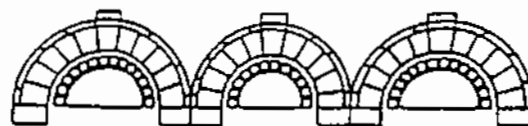


# PAYNE COUNTY

## HISTORICAL REVIEW

### DEPRESSION & INTEGRATION



PAYNE COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
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## **Contents**

<b>Brown v. the Board of Education and District Sixteen, Stillwater, Oklahoma</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>By Susie Kessler</b>	
<b>Payne County During the Great Depression 1932-1936</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>By Eric F. Griffitts</b>	
<b>President's Annual Report January 1996</b>	<b>36</b>
<b>By Virginia Thomas</b>	

## **Brown v. the Board of Education and District Sixteen, Stillwater, Oklahoma**

Oral History Interview with Mr. Bill Simank,  
President, District Sixteen, School Board, 1965, '70, '75.

By Susie Kessler

The United States Supreme Court's decision of Brown v. the Board of Education.<sup>1</sup> on May 17th, 1954, affected all of Oklahoma. The decision handed down declared that the doctrine of "separate but equal" schools was no longer constitutional as all segregation of public schools was "inherently unequal".<sup>2</sup> Sixteen southern states segregated their schools (public and private) by law and Oklahoma was one of those states. The state constitution of 1907 prohibited integration of the public schools of white and black children.<sup>3</sup>

From a national to a local level, this ruling caused tremendous impact. It is the purpose of this study, with the accompanying oral interview, to show the result of the Supreme Court decision in Stillwater, Oklahoma. The Federal Courts gave the school boards the responsibility of desegregating the schools. Therefore the task befell the school board of District Sixteen of Stillwater.

The Civil Rights Bill of 1964 invoked the 14th Amendment to insure that school districts complied with Brown v. the Board of Education. (1954 and 1955) Those that did not comply would be denied federal funds. The Office of Education of the Department of Health, Welfare and Education had the power to determine compliance by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>4</sup>

A school board had the choice of three options presented to them by the Office of Education:

- 1) If the district was fully desegregated, it could execute an assurance of compliance. (HEW Form 441)
- 2) If the district were subject to "final" court order of a federal court requiring desegregation of the school system, it could submit the order and agree to comply with the order and any modification of it.
- 3) If the district fell into neither category, it could submit a plan for the desegregation of the school system which the Commissioner of Education deter-

mined was adequate to accomplish the purposes of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.<sup>4</sup>

Under the last option (#3) there were three methods to select a plan for desegregation. District Sixteen chose the Free Choice Plan to comply with the Civil Rights Act via the Department of HEW. The school board adopted the plan in the summer of 1965 and put it into effect immediately.<sup>5</sup>

The plan was accomplished by the fall of 1965 with full integration of the schools as confirmed by the Civil Rights Commission of Southern School Desegregation Report 1966-67. The Department of Education visited sixty-three school districts in fourteen states in the summer of 1965. Stillwater was the only district to be declared "totally desegregated".<sup>6</sup>

It took a full eleven years to integrate fully the school system of Stillwater. This was a result of legal interpretations made in good faith by the school board. Considering the aspects of the social and legal stratification of Stillwater society at the time, the school board achieved integration calmly and peacefully with the least amount of social interruption.

#### Endnotes

1. Brown v. the Board of Education is the legal name of Brown V. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas and for this paper, the legal name shall be used.
2. Brown V. The Board of Education I. 347 U. S. 483 (1954)
3. Oklahoma State Constitution of 1907, Article XIII, Section 3.
4. United States Commission on Civil Rights. Southern School Desegregation 1966-67. Washington D. C. , 1967, 10, 11.
5. Stillwater Daily News-Press. August, 1965.
6. United States Commission on Civil Rights, Southern School Desegregation 1966-67. Washington D.C. 1967, 113

## Summary of Oral History with Mr. Bill Simank

Oral History topic: Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 1954 Supreme Court Ruling and its implementation in Stillwater, Oklahoma, School District #16.

Oral History interviewee: Mr. Bill Simank, President of the Board of Education of District #16, Stillwater, 1965.

On November 2nd, at 1:00 p. m. the interview with Mr. Simank took place in his home. The following is a summary of the interview.

Mr. Simank told of how his family first came to Oklahoma at the turn of the century. Mr. Simank's father was a graduate architect of Oklahoma A. & M. College. (Oklahoma State University) In 1944 upon graduation from Oklahoma A. & M. with a degree in engineering, Mr. Simank went into the Navy where he saw service in Australia. When his military obligation ended, he returned to Stillwater and joined the family business of banking. He worked at First National Bank and Trust Company for thirty-nine years.

Mr. Simank is married and has two children and one grandchild. He continues to reside in Stillwater and is still an active member of the community serving on various boards of organizations. Ballroom dancing, golf, baby-sitting his grandchild and reading are just a few of his many activities.

The organization of the school board, election of members and selection of president were topics of discussion. Mr. Simank told of the overall social stratification of Stillwater in terms of segregation. Mr. Lee Ward, Washington School principal, contributed greatly to the successful integration of the elementary schools. Mr. Simank discussed how Mr. Ward was a very respected member of the community.

Washington school remained opened after 1955 because it became a "neighborhood" school. In the fall of 1965, after the Civil Rights Act of 1964, a program of freedom of choice went into effect. That program complied with the Civil Rights Requirements to meet integration guidelines. Shortly thereafter, the board closed Washington school as it was in a flood plane.

Stillwater did not have any racial incidents or problems concerning integration. Mr. Simank credits much of this to Mr. Ward. Everyone concerned with the integration of the schools was cooperative and responsive in regards to the law and especially the 1964 Civil Rights Act.

Interview with Bill Simank, President of the Stillwater Board of Education in 1965.

This interview is being conducted by Susie Kessler, a graduate student at Oklahoma State University with the department of History. The class is Oral History and this interview is with Mr. Bill Simank who was the President of the school board of Stillwater, District 16 in 1965 when the final action of desegregation took place in Stillwater. Mr. Simank served on the board for a total of thirteen years from 1962 through 1975. The interview with Mr. Bill Simank took place at his home on November 2, 1993 at 1:00 in the afternoon.

**Kessler:** First I would just like to ask you a little bit about yourself. For instance, you said you were from Stillwater, you were born here and you have lived here all your life, that is correct?

**Simank:** No, I wasn't born here. I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but they brought me here in a dresser drawer so I was not too old when I came.

**Kessler:** Oh, OK, and then about what year was that, do you remember?

**Simank:** I was born in 1921 so that was probably the later part of '21.

**Kessler:** What brought your parents out to Stillwater?

**Simank:** My mother and Dad, my mother's side of the family came out here in 1900 and established some ice plants and they sold coal in the wintertime. They had, my grandfather's brother, had some ice plants around in Pawnee, Crosstown, Ponca City and Stillwater and other locations nearby. My father came up here to go to college from South Texas. My mother and dad met while they were here at school.

**Kessler:** Oh, then did they go back to Ohio for a little bit?

**Simank:** My father finished as an architect here at school and just at the time he finished it was World War I so he and a friend of his had gone to Beaumont Texas and established an architecture office, then they had to go immediately into World War I service.

And after the war he went to Cleveland and worked for a construction company out there, in the architecture aspect of it. Then my grandfather passed

away rather suddenly and they needed some help to operate the ice plants and what, so my dad and mother came back to Stillwater.

**Kessler:** Oh.

**Simank:** And we've been here ever since.

**Kessler:** So they really all started in about the 1900's, that's since you've been here. So when they came back to Stillwater, you were from one of the first families.

**Simank:** They didn't make the run but they came here shortly after that.

**Kessler:** Oh, that is really fascinating that your dad graduated from Oklahoma State, no both your mom and dad graduated from Oklahoma State. OK. Now you are married?

**Simank:** Yes.

**Kessler:** And you have how many children?

**Simank:** Two children.

**Kessler:** You have two children, and do they live here in Stillwater?

**Simank:** Yes, one is married and the other daughter stays at home with us. We do some traveling, and she stays and watches the house while we are gone.

**Kessler:** What was your degree in?

**Simank:** Industrial Engineering.

**Kessler:** What did you do after you got out of college?

**Simank:** Within twenty-four hours after I shook hands with President Bennet, who was President of the college, I was on a train to go into the navy for World War II. So I had three years in the submarine service, southwest Pacific off west



Australia. Then I came back here, and my parents had an interest in the local bank, the First National Bank so I started to work at the bank, and was there for thirty-nine years and then I retired.

**Kessler:** Ok, so you were a banker, trained as a professional engineer but a banker, oh that is fascinating. Were there over the years other, I know you were very involved with the school board, other community activities that you were involved with?

**Simank:** I had my turn with the Junior Chamber of Commerce, and the Senior Chamber of Commerce, the Boy Scouts and the church activities and the Rotary Club. I've been a long time member of the Rotary Club, and we've done square dancing, and we started a ball room dancing club here in Stillwater.

**Kessler:** Oh, I'd like to talk to you more about that later. I'd like to really know more about that. I'd really love to join that. I'd like to talk to both of you about that. About the Stillwater School Board, for instance how are the members elected?

**Simank:** They are elected at large from the community and there is a five year term . You file for election, then the public votes. There aren't wards as some towns have.

**Kessler:** Is there any limitation on the number of terms?

**Simank:** No.

**Kessler:** So conceivably somebody could run every five years and stay on the school board for twenty, twenty-five, thirty years.

**Simank:** It hasn't really taken place that way. I served thirteen years. Some other have served a few years longer, but usually no more than three terms because they get tired of it and their children are out of the system by that time, and it's time for other people to be brought into the system.

**Kessler:** What made you decide to run for the school board? Was there any special reason, I'm sure you had a very strong interest in education but was there somebody that prompted you or did you just feel this was something you wanted to do?

**Simank:** Well, one of the members of the board became active in politics and

was appointed to a state office and as such he was not able to serve on the local office of the school board as well as the state office. So his office became vacated and I was appointed to fill out the unexpired term and when that term expired then I ran two different times. I filled out a three year term and then was elected for two five year terms.

**Kessler:** And when were you appointed, do you remember the year you were appointed?

**Simank:** I'm sorry, I don't remember when that was.

**Kessler:** Oh that's all right. Do you think it was the late fifties or early sixties?

**Simank:** Probably around the sixties, sometime like that.

**Kessler:** OK, so you would have been on the school board during the whole decade of the sixties and a little bit into the seventies then. Is the office of President of the School Board elected or appointed?

**Simank:** Custom here for the time I was there, it was the last year of your five year term. It was customary that that person was president and I'm not sure if they are still doing that or not. That was what they were doing while I was on the board.

**Kessler:** So basically, it was almost like a round robin that it would give everybody an opportunity or chance. So you knew at the end of that five years you were going to be President?

**Simank:** Yes.

**Kessler:** That's very interesting. (over-lapped the response)

**Simank:** Well, not absolutely so but custom had it that it would be that way.

**Kessler:** Well, did that mean also that you could be President twice?

**Simank:** Yes.

**Kessler:** So for instance, on your second term you could look down the road and see that in '65 you would be president in '70?

**Simank:** And in five years after that.

**Kessler:** Oh, I see.

**Simank:** It was '65, '70, and '75.

**Kessler:** You were living here when they did Brown V. Topeka Board of Education. What was your first reaction to that decision? Let me start that over again. You were living here during Brown v. Topeka Board of Education. What was your first reaction when you heard about it?

**Simank:** Well, Stillwater never had any large population of Negro, Blacks, and the townspeople always got along very nicely with them. There were several well established families, many of them had lived here for a number of years and we knew them.

Some of them had helped my mother when I was a kid so I knew the background of the families and they were well thought of. There were not many of them. We really never "knew" them. They were very cliquish. There were never any difficulties or problems.

Professor Lee Ward was in charge of the Black School and had been for a number of years, he was well thought of, a good educator, his wife was also in the school system. He had a good, I wouldn't say control but a good feel for the Black community and if problems occurred, he was instrumental in helping to get them solved. When a situation would occur, or something of that nature, when some of the children might be slightly out of line in the Black community, they were in his school of course and he would have to get that situation reconciled. The people depended on him very much. He was very well received by the black people and the white people both. Some of the black children perhaps thought he was a little too strict in the discipline but that (discipline) was more in vogue in those times, white and black schools than presently, I'm not happy to say that but I think that is presently so.

**Kessler:** I think so too. I looked it up and in 1957 they integrated the high school. That would have left just Washington school kindergarten through eighth and at that time did Stillwater have districts for the elementary schools? For instance if you lived in this neighborhood you went to a particular neighborhood school.

**Simank:** There weren't districts and such outlined as policy that I know of.<sup>1</sup> It was kind of customary that you went to school where you lived because it was simpler for parents that they didn't have such transportation problems, most of

of the kids walked or rode a bicycle and in that respect came home for lunch many times before we had the school lunch program. So for the convenience of the families, it was better to have the kids as close to the schools as possible. Now days they transport them all over the place and transportation comes into the picture but in those earlier times it wasn't that way.

So I suppose if there had been a special request, if one family wanted to transport their child across town to another grade school, they could have done it. I don't know if that took place but I don't think there was any law against it. It would have been a special request and a special dispensation had it been done, but I don't think it was done, maybe every once in a while but not often.

**Kessler:** So there weren't boundaries drawn that said if you live here so you must go to Will Rogers elementary school?

**Simank:** No.

**Kessler:** So Washington School just became a neighborhood school?

**Simank:** Yes, it was in the Black community. They went to school there because that's where they lived.

**Kessler:** What was it, do you remember, what was it in '64 or the summer of '65 that Stillwater had to adopt the "Free Choice Plan"?

**Simank:** It was the law of the land and we had to adapt to whatever the law said so we worked it out in that way in order to comply with the terms of the law.

**Kessler:** Do you remember how long Washington stayed open after '65 as a grade school?

**Simank:** I'm not sure of the number of years actually. We had always had a flooding problem potential in that part of our community because it's close to Stillwater Creek. Once in a while, if Cimarron River was full of water, Stillwater Creek would back up also, and the school was flooded a couple of times which was awkward and expensive and eventually the school district felt it was not feasible to attempt to fix it up again after another flood. So after a flood it was worked out with the city and the city used it for other purposes other than a school. So from that point in time it was abandoned from the standpoint of uses as a school, an elementary school. I can't remember the date of it but that is what took place.

**Kessler:** So in other words, District 16, they didn't close Washington as a school because of anything that had to do with integration, segregation, it just had to do with the fact that it really wasn't in a good location.

**Simank:** Right.

**Kessler:** Oh, Ok.

**Simank:** And there could have been some aspects of the integration too but also the physical features of the flood problem.

**Kessler:** Do you remember, was there anything during that time, anything extraordinary that happened of the integration process, did it go smoothly?

**Simank:** It went smoothly and I think we can attribute that to primarily Lee Ward at the time of the integration, when the free choice came into being, Lee Ward was appointed by the school district as a principal of Washington school and Highland Park. Highland Park was out on the east side of Stillwater, east edge of Stillwater and recognized as a "so called" white school. So his appointment there was accomplished and he fit in very nicely and was well thought of in the community, and by the teachers, and the students. So that worked out harmoniously which we were very grateful to him. He was a very good man, very adaptable to circumstances and situations and as I said we were grateful to his ability to cope and handle the situation as we were brought into through the law passed by Congress.

**Kessler:** So overall, you would assess that the process was very successful?

**Simank:** Yes, I don't think we had any, there may have been some grumbling from people who had the feeling of blacks being forced with the whites and so forth but it wasn't outward, it wasn't unduly presented or talked about or there wasn't a lot of flap about it that I ever knew about.

**Kessler:** After the '54 or I should ask prior to '54, were there a lot of segregated facilities in Stillwater just due to the fact of Oklahoma being kind of a southern state, were there segregated facilities like the train and restaurants?

**Simank:** They were segregated. They were not permitted in trains and restaurants would not accept the blacks in the forward dinning rooms so it was just like other southern communities.

**Kessler:** Did a lot of that change with the Topeka decision, did that kind of make it, did that pave the way for it to change.

**Simank:** I would it paved the way. It didn't demand it or force it. It was gradual and necessary. Stillwater didn't have a large segment of Black people and the ones that were here had been here a long time and they recognized the situation and they were not aggressively forcing the issue as in some communities I read about. I didn't live in other communities so I didn't personally experience it. But it was a gradual time of it.

There was one Black man that worked at the bank, a custodian, he had been there for a long time, even before I got there, after I came back from World War II he was there, he and his wife had lived here a long time and he had been at the bank a long time, he had a good job and a steady job. He was an example of the community Black population and others had similar jobs around, over the community and some of the wives had been with local families in their situation, taking care of children and helping the wives and being part of the family really.

I know my own family, we had a number of ladies from the Black community that helped my mother while we kids were growing up and I knew them and they knew me. It was an understood relationship. It wasn't a demand situation, we didn't have them out for Sunday dinner, and they recognized that and we did too. It was just accepted. It wasn't forced, and because of their relatively small size in the community it was good to well understood that Lee Ward—

Lee Ward was recognized and he took part in our Chamber of Commerce Activities. He was recognized in the respect as the leader of the Black community. He was the principal of the Black school and as such was recognized in a leadership role. If there needed to be some communications or circumstances arranged for he was more or less the go between to communicate between the two groups.

The physical location of the Black families was always in the south part of town. Right or wrong, that's where it was. The whites knew it and the blacks knew it and that's the way it was done. It was just like most other southern communities, we were no different in that respect. So I don't know of any untold differences or problems we had. There could have been some minor ones that I didn't know about, but there might have been a fight or two but .

**Kessler:** Well, it doesn't seem that there were any, it seems that Stillwater was a real success story and I think a lot of that is to your credit and the board's credit. After '65 or after Washington school closed, did everything, did the population stay the same?

word but he was a dressy, interest basketball coach in the black community, a black man and someone said “how do you make the plays”? and he says, “well, I go out to watch Mr. Iba, I see the plays and I use those and I can win.”

**Kessler:** That’s a very intelligent coach.

**Simank:** I think that’s the story. I’m not positive but that’s one that comes to memory all of a sudden. We used to joke about that.

**Kessler:** Probably had a winning team if he was watching Mr. Iba.

**Simank:** I think the enthusiasm of the coach made the team perhaps more than the plays.

**Kessler:** True.

**Simank:** Rather than the plays he had, as he was a very energetic coach and well thought of coach. We had lots of fun with him and he had lots of fun with his kids. The white people also were related because they were interested in basketball and the sport itself helped to bring about a bit of the integration kind of thing.

**Kessler:** Was there a cross-over in say going to watch Washington play football or visa versa or going to watch Washington play basketball, was there any of that going on? Like for instance if Washington was having a really good basketball season would there be anybody from the white community there?

**Simank:** Not a great deal, but there would be some of the folks who were seriously interested in sports that were interested who would go. There wasn’t a great influx of whites into the football stadium or basketball courts but there were some and the newspaper made good reports and there was conversation among the sports enthusiasts about the team and its progress and so forth. When they did have a good team we were proud of it. It was identified and some of the kids and their parents knew white people and they knew each other well.

The custodian at the bank, we would converse about the quality of the black team that was currently going and interpret, and congratulate when they had a good team and so forth. So there was not, as I said we didn’t go and sit in their house for Sunday diner nor they in ours but there was an exchange of communication and it was not under pressure, not under force of the circumstances.

**Simank:** Not much difference, there hasn't been a spectacular growth of the numbers of black families. The town has made an effort to clean up the neighborhood. They have done some improvement in the sewage and water lines to the streets and that sort of thing, and they have a nice big playground down there.

When I was going to high school, there was a stadium right in the middle of the Black community where we played our high school football games, the Blacks as well as the whites, and there was integration to that extent. The whites on a Friday night would go down to the Black community and sit in the stands and have our high school football games. The high school itself was about four blocks from the stadium so the high school football boys would suit up at the high school and run down to the field and practice in the afternoon during the fall so that was an integration of a sort. It was there because of the facility being there. The major part of that was abolished and done away with when the high school built its stadium down near Fair Park where it presently is located.

**Kessler:** You were saying about the football stadium being used by both schools.

**Simank:** Yes.

**Kessler:** It was down there in---

**Simank:** Right in the middle of the Black community.

**Kessler:** That is really interesting. I had no idea about that. Do you remember about what year they built the new one?

**Simank:** No, to be honest I don't remember.

**Kessler:** That's alright, I was just thinking that for the exhibit that would be a good picture of the old stadium, someone surely has a picture of the old stadium. An old yearbook would work.

**Simank:** There's a collection of old high school year books at the museum and I think perhaps we could find something in there that would give us ideas.

**Kessler:** Yes, Is there anything else that you can remember like that perhaps for people just moving here that don't realize or know about the overall community?

**Simank:** No, not particular. No, there is one. I think this is a true although it does make a good story. One of the somewhat flamboyant, perhaps that is not the



**Kessler:** Did you ever get the feeling there was any regret on their part about having to comply with the law that Washington school, well Washington High School as it was a very central part of their community and their life. Was there any discussion by their community leaders about complying with the law, or course they would comply because it was the law but was there a regret about losing a strong sense of identity for them?

**Simank:** Yes, I think there was. Perhaps we shouldn't use the word strong. I think they felt a pride of ownership. "This was our school, our children, our teachers and our families". Several of them had gone to school there and their children had gone to school there and so forth so there was an element of "our school" which of course they were forced to give up because first the high school was integrated and then later the lower grades. It was a nice building and it had been built for them and it was their school. There was an element of giving up what had been theirs. They were not fully confident of the circumstances in the white school because they were a small minority. Initially they didn't have as much clout as they. (white students)

Some of their students in the high school (Washington) level more so than the junior high, in some of the sports were outstanding and did a good job, they were good athletes. They were recognized in this respect, in their athletic ability which got them in the newspaper and in front of the public more so than academic achievement, but there was some of that too, but it wasn't as well publicized, folks didn't know about it like the sports. We're passed that now.

**Kessler:** Well, you have answered a great deal, some of my questions and do you have anything else that you would care to add. You have spoken very eloquently for Stillwater and I'm sure this contributed to the success of the smooth transition. Is there anything else you would like to say?

Pause in conversation.

**Kessler:** Then it would have been very financially foolish to close Washington school when at that time you needed space to accommodate the increase in population.

**Simank:** Stillwater was growing and we had to accommodate the whole picture of the thing, even the number of classrooms we built to both, guess at how much was coming in the future as well as what we already had on hand to accommodate.

Then one other thing, after World War II, some of the students coming back to school were married and had children of school age. So that was another

factor that had to be put into the equation of figuring out how many classrooms had to be built to accommodate the townsfolk.

**Kessler:** Do you remember during the summer of '64 or sometime during that time that a representative from the Department of Health, Education and Welfare coming to Stillwater?

**Simank:** I don't personally remember talking to them, perhaps I did and I have forgotten it, but it wasn't of any supreme magnitude or aggressive action being required or taken. I think I perhaps would remember if that had been an adversarial circumstances if they were demanding this or that, or the other. The superintendent was very capable and a good communicator and I'm sure handled what ever had to be done in a good way. Since he was the administrator of the school system and the board of education was advisory, not administrative, so he handled it as he handled everything else.

**Kessler:** I think that answers all of my questions. I thank you for your time and your information. Unless you have anything else you would like to add.

**Simank:** It's been very interesting to recall something I had long since forgotten about. I'm glad I can help you and if there are other things I can do, I'll try to dig out some more information for you, I'll be glad to do so.

**Kessler:** Thank you, you have been very, very helpful.

1. District Sixteen did have neighborhood school boundaries.  
Stillwater Daily Newspaper. August, 1957.

## **Payne County During the Great Depression 1932-1936**

Narrator: Frances J. Escue (FE)

Date: October 25, 1993

Place: Stillwater Oklahoma

Interviewer: Eric F. Griffitts (EG)

### **Preface**

No event in recent history was more traumatic than the Great Depression. Perhaps, no one community experienced this more than the rural inhabitants, who endured a series of problems that profoundly affected the way they lived.

The most fundamental dilemma farmers faced was the depressed farm prices. After World War I, prices on farm commodities plummeted for a variety of reasons. During the war period, there was a great demand for food stuffs overseas. American farmers capitalized on this by increasing food production and bringing new land into cultivation. This trend continued after the war, and eventually supply exceeded domestic demand. Foreign trade of American agriculture also declined during this period. European markets bought less American goods because of the loss of the purchasing power of these nations as a result of war expenses. Protectionism also characterized the period of the 1920's and 1930's. High foreign tariffs meant a decrease in overseas trade for American agricultural products. Because cultivation on farms increased while domestic and foreign demand decreased, prices of agricultural goods declined dramatically. Declining prices meant a loss of income for the farmers of the United States.<sup>1</sup>

Many farmers became financially burdened with less money to spend on necessities, and this was typical in Oklahoma. In 1930, six out of seven rural households in Latimer County needed financial aid. In fact, the living conditions of farmers throughout Oklahoma declined well below the norm of other agriculturalists during the early and mid 1930s. One-third of farm homes in the state needed to be increased in size by one or more bedrooms. One out of every eight farm families needed new homes because the state of their dwellings exceeded any major repair. Sixty percent of farm houses needed roof repairs and forty percent required foundation work. Finally, seventy-one percent of all farm homes in the state needed repairs of some type.<sup>2</sup>

The severe droughts typical of the 1930s compounded these problems. In 1934, a drought covered the entire country west of the Mississippi River. Oklahoma experienced eighty-three days of one-hundred degree weather with

little rain. Texas, Beaver, Cimarron, and Harper Counties were described as a desert of sand. In Payne County, only one-third of all crops planted survived this ordeal. Another rain-shortage season occurred in 1936. During the first three months of this year, Oklahoma received only twenty percent of its normal rainfall. Crop production also declined fifty to sixty percent as compared to 1935 yields. The cotton production in the eastern part of the state took devastating losses.<sup>3</sup>

Higher child disease rates also characterized the impoverishment of rural communities in Oklahoma. Children in the state encountered more health problems than other young people across the nation in three major areas: illness and respiratory diseases, enteric diseases, and communicable diseases. The lack of state finances for health facilities and the inadequate living conditions contributed to poor health in Oklahoma. Typhoid fever and dysentery often resulted from polluted water supplies because of lack of indoor plumbing. Substandard housing also frequently caused pneumonia, polio, hookworm, and pellagra. These illnesses included a much higher death rate among children in the state as compared to national averages. This resulted from lack of medical facilities and poorly trained doctors in farming communities.<sup>4</sup>

Tenant farming was another characteristic of the poor rural communities in Depression era Oklahoma. In 1930, sixty-two percent of all farmers in the state were tenants. In 1935, it ranked second behind only South Dakota in the amount of these agriculturalists. Oklahoma ranked sixth nationally in share croppers in 1939. However, farm tenancy did decline slowly through the 1930's due to the inability of landlords to finance these planters.<sup>5</sup>

Local governments and organizations tried to alleviate conditions as much as they could for their citizens. The Red Cross and other charity organizations donated clothing that included shoes, socks, shirts, pants, overalls, and jumpers to needy individuals. The impoverished also received flour and other food stuffs they could not afford. County governments also provided work relief for indigents even before the New Deal began in 1933. Most of these projects included road and building repair work financed from state and county funds.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the efforts of county governments, the federal government took control of rural economic relief with the advent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. The focus of the administration's agricultural policy was the Agricultural Adjustment Act, which Congress passed in 1933. The AAA programs increased farm prices and purchasing power of farmers by subsidizing them to produce less of their goods. The government curtailed

cotton, wheat, corn, hog, and cattle production through this act. Other relief measures included the Federal Emergency Relief Administration's charitable donation of food, feed, seed, and medicine to needy families stricken by the depression. Finally, the federal government provided work relief projects. In Payne County, the Worker's Progress Administration and Civil Workers Administration constructed a post office in Stillwater, a dam near Yale, and various other projects including school, waterline, and road repairs and construction. At the end of his first administration, Roosevelt's policies did much to accomplish its purposes. The prices of most agricultural commodities rose over one-hundred percent from 1933 to 1936.<sup>7</sup>

This oral interview illustrates how these developments mentioned above affected a rural county in Oklahoma. Payne County was a large agricultural community that harvested mostly cotton and wheat. Like most farming areas, the low agricultural prices resulted in a loss of income which created impoverished conditions for many people. Many farmers relied upon their families, local charity organizations, federal employment projects, and even each other to survive the Great Depression. This interview sets out to define the social and economic conditions and characteristics of Payne County during the middle years of this great event. It also helps explain how local charity organizations and the federal government assisted the needy residence.

This oral project is unique in two ways. First, it assesses how these social and economical factors affected a small rural community, rather than taking a more typical broad study of the Great Depression. This historical account is also a more personalized one. It is devoid of numerous economic statistics used in the past to study this era. Rather it describes how people lived and coped with the severe economic circumstances from the view of a county resident who observed these developments.

The person interviewed for this study was Frances J. Escue of Stillwater, Oklahoma. Mrs. Escue grew up in Payne County after her parents, C. M. and Catherine Bond Jenkins, moved there from Shawnee, Oklahoma. Mrs. Escue married Francis A. Escue and had one son, R. C. Escue. She received her teaching degree at the start of the Great Depression and taught in a high school in Perkins, Oklahoma. Because she was a teacher, Mrs. Escue observed the economic and social conditions of her pupils, most of whom were from farm families. She also made observations about the economic and social conditions of the county in general, since she also resided in the area.

## ENDNOTES

1. Theodore Saloutos, The American Farmer and the New Deal (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1982), 3-6
2. Kenneth E. Hendrickson, Hard Times in Oklahoma: The Depression Years Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1983), 48, 77.
3. Ibid., 78
4. Ibid., 48-46.
5. Moore, Tom. "Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma 1925-1935" (Master's Thesis, Oklahoma State University, 1938). 19; Edward E. Dale, History of Oklahoma (New York: Prentice Hall, 1948), 396; Moore, "Farm Tenancy in Oklahoma 1925-1935," 19.
6. The Payne County News 2 December 1932, 10 February 1933.
7. Ibid., 16 November 1933, 22 March 1935, 8 December 1933, 16 August 1935, 6 September 1935, 3 January 1936.

EG: Mrs. Escue, before we begin, I want to get some background information. Where and when were you born?

FE: I was born in Shawnee, Oklahoma. You want the year?

EG: (Laugh) If you know it

FE: (Laugh) I know it, but I sure hate to tell it. Well, I was born on June the fourth, 1910.

EG: Where were you educated?

FE: I guess my dad lost his-- he was in the pharmacy profession, and he lost his health in Nashville, Tennessee because pharmacy was a twenty-four hour job, and he had to live in an apartment above the pharmacy. Many times they (customers) knock on the door of the pharmacy of the drug store at two or three o'clock in the night. He would have to go down and he'd help them. But, he became ill, and the doctor said go west young man go west. So, he came out to Shawnee, Oklahoma, and there he put in a grocery store with a pharmacy. He contracted typhoid fever. When he was well enough to go back to the store, the store was just gone. There was nothing left, because his partner had stolen him out. So, he had to start again, and he took a job traveling with a pharmaceutical company. They told him he could move where he wanted to. Well, he had a daughter by that time, and he thought Stillwater would be a good place to raise a daughter because of the college here. So, at that time, and I suppose it was around 1911, we moved to Stillwater. So, that's how come we lived here.

EG: And you were educated at Oklahoma A&M (presently Oklahoma State University).

FE: I was educated at OSU, went through the school and graduated from OSU in 1930.

EG: And what was your work experience after that?

FE: After that, I became a teacher. Dad wanted me to take commerce and mom--mother wanted me to take education. So, I took arts and sciences, but I did have enough hours so I could become a teacher. So, I went to Perkins (Oklahoma) and taught three years. And as I told you a while ago, my first

year (1931) I made 115 (dollars) a month, the second year (1932) I made a hundred (dollars) a month, and then the third year I dropped to 85 dollars a month. The next year because my dad was Financial Secretary, a business manager, of Central State University (Edmond, Oklahoma), they had moved to Edmond. Mother had my grandmother to take care of. So, I stayed out a year to help her take care of my grandmother. While I was out that year, I did take enough more education to get a A.B. degree. So, I do have the two degrees. Edmond (Central State University) did not offer masters at that time. So, since I had to stay in Edmond, I did get my A.B. from there. I got my B.S. from up here at Oklahoma A& M.

EG: Were you married? Did you have children?

FE: I was married in 1940, and I have one son. The son is retired from the Air Force as a Colonel. He went into computer work, because he is a computer specialist. Right now he is with BDM. He lives in Boulder, Colorado, and he is one of the directors for BDM. He also graduated from OSU. My dad graduated from Vanderbilt in Nashville, and my mother graduated Peabody, which is now Columbia.

EG: I'm just going to ask you some general questions about the times. If you could, try to confine your answers between events from 1930 and 1936.

EG: How did the depression affect public education in the county during this period?

FE: It was hard on an awfully lot of families, because they simply didn't have the clothes and food to feed their children and to send their children to school. Many of them lived on farms, and at that time I can say I was teaching at Perkins. An awfully lot of them rode the bus to school. I know a lot of them had to wear the same clothes over and over and over every day, because the washing machines--of course they did not have washing machines they had tubs that they washed in--out in the farms. They had overalls. Many of them wore overalls, because many of those teenagers were doing chores early in the morning before they came to school. And it was very hard to get the tub from out in the yard and take a bath before they came to school. Some of them I wished had found the tub of water before they came, but they did not have running water in the house. They had wells, pumps out in the yard. They had to go outside for all their water. It did affect them. Many of them, the girls and boys too, wore hand-me-down clothes. Mother spend a lot of time



remaking clothes, because maybe they were hand-me-downs from the grandmother, or something like that, and had to be remade. You could tell the clothes that were remade that the children were wearing. Some of them came to school practically barefooted; a lot of them with no socks. There was no money. They did a lot of bartering with their eggs and foods that they raised on the farms. There wasn't any cash.

EG: Then, these families were financially burdened.

FE: Oh yes definitely, and they were very happy when they could--felt like they could take a cow to town and get it butchered and get the meat. The families didn't have any extra money. The children didn't have the money to go to picture shows or things like that. There was just no money!

EG: How were farmers and their families affected by the droughts during this era?

FE: I don't know whether it was, I'm sure it must have been worse during the drought. Did we have the year of the grasshoppers in there, when the grasshoppers came in and ate up all the crops? That might have been a little earlier.

EG: I think that was earlier (before 1930).

FE: Yes, I think that was earlier. Well, you can see how it would have affected them because everything had dried up and there was nothing left. They didn't have anything to take into town to sell. Of course, they grew cotton, and the fields were in very bad condition. But many times, some of them, the older families, were able to save enough cotton, that they could have it turned into yarn or thread and make a few cloths. But that didn't happen often. Corn, they would raise corn, and then take what was left of it to the mill to have it ground into corn meal. They used an awfully lot of corn meal mush.

I was invited out to a farmer who had done better than some of the others. I was invited to their home. I do remember that we had all the vegetables that were raised on the farm. The meat was chicken. It was raised on the farm. Everything was raised on the farm. They didn't have to spend any money (in this respect). They had a cow where they got the milk, and they had one spoon, one big serving spoon. So, when you asked for the corn to be passed, you had to ask for the spoon too. So, there were times they could have

spent money, if they had anything(money) extra.

EG: You describe how these families were needy in certain ways. How did they manage to get by during this time?

FE: Do you know that many times because every family, farm family, they were all in the same boat. They would help one another. That was one thing; every farmer was very helpful to all the rest of the farmers in sickness and transportation. If they had a wagon going into town, why he'd ask some of the other farmers if they needed to go into town. They worked things out by working together. I think they probably pulled together better than they are pulling now (farmers working together at the present time), because they were all in the same boat, and they were all helping each other. Now days they go on their own sweet way and let you take care of yourself.

When I went out to stay at that farm, we rode the school bus out. Then at a certain point the school bus went the other way and we had to walk two miles on to this home. That was quite an experience for me, because I never did anything like that. The next morning after breakfast, while we started walking, and it was awfully cold out, the father said get into the car and I'll take you. Well, he had a little Ford, and we all piled into the little Ford. And he did take us to the bus, and then the bus brought us on into school.

They had to be careful. They had to know where every Penney went. They had a lot of home gardens, a lot of them. Everything was raised in the home garden, and the whole family worked in the garden. It was just a family affair when you did things like that. They had some sheep, and one of the boy's job was to go out early in the morning and take care of the sheep, and when he got home from school. When they brought me into the home everyone—I think there were three boys and one girl—went in all directions because everyone had errands to do or had something to take care of. They all had their jobs. You don't see kids doing that now; they rather sit down and play music.

EG: With all these errands they (the children) had to do, did this affect their ability to attend school at all, their enrollment?

FE: It probably did. I know this one boy that took care of the sheep. It seemed to me that he spent the whole time that he was at home working out in the fields, or in the farm, or taking care of the sheep and things like that. He didn't have time to do his homework. Now, he did have a brother who also did have to do the errands around the home. But, there was a difference in their IQ's. This younger brother was very smart. The one did so much with

the sheep and things like that would make a good farmer because he knew how to take care of animals and things like that. But, the other boy who did have errands, but not the big errands, made much better grades. But can I compare, can I say because of the errands, because of the jobs at home that affected this boy. I don't know. I can't answer that question. I feel sure that it must have. Some of the boys did some janitor work after school in the evening. And yet, I don't think that those boys who did that janitor work would go home and study.

EG: But, they still attended school regularly.

FE: Oh yes, we had very good attendance. My classes were always very well attended.

EG: To what extent was disease a problem for rural residence?

FE: Disease?

EG: Yes, typically in depressed areas there were traces of pneumonia, dysentery, diseases like that.

FE: I don't know how to answer that question, because I was not familiar with their life at home of the children who lived in Perkins and the children who lived out on the farms. Occasionally there was sickness if there was flu germ going around it hit a lot of them. And they were out of school for a few days, and then back into school. But, I did have one boy who died of appendicitis. Now, whether the boy was complaining and was sick, and the parents did not take him to a doctor. Or, whether he didn't complain enough for them to feel like he needed to go to the doctor. That would be very hard for me to judge. I had another boy who died of cancer, but his father was a doctor. The doctor first knew what was wrong, and he was immediately taken care of. But, I wonder about the other boy living out on the farm, if his parents just didn't realize that he was as sick as he was. I don't know.

EG: Were certain vaccination programs common around here to prevent against certain diseases?

FE: I don't think that they went to doctors anymore than they had to for the simple reason they didn't have any money. Now, some of them did go to doctors, but they would pay him in eggs, potatoes, and other produce from the farm. That's the way many times he, the doctor, got paid. But whether they

went for I just—don't remember my children saying that they had the vaccination for something. Now, they did vaccinate for small pox, and it was in nearly every case with kids of those who were vaccinated it left a pretty big scar. And I don't remember. You see my children were high school children and they didn't talk about those things as much as the grade school children did.

EG: You mentioned people paid for things with farm goods. Was that common?

FE: Oh yes, because they didn't have cash. They didn't have any cash so they would have to pay for it in some way. Turnips, corn, eggs particularly. Sometimes the chickens, they would kill and dress up chickens and take them to the doctor. The ministers were paid the same way many, many times with produce. Because the people loved the church, wanted to go to the church, and so forth, they had no money to give. So, they would give food and things like that to the minister to help pay him.

EG: Was tenant farming common around Payne County?

FE: What?

EG: Tenant farming?

FE: Ah, I can't answer that question. I don't know. I do know that a lot of times some of my high school kids would work for other farms, because they had nothing to do on their own farm and they could help some other farmer and make a little bit of cash. I know we had that, but as far as the tenant farming. I don't know. I can't answer that question.

EG: To the best of your knowledge, were there many charity organizations, or church groups, or Red Cross units that aided these needy families?

FE: Lot of them. The churches helped an awfully lot with the needy families. We had a mission. I believe it was on Berry Street, and we had several, oh quite a few people up to six or eight people who worked with that mission. We had one person who stayed there all the time to give out things. The needy people could go down there and get food and clothing. People in town who had anything to give to the mission would take it to the mission, and there were several people who volunteered to spend a day or half a day down at the mission to give the food and clothing out to the needy families. A

lot of times they (needy families) were lined up during those first few years, during that crash of twenty-nine, thirty, and in through there quite a number of families that were always seemingly down there. Most of the families appreciated it very, very much to be able to get that much help without money. It didn't cost them anything. They (mission) gave them (needy families) the food and clothing. But, some of the poor families who didn't appreciate it would take home some clothes and wear them for a day and then throw them away and go to the mission and get some more. So, we always had all kinds of people.

Bread was nine cents a loaf or ten cents a loaf, and yet they made bread at home. Mother made it at home because she could make five or six of the great big old loafs at a time. So, most of all the farm people and many of the town people made bread. Many of them made a lot of soap, because it was very expensive to buy soap. So, they learned how to make soap, so they could have it for their washing, which they had to do of course.

The Stillwater Mill functioned and it was quite busy. Whether you could get a job at the Stillwater Mill, that helped quite a great deal. And that's where they took the corn to have it made into corn meal and then taking it home they made corn meal mush. And many a time every night for supper or something like that, they always would have corn meal mush. A lot of things were made out of mush. The farmer learned how to use it and what to do with it, which they had to.

They wore hand-me-down dresses. You had to take care of things then. You had to take care of your dresses because you didn't have another one to wear. So you had to, you know, take care of what you had. Shoes, I know, I had some children who came to school without any shoes just as long as they possibly could into the winter, and then they'd maybe go to the mission to get shoes. Now, I'm talking more about the poor people. Now the people who had money, who were fixed, the depression didn't affect them an awfully lot.

EG: How did it affect them at all?

FE: Well, because their friends didn't have any money. I remember friends said, that if they had a dollar and could borrow one of their dad's cars, they could go to Cushing, drive to Cushing, and go to the show for twenty cents. They had dates, that was eighty cents, then come back to Huntsberrys, that was the hamburger place. The best hamburgers you ever ate, and the hamburgers were five cents each. So, for a dollar, the four of them had a night out, you see, by going to Cushing to the picture show and then coming back for hamburgers. So, it did affect the kids. They had to cut down too. I didn't go

through that depression, Eric.

EG: You were better off than most people.

FE: In fact Eric, I didn't even know, hardly know there was a depression. Because my dad—we had a nice home, dad had a good job. He was a good salesman. He traveled for a marketing company in Oklahoma City. And I know in the home economics class, the teacher had us keep an account of the clothes and things that we bought during the year. And when I added mine up, it was higher than everyone else's. And I didn't realize, I didn't realize that I was spending more money. I wasn't spending myself; my parents were spending it on clothes and things like that. But, see how it, the depression, helped them, because they didn't have to pay so much for things because of the depressed prices.

Many times a family would be living in a house, the next thing you know the son and his family would be moving in on top of them, because they had lost their home. There was nothing they could do about it, so they moved in with mother and dad. I think some of that is happening right now Eric. I've heard several people say recently that "my son has moved home". Many of them out in the county had a one room house in the first place that they were living in, and then they'd have a son and his family move in with them. It was hard, very hard on the children and adults, because they had lost farms and things. And some of those—of course they had to pitch in and help just like their parents were working, and they had to work too.

There was one man I talked about; he built a farm during that time. I mean he had a farm during that time. He built a house, just a great big, I think sixteen by forty feet. There was nothing in the middle, no partitions or anything like that, just a big square box. He bolted beds—I think they had eight children—eight beds to the wall. They didn't have any running water; they had to go outside for water. And when you think about living in a place like that with eight children, and he just didn't have an awfully lot of money to put in crops.

EG: Were foreclosures common during this time?

FE: Yes, they were common in Stillwater, and the people who did have money, I can think of one person who bought because of the foreclosure on the house or many houses. He bought quite a number of houses. Here he had six or eight houses.

EG: They could do this because prices were cheap, real estate prices that is.

FE: Oh yes, yes. They took their extra money and bought houses. There's a place down there on Duck Street (in Stillwater); see, we lived on Cowboy corner, that was my home. And, a block to the north of us across the street was the Sanborn house, which is a day care center now. They offered that home, everything there to dad for two thousand dollars. But, dad didn't have the two thousand dollars at that time to buy, and he thought that was pretty high. Of course now that would sell for many, many times more.

They lost farms, a lot of farms, and the banks got them. Many times lawyers got them. The family would have to have a person, many times have a lawyer. Well, they couldn't pay the lawyer, and he'd take their farms. The oil fields were pretty steady work. If you could get a job in an oil field, it worked pretty well. But many times those oil fields, the housing was just a chicken coop or something like that. But, he had a job, so he could put his family somewhere as long as he had that job.

The churches gave out an awfully lot of can goods, because people would take can goods and food. They had what we call now a clothes closet, and you were at the place where you needed clothes. We had a place out here east of town which was called the poor farm. There were families living at that house who had absolutely nothing. They had lost their house; they had nothing; they had no where to go. And, so they could put them out there at the poor farm. It was a brick, I'm sure you've seen it, it was just a long brick home. I believe now that it is—well at one time recently it was (for) the children who did not have any parents and didn't have an education or were not educable.

EG: What was this place called?

FE: I'm sure there was a name for it Eric, but we just called it the poor farm.

EG: And they just did. (question interrupted by response)

FE: They would take them in and would feed food to their stomachs and give them some clothes and keep them for a awhile until they were able to get on their feet. Now, we have one place like that now. It's called the Mission of Hope.

It's down there on Perkins Road, I believe, and people come in here from everywhere with absolutely nothing. And they'll take them in that Mission of Hope and keep them for a brief time and give them food and get their clothes washed and things like that. Then hope that the man can find a job, and they'll move the family on out. That's what they'd have to do a lot of

during the Depression. There were a lot of families that went broke during the depression.

You know, that's when in New York City during that stock market crash, there were an awfully lot of men who had invested everything. I had an Aunt who lost a perfectly gorgeous home on Chickamauga Ridge in Chattanooga Tennessee, and she played the stock market. She lost everything, including that beautiful home. So, she and her husband—they had three children but they were all pretty well educated by then and were out on their own—but Will and Ann moved into one room in a hotel. They had that much money left that they could live in a hotel, but she certainly did lose a beautiful home.

EG: How did the Depression during this period affect county residence who were not farmers?

FE: Oh, in the same thing, because they couldn't get work, many of them. If they did get work, they were paid a dollar a day. Although, a family was paid a dollar a day, but they had to make other things due, such as clothes and things like that. Even though they lived in a little house, they didn't have the cash to do a lot of things. So, they had to learn to use a wood stove, and use hand-me-down clothes, learn how to make bread without having to buy it. So, it affected everybody. Now with dad, as I told you dad had a very good job traveling, and he would come home discouraged because he hadn't sold the grocers in these towns around here an awfully lot of merchandise that day. And he said people will have their pleasures, go to shows and things like that and cut down on their food. They'll cut out their food before they cut out the picture shows. But, that was everybody's prerogative. If you'd rather go to the picture show than have something to eat, that's up to you.

EG: Were there many work relief projects provided by the government for people who were unemployed?

FE: Not a lot at that time. Now, WPA came in, but I don't know what year that came in Eric and the CCC that—what was that CCC, Civilian

EG: Conservation Corps.

FE: Yes. That came in, and that was a big help. It was a big help for everybody because it took in the younger men and gave them work. I don't think they were paid a lot. Nobody was paid a big salary, really around here. It also gave the men's family work too, because they had to have managers, cooks,



and everything like that to take care of the camp. So, it also helped the older people, as well as the young ones. (There were three CCC camps established in Stillwater from 1934 to 1936 to help with the soil erosion project conducted by the federal government in the Stillwater Creek area).

EG: How popular were these projects? Did a lot of people want to participate in them?

FE: I think those who realized that if they didn't, they'd starve to death. They were popularized because there were a lot of young men who had no money, and this was one way of working and getting a few dollars. I don't know what they were paid.

EG: How popular were these programs of President Roosevelt? How did people in the county react to President Roosevelt and New Deal Legislation such as the WPA?

FE: Eric, I really can't answer that question, because as I said, I didn't go through the depression like others did. But, I have a feeling that they were accepted real well because of their needs, and there was no other way to get a job. That took care of a lot of these young men who just had no chance of getting a job, and this took care of that and gave them a little bit of cash. So, I would say that probably they were popular.

EG: Was the President pretty popular around here during this time, if you recall?

FE: I don't know how to answer that. I wasn't paying attention then. Oh, I imagine so, because he was trying to help pull that—pull everybody out of the depression. So, I imagine that they did—he was popular because he was trying to help a lot.

EG: In general, how did economic conditions change in the county, if at all, from the period of 1932 to 1936 as the depression moved further along?

FE: Because people began to get jobs. And things were beginning—when everybody is depressed, nobody has any work. And, what is there for them to do? In town for instance, a lot of them lost their jobs. What could they do, go sit on a curb with the rest of them. But, when they began to get jobs, things began to open up. Why, they begin to feel better about themselves, and the

condition of the country too. When you see people getting jobs, like now—you know a lot of people are out of work now, all over the United States. But, you read in the paper, it's employment up a little bit. Well, doesn't that make you feel a little better to realize that some of the people are beginning to get jobs? It has its affect in making everybody feel just a little bit better about the conditions.

EG: In general then, employment increased during this time.

FE: Yes, it was started in.

EG: To what extent?

FE: Well you see in telling you about my salaries, those three years. I wasn't the only one whose salary came down; it was all other professions too. Well naturally \$115 and I dropped to \$100. But I was happy; I had a job. And then I dropped to \$85. Well, that not only hit the teaching profession, it hit all professions, because their salaries were coming down. And many people lost jobs, but then when they get to the place where somebody says can you come work for me, you know what affect that would have.

EG: You mentioned before that farmers didn't have a lot of money.

FE: No, they didn't.

EG: As the depression moved further along, did they begin to get more money at all or did conditions stay the same?

FE: The conditions stayed the same for quite a number of years. But, when things began looking up a little bit, that helped the farmer a lot. He was back to thinking about raising cattle and doing things like that around here.

There were a lot of kids that came to school, came to OSU because there was nothing at home. My mother had a boy who worked for her for two to three years, and she fixed up one of the rooms for him. A very small room that wouldn't be a bedroom, but she made it into a bedroom. And, he was so anxious to work when he went to school here. So, mother fixed it up for him, and he helped mother by cleaning house, doing errands for her, washing dishes after each meal, and things like that. That boy went to college that one year for sixty dollars. I bet you spend sixty dollars every week.

EG: Yes, at least.

FE: Sure, but that boy—I think he had two pairs of overalls, maybe two or three shirts. He walked everywhere. He didn't have a car. And naturally when things began looking a little better; money became a little bit easier to get, I'm sure he went on to—he was a smart kid. But imagine going to college for sixty dollars a year.

EG: That cost him everything.

FE: Everything, you see mother gave him room and board. He brought his clothes with him from the farm. I think he lived in a little tiny town somewhere, but they, the boy's family, did have a farm. So, he had all that. What did he need? He needed school supplies, and I think some of his school—he would check out textbooks from the library. He didn't buy it. He would check it out of the library and read, read, read, get ahead you know, and then check that book back in. Then, let it stay a few days, and he'd go check it back out again. And he got by on sixty dollars. I've often wondered what happened to him.

EG: Was that common for college students that went to Oklahoma A&M?

FE: The one I was talking about. Yeah, he was a college student.

EG: I mean was it common for college students to have to work?

FE: You mean did a lot more of them do that same type of thing?

EG: Yeah.

FE: Quite a number of them. Quite a number of them went through on absolutely—you just can't believe that they went through college on so little. You couldn't do that could you?

EG: No, I don't think so.

FE: Why not, because you never did go through a depression? If you had gone through a depression and you have learned the value of a dollar, or if you had learned what it means to have some clothes, then do you think you could go through a year of university life?

EG: Like they did?

FE: Not with sixty dollars, but you could cut down couldn't you.

EG: Oh, yes. I thought you meant if I could go to school on sixty dollars.

FE: Lord no, you couldn't even eat on sixty dollars to save your life. But those kids that came up in the depression can certainly tell you the value of a dollar.

It was interesting when I got my teaching job that I could have gotten one in Oklahoma City if I had bought a Ford from the Ford Agency. A lot of teachers—not a lot; I don't mean a lot—but some teachers, that's the way they got their job. Because, they needed the job so badly. They needed to teach, they needed the money, they needed that salary, and in these cities he, (car dealers), wanted to sell his cars very badly. So, I'm on the board of education—if you buy a Ford, I'll see that you'll get a job. A lot of things happen Eric behind scenes. WPA, did that come in at the same time that CCC did? It probably did didn't it?

EG: Yes, a lot of the relief work around here was also Civil Works Administration projects. I don't know if you recall but was there much construction done under federal programs around the town during this time? What were some of the projects being constructed?

FE: I don't know. What were some of the things that WPA did? You'd go by construction work, and they'd be a big sign that said WPA. But, I can't answer Eric. I was too young. Things like that weren't interesting to me like they would now. But, I do remember seeing big signs up saying WPA's project.

EG: Were there a lot of these projects?

FE: Quite a few.

EG: A lot around Stillwater?

FE: Yeah, around Stillwater there were, but for me to tell you which ones, I can't. I don't know. There were a lot of schools, there were a lot of—over the state—a lot of post offices, things like that were built by the WPA. Well you see because WPA came in that gave people jobs. These men went home with checks, money.

EG: Something they previously didn't have.

FE: Yeah, you have no money in your pocket and all of the sudden you have fifty dollars. Wouldn't you be happy?

EG: Yes.

FE: You know its just hard for you to realize—it's hard for you to realize there can be a time when you have nothing in your pocket. What are you going to do? How are you going to eat? How are you going to feed your family? How are you going to cloth them? Most you kids have had so much money you don't realize what it is to be without money.

EG: These were typical concerns of the average family during this period, wasn't it?

FE: A lot of them. There was a family very close to us who had their lights turned off, their gas turned off, because they were so poor and couldn't pay bills.

EG: Was that common at all?

FE: It wasn't common, but it happened with quite a number of the poor families. The ones that have lost their job and don't have that money in their pockets. And they can't pay their gas bill. They can't pay their food bill. They need shoes, but they don't have any money to pay for them. But they'll take the money for the gas bill and go down and buy their kid a pair of shoes, but they haven't paid their gas bill for six months. So, the gas is turned off. So, what do they use for heat? What do they use for cooking? Women borrowed many times—would come over and borrow a half-a-cup of sugar, or borrow an egg which I don't see happening now at all. But, in that day and age, it happened quite a deal more. Particularly among the poor people.

EG: Well, I guess that's good enough.

FE: Are you about through?

EG: Yeah, I want to thank you for being willing to go through this interview.

**Payne County Historical Society  
President's Annual Report  
January 1997**

This report serves as a summary of this very productive year. The review will be by topic.

**Awards:** Virginia Thomas and David L. Payne were each presented the 1995 award for outstanding contribution in preserving the history of Payne County by their promotion and chairmanship of the Capt. David L. Payne Memorial Project.

**Programs:** "Early Architecture of Stillwater" - Carol Bormann  
"Capt. David L. Payne Site Dedication" - Dr. Bob Blackburn, of the Oklahoma Historical Society, speaker  
"The Life of Will Rogers" - Dr. Reba Collins  
"How to Preserve Documents and Important Papers" - Dr. Bill Welge, Oklahoma Historical Society

**Headquarters:** An annual agreement with the Stillwater Library for the use of an upstairs room for an archival location for research and preservation was signed. Helen Matoy has supervised the receiving and cataloging of items contributed. Mignon Hamilton assists Helen in attending the room each second Saturday of the month from 9:00 to 12:00 for the public to use. Openings can be made upon reservation.

**Payne County Historical Review:** Ray and Helen Matoy, editors, have prepared, and printed and distributed the issues to members. They also promote sales of the Review at every opportunity.

**Projects:**

1. A tremendous undertaking was preparation and dedication of the Capt. David L. Payne Memorial site. Many people were involved for four years.
2. The Payne County Historical Society hosted the annual conference of the Oklahoma Historical Society on April 18, 19, and 20, preparing Stillwater packets for delegates and sponsoring a hospitality booth and display. The Payne County

County Historical Society also helped to arrange a tour of local historical sites, and Fred Kolch and Mary Jane Warde led the bus tours to the Sheerar Center, the Washington Irving Trail Museum, and Pawnee Bill Ranch.

3. The PCHS reserved space for the Olympic Torch celebration. American flags were distributed to the reserved block in front of the Wrestling Hall of Fame building to greet the runners. Dr. Bob Kamm and Coach John Smith carried the torch at this location.
4. An ice cream social and autograph party was held in connection with the program on Will Rogers by Dr. Reba Collins.
5. The Payne County Historical Society archives in the Stillwater Library were developed.
6. Early tax records were transported to the Oklahoma Historical Society in Oklahoma City for microfilming.
7. The PCHS selected the historical category inductees for the Stillwater Chamber of Commerce Hall of Fame and co-hosted the Stillwater Hall of Fame reception.
8. The PCHS joined the Friends of the Oklahoma Historical Society Archives.
9. The PCHS agreed to provide volunteers for plant maintenance at the Captain David L. Payne Memorial site for three years under the direction of Dr. Lawrence Erwin, the authorized representative to the Stillwater Tree Board.

### **Officers and Directors for 1996**

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Directors	Bill Bryans - 1998 Carol Bormann - 1997 Mahlon Erickson - 1997 Doris Dellinger - 1996 Barbara Dunn - 1998
Past President	Lawrence Erwin
Editors	Ray and Helen Matoy

**A Special Thanks to:**

- A. Capt. David L. Payne Memorial Park
  - Site Location Committee, chaired by Virginia H. Thomas
  - Site Steering Committee, chaired by Virginia H. Thomas
  - Site Development Committee, chaired by Glenn Redding
- B. Standing committees
- C. Board of Directors
- D. City of Stillwater, Stillwater Chamber of Commerce, contractors, organizations and individuals

**Future Projects:** There is a challenge to expand membership interest and develop the PCHS archives for research and preservation.

I want to thank you all for your patience and support during this year. Best wishes for strength and continued accomplishments for development and promotion of history in Payne County.

Sincerely,



Virginia H. Thomas  
President



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