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Interview with Zella Truman Regarding Her Life (FA 154)

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Folklife Archives Project 154 – A Generation Remembers, 1900-1949

Interview with Zella Truman (CT 11)

Transcriber's Note: Usually Mrs. Truman's voice is clear but there are times when she speaks softly and it is unintelligible. When her words were unclear ...is used to indicate the problem. Occasionally Mrs. Truman and the interviewer Karen Owens spoke over each other.

TAPE 1, SIDE 1

ZELLA TRUMAN: ... lived in for some time. Used to go to the Little Presbyterian Church and the schoolhouse. And I played the piano at the Presbyterian Church when I had to almost stand up to reach the pedal. And then I went to school, I started there at Smith's Vision (?) (Seven Hills, Sutherland?) when I was four years old.

KAREN OWEN: Golly.

ZT: And then they started to tear it down.

KO: I want to ask you some more about that but, first I wish you would state your full name for me and your birthday and what you went through.

ZT: Well, I'm Zella Truman. My birthday was May 6, 1908 and I grew up right here in Owensboro.

KO: Okay.

ZT: Lived in the same house where I was born in for fifty years.

KO: Oh really? I see.

ZT: (agreement)

KO: Were you a housewife?

ZT: Well no, I was a Church Hostess for First Baptist Church for seventeen years . Not way back then, that's been, I quit, resigned. It's been about sixty(?) years ago.

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KO: What did the hostess do?

ZT: I had charge of all the meals and all the wedding receptions, everything that pertained to the kitchen or the dining room at the First Baptist Church.

KO: Well tell me was it very typical for kids to start school at four years old?

ZT: No. The reason I started was my sister was going to school and I cried to go with her and they let me go. And I started to high school when I was twelve. And I was sixteen, the 6th of May and I graduated that middle of May from high school. Not that I was extra smart but just had a move on me I guess.

KO: How old was your sister that you were crying to go to school with?

ZT: She's eight years older. She was twelve I guess. I don't know. Yes, that would make it right, wouldn't it? She's about eight years older than me.

OK: Eight years older than you?

ZT: Hmmm (agreement)

KO: My goodness.

ZT: I was the baby.

KO: Was it just the two of you?

ZT: Oh no, there were six in our family. I had three sisters, three brothers with one brother dead.

KO: Did he die as a child?

ZT: I think so, I don't remember him. I'm sure he did though. My family was in Arkansas when he died, I think he was the first one.

KO: So, what was school like when you were a kid?

ZT: I don't hardly remember. It was, I guess, I was like any other kid, we had recess. We'd all hurry out and play ball, baseball all during recess. We didn't read or anything, we'd play ball. Just a little two room school. We had men teachers and lady teachers and everything that goes with a country school.

KO: Where was this?

ZT: Down on Bosley Road.

KO: Even though it is in town now, it was in the country then?

ZT: Oh yes. Oh yes, yes, there wasn't hardly anything down there.

KO: Did you live real close there?

ZT: I lived over on McFarland, right off of Crabtree Avenue. There was a big house on the corner where John Gardner lived and we lived right next door. Those were the only two houses and all the rest of it was farmland. And my Daddy run a slaughter house back in there for awhile though he carried the mail in an old fringe top surrey from here to Curdsville. He hauled people, chickens and everything.

KO: How long would that trip take him?

ZT: I don't have any idea, I was just a child. He died when I was seventeen that was a long time ago. But I wish I had the old fringe top surrey now.

KO: What did it look like?

ZT: The surrey? Well, I don't know that I can say. It was just a two seater horse drawn thing with a square top over it with fringe around it. And that's about the best I can explain it....

KO: Was it black?

ZT: It was black.

KO: It was a pretty fancy vehicle back then.

ZT: Oh yeah.

KO: Well, I was wondering about the school. You said you had men teachers and women teachers. Did you have just one teacher at a time?

ZT: Yes, one teacher in one room. In the first grade we started in the back room and then we graduated to a little higher grade and then we went to the front room. Just one teacher taught the whole, all the grades...

KO: I wonder why they separated; one teacher had to go to two different rooms? Is that right?

ZT: No one teacher for each room.

KO: Were the buildings well heated and cooled?

ZT: No, I guess we just raised the windows and used an old coal stove. We drank water out of a dipper out of a bucket. Went outdoors to the toilet. Just like a typical country school.

KO: Was it drafty in there? Do you ever remember getting cold?

ZT: Oh, I don't remember, it's been so long. I'm sure it wasn't.

KO: Did the kids ever get in trouble with the teacher? Get spanked or anything?

ZT: No. Oh, I got slapped on the hand with a ruler a time or two. But I don't remember what it was for, probably for talking.

KO: Well, what did you all do for fun? You mentioned baseball?

ZT: Baseball. That's all I, oh we played with a knife what you called 'mama pig' with a knife.

KO: I'm not sure.

ZT: But we was baseball kids. We played baseball every minute. We had spelling bees, back then we had pie suppers and box suppers things old people used to do...

KO: Tell me about the spelling bees, were you ever in one?

ZT: Well, they had that real often. Oh yes. They just, I can hardly remember about those, but I think they pitted one group against another. I don't really remember.

KO: Were you any good at spelling?

ZT: Well, I don't really know, guess I was average.

KO: So were you a tomboy? Or did most girls play baseball?

ZT: Most of them did. Quite a few. I was more or less a tomboy. I just did everything that anybody else done. Still had my work. But that's about all I can remember about games and baseball. And 'mama pig' that's what I remember. We played with a knife.

KO: Was it a sharp knife?

ZT: Just a pocket knife. Tried to stick it in the ground you know.

KO: Did you have any dolls?

ZT: Yes, I had my first doll, the only doll I can remember having till I was almost, oh I guess, seven or eight years old was an old rag doll. And we had a friend, the name of a fella by the name of Leech, by the Catholic cemetery down there. His son would paint

the face on that doll for me when it got dirty. I took it up there and he would paint another face. And that was my doll until I was probably seven or eight years old. Then I got a beautiful bisque doll. If I had it now, it would be really valuable, but I broke it. And then I had another life size baby doll. That's the only three I can remember ever having...

KO: Well, did kids have a lot of toys back then?

ZT: No, we got mostly fruit, clothes and things we needed. We didn't have money for that kind of stuff. Maybe we'd get one toy. And it didn't seem like, (kids) didn't demand as much back then as they do now. What you don't have, you don't miss. ... (unintelligible) We had oranges and stuff which we didn't have every day of the week like they do now, kind of a treat. Casket (?) candy. But we always had plenty to eat in our house that was one thing we did have. We didn't have too many, well, we didn't have the money to spend on frivolous things, just the necessities that we needed.

KO: Did you ever in your life feel poor or deprived?

ZT: No, I always had plenty of clothes. I had a brother and sister that went through college back then. No, I never thought I was poor. I had just as much the kids I run around with. I was about the same...

KO: Did you ever hang around at your Dad's slaughter house very much?

ZT: No, that was back almost before my time.

KO: So he was carrying the mail when you were growing up?

ZT: Um hum.

KO: What was it like for a mail carrier then? Was it a status thing?

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ZT: I don't really remember. I guess it was, but I really don't remember, I was tiny.

KO: What did he die of?

ZT: He died of pneumonia back in 1925. He's been dead a long time.

KO: Did that happen from carrying the mail?

ZT: Oh no. He had been retired from that for several years.

KO: It seems like a lot of people got sick back then from what I heard people talk about.

ZT: Well the doctors back then didn't know the things to do the way they do now, you know? If he had been living now, well they'd know what to do. Back then he went to what was called a 'horse doctor.' They done the best they could.

KO: Did any of the kids in your family ever get seriously ill?

ZT: No, not until, no, not really until they were going to pass.

KO: Did you have the chicken pox or the measles?

ZT: Oh yes. Oh yes. I still got chicken pox scars. We had everything come along.

KO: Do you remember how they treated it? What they did for you?

ZT: I think my mother washed me in sody (soda) water.

KO: Really, was that for chicken pox?

ZT: To keep you from itching.

KO: Do you remember the flu epidemic of 1918?

ZT: Oh yes. I was in bed with the flu. My sister had it...ache real bad. The night the war was over, of course there was whistles blowing, I was scared to death. We had a little store on the corner down from us. We didn't know what in the world was happening and my Mother went down there to find out what it was. And the war was over in 1918. And I was in bed with the flu...

KO: Was that flu like what we are familiar with today or was it ...?

ZT: It was bad, it was real bad. I guess maybe we have more antibiotics and things like that for the flu which makes it not quite so bad that maybe they didn't have then. But, oh my Mother would change our sheets three or four times a day, we were perspired and just get sopping wet. And people died going and coming back then.

KO: Did anybody that you knew die back then?

ZT: Probably did, I don't remember now. I just don't really think so. Oh honey, that's been so long so how many years ago.

KO: What about the flood of 1913?

ZT: I don't remember it. I remember the 1937.

KO: Did the '37 flood affect your family?

ZT: No, no, we were kind of up on a hill. It didn't bother us at all. But, it did, of course, up as far as Third Street. There it was just like a lake. They had to take people out and evacuate. Of course, I was just five years old. (?)

KO: You mentioned the war bond drive. What do you remember from World War I? How did it affect your family?

ZT: I don't think, it didn't affect us at all.

KO: So, you didn't have anybody to go to war?

ZT: No.

KO: Did you ever hear your parents talk about the war? I was wondering if they thought it was a bad thing?

ZT: No.

KO: Did people take much interest in politics back then?

ZT: Oh yes. Listen honey, we were just kids, the kids I went to school with... but we would have fights. They were Republicans and I was a Democrat. Just kids and we would have kids in front of school and we didn't know a thing about it. They were Republicans and I was a Democrat and that's all we knew. We were just kids but we were really into politics. That was kind of strange. We would really get hot about it...

KO: Was it mostly local politics that people were interested in?

ZT: No. In truth it was whether they were Republicans or Democrats. That was all. No, I don't think local politics were mentioned.

KO: What about World War II? Do you remember when it started?

ZT: Oh honey, I remember all about World War II. My husband was in it.

KO: Oh, he was?

ZT: Yes. I remember that.

KO: How did he come out? Was he okay?

ZT: Well, he was on his way overseas when the war was over. He got about as far as Hawaii. He stayed there for a while and then he

came home. But he was thirty six years old when he went in. And it was bad. But there was a lot of good things about it. He was a meat cutter, we had everything we wanted. We moved to Monroe, Louisiana. And he was down there about fourteen months on special assignment for the war. It was real nice. Lots of good and bad things about it...

KO: Oh, at thirty six how did he end up in the war? Was he drafted?

ZT: Yes. You see we lived in the county. And there were more men in the city than there were in the county so that's the reason his name come up quicker than if we'd been in the city.

KO: They had separate drafts?

ZT: Uhm hum.

KO: That's interesting. Did you all have any kids?

ZT: Oh yes, I had two.

Phone rings.

ZT: My son was a sophomore in high school and my daughter was... (phone rings)

KO: How did your husband break the news to you? That he was going to... (phone rings)

ZT: I don't know, but I know when he did I thought that was the worse day of my life. There I had two kids and he had to go to the service. I don't exactly remember. I know I remember that it made me sick and I had to go to bed, I remember that. And then he left. And I had never worked since we had been married but I knew Jeff Curds (?) one of the bosses at GE was a good friend of ours so he told me to come up and he'd give me a job. Well, I thought that

would help me pass away the time and my kids were both in school so I worked at GE for about six months. And then they stationed him in Monroe, Louisiana and I moved down there. We moved down there. Lived down there for about fifteen months. And it was bad, you know, I remember when he left and everything but...

KO: Did he leave on a train?

ZT: Bus. They went on a bus from here to somewhere in Indiana where their training or whatever. And went from there to Salmon (?) Field. He was stationed there all that time till he went overseas or started overseas. But he was going to Japan.

KO: Was he afraid?

ZT: He wasn't afraid but he didn't like it. He was very much a homebody. He loved his home and he loved his family and it bothered him to be away from us but it wasn't that he was afraid. He would just rather be home.

KO: When the war started, did you ever think he might have to go?

ZT: No, he had rheumatic fever when he was a child and we were just sure that would keep him out, you know. But it didn't. We thought that might have affected his heart or something. Of course, eventually he did die of a heart attack which probably was one of the causes of the fever.

KO: How old was he?

ZT: When he died? Sixty eight. It's been fifteen years.

KO: So where were you and what were you doing when you heard that the war had ended? Do you remember?

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ZT: Yes, we were in Monroe. Me and the two kids were still in Monroe and I remember us going downtown and all the confetti and everything a flying and the kids just had a ball right on the streets. I remember that. And I worked a little longer before the kids and I came back. I remember that. It was a happy time. Of course, it was quite a few months before he could get to come home....guess about six months...

KO: Did he come home on the bus?

ZT: He came on the *Ticonderoga*, that was the big ship. But he came home on the train and I met him in Henderson.

KO: Did you all do anything special to celebrate his being home?

ZT: No, no, nothing special, just being home was enough. We weren't ever very much on celebrating things. We were just kind of a home family.

KO: How did you like working outside the home?

ZT: I didn't like it at GE at all. Of course, my kids was (in school) I might have liked it if my children were with me. I loved it down at First Baptist Church, of course that has just been recently. I was down there seventeen years.

Phone rings.

KO: There were probably a lot of women who were working for the first time too, is that right?

ZT: Oh yes. Oh yes.

KO: How did they seem to react to that situation? Did they mind working?

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ZT: No, I really didn't mind cause it would have been terribly lonesome at home by myself with both kids in school. I just didn't like the factory work.

KO: What about the other women? How did they react to the work?

ZT: I don't know. I know most of them had been there for a long time or they (unintelligible).... I surely don't know.

KO: When the men came home and took their jobs back, did the women seem to mind then? Did you get any kind of impression that maybe some of the women would have liked to have kept working if the men hadn't come back?

ZT: Well, I think they did if they wanted to.

KO: Oh, really?

ZT: I think so. Of course honey, I didn't work for a long time after he came back. He was with National Life Insurance Company when he was discharged. I didn't think anything about it, I was just glad to have him home.

KO: Do you remember when women got the vote?

ZT: No, I don't. Not really, just vaguely, vaguely I remember when women first voted. It's been so long ago and I don't remember things to well.

KO: I was wondering what people thought about that, if they got upset?

ZT: No, really, I don't think so. I think it was their right to vote. I know I've voted every year since I was old enough to vote.

KO: Just Democrats?

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ZT: No, I've voted for more Republicans than I have Democrats. I vote for the man, I don't vote for the party. The first vote I cast was for a Republican.

KO: Do you remember Roosevelt?

ZT: Oh yes.

KO: Did you like Roosevelt?

ZT: Oh yes, very much.

KO: Do you remember what you were doing when the news came out that he had died?

ZT: I remember when they shot Kennedy. I was at a club meeting. I believe it was the Garden Club at Gabes and they came up and told us he had been shot. And I just got sick and had to leave. But I don't remember about Roosevelt.

KO: What about prohibition? Do you remember that?

ZT: No, not really.

KO: I was wondering if people took it very seriously.

ZT: I don't know, really.

KO: So, when you grew up. Let me ask you this, when you were dating, how did people date? What did they do for fun at that age?

ZT: Well, of course, I was always big growing up and I dated in high school. I double dated with this couple and he had a car...and we'd go up and visit his aunt and uncle and eat cookies and bananas and stuff. And then we'd sit at home and talk, you know. Maybe go to church. I don't remember going to picture shows very much back then. Mostly just sit around and talked.

KO: Did you all play music very much?

ZT: No, not like they do now.

KO: Do you remember the first movie you ever saw?

ZT: No, I think it was way back when Eddie Cantor, years ago in silent films. I don't remember the pictures I used to see. Too far back.

KO: What was considered proper behavior for a young lady back then? How were you supposed to act?

ZT: Well, I always acted very lady like. Of course, I was pretty much a like tomboy, like I said, when it come to playing ball and doing things like that. But, when I was on a date, I was very much a lady and I think most everybody else was too.

KO: Were you allowed to go out alone with a young man?

ZT: Oh yes. And then I dated another boy who lived in the country and I had pie suppers at his school and his Mother would bake pies. She'd bake one for me and one for her daughter, you know. Then he would come and get me and get a couple of watermelons we'd go out in the watermelon patch and eat the insides out. Just things like that. I remember on Halloween we used to go out, it was all country down in there, down below which is now is Bosley Road and Crabtree Avenue. It was still country. There wasn't hardly a dozen houses down in there. And we'd used to just go up and down the country roads and we had corn. We'd shell corn off the cob and throw it on people's porches and things like that. That is how we spent our Halloween. And we'd cook up parties once in a while, somebody would have a party and we'd go. I don't remember what we did at those parties...Don't seem like we danced or anything. I don't remember, the...

KO: What was considered evil back then? Was evil like smoking or was it..

ZT: Nobody smoked.

KO: Oh really? Not even the guys?

ZT: I can't remember them smoking. I guess, promiscuous girls, I guess was a bad one. And then there weren't too many of those. Back then, you didn't have anything to do with a girl that got pregnant. She was just nothing. The values back then were a lot higher than they are now. Of course, you know what our beliefs are now. I can't remember kids getting in trouble or anything like that really, I can't.

KO: Did you of any girl who got in trouble?

ZT: I can't remember. If I do, there were very few and I've forgotten. But if they did, you had nothing to do with them.

KO: Did that seem harsh back then?

ZT: I think it was. Of course, you didn't hear of it too much.

KO: What about dancing and drinking and stuff like that?

ZT: Well they'd dance. We used to go down to Ten Foot Gorge. Of course you never heard of Ten Foot Gorge down in Sorgho. They had dances there. Public dances outside. And we used to go and have parties. I don't remember any place but Ten Foot Woods that I ever went to for dances.

KO: What kind of dances did you do?

ZT: Well, I don't know. Just dance.

KO: Waltzes?

ZT: I think it was the next thing to the waltz, kind of what they called two step, something like that.

KO: What kind of clothes did they wear when you were dating?

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ZT: Well, I remember having a real long skirt and they wore them for a long time...Isn't it strange now that I can't remember the clothes I wore when I dated? And I think the others were just like a teenagers today, ordinary dresses like they wear them now. I remember this long skirt I had when I dated. ...cotton fabric. Of course they are a little more far out than they were back then.

KO: Did you make all your own clothes?

ZT: Oh no. I made some after I got married. I could have been a good seamstress if I had liked it but I didn't like to sew. No, I didn't make any. We used to order from Montgomery Ward out of the catalogue.

KO: Were they very expensive back then?

ZT: No. Well it depended on the amount of money you made,... just about equal to today. You know, not too much difference in what you pay for things today according to the money you make than what we made back then. My Daddy bought our house and worked for fifty cents a day and paid for our house. Can you imagine that?

End of side one.