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Interview with Bonnie G. (Thompson) Fields, b. 1923 (FA 210)

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JOHN FIELDS.
FOLK LORE 276

JOHN FIELDS: I am John W. Fields, a senior at Western Kentucky University. I will be conducting an interview with Mrs Bonnie Fields, my mother. She will be discussing life styles of the 30's during the "Great Depression". Bonnie Fields was born Bonnie G. Thompson on August 14, 1923, at Claremore, Rogers County, Oklahoma. We are sitting in my living room and have just turned off the television. Now, Mom, for the record I must have your permission to make this recording. You understand the recording may be utilized by others on various projects or for general information. In short this tape may become the property of Western Kentucky University. So without any further ado, please indicate you understand what I have said and you do in fact give your permission for this recording session.

BONNIE FIELDS: Okay.

JOHN FIELDS: Okay, alright.

BONNIE FIELDS: Sounds okay to me.

JOHN FIELDS: There is not a lot of information that I have available and but what we are interested in... or what I'm interested in is a, if you will, start with going to school. Do you remember going back to your early education?

BONNIE FIELDS: Oh yeah, I remember that. In Oklahoma, you was supposed to be six years old when you started to school, but my cousins decided it was time for me to go to school, so I started when I was five. Course they had to lie a little bit about it. When the school teacher asked them how old I was they said she'll be six her birthday which I would've been, but I was just five on August 14th, so that's why I got started to school a year earlier than what anybody else did. And a oh I don't know. The main thing I can remember then...it's sorta like it is now. In one way, you're talking about the depression. We had homeless people. I remember when I was a little kid men come to the door begging for something to eat. Momma wouldn't go to the door, cause she was ashamed, ^{of} ~~to~~ course she couldn't give them nothing, cause if she did she give them our supper. So I couldn't understand why momma wouldn't feed a man cause if he hadn't of been hungry he wouldn't have asked for something to eat, right.

JOHN FIELDS: Yeah, un huh.

BONNIE FIELDS: And now, I don't know if this is what you want to talk about or not, but the comparisons the same, except now, you see all these homeless people, you see women and children, back then you seen men.

BONNIE FIELDS: You hardly ever seen any children. And you have, I know there in Claremore, there was a man starved to death, sitting up in his room, a very well known man around town, because he wouldn't beg for something to eat. He would^{ask}. I don't know, its hard to say. I know, when you're a kid, I guess you judge wealth by how much they had to eat. Kids are different now, they don't do that. I used to think my uncle was the richest man in the world. We'd go out in the country, he lived on a farm. Man... they had meat, they had butter, they had eggs, they had vegetables all the milk and I thought, boy are they rich. They so rich they even feed milk to their hogs. I didn't know that was just a way to get rid of it. You just don't think about things like that.

JOHN FIELDS: Well you know in reference to food, when you was going to school, did you come home for lunch or did you eat at school?

BONNIE FIELDS: All the kids come home for lunch. And after I got up into, I think, sixth grade or seventh grade, school was about a mile or mile and a half from the house. The only time you could take a lunch was if it was snowing and you couldn't get to school couldn't get home, but you come home for lunch.

BONNIE FIELDS: The only ones allowed to eat in the lunch room was kids that lived out in the country. Then, they could bring a lunch, but we had to come home for lunch. I thought I was about the fastest thing in town, cause we didn't have very much time for lunch and I ran home and ran back. I think you had a little bit of experience with that too.

JOHN FIELDS: yeah, un huh. Well, I'll tell you what, Maw, how did my grandmother, your mother and grandad make a living. If they were living in town, were they both working, or what?

BONNIE FIELDS: Well, yeah, mother and daddy was in the restaurant business. I don't really remember this, but I remember momma talking about it...what they called the Big Crash. They lost everything they had. They had a farm they just moved out on...well my brother fell out of a tree and broke his back, you know, Uncle Paul was paralyzed from the waist down. Of course they only gave him a year to live when he done it. Then they had to get rid of the farm and the banks failed...I think, I think that's what momma said. Anyhow, I can remember her talking about losing everything they had. They bought a house there in town after Paul got crippled, that's where I was born. They moved to town, Daddy went

BONNIE FIELDS: back to working in a cafe. And it wasn't high I know he was making 3 dollars and a half a week. He went to work at five in the morning or six, somewhere in that area. He'd get home when the cafe closed at night. Now that wasn't with no overtime, seven days a week for three dollars and a half. Then he really hit it big, I remember that, he got raised up to a dollar a day. He made up to seven dollars a week. My daddy worked like a dog. But my cousins would come in and they thought we was rich because momma bought bread, we bought milk and they would milk a cow. We got our milk in a bottle. We had an inside toilet and that was the highth of luxury. Daddy lost his cafe in '28 or '29. Then he would work anywhere. One time he just worked for our food.

JOHN FIELDS: Can you give me an idea of what the price of groceries were? A loaf of bread, meat...

BONNIE FIELDS: A load of bread was a nickel. I think, sometime she would give me a quarter to run to the store and get a round steak if we had company. Now days, a quarters worth of round steak today wouldn't grease the skillet. Can you imagine a quarters worth of round steak now? Daddy was gone away

BONNIE FIELDS: somewhere trying to find work. Anyway, my momma had me run over there to Mrs. Callaways and borrow a half cup of lard. I got the lard home, then she said "go over to Mrs. Browns and borrow half a cup of flour". I went over and got the flour. She put the lard in a skillet, browned off the flour, added water and that was supper. We called it "Hoover Honey". You know when Hoover got elected there was going to be a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage. You know what that chicken turned out to be, squirrel, and that car turned out to be a wheelbarrow, and then there was that "Hoover Honey", I bet I eat a barrel of it. I guess if you was raised on gravy, you eat gravy all your life. Our life revolved around my brother because he was paralyzed. Momma would buy milk, take the top off of it and scoop out the cream for him. I couldn't understand it at first, why he could have it and I could not. But he had to have it. Like meat, he got the meat, I got the gravy. But you can't tell kids that. But I got up in my teens and went to work. I went to work in a cafe, working with daddy. I made 2.50 a week, then I made 3.00 a week. There were no tips then. I babysat for 50 cents a day, but babysitting did not consist of just baby setting.

BONNIE FIELDS: I work for this woman after school. I get there about 3:30, wife of a Highway Patrolman, Osage Indian, I think. Anyway I would come in and babysit, I do the washing, cleanup the house and fix supper. I started babysitting when I was about nine years old. This was no everyday job. I always gave my momma half because it never seemed she had enough.

JOHN FIELDS: Did grandmaw have a garden?

BONNIE FIELDS: We had a garden, but it was daddys. I never could figure out how he done it, because he worked 12 or 14 hours a day, but he still took care of the garden. We had green beans, peas...that sort of stuff. I know one time daddy was gone about three months, and all we had was potatoes. I still don't like potatoes, thats all we had, nothing to put on them...just salt. Doctor always saying don't eat starch, don't eat potatoes. Don't worry about it, I don't. I don't care for them at all. You know, they say I was young, but when you are hungry you remember. I know when Roosevelt was elected, they said he was going to alphabet us to death. They had the WPA, PWA, and all them kinds of things.

BONNIE FIELDS: But I liked him. They had the CCC. You know there was grown men in that. It was supposed to be for young boys. Your daddy was in it and so was your granddaddy.

JOHN FIELDS: What did they do, those outfits?

BONNIE FIELDS: Well, CCC was Civilian Conservation Corps. You know, a lot of those parks that was built back in the '30s, you see that was what they done. They got paid about 26 dollars a month. They got to keep, I think, about 6 dollars and the rest was sent home. They had to sign an agreement for this. They used to tell this about a man. He said he was going to California. They said why you going out there, and he said he was just going to follow his farm...it just went by...blowed to California by the wind. They made a lot of jokes. Do you know how to tell a rich Okie from a poor Okie? A rich Okie going to California has two mattresses on top of his car. A poor Okie only has one mattress. Then there was this guy they was going to send out on a job digging something. He said he needed two shovels. They asked why, and he said he needed a long handle shovel to lean on while he was standing up, and a short handle shovel to lean on while he was sitting down. Then there was this there lady in Claremore had a pretty big yard. She called up the WPA and

BONNIE FIELDS: said she needed eight guys to mow the yard. They said "Oh now, Mrs Ferguson, you don't need eight guys to mow the yard". She said, "Yes I do". They ask her how she figured that. She said, "Well two a mowing, two a going, two a comming and two a shitting." I shouldn't have said that.

JOHN FIELDS: Don't worry about that.

BONNIE FIELDS: So I don't know if she got her eight guys or not.

JOHN FIELDS: Can you tell me, was there any community organizations...churches, civic groups...trying to help people?

BONNIE FIELDS: No, not really. They had what they called commodities. Of course, momma never would take them. You know how momma was. But I think it was surplus they was giving away. They used to tell about an old woman they gave her a sack of grapefruits. She came back the next week and told them "Don't give me anymore of them grapefruits". They asked her why. She said "I boiled them, I baked them, I stewed them and they still are not fit to eat". Don't know if that story was true or not, But they gave away flour, sugar, and finally they set up what they called a canning kitchen. Don't know who set that up. But you get your garden stuff and go in. They furnish the cans. Every once in a while someone would kill a cow and donate it. They would can it and pass it out. It was good.

JOHN FIELDS: What sort of support did the family have? Did people come in with food?

BONNIE FIELDS: Well Yeah. To a certain extent. But momma was funny turned to say the least. She wouldn't accept anything called charity. I believe if my uncles, my uncles and my grandpa hada knowed the position we was in back in the Depression, we wouldn't have went hungry. But we did. I think it was because she wouldn't ask. Pride is a wonderful thing, but kids don't understand. I couldn't understand it. I remember grandpa, a guy from REA came out to the house. He said "Now Mr. Mallory, we are going to put electric in your house. We are going to run a line right down your road". Grandpa said "you ain't running down my road and you ain't putting electric in my house". The man told him you have to sign up for it. Grandpa told him "I lived here all my life, you ain't putting electric in my house and you ain't putting them damn poles in my yard". Do you know that line jutted across the road on Grandpa's property line, went down the road on the other side, down to the other end of grandpa's property line and come back across the road. Grandpa died in 1940 without electricity. He would not have it because that guy told him he had to have it. Now that is carrying stubbornness a little bit too far. He

BONNIE FIELDS: had a lot of sayings he used to tell me. I just loved grandpa. He would say "Never let your left hand know what your right hand was a doing".

JOHN FIELDS: Why was that?

BONNIE FIELDS: Well, keep everything to your ownself, don't let everyone find out your business. Then he would say "Beware, beware that man trying to give you something for nothing". Because you would pay in the long run. Then he had another one, "Beware of that man who smiles all the time, because he has evil on his mind". I used to get tickled at that.

JOHN FIELDS: Well, mom, tell me about some of the receipes you all had. Now I know about "Hoover Honey".

BONNIE FIELDS: They call that sawmill gravy some places. But it is the same thing. Plain old water gravy. And momma always made cornbread. But I'm telling you you ain't ate nothing till you ate cornbread made out of water. Cause we didn't have no milk. That didn't taste too well neither. She got pretty good, she got hold of some milk somewhere and she used that dry milk. It didn't taste too bad. The main thing I remember though is Uncle Lee, back then. My dear rich Uncle Lee. They come to town. He didn't have a car, they would come to town in a wagon. They would pull in the lot. Boy, I was

BONNIE FIELDS: down there in a minute when I found out they was a comming. That was the joy of my life, just go down and sat on the end of that wagon, when they come in on Saturday. They lived about six miles from town. We would have bologna, cheese, and crackers. That sounded like a feast. Bologna, cheese and crackers. Grandpa, he didn't never have a car neither. He had a buggy, he liked to race. He would get him a few little charges before he started home. Then he would race whoever happened to be on the road. He liked his little toddies. He figured he come to town once a month, he was entitled to a toddy. Which makes good sense, if you like your toddy. I don't know, it's this time of year, going to the grocery store, buying groceries, momma never did buy a turkey. We didn't know what a turkey was. We had an old rooster she would boil off and bake it. I know once she boiled one for two days before it got tender enough for us to eat. You talk tough, even the gravy was tough. I don't know what it was. I thought they must of run that son of a gun 10 miles before they caught it.

BONNIE FIELDS: Momma always figured that, and I didn't know, that you couldn't have oranges except at Christmas. That's the only time we would get them. We would get them in our stocking when I was little. And fresh coconut, momma liked to get them and make a coconut cake for Christmas. And Brazel nuts, english walnuts, Christmas was the only time of the year we would get them. Daddy always brought that old, I don't know what candy it was, that old accordian sugar stripped stuff. He would buy a little basket of that. About two and a half pounds, that was our Christmas candy. I know one year I was going to hang up my sock, and I looked at momma's socks and thought I would get a lot more stuff if I hung up momma's sock instead of mine. So I tacked that sucker up. You know momma weighed 300 pounds, her socks were big. But there wasn't a thing in that sock the next morning. My little idea didn't work at all. And I honestly believed in Santa Claus. When I really got tore up about Santa Claus was when me and that little ole girl I played with and she was just as mean as I was and I was just as mean as she was. I wanted a bike. And I got it in my head we was going to get bikes for Christmas. She done

BONNIE FIELDS: everyting I done. She got the bike and I didn't get one. I lost my belief in Santa Claus right there. Of course, they said, ask Santa Claus and you would get it, if you was good. Well I wasn't necessarily good, but she wasn't neither. That sort of cured my interest in Santa Claus. We had been Luluas. You know, we didn't have no school bus. I waded snow up to my knees going to school, and then you had to go home. If you didn't, you didn't eat. Sometimes after you got home, you didn't have a thing to eat. You know, sometimes I think it would be good for kids today to find out where something comes from. Then I am glad they don't too...

JOHN FIELDS: Well mom, we will stop. I think I have some good information here. I thank you.