard of the folks that live there. And I remember the teeter totter because I was on it, teeter tottering, I guess, with my friend Celia and lost my first tooth. (laughs) ‘Cause I was— it fell out and something was on my tongue and I’m thinking “What is that?” And she 35 remembers just letting go and letting me drop. So (laughs) I guess that might have had something to do with why I lost my first tooth. But I lost it on that teeter totter. And there were swings. Of course we played different kind of kickball games. I, being younger, I didn’t probably get into the big games that some of the other kids did. But one of the things, field trips, we basically kind of, on really nice spring or fall days, I guess they were, we would do 40 a little field trip on the afternoon, like I guess it was probably a Friday afternoon, I don’t know for sure. But just walking and doing a little science, looking for nature kind of things and that type of thing was always a fun time.

Corrigan: So nature walks.

45 Tolbert: Right.

Corrigan: Was recess about fif[teen]--

[End Track 4. Begin Track 5.]

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Corrigan:--[minutes] in the morning?

Tolbert: Probably, fifteen to twenty.

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Corrigan: Was the teacher out there, too, with you guys? Do you remember that at all? Supervising?

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Tolbert: Seems like she was. I couldn't, you know, we didn't really need a lot of supervision. But I guess probably she was very handy. She was the only adult there. But of course there were older students that could help take care of us if we needed some help.

Corrigan: So you did have a ball, so there was ball—some type of ball games.

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Tolbert: Yeah. Oh, yeah. They did.

Corrigan: Did you play things like hopscotch and—

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Tolbert: Oh, I would say probably. My sister tells me that they did actually play softball. I don't remember doing it myself, but they probably did.

Corrigan: Okay. I didn't know if there was—with only twelve to fifteen kids, there wasn't a whole lot of kids for a whole baseball team or a whole—

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Tolbert: No, right. At different times, no.

Corrigan: But I didn't know if you played games like Annie Over.

35

Tolbert: I do remember those. And of course we did Ring Around the Rosy and those type of little kid games.

Corrigan: Did you play Red Rover?

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Tolbert: I remember playing Red Rover. It would have either been at school or Bible school or something like that. So I do remember playing that.

Corrigan: Okay. Do you remember what you guys did when there was bad weather outside? Did you stay inside and play games, or—

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Tolbert: I don't have a specific memory, but we did have activities inside. Spelling bees and things like that. So I'm sure the teacher was creative to keep us occupied. (laughs)

Corrigan: Did the school have, did you have a piano in the school at all?

Tolbert: It does seem like it did. It does. I don't know that I have, you know, I really think it did. But somebody else older would have to tell you that for sure.

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Corrigan: Because you said you did sing occasionally, there would be songs.

Tolbert: Right, right.

10 Corrigan: But patriotic songs or—

Tolbert: Well, and because of that, your bringing that up makes me think yes, there was a piano there. Patriotic songs, just basically fun songs, too, probably. But I either haven't gotten old enough to remember that far back or something. (laughs)

15

Corrigan: No, that's okay. No, that's okay.

Tolbert: I can't tell you exactly any particular one.

20 Corrigan: No, that's okay. Do you remember, did you have to perform any chores at the school? Clap erasers or clean or—

Tolbert: Different ones did. You know, they had chores to bring in the wood in the winter and the water, the water, and pick up for your own things. I was always willing to help the teacher do whatever she needed. So if she asked me to empty trash or something, I would be glad to do it.

25

Corrigan: Okay. (sneezes) Excuse me. Was it, you said wood-heated, right? So not coal? It was wood-heated?

30

Tolbert: It was wood. The best I remember, yeah.

Corrigan: Okay.

35 Tolbert: I know it was part of the time.

Corrigan: You said there was an outhouse. Was there two? Was there a boy and a girl? Or was there one?

40 Tolbert: I think there were two sides to it.

Corrigan: Okay. We talked about your lunches and that. Could you tell me, so you stayed up until you were nine. So that was the—

45 Tolbert: I finished the fourth grade.

Corrigan: Fourth grade.

Tolbert: And that's when the school was consolidated into Fair Grove. And so I began fifth grade at Fair Grove.

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Corrigan: So Fair Grove, okay.

Tolbert: Right.

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Corrigan: And that's where?

Tolbert: That is a little bit north and east of Liberty School. About five miles from [unclear]

Corrigan: Were you bussed there?

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Tolbert: I was. It was consolidated in '51. And we started the fall semester of school in '51 at Fair Grove.

Corrigan: Is that where, then did you go to Fair Grove High School?

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Tolbert: I did.

Corrigan: Is that where you graduated from?

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Tolbert: I did.

Corrigan: And what year was that?

Tolbert: 1959.

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Corrigan: 1959. Okay. Was the other one called Fair Grove Elementary or Fair Grove—

Tolbert: It was elementary and high school at that time.

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Corrigan: Was it, oh, was it one building?

Tolbert: No, they had two buildings. An elementary building and a high school building. Later, since then, they have a middle school.

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Corrigan: Okay. You know, you only had the one, Celia, in your class. Did you keep in contact with her afterwards?

Tolbert: Oh, yes. We're still friends and don't live too far away. (laughs)

45

Corrigan: Okay. Okay. Did a lot of the kids in the area that went to that school, did they, are they still in the general area of—

Tolbert: Well, several. We have worked on trying to contact those who went in the last years. Of course the others are decea[sed.]--

5 **[End Track 5. Begin Track 6.]**

10 Tolbert: --And there are several in the area, in the Springfield, Missouri area. Not so many in the Fair Grove, necessarily, area. But twelve to fifteen. Again, I have the names of 'em. But other than that, people—I'm still looking for names, actually. 'Cause I'm trying to work to restore this building. So.

Corrigan: Okay. So you do talk to Celia. You do see other people around. Do you think you had a quality education there?

15 Tolbert: Oh, absolutely. If they want my advice, I think they should go back to that same type of education. (laughs) But I don't think—it probably wouldn't work today, since there are so many more students. But just because you had the, you did have the one-on-one attention. I mean, only since I, there were only two of us in the class, of course we had attention for that particular level. But that teacher was also occupied teaching other ages and other levels during the day. But I didn't go to the eighth grade, but I actually have a copy of a test that they gave to eighth graders in one-room schools back in those years. And honestly, I don't believe a twelfth grader could pass the test now. From what is, you know, covered.

20 Tolbert: Oh, absolutely. If they want my advice, I think they should go back to that same type of education. (laughs) But I don't think—it probably wouldn't work today, since there are so many more students. But just because you had the, you did have the one-on-one attention. I mean, only since I, there were only two of us in the class, of course we had attention for that particular level. But that teacher was also occupied teaching other ages and other levels during the day. But I didn't go to the eighth grade, but I actually have a copy of a test that they gave to eighth graders in one-room schools back in those years. And honestly, I don't believe a twelfth grader could pass the test now. From what is, you know, covered.

25 Corrigan: So you think it was well structured and well, although she was managing a lot of different grades and classes, it worked with that small number of students?

30 Tolbert: It did. It did. It worked. And it worked well. And from, actually my parents attended this same school. My mother attended only for one year. But my father, actually, that was his education. Well, up to the eighth grade. And his sister, my aunt, taught him. So, you know, it basically, when you really look back at their education, they had a well-grounded learning experience as far as, you know, reading, math, the basics. When you get into higher high school subjects, of course they weren't taught there.

35 Corrigan: Did you have any problems adjusting to Fair Grove?

Tolbert: A little.

Corrigan: Was it the coursework or just the—

40 Tolbert: Just the number of students. But it wasn't, you know, they welcomed us. I can't remember being, you know, treated—

Corrigan: How much difference was the size? How many more kids?

45 Tolbert: Well, the class that I was in in the fifth grade was probably around, oh, I would say twenty, give or take a little bit. It was probably around twenty in the fifth grade where Fair

Grove students were coming from a lot of little one-room schools. Because they consolidated a lot of them at the same time. And so we were—

Corrigan: Because this, you said, was the fifties.

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Tolbert: Right, '51. And from what I've read, that's kind of when they consolidated. The state, I guess, had some sort of agreement about that.

Corrigan: Mm-hm. So, can you tell me a little bit about your efforts now? Can you tell me about the project? How you came about to want to do this, try to do this? Can you talk about the—because what you're trying to do, if I understand it right, is to move the Liberty School to Springfield here, right?

Tolbert: Right.

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Corrigan: So can you talk about how that process came about? Or how long you're in the process, or?

Tolbert: Okay. (laughs) Yes, I got into the process with a Gray/Campbell Farmstead which is located at the Nathanael Greene Park here in Springfield, Missouri. And they have the oldest house in Greene County, and some buildings dating back to the 1860s. And they have restored it and they give tours, in particular to fifth graders that come from classes in this area to have an experience of what life was like back in the 1860s. And it, in discussion, they decided that it would be nice to have the education depicted as what the school and education was like back in those years. A lady on that board at that time, Vera Chandler, her sister taught at Liberty School. And she knew it was available. Still standing. And she knew that I attended, so she contacted me. We've been friends for years. And so I became involved in helping get that project taken care of. The building is still in good condition inside. The outside is weather-worn. And the porch has fallen down. But we still have a good, solid inside--

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[End Track 6. Begin Track 7.]

Tolbert: --The blackboard is still intact. The floors are still solid. It's a hardwood looking floor. And so you can see what the size, and like I said, it was a twenty—it measures twenty by thirty now. And that's what it was, all the time. But the project now is to raise funds. We have to have money to do this. And we have been after—they started this project in 2007. I have been working on it for about the last three years. The goal is to move it, either break it down and move it intact. But probably we'll break it down. Just seems the consensus. To the Nathanael Green Park on the Gray/Campbell Farmstead to be restored and used to educate the public to preserve the history of the one-room school and to show not only fifth graders and anyone that comes, you know, from the public what the early ancestors from the 1860s to the 1950s, basically, used for education. We will be planning to have someone, hopefully retired teachers, giving a little walk-through description of what a day would be like as far as what education was. And we will try to use some stories. We're building albums and pictures and any information that we can, of course, on the Liberty School. But maybe involve it with

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the Ozark Country School Association as a depiction of what education was like in those days.

5 Corrigan: Now the building, you said it was available. Did you have to purchase it, or did—

5 Tolbert: Well, no. We have a really good contact. The man that owns it, he bought it after it was, he was the second owner after it was moved. And he owns it now. And he actually wants it off his property. So he's willing to let us have it. Without a, we don't have to
10 purchase the building. But we do have to pay for the tearing it down and gettin' it off of the property and restoring his property and moving it to Springfield. Which we estimate, at the least, probably thirty thousand and maybe up to fifty thousand dollars to get this job done. He's actually still willing to help us with that. Not particularly in getting the job done. But he said he would even give us a donation of three thousand dollars if we get it off his property. So he's extra, Ron Buchanan, if you want to mention his name, I think that'd be fine. He
15 owns the building. And it's, it was used for a while to store some hay. The first farmer that bought it. But then because of the Fellows Lake, there's sailboats out there, and someone used it to restore sailboats. For a while it was never really changed, except there are some, oh, what look like some shelving put in there that they used. But otherwise it's still pretty much the same. I had the MSU [Missouri State University] construction, Dr. Strong came out
20 and looked at it. He looked in the attic, he looked in the inside of it and he said, "You know, it's really in better shape than I thought it would be." (laughs) Which actually kind of changed his idea of what they might be able to help us with. And I don't know if they're gonna be able to help us. But he's been interested in helping me determine, you know, what the, what we should do. We've had two movers look at it. They say it could be done but they
25 don't really recommend it, to move it intact. Partly because of all the permits and everything you'd have to do and the way it would have to come. So the consensus now seems to be to break it down, save everything that's good out of it, mark it, bring it to the Nathanael Greene Park. Put it on a foundation and restore it. We have a few fundraisers, but we're just trying to look for opportunities and ways to get that done.

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Corrigan: Okay. So it's a, okay, you came on three years ago.

Tolbert: I came on, yes.

35 Corrigan: But it started a little bit before there, 2007.

Tolbert: It did. The idea came a little before that.

Corrigan: What year is this actual school from? Do you know? Because it—

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Tolbert: The school building? Or the school itself?

Corrigan: No, no, the building. Because I have to imagine that it's changed over the decades.

45 Tolbert: Right. The building itself, I think, was built in the 1920s.

Corrigan: The current one.

Tolbert: The current building.

5 Corrigan: Okay.

Tolbert: Right.--

[End Track 7. Begin Track 8.]

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Tolbert: --It was the building. The school was there before that. Probably in a log building, maybe even met in the church for a while. That's something we can't quite determine. But we do have deeds where the land was there, like I say, in 1895. And it looks like there's records back to 1876 that the school was there. We have some records of the superintendent of schools coming back in the early 1900s. So that's where I'm thinking okay, I'm not sure where the first records would be. They're probably not around. (laughs) As far as the first actual beginning of the school.

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Corrigan: Okay. So early twentieth century, the current building kinda—

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Tolbert: Right. Right.

Corrigan: And so physically, I mean, somebody kept a roof on it and it's lasted?

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Tolbert: Right, right. It's, I'm sure the roof had been replaced because we do look at the pictures and can see where there was probably a shake shingle roof with a bell tower on it. And now it's asphalt shingles. So it's been taken care of.

Corrigan: But that probably—

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Tolbert: It's been taken care of by the—

Corrigan: Helped preserve it, though, by putting an asphalt roof on it.

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Tolbert: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. 'Cause you know, it really is not rain damaged or anything like that inside it. We have—the windows are boarded up now and we have canvas over the front door so the door wouldn't blow. (laughs) But, you know, it's in fairly solid condition inside.

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Corrigan: Okay. Good. And then once it would get moved to the Nathanael—

Tolbert: Greene Park.

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Corrigan: Greene Park. Okay. Then that's a whole 'nother, because you're saying the thirty to fifty thousand dollars is to bring it there, correct?

Tolbert: Well—

Corrigan: Or is that to put a foundation or something, or—

5 Tolbert: Well, I'm looking at getting the foundation and things for that. We're working with the park board, but it will be on the park, Greene County, the Springfield Greene County park.

Corrigan: So they will help—

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Tolbert: They can't actually financially help—

Corrigan: Yes.

15 Tolbert: --but they can, they have regulations that we have to follow. (laughs) So we have to work with them to get basically their guidelines approved. It's difficult to even determine exactly, and that's my first goal, really, would be to say okay, what is it gonna take to do this? Well, you have to have an architectural drawing. And we had three of those done three years ago. Well, they're not necessarily current now because the price may have gone up. But
20 if we can get a volunteer architect to do that then, you know, we've saved probably three thousand dollars. So it's kind of like we're still in that process of networking and trying to find the people that might be able to help with this. Getting cost determined determines when you do it, partly, because costs change. But depending on how much volunteer [help] we get, with no volunteer help, I'm saying it's gonna be fifty thousand or up. If we can get some
25 volunteer donations, that type of thing, we think we might be able to do it for that. I had one bid from a contractor a year and a half ago that was putting that thirty to fifty thousand on it. I mean, he would move it, bring it and try to reconstruct it. But he didn't know how much new material he was gonna have to have. He didn't know how much—and he was willing to, if we had some volunteers that can actually help, you know, let them help. So that's where
30 I'm getting that figure.

Corrigan: Okay. So really it's a rolling number that—

Tolbert: It's a rolling number. (laughs)

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Corrigan: Well I was just curious since you're probably one of the only people well, anybody that we're talking to, that's actually in the process of trying to preserve one of these. It's quite an undertaking. I can only imagine. And then once you actually get it reconstructed again, then you have to reconstruct the inside of it.

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Tolbert: Right.

Corrigan: And then turn it in, kind of, to like a living learning laboratory.

45 Tolbert: Right.

Corrigan: So it's a long process.

5 Tolbert: It is. And unfortunately, the longer you wait, the more it's gonna cost as well as the building, you know, a tornado could come through and there would go the building. (laughs)
So age has something, you know, you know that there's a limit on how long you can expect that to be there.

10 Corrigan: What has the community support been? I mean, is there, obviously there's not too many people that actually attended the school.

Tolbert: Right.

Corrigan: There's some. But then this would help out the greater Springfield area.

15 Tolbert: Right. Right.

Corrigan: And so is your efforts now just to get the word out about it? Or—

20 Tolbert: Well, it is. We have tried, we do a lifestyle days in September at the farmstead. And so during that time, we've--

[End Track 8. Begin Track 9.]

25 Tolbert: --reenact all the period ideas as far as what was going on then. The last one was rained out. (laughs) So, you know, just things like that—

Corrigan: Weather.

30 Tolbert: —But we had a reunion. And we've contacted as many of the surviving students, and tried to contact even families that might have an interest in, you know, "My grandma or mother or great-grandma might have attended there," trying to get that connection made. We did a fundraiser here in the botanical center on President's Day, February twentieth, "Are you smarter than a fifth grader?" Which we did local TV VIP's were our students, or our
35 challengers. And fifth grade students. Because we focus on fifth grade students we kind of focused on that. And the only way you can raise money doing something like that is to get corporate sponsors. So there's still that, okay, what corporate sponsor is really interested in history? Or in maybe restoring one-room schools. So it's a networking, communication, you always think, "Okay, the next time maybe I'll talk to someone who has an interest in that."
40 And then there was a little publicity in the *Springfield News Leader* last week. It had to do really with an oral history project, but it—

Corrigan: Yeah. I got contacted her for that, and it was—

45 Tolbert: She—

Corrigan: She kind of tied them all together, both the—

Tolbert: She interviewed me and told this little story about the school, so that was a good, a good contact.

5 Corrigan: And a lot of people read that.

Tolbert: I've had several people, I was really surprised, because of my name in there, they'd say, "Hey!" You know, "You saw it? Good!" (laughs)

10 Corrigan: Because I'll let you know that I—because my name was in there about this project. But my contact information or anything wasn't. And people tracked me down through the Historical Society's website. But I got an email as far as Ghana, West Africa, that a woman who used to live in Springfield and attended a one-room schoolhouse that she read it and she thought it was a great article.

15 Tolbert: Wow.

20 Corrigan: So she was reading the Springfield paper in West Africa and has been there for decades. Her and her husband and their family's there. But is from Missouri. So it got out a lot, far. So a lot of people heard about it and are interested, so I thought I'd let you know that.

25 Tolbert: That's good. When we did the last "Smarter than a Fifth Grader" thing, the first one, which was last year, I got a call from North Carolina. Someone read it on a website and so she was kind of wanting to know a little bit about it because she was kind of doing something along that line. So, you know, just keep talking. (laughs)

Corrigan: Well I wish you the best. It sounds like quite an undertaking. It sounds like it's probably keeping you very busy.

30 Tolbert: Well, it is. It adds to some of the other projects I have going on. It's just one of those. But I actually have a tri-fold display and we have note cards of the Liberty School. And we have a CD that a fellow has made about, it's a music, it's a song that he's written about old schools. Not particularly Liberty. But he has donated it to us and put it on a CD. So we have those for sale. So if anyone is interested, contact the Gray/Campbell Farmstead
35 website or the extension office.

Corrigan: And it's Gray/Campbell?

40 Tolbert: Gray, G-r-a-y, slash, dash—(laughs)

Corrigan: Slash. Okay.

Tolbert: Farmstead. Gray/Campbell. C-a-m-p-b-e-l-l

45 Corrigan: C-a-m-p-b-e-l-l

Tolbert: Farmstead.

Corrigan: Farmstead.

5 Tolbert: And that is because it was the Gray/Campbell family home that was on the farmstead. And that was the first—

Corrigan: So like that, right there? Gray/Campbell. Okay.

10 Tolbert: Yes. Yes. And that was the first, the home that's been restored over there has been traced back to the beginning of Greene County where the first family built.

Corrigan: Okay. That's where the name comes from. Okay. Going back a little bit, before I forget, is there any stories about your attendance at a one-room schoolhouse that we didn't cover? Or anything you wanted to mention today when you had come in that we didn't get to? I'm sure you have things running through your mind. I want to make sure you have a chance if there's something else that you wanted to talk about that you absolutely could.

20 Tolbert: I don't remember too many other things. I think we've touched on the pie suppers and the different things that were significant. I do remember getting my first vaccinations there. And it was the health, the county health nurse that came out to the one-room school to give 'em to us. And I've still got the evidence on my arm of where I got my smallpox shot. (laughs) So I remember that. It must have been traumatic or something. I don't know—but that was kind of where the county health people, I guess—

25 Corrigan: Was that smallpox--

[End Track 9. Begin Track 10.]

30 Corrigan: --or polio?

Tolbert: It was. It was smallpox that I've got the evidence on my arm.

35 Corrigan: Where they did that little scraping, right?

Tolbert: Yeah, right. There's a little scar there. And it kind of hit the bone and it kind of sunk in and it's kind of there. (laughs) But I'm sure they probably gave us the, whatever was typical then, diphtheria or tetanus or whatever, too. But the smallpox is the one that I do—

40 Corrigan: So you do remember the vaccinations then.

45 Tolbert: I remember that. The other memories I have are more because someone's told me. So I don't know that they would be first person. But because my sister was older, and I think she's gonna be interviewed later, and different, my mother and father and some of those stories. Those are things that I've heard but don't necessarily—I have albums, so I look at the pictures, and that brings back thoughts of what we did and how I dressed and all those types

of things. But as far as, Mrs. Hughes was a wonderful teacher. And just other things that I can recall, pretty much have been covered, I think.

5 Corrigan: Well that's probably, it probably does help that you know people that attended it. And those conversations that you've had and with other people probably do spark other memories and do—

Tolbert: Right.

10 Corrigan: So together you guys have formed this memory—

Tolbert: Right.

15 Corrigan: Probably more complete of Liberty than it might have been had on your own had [you] no other information, had you no pictures, no scrapbooks, no nothing. It would probably be much harder.

20 Tolbert: It would. And there are stories as we've had our little school reunions, they talk about how the older kids in particular have more memories, of how they treated the teacher when she got married, they gave her a shivaree and, you know, they played with the snakes or something. Just those kind of silly stories that they talk about. (laughs) But they're not things that I remember happening. So, so I couldn't really say something that, I might not tell it exactly right.

25 Corrigan: Yeah. No, that's okay. But no, I really appreciate you coming in today. I really appreciate you sharing your story. I think it's great what you're doing with the Liberty School. And it's good to capture these down, get these stories down and keep sharing them. Because this type of education really, I mean, I hear it still exists in Montana and some parts of western Nebraska. But it's still different. It might be one school, but they probably have
30 computers and things completely different than, but the actual one-room schoolhouse experience that so many people had in this country is going to be gone soon.

Tolbert: Right. Right.

35 Corrigan: And so that's, this is a great project for that. And I think your project's good, and what David's doing here at the association. Getting people to still talk about the way it was and the fondnesses that there were. Because that education system, it's unlikely to come back. But it's good to—you can still learn from it.

40 Tolbert: It is. And I think just talking to teachers in the last few weeks, after they saw the article, former teachers. And they, this one teacher in particular said to me, "You know, I have sat through a lot of seminars and workshops on how to keep kids interested, how to keep them from dropping out, how to get a good solid education." And she says, "You know, I have the answer. Go back to the one-room school." So she sees the importance of it. Her
45 father, I think, actually taught at one. But she didn't ever teach at one. But she just says, "You know, we need to get back to that small room school, or small school, at least, where

there's actual relationships built." And that type of thing, I think, is part of it. I would like to make a note. I should have said this at the beginning.

5 Corrigan: That's okay.

Tolbert: People back in those days called me Norma Lee. So L-e-e is my middle name. and that probably should be Norma Lee Breshears Tolbert.

10 Corrigan: Yeah. That's good. Because I can put the whole thing into—

Tolbert: So that's probably—if there was anybody—

Corrigan: So Norma Lee, L-e-e?

15 Tolbert: L-e-e, yeah.

Corrigan: And what was your maiden name?

20 Tolbert: Breshears.

Corrigan: Oh, that's right, yeah, we got that. Yeah. That's not a problem to put your whole name on your file, in the index, anything. I do that for a lot of people, especially with maiden names, too. Or I'll put them in parenthesis, just so that people know from aside that this is their maiden name.

25 Tolbert: Right. Right.

Corrigan: Because they wouldn't have known you by Tolbert back then.

30 Tolbert: Right. Right.

Corrigan: No, that's definitely, that's good to mention that. I'll definitely do that. So well I'm going to go ahead and shut off the recorder, if you give me one second here.

35 **[End Track 10.]**

[End Interview.]