

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

<http://obamakansasheritage.org/>

Interviewer: Teresa Baumgartner

Interviewee: Lois Olsen Cox

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Location: Butler Community College BCTV Studio

Videographer/Editing: Steve Cless

Transcriber: Jessa Soto, November 27, 2012

Editors: Micaela Ayers and Kym Dickey, January 22, 2016

Run time: [54:09]

Q. I guess we're ready to start, so I'm going to ask -- I'm going to start by just asking you to state your full name, and your maiden name, and -- and then I'll just say for the camera we're in El Dorado on October 4th in the BCTV studio, and interviewing Lois. And so can you state your full name, Lois?

LC. You want my full name?

Q. Including your maiden name.

LC. Okay. Lois -- Lois Olsen Cox. And birth date?

Q. Sure.

LC. 3/16/24.

(Second Interviewer): That's my birthday, March 16th.

Q. Really?

(Second Interviewer): Yes, '54. Wow.

Q. Do you mind giving your age?

LC. I don't mind. 88.

Q. 88. So -- and you have a birthday coming up in March. All right. Well, one of the things we're particularly interested in is just -- uh -- understanding what it was like to grow up in or around Augusta, Kansas in the 20s, and 30s, and early 40s. I -- you know, I mean, if you graduated in 1941 -- and so I might just ask you to tell us a little bit about your early life and your family growing up.

LC. Well, I grew up on a farm. Um -- getting to high school was -- rode to high school with a neighbor the first year, and then --

Q. Who drove?

LC. Pardon me?

Q. Who drove, your neighbor?

LC. The -- the young man -- Charles Chance was the boy that had the car, and they were neighbors, and that was the first year of getting to high school. Uh, the second year and after that, I had my own car, a '34 Plymouth, and I drove by myself for two years. And then I -- my last year, I had another high school girl, and my future husband (laughs) rode with me the last part of my senior year to high school. The old Plymouth -- one of the interesting things about that, if you wanted it to start in the morning when it was really cold, took a pan of coals from the heating stove, took that out, and set it under the oil pan, put a flat iron that you ironed with -- put that on the manifold under the hood, put a blanket over the whole thing, and in a few minutes it was warmed up enough you could start it. It was

two miles of mud road, which I got pretty good at that. One particular time -- the girl that rode with me lived on the highway, so we had a deal that if I couldn't get back home in the mud, or snow, or whatever, I could stay with her, and that would be worth one week's pay, riding the -- riding. Now, everybody -- everybody did pretty much the same thing. Parking lot was full of old cars. One time in particular with the mud, it'd been thawing, and moisture, and the soil had gotten to the place of molding clay, but I didn't know that. And driving home, pretty soon I had mud packed in the wheels until they wouldn't move, and I dug them out with a hedge post that was laying in the ditch, and got back out of there, and went back to my girlfriend's. That had to do with how we got to school.

My freshman year, the first thing that happened was that -- early on, I went to Banner school, rural school, and our mathematics was just plain old arithmetic. Well, I had algebra class, and the teacher was -- they had too many for the regular math teacher, so the teacher that I had was the manual arts teacher. I guess he understood mathematics, but he didn't understand how to teach it, so when we'd get an equation which I'd never seen before, with  $XY$  equals  $Z$ , I couldn't figure that out, and I asked questions until he got exasperated with me. We could watch out the window of the high school, which we have a picture of, they were tearing down an old high school. I'm not sure what it was called -- whether it was Lincoln or some other, but anyway, it was a big stone building and they were dismantling that. They didn't have big old movers that

were men, WPA workers. This would have been, what, 1938, '37, somewhere along there. Anyway, the exasperated math teacher said, "If you were one of those WPA workers, you could never figure out your salary -- your wages." And I thought, "Well, this is not going to work." So I went to the principal's office and said, "I want in the regular math class so I can learn to do this right." And that was -- that was one of the things that happened.

Q. Did you get into the regular class?

LC. Yeah, I did, and the man was -- and the teacher was very patient after school and explained and caught me up so I could do the algebra.

Q. Good.

LC. Well, the second year, talking about math -- the second year was kind of interesting. We were seated in -- same teacher -- we were seated alphabetically, and the boy that was sitting next to me, his last name was Purdin. I don't remember his first name, but his girlfriend was Lucy Osage, and she was very smart. She helped him all the time with his homework, and he was a senior when we were sophomores. Well, I would catch him looking at my papers every once in a while, but -- we never talked, and we had the semester test -- geometry has theorems and truths, and I saw him copying off my paper, so I'd figure out a problem, and I'd leave one step out or I'd do it wrong. (Laughs) When we got our papers back and I had a good grade and he had a bad grade, that was the only thing he ever said to me, was "How did you do that?" (Laughs)

Q. What did you do? After he copied you, you went back and --

LC. I went back and corrected it, yes. He handed -- he quickly handed his paper in, and I --. Uh, Lucy Osage got me in another situation when I was a senior. All through the first three years, I tried real hard to be included in the agriculture class because I loved farming, but girls could not be in the agriculture class. Then my senior year, I didn't try for the agriculture class, and the principal -- he was a wonderful man -- Gustafson was his name -- came to the classroom where I was on the first day of school, and begged me to take agriculture because Lucy Osage, who was prominent in the town -- I don't know if her dad was on the school board, but the principal was -- had to make him happy. Uh, he, he said, "You do me a favor. I've got to have another girl because Lucy Osage wants to take agriculture, so if I have two girls, it will work." Got to agriculture class, and the teacher was so unhappy. He looked around over the class and made one lecture about the town boys being in the class, and then, the girls that was -- that was just it. But I saw the young man across the room that I had my eye on, and that -- that settled it. Going down the hallway after that class, Lucille said, "I'm not going back." And I said, "Did you buy a book already?" And I bought her book, and I took agriculture, and I caught the young man, (laughs) and we were married on December the 30th, 1941. I don't know that I can think of too many other things. I could talk about school all day, but --

Q. So you - (inaudible). Now, I forgot what I was going to ask her. So how long have you been married then? This last -- in December this would be --

LC. 70 -- 70 plus years. It'd be 71 years in December.

Q. Well, congratulations.

LC. That was the December after graduation, and my husband, Henry, was in the class of '42, so he had another year. Uh, Madelyn was -- Lucille, Nina Perry, and all those that you mentioned -- Madelyn was very well respected. Her name was pretty common in school. Everybody knew Madelyn, but she didn't do the things that the rest of them did. She didn't -- she didn't party with them. She just tended to her class and was very dignified and -- and mature. And I guess I must have admired her or I wouldn't have asked her to write in my book, but I didn't really know very -- a whole lot about her. But I was pretty excited to find that I had her in my book.

Q. And how did you -- how and when did you discover that?

LC. That I had --

Q. Recently, I suppose? Before you sent your letter to the White House?

LC. Yes. Somebody wanted some memoirs for something, and I was looking through the box that things were stored in, and I just took my autograph book out, and was thumbing through it, and all of a sudden I saw Madelyn's name there, and I go, "Oh, my goodness. Look at this!" And so then I thought that the President ought to know what she wrote when she wrote that friends were -- sometimes wanted -- just wanted what they could get from you. But she didn't

like that, she wanted friends that were sincere, and she gave me that compliment.

Q. Do you think that shows -- reveals anything about the kind of person that she was?

LC. Yes, she was -- she was always -- she always dressed properly. She always -- she just had a very good reputation with everybody, with students, and teachers, and she was a very friendly person without being attached to anybody, really.

Q. And, you know, sometimes people who are -- who aren't as involved, or who are not attached, they don't -- everybody thinks that there's some reason, and I don't know whether they are suspicious, but they don't -- uh -- necessarily -- they don't necessarily like those people, and yet you said that Madelyn was so well liked and respected. Besides her being thoughtful, can you think of reasons why, despite the fact that people didn't know her well, they respected her so much? Anything she did that you can remember?

LC. She was just always prompt, and, and she could be helpful. Somebody maybe would be having a little trouble, and she might help somebody in study hall a little bit, but nothing that would -- she might help somebody one time, and not help them again until maybe they might ask. But she just kind of went her own way, and well, like, for instance, when I thought about the girls that -- Lucille -- that helped her boyfriend and all that, she -- this group of girls would probably not even talk to me, because I was a country girl. They had all come through kindergarten together. Uh, I don't know how

long Madelyn had been in classes with them, but while she was -- they respected her name. They -- they -- if they wanted to do something scholastic, they might be sure they included her, but she didn't ever mix with them. She just was an unusual person.

Q. Did you have any classes with her?

LC. No, I didn't.

Q. Do you remember after you found the autograph book and realized that she had -- did any memories come back to you of that day when you were getting all the autographs?

LC. No. Actually -- actually, I was surprised to find that I had it -- that I had her page, so -- but see, she was the kind of person that an underclass girl could walk up to her and say, "Would you like to sign my book?" She was that kind of person, and where the -- uh, many of the others -- there was kind of a difference. The country girls kind of stuck together, and the city girls kind of stuck together, and she was just good to everybody, and not a part of any group.

Q. But by where she grew up, she would have been a city girl?

LC. I think she would have been, but I now don't know how long she had been in Augusta to be -- the ones that were in Augusta all their school years, you know, they were -- they knew each other so well. They didn't include other people a lot of times.

Q. Well, you grew up on a farm. I'm going to change the subject just a little bit. Um -- what -- you would have probably been living on the farm during the Dust Bowl years and the Great Depression?



LC. Oh, yeah.

Q. What do you remember about that?

LC. The Banner school, located on Harry Street, on 110th Street now, it's on the south side between Tawakoni Road and Santa Fe Lake Road.

Q. Is the building still there?

LC. The building's still there. It's a residence. The first dust storm come in, it got darker and darker, and red soil, silt, came through the cracks around the windows, and that, I don't know -- it seemed like that lasted maybe off and on for, I don't know, two or three weeks maybe. It wasn't -- it wasn't that -- we didn't have like drifts of dust like some places did, we just had the soft powdery stuff all over. And again, in those years in the country school, we didn't have any such a thing as a snow day holiday. We just went to school anyway, and --

Q. You didn't have too far to walk?

LC. Didn't what?

Q. You didn't have very far to walk?

LC. Mile and a half, but that wasn't very far. And the kids had -- when it was snowy, they had their sleds and stuff, and we played, and everybody played together. And sometimes, there was -- there were, there were times when there were all eight grades in one room, there was somebody in every grade. And the way that worked, the teacher really spent time with the upper class: the sixth, seventh, and eighth grade; and in sixth, seventh, and eighth grade's time -- spare time, they helped the first, second, third, and fourth grade. And that

was kind of -- that was kind of when I began to think I'd like to be a teacher.

Q. Oh.

LC. And everybody carried their lunches. My husband's story of his school days -- he went to the Indianola School, which is west of August LC. And now, that was a -- I believe that was a two-room school, and that's still standing. It's a residence. And he tells about the teacher that he had for several years. Every morning, she put a Bible verse on the blackboard -- a different Bible verse every morning, and when they got ready to eat their lunches, if it was still warm weather, they'd be out on the porch, or not -- in the other -- couldn't be on the porch, they'd be in the schoolroom. And this teacher would have a blessing, a prayer, before they ate. We didn't have much trouble with -- and --

Q. Where in school, wasn't forbidden.

LC. That was the way things were then, and it wasn't quite that way when I was teaching.

Q. What did you teach?

LC. First, and I taught 2nd and 3rd grade, mostly.

Q. Where?

LC. My first year was in Turner, Kansas, a suburb of Kansas City, and then for, oh, I believe it was eight years in Arizona, and then back to Kansas in Arkansas City. My husband was a pastor at the IXL Church, south of Ark City, and I taught -- I taught school in Sleeth Community. Now, Sleeth was on the other side of the tracks, across

the railroad, and across from the river. (Laughs) That's where that was. But, uh --

Q. Now, you say you have five children. Quite often in those days, women weren't allowed to teach after they started a family. Did you teach and raise your children at the same time?

LC. I got one year of college before. Well, I got one year of college before we had any children, and then different times where we might live where I could pick up some more college hours, I finally got a bachelor's degree from University of Missouri in Kansas City. This Robert that we have here with us today, he was like two years old, and when I started teaching, he was about three or four years old. And then I taught -- the others were through high school and college.

Q. Looking back on your teaching career, do you have any favorite memories from that?

LC. In teaching through the years?

Q. Mm-hmm.

LC. Oh, I really had -- I was kind of - uh, did things different. I have a class with -- we did a lot of interesting things besides the regular lessons. We had different ways of teaching, like having a booth, and have -- made fun of it -- made fun out of teaching. Had a mother one time that went to the principal and said that her child wasn't being taught because all they did was play, and he challenged her to bring her lunch and spend the day with them in that classroom, and at the end of the day she reported, well, there was teaching going

on all day, those kids thought they were playing. So that was kind of my style.

Q. Going back a little bit, you talked about the Dust Bowl. Do you remember The Depression? Do you remember being aware of what was going on and how it affected your family and life on the farm?

LC. Uh, I was being raised by my grandfather's sister and her husband. My mother died when I was born. I had no grandparents except ol' GrandpLC. We were not -- The Depression didn't seem to bother us a whole lot. We didn't realize it if it did. We had, always had plenty to eat, and one of the things that was a tricky little thing with -- back to the high school days, when this teacher had a problem with girls in class, I really had -- he couldn't -- he couldn't throw me out because the Building and Loan Association had gone bankrupt and people that had investments would -- could make like -- take a mortgage over and get their money back by the individual paying, so my folks held the mortgage on this teacher's home, so he had to be good to me.

Q. Did he ever say -- did he ever say anything about that or --

LC. No, he knew.

Q. Just something he knew?

LC. And I -- I just knew him already. I -- you know, he brought his payments to our house. Now, my husband's family, they had just a little more Depression stories than I did because they really had to be careful -- real careful, but apparently -- apparently my parents that was raising me did not suffer financially through the -- I

remember when Roosevelt had what was called the bank holidays, and the banks were all closed for a short time, and audited, and so forth, and so on. And there were two banks in Augusta; the Prairie State Bank and First National Bank. And First National Bank was the big bank, and everybody just knew that it would be all right, and the Prairie State Bank was home owned and had a very small start. Well, guess what. When the banks opened up again, First National was not allowed to open, and Prairie State kept going. It's now Emprise.

Q. Interesting. Uh -- what do you - uh -- let's see. When you were young and before high school, and just growing up on the farm, um, you must not have had a lot of the kinds of entertainment that kids today have. What (laughs) did -- what did you do for fun, and what kind of family traditions do you remember?

LC. My uncle was -- he was kind of a politician. He liked politics. He liked the neighborhood. He always had something going on, on the Fourth of July. There was a four mile creek that ran through our farm, and there was a little area -- there was a little park areLC. He cleaned that all out, and put up some makeshift tables, and we had a Fourth of July picnic. I don't know about -- we only did that once or twice, but that was -- that was one of the things that, uh -- and, you know, we didn't -- we didn't need entertainment. For me as a child, he had a swing in the tree. He figured out how I could have a teeter-totter with a big ol' rock on the other end to be my partner on the teeter-totter, and just made, made my own things to play with. And we didn't go -- we didn't go to movies much.

Now, my father came from Denmark, and he remarried after -- I was -- I was the only child, and in a couple three years, he remarried and lived out of Leon. And through the summer, from the time I was about eight years old till, I guess, probably high school years, I would spend a couple weeks or so with him and his family, and they always went to the Saturday night movie since it was held in Leon. I think the screen was probably one side of a building. And all the old cowboys, my half-brothers were -- they played cowboys and all that stuff, and we enjoyed those kinds of things, but I liked my kind of stuff better.

Q. What was your kind of stuff?

LC. All by myself, with whatever I could figure out to do.

Q. Did you have an active imagination?

LC. Oh, yeah. (Laughs)

Q. Do you remember any of the imaginary games you played or any of the imaginary play that you did?

LC. Oh, from -- well, one of the things that I have done in the last 10, 10 years or so, I wrote a little book on the kinds of stuff that -- that I did, just as a -- almost as a toddler, and it was a lot of fun things that -- my imagination was going then. I had a -- I had a whole family. I had a playhouse and the yard fixed up so that I had different places where I'd meet with my imaginary family.

Q. Was the playhouse real or imagined?

LC. Uh, it was -- it was real, and the fact that there were boards that outlined the, the walls - the rooms in my house, under the tree, and

there were -- there was a nice big rock that was made a stove, and all that sort of thing.

Q. Maybe that's how you became so good at making learning, like play for your students later. You had a lot of practice.

LC. Uh-huh, yeah, yes, I did. I did a lot of things like that.

Q. What about -- you talked about your -- your husband. Any interesting courtship stories we should hear?

LC. (Laughs) Well, probably not for publication. (Laughs)

Q. Or in front of your son?

LC. Well, one that I like to tell sometimes, it's kind of funny. See, I've got my eye set on him long before he noticed me, and I was about to, coming down to the last month or so of school, and there hadn't been any -- we did go to the -- we called it the Junior-Senior Banquet. We did have a date to that, but there wasn't any kind of commitment, and I couldn't figure out what I was going to do. And I had a diary that I seldom used. I'd write in it for maybe a month, and then it'd be a long time, and I'd write in it some more. There was a lot of blank pages. So I wrote in my diary, one night, different things that we did that was kind of getting -- you know, we, we were almost engaged, and yet there wasn't any kind of commitment. And so I put down everything that pleased me. Like our agriculture class would dig in the dandelions in the school yard. That was our project for a couple of weeks, and he and I found a place where the -- it was kind of sheltered from everybody else, and we always left enough dandelions that we could go back. So we had, kind of, a dandelion

courtship. That's kind of funny about that. So I wrote such things as "I think he loves me. I love him.", and I just embellished it up pretty good. And we come down to the last two or three days of school, and I put that diary on top of the dash, and he picked it up, and I made a scuffle. "You can't be looking in that." And of course, that -- that tweaked him. He wanted -- he really wanted to see after I didn't want him to, so before we tore the diary up, I let him have it. And so that -- we've always hung on to the idea that I salted the diary, that -- and then we were engaged soon after that.

Q. So it did kind of lead to a proposal?

LC. Yeah. And my uncle that was my guardian -- you know the song "Wolverton Mountain"?

Q. Yes.

LC. You ever hear that song?

Q. I think so.

LC. It's an old western. "Go Up Wolverton Mountain." The birds and the bees let -- birds and the -- I think it's the birds and the bees, let ol' whatever-his-name-was know when the boys were coming, and nobody would go up Wolverton Mountain to get that girl. Well, my uncle was like that, and so we had quite a -- quite an experience with uncle, and we sort of eloped, and after all was said and done, my uncle decided that he was a pretty good guy after all.

Q. Wow. So you think he wanted to protect you, or he didn't approve?



LC. Oh, it was just kind of like, you know -- kind of like dads don't want their girl to get away, that sort of thing.

Q. Nobody's good enough. That's neat. Um. One more thing I should maybe ask you about, um, and that is -- let's see, you graduated in 1941, and that's leading right into the war years. Um, what do you remember about that? Or -- were you married in 1941, also?

LC. In December, after, but now, he was still in school. He still had another half a year to go.

Q. So do you remember learning about Pearl Harbor, and do you remember those early days?

LC. I was in college in Ottawa University, and I didn't live in the dormitory, but I lived in a house right practically on the campus. It was -- the word went out that everybody was to go to the college on a Sunday morning, wasn't it? Seemed like it was. Anyway, we heard on the radio -- they played the radio -- that Franklin Roosevelt had declared war on Japan because Pearl Harbor had been -- and I remember how -- how disturbed the older -- I -- I just kind of, was kind of in shock. I didn't -- it didn't really matter to me right then, but the young men that were older knew exactly what it cost them, and they were pretty emotional at that announcement. And that's what I remember about where I was and what -- the Pearl Harbor day.

Q. Do you remember a lot of them enlisting after that?

LC. Well, no -

Q. Or you did you finish out that year, did they finish out the year?

LC. Yeah, they finished out the year. They weren't -- there wasn't a draft that swallowed them up right away, but they knew -- they just knew that their age -- and they were right, a lot of them were, but I don't remember -- I don't remember them having to leave school to go in the service.

Q. How about your husband, did he serve in the war?

LC. What?

Q. How about your husband, did he -- was he -- was he drafted or --

LC. No, he was too young for a while.

Q. Well, a blessing.

LC. He was 17 -- 16 -- 17, and yeah, he was 16 when -- I was 17 when we were married. Then, eventually, he - we, we got a farm, rented a farm, lived on a farm, and he eventually worked for a rancher. So all the time that he was in agriculture, they didn't draft people -- men that were part of the agriculture. They needed the farmers.

Q. Mm-hmm. Wow. Did the war touch your life in any other way, friends or family?

LC. Not -- not -- not especially, no. Uh. My brothers were too young, and I think what -- what is most shocking was the high school reunions, and it was kind of like the roll call of the ones that -- our classmates that were killed in service. That was probably the -- touched the most. During the war, we had put up with rations of sugar and different things, and tires were hard to come by, and gasoline was rationed. Then, you just sort of put up with it.

Q. Um. Uh -- I -- I don't want to over -- I don't want to take too much more time. Steve, anything you can -- well, we might just come back at the very end to your -- your autograph book --

LC. Mm-hmm.

Q. And -- did you just right away decide to send this to -- you sent it to the White House after the 2008 election?

LC. Oh, yes. Yes.

Q. And then how long was it before you got the reply back?

LC. I noticed that I pulled -- I pulled the letter up on the computer this morning, and by the letter -- the date on the letter, it seemed like it was -- my letter was in April, and I got the reply back in December. It took a long time.

Q. Long enough that you probably thought you weren't going to get a reply back? (Laughs)

LC. Yeah. I was kind of excited when the envelope came from the White House. I kept the envelope for a long time.

Q. Well, so given what you -- what you remembered about Madelyn, and told me, is there anything that you see in the President that makes you think might have been her influence, or -- and I'll make that my last question.

LC. I would say very much so, because she was a determined person. She knew -- she knew what she wanted and how to get it, and she was a very hard worker, and just an impeccable reputation. I mean, there might be gossip stories going around about different ones, and

different things, never any -- never any gossip stories about Madelyn.

Q. She didn't give them any food for gossip?

LC. No, and she was never in any -- in any kind of disciplinary problems, whatsoever.

Q. Um. Oh, great.

LC. And she just had -- she just had good judgment about things, so as -- and she was -- she was the right age for the class. Now, sometimes, we had a few people in school that were maybe three or four years older than -- they'd done something else when they got out of high school, but she was right -- she was the right age. She wasn't older, but she acted older, and yet she was a happy person.

Q. (Inaudible) Go ahead. Were you going to say something else?

LC. I don't think of anything else about her.

Q. Okay. I thought I had interrupted you. Well, those are nice memories, and thank you so much for sharing them with us. And I bet -- Steve, do you want to try to get a shot of the page in the autograph book?

(Second Interviewer): Sure.

Q. And I might - (inaudible).

[END]

Note: Conclusion of the audio transcript is followed by visual shots of

three documents:

Document 1 from autograph album, time stamp 50:47 to 51:03:

Dear Lois, (date not clear)

Remembrance is all I ask

But if it serves a task

Forget me,

Your Schoolmate,

Billy Burris

Document 2 from autograph album, time stamp 51:03 to 52:31:

April 24, 1939

Dearest Lois,

Altho you + I have never "paled"  
together I regard you as one of  
my truest friends. So many are  
"friends" for just what you  
can do for them, but I believe  
you are sincere.

Love,

Madelyn Payne

Document 3 Note card from the President, undated, time stamp 52:32 to 54:02.

The White House

Washington

Dear Lois -

Thank you for the wonderful note.

It's good to know that my grandmother was sensible even in her early years!

Best Wishes, Barack Obama