

Obama Kansas Heritage Project

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Interviewer: Teresa Baumgartner

Interviewee: Mary Frances (Kennedy) Lawrence

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Videographer/Editing: Steve Cless

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Run time: [41:35]

Q. So we can start? Yes. This is an odd way to start, it may seem to you, but it helps to place everything in context. So can you tell me your name?

FL. Frances Lawrence.

Q. And it would have been your full name before you were married. It would have been --

FL. Mary Frances Kennedy.

Q. Okay, thank you. Your age?

FL. 88.

Q. The date?

FL. August 9th, 1922.

Q. Great. And today's date is June 21st, 2011 --

FL. Mm-hmm.

Q. -- and we are -- and where are we?

FL. We are -- 1700 Fairway in Augusta, Kansas.

Q. Fabulous, okay. Now, wherever you'd like to start, at the beginning.

FL. Well, Madelyn and I -- Madelyn Payne and I started school together in Garfield School, and we went clear through school together. She lived -- I lived on Clark Street, and she lived up on State Street, so it was -- we didn't really, other than school, see each other or know each other very much, until high school, maybe a little of junior high. High school we became great good friends, and there was kind of a rock and stone wall from State Street, around the curb, and up toward the high school, and at noon, we all met there early before school, and talked, and joked, and laughed, and checked to see what boys were there, and that sort of thing. One really lovely day, Darlene Scott, at that time, and Madelyn and I decided we didn't want to go to school, and so what did we think we wanted to do -- and we discussed it sitting on the rocks, and, and finally decided we'd just go down to Cooper Drugstore, and I do not -- and I swear to this day, I don't know who had the cigarettes or where they came from, but we

smoked in the drugstore and batted them -- smoke -- anyway, we were there the rest of the afternoon, and by the time I got home, the school had called my mother and Madelyn's mother. Madelyn's mother -- probably you would say -- I want to say holier-than-thou. Does that make sense?

Q. She was very religious?

FL. Well, kind of. Anyway, she told Mr. Robinson, who was our principal at school that Madelyn was at home. My mother said no, I wasn't, I was at Cooper's smoking a cigarette, and Darlene's mother -- and Darlene still lived south of town. Anyway, I couldn't go back to school for a whole day, and my mother had to take me. Well, now, this did ruin the friendship. Her mother thought I was not a good -- well, she was quite sure that I had led them into this. Probably, I had. I don't know. Anyway, but the fact that she said Madelyn was at home, and I was -- and my mother said no -- of course, my mother had been a school teacher, so, you know, so you had to do it all proper. That really hurt the friendship. We -- it was probably toward the end of our senior year that this little episode happened.

Before that, Madelyn had a sister, just younger, and then Charles, and he was a her brother, and he was dear, so he was with us some through this -- oh, probably most of our high school if we did anything

together like walking to -- on downtown, or, of course, in those days you walked everywhere, and, of course, we did, and so I knew Charles real well. I did not know her sister at all. They didn't get along, so I just -- I really didn't know her.

Madelyn was very, very smart, very, very intelligent. Why we were friends, I don't know, because I wasn't. But anyway, she was on the honor roll clear through school -- and I love this. This is important -- until her last semester in high school. That's when she started going with Stanley. Stanley lived in El Dorado, and Darlene and I did not care for Stanley very much. He was a bit arrogant. He was -- he was tall. Well, you know, only somebody that's a bit arrogant would name their only daughter Stanley Ann, so that kind of tells you about him.

After high school, I went to -- I -- well, during the high school, my senior year in high school, I went to work for Peterson Drug, and that's where all the kids hung out, and there was a -- you could plug the -- whatever -- and there was -- and there was a little area in the back where the booths were, and you could dance. Now, on occasion Stanley met Madelyn there. Not very often, but some. After school, I went to work at Cessna, and Madelyn went to work at Boeing, so we saw very little of each other, just on occasion. And -- and then, she was still going with Stanley, and at Cessna I met Raymond Lawrence. Well, he would come to Augusta to see me, and so -- they

were both going to BCC, Stanley and Dutch. And he would come down to see me, and Stanley found out, and he didn't have a car, Dutch did. And so -- now, we never double-dated, ever, but he came down with Dutch, and I don't know where he went. Did he -- I don't know whether he went to Madelyn's. [Phone rings several times in the next few minutes] I don't know -- that I just simply don't know.

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. We never one time in all that time double-dated, ever, but he always came with Dutch. And how, uh, he worked at a furniture store in El Dorado. After they were married, he worked in a furniture store in Wichita, and I guess he was working in a furniture store in Hawaii, too, 'cause Jenny [Virginia Ewalt] knew her more after. Well, they were in a play together, and then, I think they both rode in the same car, didn't they? Going to Wichita to work after high school?

Q. Jenny and Madelyn?

FL. Uh-huh.

Q. Might have been somebody else. I think Jenny said she worked at the refinery.

FL. Yeah she did, too.

Q. Probably somebody else, but you said they were in a play together. You mean, Jenny and Madelyn?

FL. Uh-huh.

Q. Yeah, she did tell us that.

FL. And she did --

Q. [Videographer to Q.: Just talk to her. Don't worry about the camera.] Yeah, look at me, I guess.

FL. I -- other than just girlhood things that -- we told each other lots of our wishes and dreams.

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. And -- before the cigarette incident.

Q. Incident?

FL. Uh-huh, because that really kind of -- I was a bad influence.

Q. That's too bad.

FL. But before that, we did lots, and so I knew -- well, I don't think she ever wished to -- to -- we never, ever, got to wishing to go to Hawaii, but she knew that -- and, you know, she didn't go on to school. She didn't go to -- even to BCC. We both went to work.

Q. But that was fairly common then, wasn't it?

FL. Yes, but to end up as President of the bank -- wasn't she?

Q. I know she had a position of real importance.

FL. Yes, yes.

Q. The bank in Hawaii, you're talking about?

FL. Yes.

Q. And I know she just -- they just had the one child. They lived in Wichita, and I don't -- I can't remember after that first summer after school when my husband-to-be and Stanley came down all the time. I did see her. I did talk to her a lot. We never double dated, never.

Q. Never were couples friends? Is that the --?

FL. Huh-uh, huh-uh, not ever, even though they came from El Dorado down together, the two guys. There was a lot of snide remarks -- unkind remarks about Stanley between all of us who knew Madelyn. I cannot remember -- even the few times that they were at Pete's Drugstore -- and I don't believe they came together. I think she was there and he came on occasion, but her friends teased -- made fun of -- and I think sometimes to her -- didn't seem to -- I've been trying, in my mind, to recall one single instance when she got mad at us for being unkind, because kids can be, and, and I can't remember. But she knew that we were making fun of him. Didn't bother her a bit, not a bit.

Q. What do you think that she saw in him?

FL. It had to be something special.

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. Yeah.

Q. Any idea what it might have been?

FL. Honey, how could I have any idea when we only saw the arrogance and the -- he was tall, taller than my husband, and, of course, Madelyn was a little -- yeah, Madelyn was quite a bit taller than I was, and Darlene and I were the same size, but Madelyn was taller. She had a wonderful personality; laughed, joked, all through high school.

Q. Can you remember some of the things she laughed and joked about for example?

FL. Well, one -- (Laughs.) We had an English teacher and her name was Arethusa Lowery. She also had the study hall. The study hall went the whole length of that side of the building, and there were chairs and desks the whole way. Daryl, who I showed you the picture of -- Bob Bisanuelle, he had the theatre here, his dad and mother. Anyway, they managed to always sit in -- one at one end of the study hall, and one at the other -- the end, and they would roll marbles --

Q. (Laughs.)

FL. -- down the whole length of the -- now, we all were part of that, and did lots of laughing, and lots of encouraging, and that sort of thing. Now, Daryl swore that in high school he dated her. I know

better than that, but Daryl said he did. I mean, that's his story. Well, anyway -- but anyway, she and I were part of that teasing Arethusa, and we would go outside after school and laugh at -- she would start running. She was a little lady, and she would start running when the marbles started down to try to catch whoever. And we did lots of joking and teasing about Mrs. Lowery, but I don't think -- to this day, that's the first time I've ever said Mrs. Lowery. It was always Arethusa Lowery. Isn't that ridiculous? But we did. We made life very uncomfortable for her. We had one teacher, and her name was Miss Thompson, and she had an affair with the druggist across the street from Pete's and we did lots of sneaking around to watch that little affair. Now, if you want to know what we did and laughed about -- typical high school -- not being nice, and we weren't, and yet we didn't -- [shrugs].

Q. High schoolers rebel. That's part of the deal, isn't it?

FL. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. It was -- and she was an important part of my life for most of school.

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. So --

Q. Well, you said you shared wishes and dreams, and you don't do that with people who aren't very close friends.

FL. Huh-uh, and we did. And I lived on Clark Street, and she lived up on State, and we would come down, and meet, then walk on to -- downtown to the drugstore, because that's where everybody went. You went down for a coke.

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. And sometimes she was aggravated because we had to have Charles, and sometimes she was, you know -- and he was -- he was a dear little boy.

Q. But he was little enough he couldn't be left alone, so when she went somewhere she had to babysit him and take him with?

FL. Yeah, and take him with us. But -- and so we did lots of laughing, and lots of joking, and lots of -- she just was part of my growing up.

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. And -- and --

Q. Were there other girls that -- was it just the two of you?

FL. Oh, no, Darlene -- oh, Darlene and Mary Barnholdt -- oh, no.

Q. Okay.

FL. Darlene lived out on the -- her dad was City Service, so was Madelyn's. Madelyn lived on the corner and most of behind -- clear down to the

next street was the pipe yards -- City Service Pipe Yard. I could remember Pat Schooley lived down on the other corner. And now, there were many times when I was there and we played in the pipe yards. I think about it now, and that was a dangerous place. It was, you know. The pipes were oilfield pipes, and I wouldn't like my grandkids playing there, but we did, and wondered around. And there were always two or three others, never just Madelyn and I when we were that much younger, like, junior high.

Q. Oh, okay. I was going to ask how old you were.

FL. Mm-hmm, probably junior high when we were there. And I don't believe I ever saw her dad, ever. I did see her mother a lot.

Q. So when you played on the pipes, were you, like, balancing and walking on them? Were you playing imaginary games? Do you even remember what you played?

FL. Yeah, see who could get under that row and down quicker than -- ridiculous things, now. I think about it, and I think -- and her mother -- their house was there, and the pipe yards were all -- clear down. There were a lot of them, and there were always -- there just was not Madelyn and I, ever, when we were that young in junior high. There were lots of kids, and we all played in the -- on the pipe yard. We went under. They were on -- I don't know, things, so you could get under. They were never on the ground,

ever, but they were piled up on top of these things. And how somebody didn't get hurt, I'll never know, but we didn't, I don't think, ever -- anybody got hurt, but that was my first -- where we did things. That was junior high, and that was lots of kids together, and it wasn't until high school that we came -- we became -- where we talked about what we wanted to do. What -- that sort of thing.

Q. Do you remember what you wanted to do when you were that age? When you were in high school, what you dreamed of doing? And if you don't remember, that's fine.

FL. (Laughs.) Yeah, but we won't go there.

Q. Oh, okay. That's fine too.

FL. My mother was a school teacher and -- and I had an older brother who was a terrible tease. Anyway, I knew one thing for absolute certain; I didn't want any part of being a school teacher. It seems to me like at one time, she kind of thought she would -- that's what she would do.

Q. Madelyn?

FL. Uh-huh, would be a school teacher. And, of course, Madelyn would have been very good at that. She could communicate.

Q. Do you see some traits -- I mean, she was an important part of her grandson's education. Did you see traits in her then --?

FL. Oh, yeah.

Q. -- that might have applied --

FL. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And I can see her, if he got out of line, correcting him. I mean, I can just -- I can see her. And in Hawaii -- I have another friend whose family grew up in Hawaii, and in Hawaii, grandmother is "tutu", and so Obama called Madelyn "Toot", and we called ours "Tutu". But anyway, no, she would have been a good -- she -- and I kind of think -- what little sticks in my mind about that, maybe that was what she'd like to do, and I know she had -- Madelyn would have liked to have gone on to school.

Q. And could have gone far.

FL. Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. And when -- I don't think it was -- I don't think money was ever a problem. Stanley --

Q. Well, and girls didn't just go automatically to school then, either.

FL. Nope. She was going with him, and -- and -- and some of the girls, Jenny was one -- prom night was when they ran off and got married.

Q. Who?

FL. Stanley and Madelyn.

Q. Oh, senior -- was this Madelyn's senior year?

FL. Uh-huh, uh-huh. Jenny didn't mention that?

Q. Oh, in our interview?

FL. Uh-huh.

Q. She didn't.

FL. Because I think -- who else was with them? But anyway, before high school -- before school was out, they were married.

Q. So they snuck off on prom night?

FL. Mm-hmm.

Q. They eloped?

FL. Mm-hmm.

Q. Did they tell people right away?

FL. I don't think so. I can remember graduation, and nope, no, we had -- that's why I think -- who discussed that long and strong, the actual going to get married?

Q. Mm-hmm. Did they start at the prom and then leave or they -- they didn't show up at the prom because --

FL. I don't think they showed up.

Q. Okay.

FL. And he couldn't have gone anyway because he's El Dorado, we were Augusta.

Q. You had to be --

FL. Uh-huh, back then. And we had H.H. Robinson for a principal, and he was very strict, (laughs) and so, you know, he would not have approved of El Dorado. There was -- there was a fight. The El Dorado boys and the Augusta boys --

FL. Oh.

Q. -- out on the railroad tracks. And I remember Madelyn and I -- they wanted -- at that time, you wore hose, but not pantyhose, and they wanted hose. And I remember -- and it seems to me like she did, too. Robert David -- anyway, they put bars of soap in the end of them, and dampened it. Made quite a --

Q. Oh, like a slingshot?

FL. Uh-huh, uh-huh. And now, I remember we were kind of part of that, Madelyn and I, Darlene, Mary Barnholdt, some of the girls.

Q. So it was planned ahead of time?

FL. Oh, yeah.

Q. Who won? Do you remember?

FL. Well, now, of course. Well, there's a reason we won, but we won't go there. But anyway --

Q. And how much trouble did everyone get in afterwards?

FL. Not any then, but Robert David had a truck with -- and the back had a -- kind of a built-up wooden thing. Anyway, we'd take -- we'd collect money and buy gas. Well, he took a whole bunch of them to El Dorado to return a little bit of a fight, and the police caught them. They -- oh, they got rotten eggs from one of our high school buddies, and -- and he furnished the eggs -- rotten, not good eggs, and they went to El Dorado. And we were not part of that. We stayed here. The guys went to El Dorado, and they were throwing eggs at the El Dorado guys, and the police caught them, and they only knew one person. He was the one who threw the eggs left-handed; my brother.

Q. Uh-oh.

FL. And they were all in jail. The whole truck load of them were in jail.

Q. Oh, we were so upset. Everybody -- we all got together, and moaned, and groaned, and carried on. And Mr. Bisanuelle was going to El Dorado to get them out of jail.

Q. One of the fathers?

FL. Uh-huh, Robert David's dad. And my mother said no. She had always said, if you would get in trouble, you will stay. Well, Mr. Bisanuelle couldn't stand it, so he brought him home anyway. And I remember we were at my house on Clark that afternoon -- Darlene, Mary Jo, the girl next -- okay, anyway, there were several of us,

and Mr. Bisanuelle brought him home. We had a screened-in porch on the back, and my mother wouldn't let him come in, and so we girls had to leave because she made him take his clothes off, because she knew there would be bugs from jail --

Q. Oh.

FL. -- and he could not come in. We did have an uproarious time over that. Trying to think of good things -- good -- and see, I haven't told you a good thing, and so --

Q. I think you have. Yeah, you have great stories.

FL. What?

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. Well, I hope it was worth your time, okay?

Q. Absolutely, mm-hmm.

FL. Okay, but I really am -- truly am -- you know, and you get to -- there's -- I forget -- I have a granddaughter, and she comes, and she'll say, Nana, tell me a story about so and so. So I've always been a storyteller, but it's usually about family, and to be a storyteller about someone --

Q. Yeah, you knew her well, but you don't know as many intimate details as you do your own family.

FL. No, and at the time, I know we did, and at the time, I know we discussed -- oh, I know we discussed wants, dislikes, likes, that kind of girl talk.

Q. Sure.

FL. But -- and I do know she really -- she had planned on going on to school and -- but evidently --

Q. Love happened instead.

FL. Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

Q. And if, you know, if it hadn't, there would be no Barack Obama.

FL. This is absolutely true, yes. And, you know, I think --

Q. And that's the truth.

FL. I was just thinking of Stanley Ann, and her rebellion, and some of the things she did, and --

Q. It just made her a normal teenager, really.

FL. Normal?

Q. To rebel -- I mean, that is -- that's part of growing up, is going through that, testing the boundaries.

FL. Well, this is true. And we did in our way, I suppose. We just didn't go to another country and find somebody to marry, and, you know -- but

I am sure that -- that -- that Madelyn was -- well, and he even says, Toot was the big influence in his life, and he even liked his grandfather. (Laughs.)

Q. (Laughs.) Wouldn't it have been fun to know then that she was going to be the grandmother of a president?

FL. Oh, golly. Just think about it.

Q. Mm-hmm.

FL. It really -- and when I think about -- oh, God love her. She would never have thought she would be the grandmother of a president either, but she wasn't going to be just -- she was -- she had always -- in school, in junior high, high school, didn't make any difference -- Madelyn always wanted better. Does that -- am I saying it right?

Q. Sounds right to me. That's why she pushed him to learn.

FL. Uh-huh, because she was always going to be -- always -- she didn't dream just about being a wife and mother, she was going to be somebody, and she ended up being somebody. She sure did.

[END]