

**Oral History Interview of
Sabette Pitcaithley**

**Interviewed by: Elissa Stroman
June 26, 2018
Lubbock, Texas**

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Sabette Pitcaithley as she discusses her family life and background. In this interview, Pitcaithley details how she met her husband, her education, and the strong women who influenced her life.

Length of Interview: 01:48:46

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Keywords

Family life and background, Gender Roles, Teaching

Elissa Stroman (ES):

Okay. We are recording now, so I'm going to say that today is June 26, 2018. We're here at the Southwest Collection. My name is Elissa Stroman and we're in my office, and we are talking with Sabette—and I want to make sure I say your name right—Pit-caith-ley?

Sabette Pitcaithley (SP):

Correct.

ES:

Okay. We're going to hear about her family lineage in Texas and about some of the stuff that she brought in today and just her history in general. So we always start out with interviews with, can you state your full name for us, please?

SP:

My full name is Sabette Stephens Pitcaithley.

ES:

Okay. And when and where were you born?

SP:

I was born in Colorado Springs, Colorado, August 29, 1945.

ES:

Okay. And what were your parents' names?

SP:

My father was William Alton Stephens—and that's with a p-h.

ES:

Okay.

SP:

And my mother was Carrie Wood Cleveland Stephens.

ES:

And tell me about growing up. Tell me about your family.

SP:

My father, in the thirties, joined the—I've forgotten what it was called then. The Army—it wasn't the Air Corps yet. He had been working in the bank in Lamesa, Texas. Because of the

situation in the world, I guess, he joined the military. He had met my mother in Lamesa, Texas, where she had grown up. He began his travels in the thirties training for the military. My mother, who began teaching school when she was sixteen and then went off to college and came back, was teaching school there. One thing that I brought was the letters that they exchanged in the thirties. I actually have his letter and her response for at least three years. When he finally got a posting in Colorado—and I think there're letters that talk about that—my mother stopped teaching, moved to Colorado. My sister was born in Grand Junction, Colorado. She's eight years older than I am. Her name is Stephanie Stephens Chester. They then traveled to California during the war. I remember stories. They had a house on the beach during the blackouts after Pearl Harbor, and my mother deciding where she would hide herself and my sister if the Japanese landed. They also lived in Virginia. They lived in Oklahoma. Then they moved back to Colorado. Colorado Springs. I was born there. I think at that point—that was the early forties—my dad was in Europe and I know that the year before D-Day he was in London, because we have a book that he signed to my mother on that day, and it says London. He had come home from France. My mother would be horrified for me to say this, but I think I was a mistake. [laughter] Due to that visit home. He was actually in France when I was born. When I was nine month—actually eight months old—we went to Germany. He was with the Air Lift. At one point he was an inspector general. We have letters about when we were going to be leaving, when we had to get on the ship to get to Europe, the house we would be living in. There are pictures of that house.

ES:

Um-hm. That's great.

SP:

I think we were only there—she said I spent my first and second birthdays there. For whatever reason he sent us home and he remained. So I was two and he came home when I was six. So I remember my mother saying we could have gone back to Colorado or come to my grandmother in Lamesa, Texas. And we ended up coming to my grandmother. My sister says that she said to my mother once, "Where am I from?" And mother was saying, "Well, you were born in Colorado. You've lived in Germany." She said, "No, where am I from? My friends want to know where am I from?" So she thinks we came to Lamesa so we could be from somewhere.

[Laughter] So when we first came back we lived with my grandmother and my maiden aunt. At 1601 South First St. in Lamesa, Texas. And then when my dad came home from Germany—whether it was serendipitous or not, I don't know—but he was base commander at the base in Big Spring.

ES:

Fantastic.

SP:

So he—

ES:

Not much of a commute.

SP:

Right? He commuted and I guess he thought he would be there a while, so they built a house. He was there two years, I think. I remember that as a really good time. It was time for my sister to go to college, so let's see—maybe he left. She was saying she would only come to Tech. She would go no place else. He had been transferred to Oakland, California. My father said, "You can't leave her and our house is here." So he left again and we remained in Lamesa. He returned when I was twelve. Having said I was a mistake, my mother was forty-five when I was born.

ES:

Wow.

SP:

And my dad is two or three years younger. So he was a bit younger. So in the fifties they were cleaning out the military. The war was over. So he was sort of forced to retire. He came back to Lamesa an angry man. Just as I was entering my teens. So it was not a pretty sight. My sister wasn't there, my mother and I had become very close, and I was angry, you know, that he was—he was a colonel and he came home as *The Colonel*. We actually called my parents—or my husband does—the Colonel and Carrie. That's what everyone called him. The Colonel. So he began ordering everybody around, and I was kind of like, "Really? I don't think so." So we locked horns. Ultimately became very close. Then when my grandmother died in '68 they moved to Abilene. So that's my family story in a nutshell. When I went to college I went to Trinity University my freshman year, and came to Tech that summer to get math out of the way. [Laughter] And ended up transferring to Tech. So my sister, my brother-in-law, my niece, and I, and my husband all went to Tech. So we're sort of a—except for Dwight. He's a New Mexican. My husband—west Texans.

ES:

Um-hm. You found your identity, for sure then. [Laughter]

SP:

Right? Yeah.

ES:

I'm fascinated by your mother's story. Having you later in life in the forties. Were there any health repercussions? Or did she have you at home or—

SP:

She had me at a Catholic hospital.

ES:

At a hospital? Okay.

SP:

In Colorado Springs. I don't think there were repercussions as far as I was concerned, but my mother ultimately died of complications from osteoporosis. I think it wrecked her bones, carrying me at that time. Then going to Germany where nutritious food was not available. So I think that was hard for her. My mother was a powerful, powerful, West Texas woman, and I could spend the rest of the time talking about her.

ES:

Um-hm. It sounds like—and I want to come back to her. I want to get a little bit more—but the infrastructure that she put in place for you to succeed. To go back to her family so that you had these resources. And I guess your sister being eight years older also probably helped a little bit. She could help out with you at times, too.

SP:

You know what we—she and I—say? We were raised by powerful women. My grandmother had come to West Texas in 1905 or '06. My aunt was an infant and my grandmother got on a train in East Texas and came west and my grandfather met her with a wagon. This is in my mother's memoirs—they spent the night on the way to Lamesa out on the prairie to a shotgun house. So they lived out on the ranch until my mother and aunt needed to go to school, and then they moved to town. But these women needed to be done, they did it. And that was very much—I think that's why I resented my father. Because my mother had been taking care of things very well, thank you very much. [Laughter] And here he came home and she sort of backed off. A friend has just this year said to me, "You know, Sabette, he was crushed. His ego was crushed. And she was protecting him." And that was kind of like a slap in the face. Of course she was. She didn't need to prove anything. She already knew who she was.

ES:

Yeah. Yeah. How did you get your name? What's the story behind your name?

SP:

So when my mother began travelling she began collecting names. She actually had a list of names on the pantry door, even after I was an adult. So if a child was born they'd contact mother, "We need a name." So I have a cousin named Signey. S-i-g-n-e. Which mother picked up somewhere. I have a cousin named Tobin. Another one named—let's see—Dana. These weren't common names then. My sister Stephanie and she said my name was Bavarian for Elisabeth. My sister says she read that in a novel. [Laughter] But wherever she came up with it, it's served me very well.

ES:

Why don't we—well, we could go in so many directions. [laughter] Your—the grandmother that came to Lamesa, what was her name?

SP:

Her name was Maddie May Wheeler [?].

ES:

Okay.

SP:

And she grew up on a big farm, which was sort of a plantation house, between Windham and Honey Groves, Texas. She was one of nine children and one of the younger ones—I don't know if she was the youngest—she was a bit spoiled. I remember—obviously very strong woman—I remember my mother saying that when my grandfather said, "We're going west." She said, "I will cook, I will clean, I will do nothing outside." [laughter] And she meant it. And so when they were on the ranch in the beginning he did the sewing to make the clothes for my mother and my aunt. And when my mother got old enough she took over that job. She was very much the matriarch of the family. And her younger brother and sister I think sort of saw her as their mother figure. What my mother said went. If my mother proclaimed something everybody just—said, "All right, Carrie." That's the way it is. So my grandmother was a strong woman, but also sort of self-contained. Her two younger children—I think my aunt, mother—and I may have the years wrong—were maybe twelve and fifteen when they came along. I think they did a lot of the raising. In the pictures—I was looking at a picture before we came of my mother and my aunt—and I'll tell you her story—and then the son and the younger daughter. As I looked at that picture I was haunted by my mother and aunt's eyes. They look sad to me. And their little brother and sister look so happy, and I think that was their doing. Maybe I misread that, because to hear my mother talk her whole life was an adventure and fun. So that may or may not be true, but.

ES:

Um-hm. You said she starts teaching school at sixteen?

SP:

Yes.

ES:

How did that happen? Did she graduate early, or—

SP:

She must have graduated early. They needed teachers in West Texas, and so she went to—she and her friend, and I've forgotten her friend's name—went to these little country schools and they lived with a family and taught at these schools. Then she went to West Texas, and I guess it was teacher's—

ES:

Yeah, the Teacher's College.

SP

--college. When my aunt was old enough to go too they went together, and at that time—let's see if mother was born in 1901, that may have been 1920/19? He—my grandfather sent them with a car to West Texas—to Canyon, Texas. To school. So she got her degree there. She went on after she had met my father to go to University of Texas to work on her master's, but she began having migraines and dropped out. My sister says when we were born she said, "You will go to college and you will get a master's degree and you will be able to take care of yourself." And that was her mantra.

ES:

Wow. Well—and I just looked to make sure on your resume—yeah, you got a master's degree.

SP:

I did. [laughtes]

ES:

Well, tell me about education. So you came to Tech. You were at Tech in the sixties, so that's kind of this transition from Texas Technological College to the university. Tell me about kind of your observations upon moving here. Your first kind of—well, you have history with it beforehand—but kind of your impressions of it?

SP:

Of Tech?

ES:

Uh-huh.

SP:

We had always come to Lubbock to shop, so it was sort of like coming home. I lived in Hulen Hall. Of course back then there was curfew. I think not until my senior year could we wear pants. I remember walking to class in sandstorms and having sand in my teeth and having to watch my skirt. I liked being here. I think looking back—and my husband and I have discussed this—we got very good educations here. Dr. Kenneth Davis was my primary professor/advisor, and I loved him. Who else? Eddleman was a professor I really liked. I liked my Shakespeare professor. I can't remember his name. This was all in the English department. Minored in history. Remember Vignious Anne Wallace [?] [0:19:19.2], and who taught western civ? Not Bledsoe. What was his name? Anyway, I think I got a good education. I went home my freshman year—the summer after my freshman year, and stayed at home and commuted here to take math. And as the spring progressed I went home one weekend my sophomore year and my mother said to me, "What are you doing this summer?" And I said, "Oh I don't know." And she said, "Well, I do. You're going to summer school. You drove me crazy last summer." [laughter] So I got my bachelor's in three and a half years. [laughter]

ES:

Because your mom kept you busy.

SP:

Because I was in school. And then I entered graduate school.

ES:

So you did English for your graduate studies as well?

SP:

Right.

ES:

What—was there a thesis requirement?

SP:

There was. I wrote my thesis and I—we wondered if we should bring that.

ES:

I imagine there's a copy. A lot of those—

SP:

In the library.

ES:

--from that time period actually we have copies here in the Southwest Collections. But yeah, it's still nice to cross-reference it.

SP:

The Use of Nature in Thomas Hardy's novels: Tess of the d'Urbervilles, Mayor of Casterbridge, and I've forgotten the third one. But anyway. That was my thesis, and I wrote that under Dr. Davis.

ES:

And so after graduation what were your plans? What did you—

SP:

Well, so I told you my mother said, "You will get a master's and you will be able to take care of yourself." She had been an English teacher. My sister was the rebel in the family. I was the goody two-shoes, because being eight years younger I watched her rebel and I saw the results. [laughs] And I loved my mother dearly, so I would not have hurt her for anything. So she had taught English.

ES:

And so you taught English.

SP:

So I taught English. And funny story, which some people would find horrifying, when I determined this—that I would teach English—I also loved design, but there was no—design at Tech was Home Ec. And I don't like to cook yet [laughter] or sew, and so I thought, Okay, that doesn't work. And so I decided on English. I would write home even though it was sixty miles away, and mother would return my letters corrected. [laughter] So her point being, "If you're going to teach English, by golly you're going to know English." And she worked on our accents all the time. She didn't want us saying "oh-l" [oil] and "bai-bai" [bye-bye]. [laughs]

ES:

My mom is a—was—an English teacher before she retired, and I remember standing in line at a restaurant and she said, "You'll know the difference between pic-ture and pit-cher." And so that enunciation, I think that must be an English teacher thing.

SP:

Right. It must be. So anyway, that's—I became an English teacher, and it served me very well. I had thought that I would go teach someplace different. Maybe to Colorado, maybe to California, travel, and then as I was doing my student teaching—actually, before graduate school—I taught with a woman. I can't remember the name of the school, but anyway I taught—I was student teaching eighth and ninth graders. This was during Vietnam, and so I had an A and I wanted to keep that A. She came in school one day and said, “Sabbette, we have this friend that just came back from Vietnam. He was all shot up. His arm was all messed up. He's coming to visit this weekend. Would you go out with the three of us?” And I'm going, Oh, I don't do blind dates! And I thought, Oh I have to do this. I have to do this. So it was Dwight. My husband. [Laughter] So I spent two days in the dorm talking to the girls about, how do I approach this man? Do I say, “I'm so sorry you were wounded?” Do I pretend I don't see? How do I approach this situation? So I go downstairs in Hulen Hall and there stands this man, and I can't see anything wrong with him. [Laughter] So he had been wounded, but they had patched him up well. So he is disabled, but this arm is shorter because they had to cut the ulnar nerve and redid. This finger got blasted so it won't bend. But those are his injuries. So anyway, we began dating long distance because he was at Pendleton. Is that it? In San Diego. Camp Pendleton. For a while he was in the hospital, and then he was chasing prisoners. So—actually I didn't bring those letters. [Laughter] I can't bring myself to do that yet. But we were writing back and forth, and then he had flunked out of college partying. So he needed to go back to Eastern New Mexico to make up all his grades. He was there the year I was in graduate school, and I was here. Lo and behold he proposed and at first he said, “Well, just wait until I finish school.” And I said, “Well, I'm not hanging around here.” [Laughter] So I said, “I can teach anywhere.” So we married. And that's how my teaching degree—my degree in English—helped a lot. Because the whole time he was in school I was teaching school. He got his bachelor's and master's at Eastern. We could afford Tech for his PhD, so we came to Lubbock and I taught at Matthews Junior High. He got his PhD here. Initially, he was sort of a lost soul. He wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do and he went home and was looking at all his books—his father wanted him to be a musician. So when he went to college the first time he majored in music. It just didn't work for him. So he went home and was looking at all his books and they were all history books. So he decided, “Well, I'll be a history teacher.” I was teaching eighth and ninth graders and I thought, These kids would destroy this man. [Laughter] So I said, “Maybe you want to teach at a higher level than public schools.” So that's when we began the process of the master's and the PhD. And lo and behold, he was working for Dr. Kitchen here. The Buffalo River in Arkansas had become a national park, and they needed to inventory all the buildings along the river. They asked Dwight to do that. So he did that for the National Parks Service office in Santa Fe. He graduated—there was a surplus of history professors. Not many jobs. We got a call saying, “Would you like a three-month appointment with the National Parks Service in Santa Fe?” And we're thinking, Duh. Who would pass that up? [Laughs]

ES:

Exactly. Yeah.

SP:

So we went to Santa Fe for the summer, and he got an extension. So we determined if I got a job there too, we would move. If I couldn't I would come back to Lubbock. Sort of like my mom and dad. And he would stay there. I got a job at the College of Santa Fe teaching English. So we moved to Santa Fe and that thus began the career with the National Parks Service.

ES:

I was looking—and so that was 1976 that y'all went to Santa Fe.

SP:

Right. Yeah.

ES:

Tell me about teaching junior high English?

SP:

I loved it. [laughter]

ES:

I know that middle school can—because of this transition for students—it can be a hellscape for some teachers, but some teachers really thrive in that—

SP:

I did.

ES:

--that growth that students can have. So tell me more about that.

SP:

You know, one minute they're children and the next minute they're trying to be adults. They're funny. My daughter—I also had my daughter late. When I was almost forty-one. She says, "Mom, don't look at me that way. You have fire in your eyes." And I inherited this from my mother. It works really well with eighth and ninth graders. My philosophy was, "Everyone will be safe in my classroom. Everyone will be treated equally. Everyone will be heard." You know, I took education courses and they said, "Don't give rules the first day of class." I gave rules. And those were my rules. And, "You will respect every other person in this room. You will not laugh when someone is speaking." And when I taught at Matthews, it was the *barillo* school. I don't

know what it is now. But I knew that I could go into that neighborhood day or night and I'd be protected. I loved those kids. And I think they loved me. So my teaching of eighth and ninth graders was a very powerful experience for me. However, incredibly draining. When they wrote an essay, and they wrote an essay every week, I—they had a grammar book. I put the rule number above the mistake and if they wanted extra credit they only had to turn over the paper, rewrite the sentence correctly, and I'd change their grade. So that's the way I taught. I broke up fights. I was the sex education teacher. Girls came in and asked me things—because there wasn't such a thing then—that just made my jaw drop. And I would think, Yikes! How do I talk about this? I'll tell you one funny story. So I had this one big good-looking kid that sat in the back seat in my class and he would come in and he'd put his head on his desk and go to sleep. I knew this kid is wiped out. I didn't bother him. I let him be. I taught—we had things we had to teach. I taught *Great Expectations*, I taught *The Odyssey*, I taught *Romeo and Juliet*, and I think I was teaching *Romeo and Juliet* or I was teaching poetry and we were having a class discussion. His name was Leon. Leon sat up and he looked around and he began talking. [Laughter] And so not only was he tired, but he was bored. And really sharp kid. So he came up after class one day and said, "I am so sorry I fall asleep in your class, but my older brother has a band and I play in his band at night." And so that's why he was tired. I was standing behind him during a test one day—and you have to remember this was what—in the seventies—and a word that's very common now that you hear in every movie was not common then. Leon had on a t-shirt and on the back of it it said, "P-h-u-q-u-e." With a U underneath. I was looking at that thinking, [sounding out] fff-fu-fu—[laughter] Right! I know what that is. You know, for him it was, "I'm getting away with this. Nobody gets this." And he got away with it with me too. I thought it was hilarious that it was phonetically spelled and the stupid teachers didn't get it. Or they did, and like me, ignored it. [Laughter]

ES:

Thought it was kind of ni—yeah.

SP:

And there was a party one night. A ninth grade party. The theme was the mafia—Al Capone and all of that. These kids came in and they said, "We want your money." And one of my students stood up laughing and said, "Are you kidding? You're in the *barillo*! We don't have any money." [Laughter] So yeah.

ES:

What was your favorite book to teach them?

SP:

I loved teaching *Romeo and Juliet*. And I taught it—there was so much more leeway then. You know, I bought *Old Man and the Sea*, I brought in paperbacks to teach. I taught *Romeo and Juliet* and right after it I taught *West Side Story*.

ES:

Oh wow. Um-hm.

SP:

And so then we plodded through. We read aloud *Romeo and Juliet*, because otherwise they wouldn't have gotten it. And then we watched the movie. Then we went to *West Side Story*, and they loved it. They loved it. So I really enjoyed teaching that. I liked teaching *Great Expectations*. Once a little boy that's deprived and his story. They like that too. I think it depends on whether you teach in a way that they can grasp it. But I've had two students—both of whom found me on Facebook—one was in the military and then became a preacher. He tracked me down and told me I changed his life.

ES:

Wow.

SP:

He must be in his sixties now. And the other one was here. That first one was when I was teaching in Clovis. This one—a Caucasian—a white kid in a predominately Latino school. And he said that I said to him, "Would you like me to recommend you for the honors program when you enter high school?" And he said, "I didn't know that I could do the honors program." He said, "You totally changed my image of myself." And the thing I took away from that is every word you speak has an impact on someone, and you have no idea the impact you have. So you know a smile or a word or whatever. [Laughter]

ES:

That's amazing. Well, and I think all of my favorite experiences in English classes were when they were able to cut through these older works of literature and make them relevant.

SP:

Right.

ES:

And that, you know, and you never know when some sort of relevancy is going to hit a student and really make an impact. So you taught—essentially the seventies were your time period of teaching.

SP:
Right.

ES:
And then what happened next?

SP:
So for Dwight to get a permanent position with the National Parks Service we needed to move. A position opened up in Boston, Massachusetts. [laughter]

ES:
That's a world away, it feels like.

SP:
Right. Oh yeah. And he got it. Everyone said to us, "You're crazy. You're absolutely crazy to go to Boston." Because we were leaving family, we were leaving friends, we were—but I had my dad's wandering genes. So, "We're going to move? Okay. Yeah, yeah. Let's move." We moved after the school year had started, and so teaching positions weren't all that available and we needed money for me, because it's much more costly to live there than it was to live even in Santa Fe. So I spent the fall looking for a job. I went to a temp agency. And so at this point, I'd grown up in Texas, we'd lived in Clovis, we'd come back to Lubbock, we'd lived in Santa Fe, now we were in Massachusetts. This woman said to me, "Why are you moving around so much?" [Laughter] So I was—they were suspicious of me because Massachusetts is very provincial and tightly knit, so I saw that I could go to a junior college and take design classes. I decided I wanted to try that. Because that had been my initial dream. As a little girl I had this beautiful dollhouse—two story dollhouse—and I redecorated it and wallpapered it. So other girls were playing with dolls and I was decorating.

ES:
Decorating the whole house.

SP:
And so I began taking classes in the spring and got a job at a place called Peabody Office Furniture. They had an in-house design department. I became their librarian, so I took care of their samples. So in some ways it was quite humbling. Because I was going back to square one and these designers who were younger were bossing me around. I began taking drafting and drawing and I loved it. So I got a two-year design degree. I could have gone for a four-year degree, but also we felt that moving there with—what did I have then?—eleven years' experience and a master's—they didn't want to hire me because they didn't want to pay me. They weren't sure that I would stay, which ultimately I didn't. So I thought, I'm not going to

waste money on a four-year degree when I can get a two-year degree and start working. So I did commercial interior design in the eighties in Boston. And what a trip that was.

ES:

Tell me about that.

SP:

So initially I worked at this Peabody Office Furniture and someone would get a contract and they'd come and say, "We're doing the twentieth floor of the AT&T building, and it needs to be designed." So it was interior architecture. Breaking up the space, choosing all the finishes, seeing that it happened, furnishing it. So I did that I guess for four years. Then a man came in to—our manager had left and he came in to work as manager until they found a new one. He handled the facilities department at a Shearson Lehman American Express bank. I went to work in their design department. There were six of us. We moved 50 percent of our employees every year. It was the beginning of systems furniture, and we were setting up offices. We took spaces from interviewing people, "What do you need in your office? How much space in your position do you get?" To doing the working drawings. We did all of the working drawings. No computers. Chose all the finishes, all the furniture. Supervised the space being built, supervised the furnishing of it, and then we moved the people in. So people would be in their old space and we'd go in on the weekend, pack up everything. They packed up their office. Left boxes. We loaded them. Took them to the new space. When they came in Monday morning their boxes were in their cubicles. So it was a trip. One project I worked on and in some ways I think, Okay, was I helping people then like with teaching? Because we were spending a lot of money. And for one of my projects in the bank I had a thirty-thousand dollar art budget.

ES:

Wow.

SP:

So for someone who likes fabric and paint—which I do. I like feeling those things—it was magical. It was probably wasteful on many levels. Probably those people didn't need spaces as fine as they got.

ES:

But you made beautiful spaces.

SP:

Right.

ES:

What were—in the eighties—some of the common design elements you would put in offices? Were there removable walls? Was it, like, this kind of faux wood stuff? What were some of the colors and fabrics and things you were using?

SP:

Depended on the space. You know, even when I walked in here I was wanting to turn these chairs over. I used—there was a day I could have told you who made that chair.

ES:

And these chairs have been—you walk through the Southwest Collection you can tell it was built in the late nineties because of kind of this like pastel and the wood colors and tones and these chairs have been here forever. But like when I try to think in my mind of like eighties aesthetic I can't really come up with something—some unifying color palette or if there was anything that everybody wanted that was really trendy at the time.

SP:

You know the thing I remember most—and it depended on the position of the person. So in the bank itself they had three buildings. On the perimeter were offices. Those people got either cherry or walnut desks and Herman Miller—I don't know if you—or what's the other big name? Anyway, very fine chairs. And we usually went with leather for their chairs. I remember—well, these kinds of colors but a little richer burgundies and maybe jewel tone colors we used a lot. The panel systems, because we worked with this particular office furniture company, Peabody, our panel systems were Westinghouse. So we could virtual get panels in any color, but we usually went with neutrals. Either beiges or grays or whatever. A cubicle was usually five by eight. Then an office nine by twelve office was a really nice size office. In an office you got a desk and a return and the filing cabinet like that and two guest chairs.

ES:

Did you have the transition into having to accommodate computers at that time period?

SP:

So yes. Yes, we did. You know, we did the electrical plans too. So that was the beginning. So we allowed for outlets and desks began having holes and everything, and the panel systems too. However, the way it had an effect on me personally, CAD came long. So here we were designers who did our sketches and sat at a drafting board, did our drawings. And so our boss came in and said, "Who wants to learn CAD?" We thought we won't design anymore. We'll be doing the CAD work for everybody else. So none of us wanted to. I didn't learn CAD. [Laughter] So I just sort of put myself out of the market, right? Because that's what people do now. I was on a plane recently with a young man from Mexico who's an architect, and so I asked him to show me some

of his drawings. Well, they're virtual drawings from the computer. You know, when I visual things. So I see it all in my head. And if I can see it on the computer first am I—is it my design? You know, that's sort of the way we looked at that. So yes. And now I couldn't possibly—with all the different outlets and plugs—I don't know how many you have—various things—I would be lost.

ES:

Well, and this space was originally designed to be—actually just an interview and a meeting room. As I understand it the staff of the Southwest Collection would have staff meetings in this room. It wasn't meant to be an office. The director would be in the room. That's why—actually there's a door behind that filing cabinet.

SP:

Oh. [laughter]

ES:

So setting this up, there's not—there's plugs but it's a little misshapen for turning it into a proper office space. But we make it work. [laughter] In the eighties you had at least—you had children, right?

SP:

My daughter was born in '86.

ES:

Okay.

SP:

And I was working for this bank then. You know, I think about those years because when I went to Boston I had never ridden in a cab, I had never been on a subway, I had been on a plane. What other contrivance could there have been? Anyway, so that—I went to class on the subway and we lived in the suburbs, and I took the train into the city and then transferred to the subway and then went to school. What did you ask me? [laughter]

ES:

Oh your daughter.

SP:

Yes. So she came along and because I was nearing forty and I was thinking of—I'm missing out, you know? So it took me several years to convince Dwight, because he thought life was really good. I had her and I had be back at work in six weeks. So at three weeks I began running to get

my body back in shape, because we didn't step out of our offices unless we had on suitcoats. We wore suits. So I went back to work. We dropped my dear daughter off at the sitter's at 6:30. I think six thirty or seven. We picked her up at six at night. When she was nine months old I got pneumonia, because I was working so hard and trying to be a mom. I was in bed a month. Almost died. So you know, as I was lying there—because when you're in that state you sort of withdraw—and I was thinking, I'm trapped. I am trapped. Because I had always worked. We sort of saw ourselves as a two-income family. Here I had this child and I thought, What am I going to do? What am I going to do? And so I stayed. I guess I stayed another six months—nine months. I was working four very big projects—juggling all these things. My boss was under a lot of pressure. Did you ever hear of the Peter Principle?

ES:

Unh-uh.

SP:

That people are promoted to the point where they don't know the job and are out of their depth? And my boss was very much out of his depth. So he took his stress out on us. And I was there late at night and he said, "Why did so and so happen?" And I said, "That's not the way it happened. And I took care of it." And he accused me of lying. So—and my word is very important to me—my husband and daughter picked me up at the train station at nine at night, and I was like, "Sam accused me of lying." And Dwight said, "Quit.", "Really?", "Yeah, quit." So I did. I went in and gave my notice. I did consulting until Dwight then took a job in DC. This was his ultimate goal. We moved to northern Virginia outside Washington. Catherine says when I was doing consulting she remembers crawling around under my drafting board, and so I could work at home and take my work in. And then when we moved to northern Virginia I began working for a builder as his selections coordinator. He built very large homes and everything had to be chosen. I met with people. But at night or on the weekends, so I could be there for my daughter and she could be with her dad at night or on the weekends. So that worked really well.

ES:

You know, as you were talking I hear this parallel of your mom at nine months kind of had this major life change—when you were nine months old—and then when your daughter was nine months old you had this kind of—within a couple months later—had this major life change.

SP:

Wow, I've never thought of that. Yeah.

ES:

But it's really the—you talk about the impact of your mom. It's—I think for me too, having strong women, especially—we're biased, because we're Texan so we always think—but it's having these strong women in our lives.

SP:

You know, I think someone said how growing up as a woman in Texas—how is that different from growing up someplace else? There's strength in the women here and a respect for women that you don't see other places. My sister and I have talked about that. It's because the women here are so needed to run the ranches and take care of the farms while the husbands were away. My uncles treated me with such—I had a mouth as a little girl. And I say that—I'd say, "Don't you talk to me that way." You know? They thought that was funny. It wasn't something to be reprimanded for or spanked. They saw it as spunky. And I didn't see that in the northeast. They see themselves as being able to handle storms and all that sort of thing, but not this spirit that I think we have as Texas women.

ES:

Did that impact your work when you were doing consulting and when you were—did you ever—

SP:

Absolutely. The week that I decided to quit I had been down working with a crew. We had a deadline. These men—I could see an argument beginning, and I broke up a fight. [Laughter] So I saw this beginning and I thought, Unh-uh, this isn't happening on my watch. And so I walked out there and said, "Knock it off." They flew apart and one went one way and one went the other and I went about my business. I went back upstairs to the offices and I said to Carol who had the station next to me, "I broke up a fight." She said, "Yeah, Paul,"—who was the electrician—"he already came up and told us." [laughter] So yes, with my dealings with the workmen. Never growing up the way we did had trouble looking a man in the eye or stating what I needed. I've never felt myself as less. And I think that comes from—Dwight will say, "Oh yeah right." But I think that comes from our growing up here. I do.

ES:

So y'all are in—let's keep progressing through—y'all are in DC for how long?

SP:

So we were there sixteen years. Our daughter grew up there, because she was—what was she? Three when we went there. Yes. And so she grew up there. Dwight's career really took off then. You're saying my mother's and my life's parallel. He travelled two weeks out of every month, so he was not home.

ES:

Wow.

SP:

So I took care of everything. I raised Catherine. It worked well for the two of us, because we became very close.

ES:

Very close.

SP:

He really wasn't around to be a part of it all. A part of me—and I think my mother felt this way too—resented that. But also I didn't have to listen to his advice. So I made—our daughter is dyslexic. She's learning to deal with it. But at one point I felt she was drowning in public schools. I made some very big decisions for her without consulting him, and he would come home. I said, "Well, guess what? I put Catherine at a private school." [Laughter] So yeah.

ES:

We're talking about identity. What about Catherine, since she grew up on the east coast? Does she see Texas roots or does she see herself as an—

SP:

No, I don't think she sees her Texas roots, really. We came home every Christmas and we came home—she and I—would come home for a week, two weeks in the summer. Especially after we move to Virginia. She came with us to New Mexico and that was an eye opener for her. She's only now finding her power. She's a force too. But growing up—we watched *Xena*, we watched *Anne of Green Gables*, because she came home in kindergarten and said to me, "Well, Bobby says that boys are smarter than girls." And I thought, This isn't happening on my watch. [Laughter]

ES:

Anne of Green Gables was a staple in our house. I was born in '84, so we probably have the same type of media growing up. [Laughter] Catherine? Is it spelled with a C or a K?

SP:

A C. C-a-t-h-e. So my niece is named Tiffany, and she's a microbiologist turned acupuncturist. She said to my sister once, "Why did you name me Tiffany?" Because she doesn't see herself as a Tiffany. So this was before Catherine was born. And already my name—it's been powerful for me, being named Sabette. So I thought, Okay, I've got to—this child's last name is Pitcaithley, and I've got to give her chances to change her name to be whomever she wants to be. So Dwight

chose Catherine, and I chose Carlynn, which is a combination a my mother's name Carrie and Dwight's mother Carolynn. So we thought, Okay, she can be Cathy, or Cate, or Catherine, or Carlynn, or Carly, or Lynn. She's got choices. So we called her Carly until she was eleven, I think. She came home one day and said, "I am not Carly. Call me Catherine."

ES:

Okay.

SP:

And she's been Catherine ever since.

ES:

Oh that's great.

SP:

Yeah.

ES:

So if we're progressing through time, what happens after DC?

SP:

Okay, so Catherine graduated—it'd have been 2005.

ES:

Yeah, '04 or '05. Yeah.

SP:

And at about 2003 Dwight was closing in on thirty years in the National Parks Service. He wanted to teach too. So he said, "I think that when Catherine graduates I will retire and we'll move home." [Laughter] And so that was fine with me, because we knew we couldn't retire in the metropolitan DC area. It just costs so much to live there. We lived in a planned community, but the metro was coming out to it and it was growing too. I would get in the car and drive up to the stop sign—we lived on a cul-de-sac—and I'd go, "Okay."

ES:

Buckle up. Get ready.

SP:

Buckle up. Get ready. Because you drive fast and you're changing lanes. I'm not sure whether it was a disservice to Catherine or whether it's just her journey, but we began looking at schools.

Her counselor said, “She needs to think of new,”—because we’d decided on Las Cruces, because Dwight could teach there—“She needs to think of New Mexico as home, and don’t leave her up here.” So she came with us. And because of her dyslexia she began at the community college. The high school she’d gone to is called the Lab School of Washington. It’s for kids with learning differences. When she entered that high school she still couldn’t read. With everything I was trying to do. But they were changing reading systems in the school. She needed phonetics. And so they taught her to read. They gave her self-confidence. She had zip self-confidence. But they taught through the arts. So Catherine saw herself as an actress and a screenplay writer and a creative type. It has taken her until this year to realize that she has the mind of a scientist. So she’s been floundering. So anyway. So we move to Las Cruces. Oh, let me back up a bit. When she began school, because she also has food allergies, raising her was a hard, hard job. Because she had tantrums and strawberries could set her off just like that. I would watch her come down the driveway from school. Some days she’d be skipping. I’d think, Oh good day. Some days she’d come down the driveway like this. And I’d say, “Who had a birthday?” [Laughter] So sugar, dairy, set her off. So—I’ve lost my train of thought again. She had a hard time of it and went to this high school which helped her a lot, then moved with us, but she went into movie making. She floundered. She got her degree in mass media, but you know, she couldn’t find work in Las Cruces, and I now know that wasn’t what she needed. So now she’s seeing, “Oh, I ‘could study botany. Or I could—“ And she’s working at White Sands National Monument and she loves it. She loves the bugs, she loves the sand, she loves everything about it. So anyway, we move—I know where I was going. So because she was hard to raise, when she went to kindergarten a friend of mine said, “Let’s go to a yoga class.”

ES:

I was going to ask you about that.

SP:

And I went to this yoga class and it was like someone had just given me a peace pill. [laughter] I just came out of there thinking, Oh this is so what I need. And so I began taking yoga and my teacher broke away from her studio and began her own studio and asked several of us to train. So I became a teacher, and it was life-changing for me and I think for Catherine too, because when I came—she could sense any agitation in me [snaps] instantly. When I didn’t become agitated it helped her not become agitated. Or I would just say, “You know, you go ahead and do that. I’m going to go over here and breathe.” So it changed our relationship, our friendship, all of that. I’ve been doing yoga twenty-seven years now. I find it to be a powerful thing. [laughter] So yes, when we moved I was already teaching in my basement in Virginia. When we moved west our neighbor was a dean for distance learning at the university. She’s since retired and moved. She said, “Would you come teach my staff?” So I’ve been teaching two classes a week at the university for twelve years. And then I teach at home, too. So I teach six classes a week.

ES:

Nice, nice.

SP:

They're not great big classes, you know. We're not talking thirty people.

ES:

No.

SP:

But yeah.

ES:

And the practice seems to have really helped you, and so that's—being able to pass that on. Well, and it also goes back to your teaching roots.

SP:

My teaching roots, right.

ES:

Okay, so are we up to the—we're pretty much up to the present in your timeline, then?

SP:

We are.

ES:

You're back in New Mexico. So I had—there's one question I want to ask, because it's kind of an insular question, which is your husband's Vietnam service. How did that impact y'all's relationship? Were there any—anything that you had to kind of help him through? We hear about—especially today—soldiers coming home and the spouses having to assist and kind of transition back. Did you have—was there some of that as well for y'all?

SP:

I would say no. But let me preface that with saying he never shot anyone. He saw people die, which was traumatic for him, and he came home knowing the war was wrong. But he was a radio operator. That's how—so they got hit with shrapnel and he was calling for backup. He had the phone here and so it hit this finger and then hit him on this side. Is that right? Anyway, I think it's that finger. And he was there only nine months. They airlifted him out because—no it was this finger, because he can't shoot a gun. So it's this finger.

ES:

The right finger.

SP:

So because he couldn't hold a weapon anymore and because he had the shrapnel. So in my mind that makes a difference. You know, it's—and plus the fact that he's a very powerful personality. The thing—I don't know if you know what My Lai is? But there was an incident where some soldiers killed civilians in a Vietnamese town and were tried.

ES:

Oh uh-huh.

SP:

And at that time Dwight said to me, "I know how that happened." He said, "We sat on a hill for months protecting this village and every time we went through it we lost somebody." And he said, "It's just the frustration that they can shoot you, but"—you know. And plus he came home believing that it was so wrong that we were there. The way it had an impact a little bit was that I was a military brat. And he was saying, "This is wrong, wrong, wrong, wrong." And I'm going, "Yeah, but." But that was an awakening for me, too. This was—we married in '68, so he came back in '66, early '67. And that was still fairly early, and he was already saying, "We shouldn't be there. It's not our business. We should get out." And another thing that his career—my father, one of his jokes was, "You can also always marry an officer as easily as you can marry an enlisted man." And so I came home with an enlisted man that had flunked out of college. But the two of them became very close. My dad told Dwight things that he never told any of the rest of us. So there was a connection there for the two of them.

ES:

Well, Monty kept telling me that I just need you to talk about all of your family connections across Texas, and especially Dawson County, and just let you go. And so we kind of talked about your mom and the aunt and the—but just tell me more about the family lineage going back five generations and all that. For genealogists fifty years from now listening to this recorder.

SP:

Well, Dwight has gone on Ancestry.com and all of that. My mother, being a Texan first and foremost, always called the Cleveland side of the family—and she was a Cleveland—carpetbaggers. They were carpetbaggers. So Dwight began researching that. And the Cleveland branch of the family came to Texas before the Civil War. They couldn't have been carpetbaggers. But the first Cleveland, and from his research his name was Moses Cleveland, he came as an indentured servant to Massachusetts in the sixteen hundreds. And ended up marrying the boss's daughter. Who was the governor of—anyway, married—one of his children married

into that family. I've forgotten the name. Then they travelled to New York, then they came to Houston from New York. Maybe they were in banking. I don't know at that point. But they had money. So that was the Cleveland branch. And the Wheelers—my mother's—the other side of my mother's family—my grandmother—apparently great-great-grandmother Wheeler lost her husband and came to Texas from the east somewhere with three boys, and settled around Honey Grove. That area. So one of those Wheelers was my great-grandfather on my grandmother's side. So my grandfather—Sol Cleveland—his mother was a Donaldson. Sol Cleveland, his father—they're five Sols—was a gambler and apparently wore a gun. Just your stereotypical Texas dude. So he came to east Texas, had a drinking problem, and met my great-grandmother, who was a Donaldson, and married her. They had four children. One night he came in so drunk that she just rolled him onto a train and sent him back to Houston. So they sort of disowned my grandfather and his siblings and his mom, and they moved in with the Donaldsons. I think that my great-grandmother's siblings began to resent these four children as they got older. So all four of them came west. So my grandfather was Sol and he moved to Dawson County. First ranched, then owned the general store in Lamesa. He was mayor for a time. His brother Jim went to Amarillo. They convinced their sister May to move to Cedarville, New Mexico with Mama, and she taught school out there her whole life.

ES:
Wow.

SP:
And her sister Sadie went—ended up in Canyon, and married a professor at West Texas State. So that—she's a Slack. So they all live there. So that was the Cleveland side. My mother always said that Sol, her grandfather, had shot a man once and Dwight said, "Oh she just made that up." So he began checking papers. And apparently a man shot a judge and my great-grandfather shot him, so it really did happen. [laughter]

ES:
It really did. He really was quintessential kind of outlaw Texan.

SP:
And apparently wore a diamond that when he got in debt—because he gambled too—he would leave the diamond with wherever he was boarding, and say, "I'm paying you with this but I'm going to come back for it." But that may be true or not. So that's my mother's side. The Wheelers, the Donaldsons, the Clevelands, and then great-grandmother Wheeler was a Hammel. So the German part of the family came in with her. The rest is more or less English. On my dad's side all these Stephens's—P-h, and V and Steins—traveled from Tennessee to Gonzales and all settled there. I don't remember well, but it's in the genealogy. Maybe soon after Stephen F. Austin. But anyway, and then my dad's father—there were nine siblings—married. I've

forgotten my great-grandmother's name. But anyway, she died early. When my dad and his sister were maybe three and one. His—the mother's mother—was raising nine children. We've seen that now. My dad used to always say, "My grandmother didn't want me." And now that I've seen the records and seen that she had children the age of my dad, no wonder she didn't want him. So anyway, this Henry Stein who had married my grandfather's sister. We called her Aunt Fanny. I've forgotten her name. They had no children, so they adopted my father and his sister. They grew up in Bradshaw.

ES:

Okay.

SP:

My grandfather, he couldn't keep the children because he worked for the railroad and he was on the railroad all the time. So my Aunt Gladys—my dad's sister—lived in Abilene. My dad attended Stephen F. Austin for a while. I think he went to A&M for a while. I think money was short, and so he ended up coming to Lamesa to work in the bank. Dated my aunt first and then met my mother. [Laughter] The rest is history. So that's—we've been on this side of the pond a long time.

ES:

Yes. Yes. What—so y'all brought in stuff today. What would she know about—you've talked about the letters. Some of the letters that you've donated. What else is in that donation? And there's some photographs. What else should we know about?

SP:

There are nine boxes of letters.

ES:

Wow.

SP:

And I think three of them are just the thirties when my mom and dad were writing back and forth. So that covers the Depression. There's a—what do you call it? Not a coupon book.

ES:

Oh a ration book.

SP:

Yeah, a folder for rations in there. So those years are covered. Uncle Henry Stein, there are letters from him back and forth to my dad. He almost lost the farm at some point. You know, it's

all of those kinds of stories. There may be some more letters still in there. The letters go from—I think there are some that go from 1900 and they go up to the fifties. The pictures I divided in families. There are Wheeler pictures and there are Donaldson pictures. They're Cleveland pictures. The Stephens's, who don't have a lot of pictures. I think they were lost at some point. But we do have some pictures. Some Stephens pictures. So we just brought all of that.

ES:

Well, that's great.

SP:

My sister brought two big Army trunks—my dad's trunks—and said, "I can't deal with this." [Laughter] So that's all of it.

ES:

Okay.

SP:

And any questions you have I tried to label things. Oh and my mother wrote her memoirs of her early years out on the ranch.

ES:

That's wonderful.

SP:

And as Dwight says, because he typed them up, her notes for her, I think, "Oh your mom. Everyone is beautiful and smart." But I was looking at their pictures and I said, "Well, they were good looking." [laughter] But anyway, she did do those early years.

ES:

Tell me more about some of the—tell me more about your mom. What was some of your memories, or you know like were there dishes she loved to cook or was there music she loved to listen to? What kind of memories really stick out to you?

SP:

It's her and her sisters. So some of these stories you may find horrifying, I don't know. But first of all, I should tell you my aunt—how she got her name. Her name was Willie Belle.

ES:

Okay.

SP:

And when they left east Texas to come on the train to west Texas she hadn't been named. They stopped in Colorado City to see my grandmother's sister Belle, who was named Will—married to Will—and they were horrified that she didn't have a name so they named her Willie Belle.

ES:

Two words or one word?

SP:

Two words.

ES:

Two words. Okay.

SP:

And my mother was Carrie Wood. But the Carrie came from a Cleveland aunt in Houston, and the Wood was a family friend that they were very close to. The third sister was, I think, Sarah Belle or Clara Belle. And as a little girl she said, "I'm not doing this." So she became Bobbi. She had a little bob haircut so they called her Bobbi. My uncle was a Sol. So there was the Sol the gunfighter, and then the Sol my grandfather, the Sol my uncle, the Sol my cousin, and now he has a son in El Paso who is also a Sol. So there are a lot of Solomon's. So these three women had outrageous senses of humor. So this is the story—this is something I remember from maybe I was five. My mom and one aunt weren't big huggers. Willie Belle was a big hugger, but they weren't demonstrative people, but very loving, funny people. So they'd come out of my grandmother's house, and it was all three women, me and my grandmother. My grandmother must have been about the age I am now, but I'm in a little better shape. The sidewalk—they had stopped using the steps down and would just sort of walk to the side. My aunt Willie was pulling the car out of the garage and my mother was tending to me, and my grandmother slipped and fell in the driveway. So my auntie Bob, who lived in Nevada at this point or Arizona, I don't—anyway, she turns around and they all call their mother—and this tells you something about the relationship—Maddie May. They never called her Mother. They called her Maddie May. And so Bobbie turns around and says, "Maddie May, why are you sitting in the driveway? What will the neighbors think?" [Laughter] And they're all just standing there beating themselves laughing, and I'm this little kid watching these crazy women. My grandmother was just furious at them, but she had that kind of sense of humor too. So they were—you know, once my parents moved to Abilene and Aunt Willie—who had spent her life with her mother—would come over every weekend. She was in her seventies then. And my dad would worry about her. I was there this particular time, and she was late getting there. She came in and they said, "Where were you?" She said, "Well, I had to stop and see Old Man So-and-So, and there was a rattlesnake in his

yard, and I had to kill it.” And I said, “Well, how did you kill it?” She said, “Well, I got a hoe and chopped its head off.”

ES:

Just matter-of-factly.

SP:

Yeah. “It had to be tended to, so I took care of it.” So these are the women that made me.

ES:

So your earliest memories, do you have any, like, hazy memories of Germany at all? Or was it being back in Lamesa and being with these women?

SP:

My first memories are being in Lamesa, and I had vocabulary still. I call my grandmother Oma. badezimmer. I know when I need a badezimmer. [Laughter] But I only know stories—my first language was German and mother says—and I was blonde. My sister and I were both tow-heads. Mother would get angry because when we came back, even in New York when we landed, would say, “You adopted a German baby?” [laughter] She’d say, “No.”

ES:

“No, they’re mine!”

SP:

“It’s my baby.” [Laughter] So I don’t have memories of that. My sister of course does, and I have memories of—I remember stories of accidents that I obviously had in Germany. I have something like seven scars across here. I must have spent my early childhood on my head. [Laughter] But the memories I have are my grandmother loved to cook, and sitting on the kitchen counter because she and I were very close. She could be—she was not always kind to my sister. My sister will say, “I was the favored child, and then you came along.” But my grandmother could be really—she could be a little mean and stinky and I’d call her on it. She thought that was funny. And so I think that’s why we got along. I can remember sitting on her counter while she was baking and I always got to lick the bowl. When I was sick, because my mother also when someone was sick my mother went to take care of them. Two uncles I can remember her going to help tend to. So when I was sick I can remember—my grandmother wouldn’t want me to tell this—but if Mother weren’t available and I would go to my grandmother’s house and my Aunt—Aunt was the first county—female county clerk in Lamesa, so I should tell you that too.

ES:

Yes. Yes.

SP:

But I would lie in my grandmother's bed and she would sit in her little rocking chair, and she loved to crochet and embroidery and dip snuff. [laughter] But nobody—none of the Methodists knew this, but she did dip snuff. And we would chat and then she would get up and fix lunch. That's one of my fondest memories.

ES:

What types of foods?

SP:

Oh my gosh, have you ever had Coke salad?

ES:

Yes. [laughter]

SP:

So Coke salad and marshmallows and tangerines and coconut and what else did they put in that? She cooked two cakes and a pie every week. One went to her son Sonny—one cake—and then a pie and a cake for Sunday dinner. We all gathered at her house for Sunday dinner. Roast beef pot roast with veggies in it, and pie and cake and Coke salad and marshmallow salad and iced tea. So that was what she cooked. She loved to make fried chicken. She loved to mash potatoes. You know, all those—

ES:

Those—

SP:

--West Texas foods.

ES:

--southern foods. Yes.

SP:

Yeah.

ES:

Well, what am I forgetting to ask you about that you think people might be interested in? You know, one of my goals is the archives often interview a lot of the men, and there's so many interviews—especially early interviews in our archive of women where we don't even know their first names—

SP:

Oh my goodness.

ES:

--because it was just archived as "Mrs. John Smith" or something. So one of my goals is to get some of—get a lot of these stories of home life and family traditions, because it's just lacking. And technology has changed the way families operate so much today. We're spread out more. We don't take the time to cook so many pies and cakes and everything. My mom tells me stories of her mom doing that too. I think it's interesting too, because my family has sisters that were very close and lived together all their lives. I think that's another kind of west Texas thing. Small towns and staying close-knit. But what—you know, what other stories do you think might be important? Just mundane or—

SP:

Well, just funny stories. So, yes, my grandmother loved to cook, but my mother cooked but she didn't love to cook. I actually hurt her feelings once because I said, "Yes, mother always fixed me a strawberry cake for my birthday but it always fell over." [laughter] She said, "It didn't always fall over." And my Aunt Willie did not like to cook. She was very much more a businesswoman. Maybe Bobbie was more of a cook, but only because she had to be. I don't—she did—my grandmother made the most amazing German chocolate cakes, and that became Bobbie's specialty too. So none of them were especially great cooks. My mother was an amazing seamstress, and my sister and I were so spoiled because you know I didn't—to go out and have to buy clothes and they didn't fit the way mother's dresses fit was just hard. Every dance I had a new dress, and the design thing comes in there too, because we would go to the fabric store and she'd say, "Okay, pick your pattern and pick your fabric." So at ten I was designing my clothes and she would stitch them up. So she—and that goes back to having to sew as a child for the family. But she could sew anything. So she was an amazing cook, but another funny story; my Aunt Willie was such the character. So when it was hot in the summer the house was hot, so she'd drag her mattress out in the backyard and sleep in the backyard. [Laughter] And she loved hats. She loved big hats with feathers and things. We had a little dog—my family—a rat terrier named Bo, and all the family was gathered and we'd been to church. We'd come in and Aunt Willie had put her hat on the bed. She shared the house with my grandmother. And Bo came in with feathers sticking out of his—

ES:

Oh no!

SP:

And so you think, Well, for me, if that happened and it was my sister's hat I'd be saying, "I'm sorry, I'll buy—" What did these women do? [Laughs] Everybody just thought it was hilarious. So humor. Humor was such an important part of growing up with them. And even with the men I can remember my swing broke. There was a swing in my grandmother's tree, you know, that they had rope and a slate. My swing broke and I was in it outside with all the men. No, they didn't ask, "Are you hurt?" They laughed. They laughed, and it toughens you up a little bit.

ES:

That's what I was about to say. Now was Willie the one that became the first county clerk?

SP:

Yes.

ES:

What—were there any stories going along with that?

SP:

You know, I just accepted that as life and no, I don't remember any stories.

ES:

I was going to say—

SP:

I think there's some clippings in there.

ES:

Okay. I didn't know if there was any pushback or if there was any problems she faced.

SP:

She was running against a man.

ES:

But she won.

SP:

But she won. Yeah.

ES:

Well that's wonderful.

SP:

She—I put on her, because when she died, Dwight and I—she had asked him to take care of her estate. I ordered the message for her tombstone. I didn't ask anybody. I just did it. I put, "She taught us to love." She loved us all unconditionally. She was an amazing woman. I've been driving since I was ten. My cousins drove tractors. My three boy cousins that lived on the farm. The Cleveland boys. Jimmy Sol, Robert Wheeler, and William Brian. So I wanted to drive too, and Aunt Willie would let me drive. So you know, here I was driving like this and I remember coming into town one day. They lived ten miles out of town, so I drove the highways. Coming into town one day it began to rain, so I pulled the car over to the side. She said, "What are you doing?" I said, "Well, it's raining. You drive." She said, "You brought it out. You take it home." [Laughter] So that's the kind of person she was. So by the time I could get my license at fourteen I thought I was a pretty good driver.

ES:

Well, yeah. Yeah. Did you—was she the one that you mentioned kind of early on never married, or was there—

SP:

She never married. She had a boyfriend and his name was Joe—can't remember his last name. She loved him. My grandmother did not approve, and so she never married him. But she said at one point—and as Mother said, "Willie always had boyfriends." She always had boyfriends. Men loved her, but she would say to us, "I wouldn't know what to do with a man." [Laughter] So I guess she was fine not having married.

ES:

Yeah, that's another common theme. Every once in a while you see one of those very strongly independent women that are just never got married. Never saw the need. Well, okay, so this—since I work with the oral histories all the time, I can see kind of the big picture, which is we have interviews dating back to the fifties. And so every time I record an interview I think of, you know, somebody listening to this fifty years from now.

SP:

Oh my gosh.

ES:

And it's always kind of overwhelming and daunting simultaneously, but also what do you think somebody who's listening to this decades from now, what's something you think they should take away from either your experiences or just living in this age, this day?

SP:

I think for women your sense of self is so very important. A lot of women lose that. I think that I've always had a fairly strong sense of self being raised by women. If nothing else, teach your daughters to stand up, advocate for themselves, love themselves, laugh at themselves, and don't let anybody hold you down.

ES:

That's fantastic. [Laughter] So any other stuff we need to put on the recording?

SP:

Oh, you know one thing that—talking about driving. So my dad, having retired a colonel and while he was in Germany his license expired and he refused to get it renewed. He was not going to go take a test. So at fourteen I was driving, so I became his driver. We would tra—he loved to look at property and he loved to look at cars—another design thing. And so we would travel together, and he was a very quiet man and I—although I've been babbling—I tend to be quiet often. So we would just drive in silence for miles and be perfectly happy doing that. But he also, even though he had had this military career and he expected a certain amount of respect, he respected me. And that's so powerful too, when the men in your life have that respect for you.

ES:

It's made you who you are, having that.

SP:

It has. Yeah, that's right.

ES:

It laid a solid foundation for you. Well, is there anything else that Monty would get onto me that I didn't ask you about, history-wise? [Laughter] Because usually that's—

SP:

Let's see.

ES:

Any other family stuff in Lamesa that I need to know? Is the family house—you listed off the address earlier—is it still there? Do you ever go back and drive around?

SP:

And I wrote on the backs of some pictures. So my grandmother's house is still there. Not in the shape it was my grandparents built it. 1601 South First Street, Lamesa. And—excuse me—my parents' home. They built—oh there's stories I could tell you—but anyway, they built on the edge of town. Up on ____ [1:43:51.2] on a hill. So if you're driving from Lamesa to Seminole there's the pink brick house up on the hill at 2301 Seminole Road that they built, and that's where—

ES:

What year did they built that?

SP:

They built when I was six, so that would have been 1951. And so I lived there until I went off to college.

ES:

Okay.

SP:

And that was sort of my family home in the years that—when my dad went to California my sister went to college—mother and I lived there alone. We had—it's on the highway—we had some events when people came up and knocked on the door. I remember—and I hate guns—my mother sleeping with a gun on the bedside table because we didn't have neighbors close, and the phone lines dipped down and everybody thought maybe we weren't safe. But she still threw open the windows at night. [Laughter] We lived up there on the hill by ourselves. You know? I never sensed her fear. She had to have been terrified. She had to have been terrified. I never sensed that in all the years that my dad was away. She never said anything negative. She did after he came home and they were back together, but she never said negative things about him.

ES:

She kind of filtered all that emotion from you?

SP:

She did. She did.

ES:

I was just thinking, and she didn't have yoga back then to kind of help her with all of that. Which is what we all need today to be able to accomplish that.

SP:

You know, one other story I'll tell you about her. I came home one day—because she had taught English all those years earlier and then moved away and came back and she taught history while I was in high school and college—a man—I'm not going to say his name. It should be on the tape—but he had been one of her students the first time around who worshipped her. He was an alcoholic. When he got in his cups he came to visit mother. He wanted her to help him solve his problems and so forth, and he was a very successful man. So I come home from selling Girl Scout cookies. I was probably—my friend Kathy says she and I were the oldest Girl Scouts in Lamesa. So I had to have been driving. I come home and there's a firetruck in the driveway. And also this man's wife's car is in the driveway. So I walk in the house and say, "Mother, what's going on?", "Well, the air conditioner caught on fire. They're tending to it." And she's sitting at the kitchen table with this woman. So I say, "Okay?" So finally the firetruck, they come in and say everything's taken care of and they leave. And this woman was planning on leaving her husband, the alcoholic. My mother was advising her. She advised her not to, but anyway, she left and my mother said, "You never share anything that anyone tells you in confidence, and you never share what you heard today."

ES:

An amazing woman.

SP:

Yes. [laughter] And I think that was a little bit hard on Dwight when we first married, because if my mother said something it was sort of like, "You heard mother." You know? In a relationship he had to be very tolerant of that. What they shared was her sense of humor, and so he loved her too. I still say, "One thing you and mother share: If no one else laughs at your jokes it doesn't matter because you're both laughing at them yourselves." [Laughter]

ES:

Well, that's wonderful. Well, we have talked. We have talked about—

SP:

A long time.

ES:

--yeah, about the amount of time we're supposed to. I've got to get you downstairs pretty quick. So thank you for talking to me about this.

SP:

Well, you're welcome.

ES:

And I'm going to turn this off now.

[End of Recording]

