

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

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Interviewee: Anna Margaret McCurry Wolf

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Run time: [30:01]

AW. We really are closer related than Barack [Obama] realizes when I'm his grandma's first cousin.

Q. Sure. Your father was his -- Madelyn's mother's brother.

AW. Yeah. I think he came to Kansas once when he was about nine-years-old, but I don't know. I'm not aware if he even met his grandparents. I don't know how that situation was going on; I don't know.

Q. Oh, you remember playing with Stanley Ann?

AW. Oh, I played dolls with Stanley Ann.

Q. But you mean his grandparents, Stanley and Madelyn [Dunham], you don't quite remember?

AW. I remember them, but see I was three or four when they got married.

Q. Right. Right.

AW. And they kept moving other places.

Q. Uh-huh.

AW. And then they'd come back and they'd stay a while.

Q. Yeah.

AW. And I remember Stanley Ann more because we played together. Okay. I have a list here of all of Madelyn's first cousins.

Q. Oh, my.

AW. And there's only three of them -- there's 14 of us and only three have passed on.

Q. Oh, my goodness. Good genes. [Laughs.]

AW. And that's why I said he's got hundreds of cousins out here.

Q. Can you tell us your full name, Margaret?

AW. My name is Anna Margaret McCurry, and I'm named after Barack's great-great-grandma, Margaret McCurry. She passed away the same week I was born, but my dad went to her bedside and said, "We got another Margaret." And she smiled—she didn't say any words—but she took his hand and smiled, so she knew I was here. And then Barack's aunt, Madelyn's sister, was also named Margaret: Margaret Arlene [Payne], so we were both named after our grandmother.

Q. Quite a legacy there.

AW. Mm-hm.

Q. What's your relationship then, once again, to President Barack Obama?

AW. Barack Obama's grandma is my first cousin and we spent many, many, many hours at their home in Augusta [Kansas], and they came to Wichita [Kansas]. And oh, we had all of our holidays and celebrated. You know, I think Madelyn was enough older; she wanted to go out with teenagers or something and us little ones were kind of like children to her instead of cousins.

Q. Mm-hm. Tell me about the family celebrations. What holidays specifically?

AW. The main one was the Fourth of July with homemade ice cream. Where they lived in Augusta was a tiny little house that was owned by an oil company that furnished the home to Uncle [Rolla] Payne and Aunt Lee [Leona (McCurry) Payne]. And they stayed there 'til retirement and then moved to Winfield [Kansas], so they always lived in a little house. Next door was this big pipe yard and, oh goodness, we played and we made houses out of pipe—now, it's a telephone company right next to this house—but we had such a good time, and they were always afraid we were going to roll a pipe down from the big stack. But

it was just a ball out there playing among all those pipes in the pipe yard.

Q. And a lot of cousins.

AW. Lots of cousins. Well, I have six brothers and sisters and there were a lot of cousins.

Q. And do you remember how many Madelyn -- how many siblings Madelyn had?

AW. Madelyn has one sister and two brothers, and they're all living.

Q. And they're all living. Tell us about the moment when you first realized the relationship between you and Barack Obama.

AW. That was so exciting. My brother and Dallas told me that Jack--that was one of Madelyn's brothers--said, "Well, Stanley Ann is married to a black and he's very well known in Chicago and a lawyer." But, you know, I didn't think much about it. I mean, how would I ever see him anyway? And then after he made that famous speech with [Senator] John Kerry that we all just fell in love with him, he was on the Barnes and Nobles book review on television. We were sitting there listening, and they asked him what he was going to do now that all of this was over--it might have been even before he was a senator; I'm not sure where he was at this point - and he said he was going to go to Honolulu to visit his little 82-year-old white grandma from Augusta, Kansas. I just started shivering. I said, "Jean, that kid has

to have the same DNA I have. That has to be Stanley Ann's son." So I quickly called his aunt Arlene, and she confirmed that it was Stanley Ann's son so we quickly wrote a letter. He was a senator then, cause we went to see him. We went on a bus tour with a group--only 12 in the group, it was really neat--to Washington DC, and we called him and he said we could come meet him. And so that was very exciting for me and Jean.

Q. Oh, I'm sure.

AW. He was so nice to both of us. He gave us his CDs and his book and autographed them. We were in the capital building after that with our group and there stood Barack right over there and I thought, "I can't believe I'm running into him twice." I started to go right to him, but he came right up to us. Before he noticed me he shook everybody's hand in our group, and he said, "I understand you're all from Kansas," and gave them all greetings. Then he gave me a hug and he said to them, "Now, you guys take care of my cousin." So that was a really special time for me.

Q. Quite proud I'm sure.

AW. Mm-hm.

Q. Quite sure. He has such a --

AW. And, at that time, most of my family members did not know who he was, so I had some pretty excited brothers and sisters --

Q. Oh, mm-hm.

AW. -- when I spread the news to them, they were just really, really happy.

Q. Oh, I can imagine. What memories of Stanley Ann Dunham do you have?

AW. She was just a beaut -- she's probably four or five years younger than I am.

Q. Mm-hm.

AW. She was just beautiful; dark hair just like you just want to make a doll out of her she was so cute. When she'd come to my house or I was at her grandma's house, she always had to play dolls because I liked dolls. I don't know if she liked to play dolls or not, but if you played with me, you played dolls. I just remember that I just thought she was beautiful and special and I never could understand -- she's about the same age as her Uncle Jack, Madelyn's younger brother that is even younger than I am. And I just could not understand in my mind how Jackie could have a niece, how he could be an uncle, when he was only like four or five-years-old, and here he was an uncle. So anyway, we had to get that figured out. So they had older children except for this, Jack, that's my age and my two brothers' age. We were kind of the younger group in the family, the babies. So anyway, we had a lot of fun. My aunt Lee always

wanted us to come over and spend the night and spend time with her. She was just a lovely lady; really beautiful.

Q. And this was Madelyn's mother?

AW. Yes. Yes.

Q. And her name was Leona?

AW. Leona, but we called her Aunt Lee. She was very kind to everybody; just really high morals and you just couldn't ask for a better woman. She was super.

Q. And the matriarch of family holidays and get-togethers, were they most generally held there in Augusta at her --

AW. Augusta and at my folk's house. They kind of took turns; one year Wichita, one year Augusta. They just -- you know, Wichita and Augusta they seemed far apart then, but they are really close now.

Q. Right. Right.

AW. But we just took turns having them at one place or the other. But I loved Augusta because we could walk downtown, you couldn't do that in Wichita, from their house. We could just walk downtown. I thought that was so great to live in a town that you could do that with. Augusta has changed so much. It's not that little tiny town; it's just different than it was when I was a little girl.

Q. What are some of the family traits that you recognize in Barack Obama the more you get to know about him?

AW. The more I look at him, he and my father look alike. I had a family picture of my family—I gave him all these pictures—and he took it in his hand. He kept saying, “Who, who, who, does he look like?” And I said, “Oh, Charles.” And he says, “No.” It still didn't dawn on me till I got home.

Q. Oh.

AW. And then I could see my father.

Q. Uh-huh.

AW. And I think he did too because I don't know why he kept pointing--

Q. Oh.

AW. --at that picture and going, “Who, who does he look like?”

Q. Uh-huh.

AW. And they even -- they were kind of alike -- my dad was vice-president at Derby Oil Company, and he was a chemical engineer and a pharmacist. He was very good with hiring people and working with all their problems. I could see my father the way he never said anything unless he knew he was going to say it right. And sometimes it might sound like it's slow of speech, but it's really “I got to think this through before I say this.” And I see that in Barack.



Q. Yes.

AW. A lot. I see that a lot in Barack.

Q. He's quite articulate.

AW. Yes. Uh-huh.

Q. He has a marvelous poise.

AW. Well, his Aunt Ruth, my dad's other sister, was an English teacher in Goodland, Kansas and also taught in Peru, Kansas, and she was articulate, and her speech was just absolutely beautiful. I can see that -- I see that in Barack, and I see that in a couple of my children. That it just flows out so easily for them. I just --

Q. What do you attribute his -- he's been described as being worldly -- certainly growing up in Hawaii, spending most of his formative years in Hawaii. What do you remember about Stanley Ann that might connect with that openness to culture and --?

AW. Mostly what I remember about Stanley -- she was never there very long. They'd take off somewhere and then they'd move somewhere else, and you'd see them again for a little while. And you were never sure when they were going to be back or if you'd see them again. But his grandmother, I mean my Aunt Lee, they read all the great books to their children. They were very strong readers and their kids were just taught really early. In fact, my daughter went to visit Barack at his office. She home

schooled and she also like taught calculus in Claremore, Oklahoma. She said, "The girls were saying how hard, you know, their mother was so strict on all these." And he said, "Well, if you think -- just listen to my story. If you think you had it hard, wait till you hear about me." He said, "I went to school all day long, but when I got home my grandma and my mother followed me around with books till 8 o'clock at night. I was reading all these books." So he said, "You didn't have it any harder than I had it." So I think he was on top of all the reading and stuff from just a little tiny boy.

Q. Right. Right. I do remember that from his autobiography. He described his mother and how intense she was on making sure that he was educated.

AW. Uh-huh.

Q. And getting him up on 4:30 in the morning.

AW. Yes.

Q. And studying with him.

AW. Yeah. To make sure that he knew English.

Q. Right.

AW. When he was living --

Q. And when he complained, she said, "It's not a piece of cake for me either, Buster."

AW. Yeah. Yeah.

Q. So she was quite intent on setting a sense of responsibility about education.

AW. Uh-huh.

Q. Are there any particular McCurry family stories that you recall your father sharing?

AW. Well, one thing that has really interested me lately, 'cause I have been trying to follow the family tree, and we all, my dad's side, all came from Scotland. They migrated into Kentucky, and Illinois is where my grandfather lived; Alten, Illinois. And he, at age three, shook President Lincoln's hand.

Q. Oh, my.

AW. I had -- can't find it, but I had an English paper that this aunt, that teaches English, had written in college about that. But he was on my grandfather's shoulders, and this is Thomas Creekmore McCurry, and Lincoln just came over and shook his hand way up there. And I thought well, isn't that strange?

Q. Oh, my.

AW. But then they migrated. I think people in those days got on their wagons and horses, and they migrated clear to Grandby, Missouri, which is really a story in itself. I just -- my grandfather, I think, worked in the mine for a while and drove a horse and wagon to Jefferson City with lead on it. They lived in like one of those little shotgun houses out in the country.

And some bush whackers came one time, and they killed my grandfather's -- shot my grandfather's brother. He was about ten-years-old and my great-grandma took my grandfather and hid him inside the feather mattress 'cause they were coming. They thought they were just going to leave this Tom McCurry alone cause he was little enough, but then they thought he might be able to tell more than what we think. And so they went to the home, he was hidden in the mattress and they wanted to know where he was, and my great-grandma pointed to the door and they left. But they did return, and they put hot coals in Mary's eyes, which would have been my grandfather's sister as a little baby sitting on the floor. She went blind from it. And they burned the house down.

So then when I went to Grandby to visit, cause I knew they were from there. I just wanted to see what the town was like. I really was pleased with the little town the first time I went; just a cute little town. Then the next time I could see -- well, my grandparents weren't happy here. They ran from this place because of this happening to them. So they migrated on a wagon clear to Kansas. I think it was Longton, Kansas. It was kind of a circle: Grandby, Longton, and over here was Peru [Kansas] where my father was raised. But just straight across was kind of Longton, so they never really got too far away from

this original Grandby. But my grandfather and grandmother raised eight children in Peru, Kansas, which is a town probably less than a hundred now. And they were all -- and the little Methodist church is still open that they went to. Because we went down there, and the preacher comes in from another town, and my son met me there and it was just a real warm feeling to -- that's where my grandfather's funeral was and my grandmother's funeral. And it was just touching to be in these spots. But when he lived there it was a town of one to five thousand; large high school. And it's just worn out now.

Q. Quite a history. Quite a family history.

AW. And so we went over to the cemetery and this always warms my heart because my brother that's a year younger than I am, his name is Tom, and I'm Margaret after our grandparents. And on this tombstone, -- all these people were gone before I was born because I was much younger in the family than the rest of them. And when I see that name of my brother and I on that tombstone, it just kind of took my breath away.

Q. Mm-hm.

AW. But there we were "Margaret McCurry and Thomas McCurry." And it was just real touching to see that and to know they had stayed in that town all this time. The town, little town, was so friendly. There's kind of like a -- they don't sell gasoline,

but a little truck stop, and we went in and some of those people in there, some of them had no teeth. And they ran over to this -- I guess they still keep records in that building that looks like it's going to fall down. And they went over and brought this great big long picture of my Aunt Ruth and she taught there till her parents died, she never married, and she lived with her parents until they passed on. Then she went to Goodland, Kansas. In this picture was like oh, I bet 40 or 50 women at this society meeting. And it said number 40 is Margaret Bell Wright, and number 14 is Ruth McCurry. She was walking home from school and saw all these ladies sitting in the yard so she joined for the picture. And every lady in there was numbered. So if you look at number 12 you can count up and see which one it was.

Q. And we need to get this straight again. The little boy who shook Abraham Lincoln's hand was your great-grandfather?

AW. Was my grandfather.

Q. Was your grandfather.

AW. But Barack's great-grandfather.

Q. And this was Thomas Creekmore?

AW. McCurry.

Q. McCurry.

AW. Yes. Uh-huh. When he was -- and that's the one that was with his brother that got shot by the bushwhackers. That's the one that they hid in the mattress.

Q. And I thought it was. How ironic that he has been compared, Barack Obama, has been compared to Abraham Lincoln.

AW. Uh-huh.

Q. An Illinois senator, his political roots in Illinois. And then to have this image of this little boy shaking Abraham Lincoln's hand.

AW. Yes.

Q. And to think of the heritage.

AW. And I don't know how long they lived in this town, but they left it and came on to Grandby, Missouri. And that was a long ride when you look at -- when I was studying the map and you go by horse and wagon all the way there and take your family. That was a long way -- journey for them to take.

Q. Right. Right.

AW. And --

Q. Incredible. Strong family. Did your -- you talked about your family visiting Augusta, but what about El Dorado? Do you have any memories --?

AW. I do not know that family at all. And if I had been older, my sister's only three years younger than Madelyn. I knew Stanley

was from El Dorado, but I don't remember ever meeting his parents. I guess he was from Wichita too, and I didn't know that till Suzan Peters put on the news --

Q. Right. Right.

AW. -- that he was from there. So I just wasn't aware where all Stanley was from.

Q. What community traditions do you remember growing up as a child?

AW. Well, basically the homemade ice cream and it was just the more the -- well, you know Aunt Lee and Uncle Payton had a small house. Ours was quite a bit larger. But the grownups were usually inside and we were all over that pipe yard having just a ball. And that's the most -- I don't know if I --

Q. But you say they did come to Wichita as well?

AW. Oh, yes.

Q. Well what were some of the festivities in Wichita that would draw --?

AW. Well, they were at my high school graduation. And I think --

Q. And you graduated from where?

AW. Wichita High School East.

Q. Wichita East?

AW. And there were six of us so there were lots of things going on that they came in for. Then my Aunt Ruth from Goodland, she was just -- oh, Barack would have loved her. She was a school



teacher and all of her summer she took turns coming to see all of her brothers and sisters and we'd all get together when she'd come. She'd come in the summer, she'd stay a few weeks at Aunt Lee's, and few weeks at ours and uncle John and Joe's. During this time, we all kind of got together to see each other all again. And she never drove till she was 65.

Q. Oh, my goodness.

AW. When she retired she had a little red convertible. And they said, "Watch out for that little Ruth McCurry when she gets behind that" --

Q. And she taught?

AW. She taught English and grammatics in Goodland, Kansas. And I always say for like 150 years because she was there it seemed like forever.

Q. Uh-huh.

AW. I hardly remember her being in Peru, but she stayed there right out of college till both of her parents had passed on.

Q. Mm-hm.

AW. Just to be with them and help them.

Q. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

AW. And I don't know how she chose Goodland, but that's where she ended up after they passed on.

Q. What are the historical events worth noting in your own childhood and adolescence that -- as you think back on your own life that this has been quite a historical year?

AW. Well, one time, I don't know how historical this is, but I got really excited at a Kansas City ball game 'cause President Truman was there. I don't remember how old I was, but I was determined I was going to go to where he was. And my folks had a hard time keeping me in my seat 'cause I knew he was there. I think he had thrown the ball, and I just didn't see any reason why I shouldn't be able to go hunt him up.

Q. Mm-hm.

AW. But I didn't get that far.

Q. What do you remember, you were quite young, but what do you remember about the war years?

AW. Oh, boy. In Wichita we had air raids. I don't know if you had them here in your town here, but it was pretty scary because Boeing -- we lived in East Wichita, College Hill area, and Boeing was not all that far from us. But when the air raid whistles sound -- usually at night when it was dark, every light in your house had to get off or you were fined. Every light was turned off and you had to go to your basement and not come out. And there was one block follower for each block that would walk

up and down the block to make sure all this had been done. And that was always really scary and I --

Q. Oh, my.

AW. -- I'll swear, one time I thought one of those little Army planes or Air Force planes, I thought they went through the side of our house like this.

Q. Oh, no.

AW. You could hear the airplanes because Boeing was maybe five miles away or so, so airplanes did get in that path.

Q. Right. Now, that's very interesting and I would, I'll have to follow that up with people from El Dorado --

AW. Yeah.

Q. -- further east. Because of Wichita being the air capital of the world, it makes me think that that was unique to Wichita. I'm not sure that El Dorado did have air raids.

AW. Maybe you were further away from Boeing than we were.

Q. Yes. Yes. That's quite interesting.

AW. But then another thing that I always remember as -- they had rationed these stamps out and you could only have so much of every item. Like, sugar was rationed and rubber and maybe shoes. But you could only -- when you used up your stamps, you couldn't get any more of these things. I guess you were lucky if you had six children in the family, 'cause you had a lot of

different food stamps that went a little further than some other families.

I also remember that, since my dad was vice-president of Derby and had an office downtown and at the refinery, that we always got our gasoline free during that Second World War time, I can remember. And we always had a company car. We just never bought our own car 'cause the company furnished it. And I always thought that was kind of nice that they gave him that kind of benefit. Then we had the newspaper drive. I don't know if you had them here, but we'd take all our old newspapers to school and they'd take them in. And that was all the money that went to help the Second World War. Then we had saving bonds and once a week or maybe, I think it was just once a week, you took your money to school and you could buy as many stamps as you wanted. And you'd fill up your little book where you bought these little saving stamps at school in a little stamp book like the size, a little bigger than a check book, and then you'd fill each page. And then when you had it all filled up, it was worth something. But we always kept those going during that time.

Q. Mm-hm.

AW. So that was something that we used to do. And my sister, that's kind of Madelyn's age, was the age where she had a lot of friends, you know, going away in the Second World War so she

knew a lot of people. We didn't have -- I had three older sisters so I didn't have any brothers in the war.

Q. Experienced it different --

AW. Uh-huh.

Q. -- than she did.

AW. So I was glad. But my sister was a school teacher. But when the war went on, she quit teaching and went out to Boeing and worked like Rosie the Riveter.

Q. Rosie the Riveter.

AW. Madelyn was working there too.

Q. Right.

AW. I don't know if they knew each other when they were doing that, but somehow I guess she wanted to do that more than teach, at that point.

Q. Mm-hm. There was quite a call for that.

AW. Mm-hm. Oh, yeah, there was a shortage. There were a lot of jobs there for people, but she gave up teaching to do that for a while.

Q. Well, Margaret, thank you so much, Margaret McCurry Wolf, for sharing your memories and adding to our heritage project for President Barack Obama. Strong family with some wonderful memories and thank you for sharing that.

AW. I have one more thing that's really kind of neat.

Q. Yes. Please do. Please do.

AW. Wild Bill Hickok is my fifth cousin. I don't know if Barack's ever mentioned that.

Q. How fascinating.

AW. But his mother was one of my great-great-grandfathers, or something, sister and her name was Christina.

Q. On the McCurry side?

AW. Uh-huh. Christina Wilson so --

Q. And this was Wild Bill Hickok's mother was Christina Wilson?

AW. I believe that's it, if I have it right.

Q. Oh, wow. Fascinating.

AW. And like when they lived in Granby one of the other cousins that lived there are the Browns that were related to us said, "Well, I always saw this Hickok guy come and visit your grandparents all the time, but I had no idea it was Wild Bill Hickok." He just always came and visited them.

Q. Oh, for heaven's sakes. That's fascinating.

AW. So, and my dad always said, "Never tell anybody that you're related to Wild Bill." I guess they thought, at that point, I guess everybody thought he was Wild Bill.

Q. Wild.

AW. And my kids say, "Well, Mom, if you read up on him, he's really an interesting guy."

Q. Uh-huh. Fascinating.

AW. Mm-hm.

Q. Well, I think that's what makes this project even more wonderful.

AW. Mm-hm.

Q. Is that the stories come out and inspire people to do more of their own family research. Thank you, so much.

AW. Well, you're most welcome. We are proud of Barack.

Q. Well, he will go ahead and edit this part right here so I'll tell him.

[END]