

Gathering Our Voice

Interview with Esther Todd
Interviewed by Nancy Warner
September 7, 2012
Transcribed by AmeriCorps volunteer Maria Davis

Nancy Warner: This is Nancy Warner and I'm here with Esther Todd and her niece-

Judy Johnson: Cousin

NW: Cousin, Judy Johnson at Colonial Vista in Wenatchee and the date is – you're going to have to help me with this – its September

Esther Todd: 7th

NW: September 7th 2012. And thank you Esther for making time in your very busy schedule to visit with me a little bit about your history in the Wenatchee area. So I'd like to just start by asking you to say your full name

ET: Esther Eleanor Stevens Todd.

NW: So Stevens is your maiden name?

ET: That's right.

NW: And it's S-t-e-v-e-n-s?

ET: Yes.

NW: Ok. And what's your birthday?

ET: December 5th 1914.

NW: Wow. That's great. It's so great to meet someone that has that length of memory in our region. So, it's great! Well lets get started and I think we'll just kind of get the tip of the iceberg today but it'll be a start. So Esther you were born in December, and where were you born?

ET: In Wenatchee, WA.

NW: In a hospital?

ET: No, at home.

NW: Ok.

ET: It was a disgrace to be born in a hospital.

NW: Oh really? That's interesting and why was that?

ET: Well only illegitimate people were born that way.

NW: Really? Oh that's interesting. And so did your mother have a midwife?

ET: No we had a doctor. Doctor Saunders.

NW: Ok, all right.

ET: He was going out of business but he waited until I got here.

NW: Oh good I'm glad that he stuck around for a while.(background noises) So, now I guess that- the sharp noises –well we're going to hear some background noises, they're just part of the background at Colonia Vista. So we'll just look past that. So I wanted to ask you about your parents a little bit and what were their names- your mom and dad?

ET: Edward Frances Stevens Senior and Emily Johnson – Emily- Loraine Emily Johnson Stevens was my mother. And what else was the question?

NW: Your mother was Emily?

ET: She was Loraine Emily

NW: And your father's name?

ET: Edward Frances Stevens

NW: Ok. And were they born here?

ET: No. He was born in Minnesota, down in the southern part of Minnesota, and I can't think of the name

NW: That's ok. So what brought them to Wenatchee?

ET: Well my grandfather was a wheat buyer in Minnesota and he had two older sons that took up telegraphy. They did upstairs downstairs until they learned it, they learned telegraphy. And then they wanted a job so they came west. And the one went to Portland and the other was in the Blue Mountains of Oregon.

NW: Oh doing telegraph wires. Putting them up or transmitting them?

ET: Dit and daw. Dit was for words. And my grandfather came out to find where his boys were. He came from Minnesota out here to find out where they were. And then he went back and later they- he and the whole family came and my dad was the youngest of the family.

NW: How many brothers and sisters did he have?

ET: Fred and Gene, Mattie and Maun, Josie –Ellen, Josie, and my dad. So that was-

NW: Five

ET: Five, six, seven, I think altogether.

NW: So had your father met your mother, did they move out here together?

ET: No, no. My mother was born in South Dakota near Madison, a little town.

JJ: Where we have relatives still-

ET: We do. Well-

JJ: Larry, Victor's son still lives there.

ET: Oh yes, that's right. And my grandfather- her father- moved about different laboring jobs and he went down to Kansas when they were putting the railroad through and they were well I don't know exactly when - they were living in Kansas when Washington became a state. That was 1889.

NW: OK, all right.

ET: And he came home and he told everyone that Washington was a state and so then they packed up and came west. And she had about five dollars left when she got here.

NW: Your mother?

ET: Yeah.

NW: Oh.

ET: And she was I think a late teen age and they went from here up to Chelan and up to Navarre Coulee and then she worked at I guess it was Moore's Point where there was a hotel that entertained the eastern well-to-do people who came out here and so she worked with them in the house and they would go out one day and catch fish for dinner and that was quite an experience for her. And then she came to Wenatchee and President McKinley died and they had funerals all over the United States. And they had the one in Wenatchee down on Columbia Street in a warehouse and there were bales of hay I think they sat on for the funeral. And my dad was an usher.

NW: Oh really? At McKinley's funeral? That's where they met?

ET: Yeah, well he saw her first there. And then he got acquainted with her. He courted her on a bicycle. They would ride from here or he would ride up into the Coulee, Navarre Coulee and then they would go riding in the coulee, no paved roads nothing at all, just dirt.

NW: Boy that's something isn't it?

ET: And my dad would hang on to her bike to get her through the dirt that was-it wasn't the easiest thing.

NW: It makes those mountain bikers look like they've got it made now.

ET: Yes they do.

NW: They do. So have you seen pictures of the tires? Were they really fat?

ET: No they weren't fat.

NW: Oh, gosh.

ET: I had a picture. I have one I don't know where it is.

NW: Well that's okay.

ET: It's in Othello probably. That's where all my stuff is.

NW: So he would ride his bike all the way from Wenatchee to Navarre Coulee? We're talking serious courtship aren't we? And what was he doing at that point, your father, when he was courting your mother?

ET: We'll he - I'm not sure of dates and so fourth but as a teenager he worked for the - it was a great big Birkendhill business down on the corner of Wenatchee Ave and Orondo and what was it called. I know it as well as now. The Beal building.

NW: Beal?

ET: Beal. B-e-a-l. And so he would deal with the people who came in the store and he always had to deal with the Indians and it always got him when we used to have a neighbor Mrs. Sawyer, Dr. Sawyer's [Saunders?] wife. She was just enamored by the Indians. They were just so wonderful and she, and my dad would say afterward at home that well she didn't have to deal with them as he did "they smelled so"- that was his opinion. But he taught me "en, teen, tettery, bettery, bimp, sattery, lattery, do, domino, dik. (1-10 in Chinook) That was 1-10

NW: Oh in Salish?

ET: In, uh, no there's another.

NW: Oh Chinook?

ET: Chinook I guess it was. Yeah.

NW: So that's an interesting little look there. When- so you were born in 1914 were you the first of their children?

ET: No I was the last.

NW: How many-

ET: There were two older. Six and eight years older than I.

NW: Oh okay.

ET: I was kind of an afterthought.

NW: Ok, ok. So when did they get married then early 1900's?

ET: September 25th 1903.

NW: 1903. So you came around in 1914, young whippersnapper in the family. And where did your family live when you were born?

ET: 1302 McKittrick Street.

NW: Oh ok!

ET: I don't think it was numbered then, it was called Ross Road.

NW: R-o-s-s?

ET: Yes

NW: Oh that's interesting

ET: It didn't go through to Western Avenue but in recent years they built the road through to Western Avenue. So it's a through street, McKittrick Street. Oh and it was changed to McKittrick Street because McKittrick's lived on Wenatchee avenue and that's where you'd turn off, at McKittrick's place.

NW: So then where did you go to school?

ET: Lewis and Clark Elementary in Wenatchee.

NW: OK and so-

ET: And in the meantime I had gone to school one week and I had polio.

NW: Oh dear and so you were what like five years old?

ET: No I was in school I was almost seven. In September. And December I was 7.

NW: 1921 then?

ET: 19- yeah. It was 1921 then when I had it of course they knew nothing to do for it.

NW: And so what happened?

ET: Well the doctor sent for- I don't know how he got it but he got it from Portland, some medicine and he put that in my spine

NW: Really?

ET: And that was the most excruciating experience. And I of course don't know what effect it had. When I first got it I was out playing and -

JJ: Were you at school or at home (Judy)

ET: At home.

JJ: At home playing.

ET: Yeah and I came into the house and I said my head must have laid on my back.

NW: Your head must have laid on your back? Oh. Oh, my gosh. So your mother got you to the doctor probably.

ET: Oh well yes that's true but she had seen this same thing happen to - her aunt had had it and they had different reactions

JJ: What aunt was that Esther?

ET: My aunt Alice.

JJ: Alice, okay.

ET: She was Alice Johnson. And then my mother's Aunt Quinny had it. A generation before. So they were familiar with it but nobody knew what to do.

NW: So did you end up staying home -

ET: Yes.

NW: -for quite a long time?

ET: All year.

NW: Your whole second grade.

ET: My whole first grade. I only went one week.

JJ: Were you not in the hospital in your teens though? For this also?

ET: Did I what?

JJ: Stay in the hospital.

ET: No I was never in the hospital.

NW: It might be better for the tape Judy, if you save your questions a little bit and we can bring you over a little closer to ask them. So Esther one of the things Judy and others talked about and I think it might have been before you were seven, were you able to see Pangborn's landing in East Wenatchee?

ET: Well I didn't see the landing; I saw the movies of it afterwards.

NW: Oh, okay.

ET: But we tried to see. My father had been out milking. He had two cows and he had a string of cats that followed him from the barn to the house and while he was walking to the house I think the plane is here. And it was flying up and down the Columbia River dropping gas.

NW: Oh did you see that then?

ET: Well, we didn't really see that, no, but we heard that that's what they were doing. He knew that was going up and down the river, but we didn't know what it was doing and then it raised itself up to the bench land across the river and that was where Fancher Field was and I don't remember weather it was named that then or not, I doubt that it was.

NW: It was somebody's farm I suppose wasn't it

ET: No apparently not- it was a wasteland.

JJ: But you went to see it, the plane (Judy)

ET: We all climbed into our 1930 Ford and went over there to see what was going on and if you're familiar with the way the road goes up and around and climbing all the time. About that point where you just got up there around that first corner and all the cars in front of us had stopped. It was a regular parade. And they had stopped and left their car right in the middle of the road and ran up that rest of that hill to the landing space because they knew that they landed out near the edge. And we couldn't do that of course; climbing the mountain would have been out of the question for me because of my polio.

NW: How old were you then?

ET: Well I was a senior in high school.

NW: Right. You said your car was a 1930. We skipped a few years. Okay I was thinking you were littler when you saw Pangborn.

ET: And so there was nothing left for us to do but to turn back around and bring me to high school at Wenatchee High. And I was late and they sent me to the pest house - that was the study hall.

NW: Pest house? That's what they called study hall? That's really motivating.

ET: Yes.

NW: And it was the first day of school?

ET: No it wasn't. It was October 5th 1931. And there were several of us late.

NW: Oh good.

ET: Yeah there were several of us.

NW: Always good to run in a pack.

ET: We were all quite concerned because we were out seeing history in the making and then got penalized.

NW: The whole school should have been there!

ET: That's right. Well the next day – of course they fed the boys because they were hungry, they'd been 41 hours on a flight and they put them up at the Cascadian Hotel and then they came up to the high school and appeared before all of us and they were kind of tongue tied, you know they couldn't think of anything to say especially. But it was a thrill for us to see them.

NW: Do you remember what kind of questions people asked them?

ET: I don't think we had the liberty to do that

NW: Did the principle ask questions, or teachers, do you remember?

ET: No they probably didn't. They probably told the boys what they did.

NW: Oh yeah maybe they just wanted you to physically see them.

ET: Yes that's right.

NW: And to applaud their success.

ET: Yes I think that was the thing of it, what they were doing.

NW: Well that was a pretty exciting school day

ET: Oh boy was that ever exciting. I should say. And our senior class - that was 1932 graduating class- and we were working on the annual. I have it here.

NW: Oh I wondered what that was. Ok. WAWA?

ET: Mmhmm. It's the WAWA

JJ: The first two pages.

NW: Oh, WAWA Wenatchee High school, published by students. Oh this is great. Oh! Dedicated to Clyde Pangborn and Hugh Herndon. Dotless fliers. May those same qualities that made this feat possible guide us through our future. Perseverance to hold on, come what may. Boy that's great. So did you work on this?

ET: No I wasn't on their staff.

NW: Oh okay. But this -

ET: But I was glad to get the annual.

NW: Yes.

ET: But our annuals previous to this- the three that I had were lovely annuals with leather covers and that turned out to be a real sliver of a page.

NW: Well it's still a very nice book and this is a primo condition so it's great you have this. So your picture is in here I'm sure.

JJ: There's a poem about them in there.

ET: Yes my picture is in there.

NW: We could look at this maybe another time.

ET: Maybes there's a -

JJ: There's a bookmark where Esther is.

NW: Well I would like to look at this maybe when we're done recording but I would like to ask you a few more things while I can.

ET: Yes, sure.

NW: So you –just to go back to your school years- its so fun to talk to someone who has such a memory of what Wenatchee was like in that early part of our history. So you lived in the McKittrick neighborhood and I know someone else a little bit younger than you who lived in that neighborhood, Faye McKee

ET: Yes. Yes, I know Faye.

NW: Yeah Faye's just over at Columbia Heights it would be fun to get you together.

ET: Yes, well he kept coming in here when his wife lived here. And so we regained our friendship.

NW: That's neat isn't it! Late in life.

ET: Yes it was.

NW: Did you used to play together in the McKittrick neighborhood?

ET: No, I was a little older than he was.

NW: You could babysit him probably.

ET: Well he lived on Springwater and I lived on Mckittrick

NW: So there's a distance.

ET: Yeah a distance there. And his sister was in my class.

NW: Oh ok alright.

ET: I got to know the whole McKee family.

NW: Good. Well tell me a little bit about what your neighborhood was like while you were in grade school.

ET: Well it was all orchard. And I had a bicycle and the three little Pyle kids would ride the bicycle with me. I would put one on the handlebars, and one on the bar because I had a boy's bike, and the other one sat behind. And I went up and down the streets with that and that was what we did. We did what there was to do. We dug a cave- it wasn't really a cave, it was not a cave it was – we dug out the room the maiden room and then we dug the crawlspace into the room and in it was out there that we got into the crawl space and then we crawled in and got into the room. We put boards on the top and dirt on top so we had a regular- we did have a stovepipe. It slanted in from the outside. We probably were really living dangerously.

NW: Yeah but fun. You had your own hide away.

ET: Oh yes, we did. And I always had boys to play with. I didn't have any girls.

NW: Because Faye's sister was too far away.

ET: Oh yes.

NW: So you said you had milk cows. And did you have chickens?

ET: Yes. White leghorns. And we had a dog. And I guess he must have been a shepherd because he acted like a shepherd.

NW: Very protective?

ET: He would round them all up. And then he would run through them and scatter them all.

NW: Oh the chickens?

ET: And then he'd round them up again. So it was real fun.

NW: So did you have jobs that you did for the- related to taking care of the animals and the house?

ET: No. No I didn't. I was spared a lot of things because of my limp and it was quite a bad limp.

NW: So when were you strong enough to be riding a bicycle with three other kids on it?

ET: Oh, when I was nine, ten.

JJ: Tell her how you peddled.

NW: Yeah how did you peddle with all those kids on there?

JJ: Didn't you tell me you had to pull up on the limp leg and push?

ET: Well I really didn't have very much push on this leg

NW: So it was your left leg that was affected

ET: Yeah. But I could carry myself around with this leg and help this leg.

NW: And ride a bicycle then too. Just really a lot of pressure on the right leg so the left would come up

ET: That's right

JJ: She rode a bike all the way through college.

NW: Oh good for you so that probably helped you to stay so strong and live so long-exercise.

ET: We had a tree house. It was in the locust tree. And we had an old garden hose we attached to a first limb up there and then we climbed it.

NW: I can tell you had boys for friends instead of girls. (Laughter) This is not your- did you play with dolls?

ET: Well I had one but it got left out in the rain.

NW: Oh ok. So you did more physical things with the boys. So who were some of your best friends?

ET: Darwin Boblett, Buddy Boblett, and George Sawyer were my three closest. And then Bobby, Mary Ellen and Dickey Pyle up the road a ways. And that was mostly the ones I played with.

NW: Did all their families have orchards?

ET: Well Gilbert Pyle worked for the what was- was is now the PUD

NW: His father did?

ET: Yeah. I mean- that was Bobby, Mary Ellen and Dickey. Their dad worked for the power company. And his brother lived on Wenatchee Avenue and he also worked for the PUD but there was orchard land and-

JJ: George's father was a doctor

ET: Yes. Dr. Earl D Sawyer was George and Gwyneth- Oh I forgot to mention Gwyneth. She was two years older than I.

NW: Your sister?

ET: No she was a Sawyer, she was the sister of George Sawyer. And George passed away in 19- oh goodness.

NW: Oh that's okay-

JJ: He was fourteen wasn't he?

ET: No he was sixteen.

JJ: Skiing accident.

ET: When I was eighteen he was sixteen and he was killed on skis up on a cemetery. Yes his ski hit a rock, an exposed rock. And it ruptured his spleen and he- that all happened on Christmas day.

NW: Oh dear what a sad thing. What kind of skis was he skiing on, do you know?

ET: Just regular, we didn't have any named skis.

NW: It was in the 1930's then?

ET: Yes.

NW: Yeah ok so probably they were wooden skis that he maybe bought downtown.

ET: Yeah. He might have. I don't know. But he and Buddy and Darwin Boblett were skiing up there on that hill above the cemetery and that's when it happened. And I was over visiting friends after church. That was on Pear Lane. McAnaughey's. Olive McAnaughey was the girlfriend of George. But we knew nothing about it until I was on my way home.

NW: Boy what a sad thing.

ET: Yes and I was-

NW: So that was winter time- were you riding your bike then?

ET: No

NW: You were walking or your family-

ET: Well I always rode in the car as much as possible.

NW: Because of your limp. But you did ride a bike and you did- did you go walking up in the foothills at all?

ET: No.

NW: You didn't. But you were up in your tree house and you were down in the dugout.

ET: Yeah that's right.

NW: Probably not by high school though right? High school you probably had other pursuits.

ET: Yeah.

JJ: She had a job.

NW: Did you have a job in high school?

JJ: The telephone?

NW: Oh yeah the telephone!

ET: I didn't get to it until after high school.

JJ: Oh after, sorry.

ET: But uh-

NW: Were you in clubs in high school? Girls club?

ET: Well the girls club included every girl in the school but I was in the "ink slinger."

NW: What's that? The Ink Slinger

ET: You were slinging ink writing!

NW: That's great! So you liked to write from an early age?

ET: Yes I did. I wrote the "Luminous Letters" on the typewriter. That was after I got out of high school, I was on the typewriter.

NW: Well let me ask you a couple more things about high school and then let's leave high school because I would like to talk about your experiences as a telephone operator. I'm wondering about in high school were there kids that lived in East Wenatchee that used to come over and go to school with you?

ET: Yeah, yes. They were called "Bridge walkers."

NW: Could you talk a little bit about what that was like and who those kids were?

ET: Well Lawrence Parkhill was our president of our class and he lived in East Wenatchee and there was a whole group of kids that came from Orondo. They came in a car and all together. I knew some of them through the band. I was playing trumpet. And so I knew some of them that way as well as other classes.

NW: So bridge walkers would literally walk over what we now call the footbridge but it was the only bridge.

ET: Yes it was. The very first bridge built on the Columbia.

NW: Yes and it was built before you were born.

ET: No. Let's see. I can't remember. Our neighbor worked on it, I remember that. But I can't remember when it was built.

NW: I think it was built in 1906 or something

ET: It could have been.

NW: And if you were born in 1914 you just would have grown up with that bridge being there.

ET: Yeah I think so.

NW: So did people think it was- was it a big deal to drive over that bridge or not. Did people drive over it all the time?

ET: Well we drove over it all the time.

NW: What would you go over there for? Besides seeing Pangborn that day. What was in East Wenatchee that you'd go see?

ET: There wasn't much! It was orchards though. The highline canal was brought from Dryden down here and at the time they were thinking of building it they sent- I think Mr. Gelattley or somebody came to the house and asked for donations to build the canal and my dad said- I think he gave him fifty dollars.

NW: Wow that was a lot in those days!

ET: It was. And his mother trembled to think that he would do that when his father was away buying wheat down at - oh goodness where was he? He went down somewhere near Moses Coulee.

NW: Rock Island maybe?

ET: Yeah but it was quite a ways away he was, and my dad was the only one home of course and he said well he had a vision he could see what the water would do and then they built the canal and it just about every year somewhere it would wash out and they would have to built that up again but it was a life saver and then the water went to East Wenatchee and then I don't know how far down - up and down it went. But it went East Wenatchee and grew into a real farming community. The downtown area of East Wenatchee was dominated by a group of people from Kentucky or somewhere back there and they had wild parties and so forth!

NW: Oh tell me more! Let's talk about that more! But you mentioned Parkhill as president of your class who lived over there.

ET: Yes he had an older brother that was graduated from WSU and - Johnny Parkhill.

NW: Okay. I've met some Parkhills, they've been around long. So were there girls from East Wenatchee that you knew - that were in the Ink Slingers with you?

ET: No. Well this girl wasn't an Ink Slinger but she came from Majestic Flats. Majestic Flats had a school, a grade school, and she had been there and then she came to Wenatchee High. And I knew her. And her sister is living here now.

NW: Oh okay.

ET: But she is gone.

NW: So was there any sort of competition between East Wenatchee and Wenatchee in those days when you were growing up?

ET: Well I can't remember any. There was no school down – well they did have an elementary school

NW: But not a high school.

ET: No. I went there to teach, yes I first taught at Peshastin and then I got a job here at Eastmont and we were just forming a high school.

NW: Oh really you were very early on in that then. What year was that do you remember roughly?

ET: I was at Peshastin 1950 to 1955 or 56 and then I went to Eastmont and we had a freshman class and the class that would have gone on to Wenatchee High stayed and we built it up one class each year until we got a senior class. Then we graduated them.

NW: That would be another whole topic that would be fun to talk to you about. Well right now I want to go back and get you graduated from high school. We've got this 1932 annual here and before you graduated you were part of the Ink Slingers...

ET: Yes, that's what I was.

NW: And so you typed up a lot of papers, what happened to those papers? Were they published or did you have a club where you read your papers to each other?

ET: Yes I guess we did that.

NW: So you could learn from each other.

ET: That was the news; it was supposed to be news.

NW: Oh that was a journalism group.

ET: Sort of. We didn't have a class though, we just had an advisor.

NW: Who was your advisor? Do you remember?

ET: I remember what she looked like.

NW: (Laughter) Oh that's neat though, I'd love to learn more about the Ink Slingers. That sounds interesting. Did you, of course The Wenatchee World was publishing then - did you ever have anything published in the Wenatchee world?

ET: Not that I know of.

NW: We'll have to ask Wilfred!

ET: No I don't think he ever heard of us.

NW: Well it would have been his father in those days.

ET: Yes. Wilfred was below me in school.

NW: He was probably about the same age as Faye wasn't he? No, no, Faye would be older than Wilfred. That's okay.

ET: His sister Willa Lou was in my class.

NW: Oh really? Okay. I really love that name. So you graduated from high school, you played the trumpet, you were in this writing club-

ET: Yes, and I was out of high school without a job

NW: And that was 1932 and the world was in turmoil. In 1932. So then what did you do?

ET: I just did everything I could. I played.

NW: So you lived at home.

ET: Yes. And I had girlfriends. Roberta Batdorf and Golda Miller and Gloris Smalledge were in one group and then the other group was our church group and we were very close.

NW: What church did you go to?

ET: First Presbyterian

NW: And it was located?

ET: Right where it is - oh no, I can't say that. I can't say that anymore. It moved. It was located- the building that they left is still there on Chelan and Palouse.

NW: Oh okay. I can picture that. That's still a very nice building.

ET: Yes it's a very nice building.

NW: It's another kind of church now isn't it?

ET: I think that it is- was the Missionary Alliance.

NW: Yeah something like that. Right there by the library then. So that's where you went to church, you would drive- your family would drive from McKittrick Street, that would be a pretty great walk.

ET: And I was in that church until I was- I must have been out of high school when I became a Baptist.

NW: Oh, what prompted that? Friends?

ET: The first thing that prompted it was that we got a pastor from Grand Island Nebraska who didn't even bring a bible when he came here to candidate.

NW: To the Presbyterian Church? Oh, so you were looking for a little higher standard?

ET: Yes and he borrowed my bible to use while he was here.

NW: Oh the Presbyterian minister did?

ET: Yes. And that- wasn't very good. We really believed the bible and he didn't really believe it.

NW: Or he didn't really know it that well maybe.

ET: Well he sure didn't preach it.

NW: So then you became a member of the Baptist church. Where was that located?

ET: Where the Young Women's – It was on the corner of Mission and First street. Its where that – you know-

NW: The YWCA!

ET: YW. I couldn't think of the-

NW: That's neat, so that was the Baptist church that you went for high school on for quite a few years? Or did it start after high school that you started going there?

ET: Well it must have been about that time.

NW: Young adulthood.

ET: And so most of the Baptist's had left and we were all Presbyterians.

NW: Really? Now that's interesting.

ET: Oh I could give you a whole history of churches.

NW: That would be another really – a topic I'd love for another day. Now I do want to hear a little bit about the telephone operator. So you didn't have a job for a while.

ET: Yeah I didn't. And then Mrs. Alexander Murray was 94 and her daughter lived in Seattle and she was looking for someone to come and stay with her mother and so she called me to see if I would be interested. And I had nothing else to do so it sounded good, and I went to spend the nights with her. And I was at her house when the telephone company called me. I had applied for a job but that was – it was some time after that. And it turned out that the manager of the telephone company told the operator to call me and he told me later, he had had polio.

NW: Nice, nice.

ET: They didn't know that I could learn it.

NW: But there was nothing wrong with your hands or your head so why were they worried about that

ET: Well just you had to read long ways up to the numbers and so I had to learn it. So I learned for nothing.

NW: How long did that take, do you remember?

ET: About six weeks. But I really did learn it. I worked. I drew little pictures of the- of a unit of phone numbers, a hundred in each square or rectangle. And I studied it in church, every place. So I know where the numbers were.

NW: So having a photographic memory would have been a good thing if you were a telephone operator it sounds like. So some phones probably rang a lot more than other phones.

ET: Oh yes. There were lots of – lots of calls. There were about nine thousand telephones in the Wenatchee exchange when I went to work there. Wow.

NW: So how was it-

ET: Well they built it in sections. You had three- thee rows of these one hundred telephone jacks and the – one girl could sit in front of the whole town but you couldn't answer all of the calls. So they built another one and another one and another one down – they had twelve positions on the board for twelve girls to work all at once. Well but then to keep you from being swamped in front of you they blanked out a whole group of them. The lights wouldn't come on but you would look down the board and see it so you could plug in.

NW: Oh, huh.

ET: And say “number please, thank you, I'll give you information, I'll give you long distance, I'll give you Cashmere operator,” whatever they wanted to know, that's the way and so you'd be busy just saying “number please, thank you” it was a constant thing.

NW: So how long were you- what was the standard for once you answered a call to plug it in to the right hole? Were you supposed to be able to do that in five seconds?

ET: No, they had no standard.

NW: Just as soon as you could?

ET: Yeah just as soon as you could. And some you'd have to reach way, way up to plug in and then others would be right here in front of you. Like Jones, and Jones was 116.

NW: You still remember that?

ET: Oh yes! 1781 was the Sheriff. 498 was the police. Just- whatever it was.

NW: The hospital probably was called a lot

ET: Yes it was.

NW: And so the woman who was overseeing all of you, all twelve of you, her job was-

ET: Chief operator.

NW: Just keeping her eye on the big picture, make sure things were working.

ET: Oh yes. She'd just run this way and that way and push a chair under somebody and we had to sit on a high chair because the cords had to go down.

NW: Oh I see so was that hard for you to sit on a high chair with your leg?

ET: No. No it wasn't at all.

NW: So let me ask you this- I have an old phone, an old rotary phone in my home here in Wenatchee that still has the prefix on it. So do you remember the names and how the neighborhoods were identified, the blocks?

ET: Well 28- 29 phones were out in the rural areas and that meant there were eight people on the line, four on each. 2804 and 2904. Our number at home was 2803 black.

NW: Oh black? Okay.

ET: We had- it was black and white, and red and blue- little indicators. and they were painted white if they were ok. if they were painted red they were disconnected. If they were painted green they were temporally disconnected. and then I can't forget the East Wenatchee numbers. they were "0" and "0-1" the O was out here in front. and they had code ring. one long for - well lets see. I was trying to think of something. Well if the number ended in a 1-0 it was well I better not say anything about that.

NW: Let me ask you this Esther, I know- did everyone have a party line? Did everyone share a phone?

ET: Oh no, there were lots of private lines. 1-7-8-1 was the sheriff, that's not a part of a main line. And our chief operator was 1-6-4-1.

NW: You still remember those numbers- they were important. So how long did you do that job?

ET: Twelve and a half years.

NW: Oh my gosh no wonder you remember those numbers

ET: Yes

NW: So you graduated from high school, had a little transition time, and then got in to that and did that into the 40's it sounds like. WWII right- maybe around then?

ET: Yes. Let's see. I was trying to think when it was. Oh let's see I went to junior college and I broke after the twelve and a half years I went to college, the junior college. and I graduated from there – that's silly I can't, I just can't quite-

NW: Let me give you another milestone here, you married someone named Todd along the way. When did that happen?

ET: After everything else had happened.

JJ: She went to graduate school.

NW: Oh so you did a two year degree at Wenatchee Valley College and-

ET: Yes and then two- three years at the University of Washington.

NW: Oh goodness, in what field?

ET: Well my major was history and English.

NW: Of course, that makes sense.

ET: And then, then I graduated in 1949 with a BA degree and then 1950 I had my last year and I was hired as a teacher at Peshastin.

NW: All right I see, gosh you were busy.

ET: I know I was. I was busy, busy, busy.

NW: So how did you- did you save up your money while you were a telephone operator?

ET: Well I didn't make very much.

NW: So how did you go – how did you pay for school?

ET: I applied for the Lanham scholarship.

NW: Lanham?

ET: Lanham. L-A-N-H-A-M.

NW: Was that at the University of Washington?

ET: No that was here in Wenatchee

NW: Oh nice is it still there do you-

ET: Oh yes

NW: Oh so you're one of the success stories from the Lanham scholarship.

ET: Well I guess so. But they gave me 750 dollars I think it was or 700 - I don't know which it was. And that paid for my- you know board and room. I lived in Leary hall over there at the university, and then I just had - what I had saved and my sister helped me a little bit. She bought- she got me a car when I went into work at the Peshastin and I paid back the price of the car. It was Silver and I was the Lone Ranger.

NW: So what grade were you teaching in Peshastin?

ET: High school English. Junior and senior English. They were - I don't remember, I guess they were all of the years. And typing.

NW: How fast could you type? How many words per minute?

ET: Oh about eighty.

NW: That's pretty good, that's pretty darn amazing using those Royal, and Underwood.

ET: Yeah, that's right

NW: Yeah there's nothing wrong with your hands. Good reflexes

ET: No there wasn't, that was true

NW: So that's blessing. So how long did you teach up there? Five or six-

ET: Six years. I think it was six years. And then I went to Eastmont, and I was there twenty years.

NW: So when did you meet Mr. Todd?

ET: Oh well let's see. Must have been, about - oh my

JJ: Do you remember the year you got married?

ET: Yes, 1960

JJ: Oh there we go

NW: So you were already at Eastmont and-

ET: Yes I was at Eastmont when I got married.

NW: Well all right. With your training and your training to teach at Peshastin and then going to Eastmont, tell me what you love the most about teaching.

ET: Oh well I really liked to help the students. The students that didn't want any help, they were rascals. And the first week at Peshastin a group got around me and said we want you to know that we chased the last two English teachers out of here and I said "well you better not try that with me because all of Peshastin would know about it." There were always good kids, and always bad kids, and the good kids didn't speak up. The bad ones were the ones that did the talking. But each year was better. I've had to climb out the English window and go down the other end of the building and climb in the boy's room.

NW: Because they locked you in?

ET: No they didn't lock me in, but they put one of our little strange boys – one of them that had come new and wasn't in the swing of things- they put him in a locker

NW: Oh gee.

ET: And the bell rang and everybody was out of the hall and I went out of the hall for some reason and this little boy said, "Mrs. Stevens, would you help me out?" It was terrible.

NW: Oh man

ET: I said well you keep talking I don't know where you are and so he did. But that's the kind of stuff - all the time.

NW: Were there some students that really found their voice - that you helped them write and they went on to become journalists, or writers? Were there some satisfying relationships with some of the students?

ET: Well some of them became teachers themselves and they found they had to eat some of the things they did. And I have a picture in the room of one of the girls that she was just a little freshman that came in and she was a real student and you just loved to help and I had – I was invited to their wedding. She met this fellow and they lived in Oregon, Illinois for several years. He was a preacher and they lived – he's had a stroke and they live here in Wenatchee now. And –

NW: Were there very many other woman teachers that you-

ET: We had Home-Ec teachers

NW: So there were just the two of you at Peshastin? Did you become friends and sort of support each other?

ET: Well I don't know whether we supported each other or not. I guess we did.

NW: A little bit maybe.

ET: I would come home to Wenatchee on the weekends.

NW: Oh you stayed out there, I didn't, I wondered about that- commuting. That's what we would do now but you didn't do that, you lived up there.

ET: I lived up there.

NW: That makes sense doesn't it? Did they provide housing for you, the school district?

ET: No I bought it. The Home-Ec teacher and I lived together.

NW: Oh good. Did she do the cooking?

ET: A lot of it. Then she got married. And that's another sad story. Her husband was drowned up in the Entiat River and her little girl was drowned.

NW: What was her name?

ET: Her name was – let's see. She had a car and I had a car. They were each named something. But-

NW: I just know, getting to know more people in The Entiat I'm going there this afternoon and doing quite a few interviews- I just did an interview with the Home-Ec teacher who is retired, but was much younger than you. Did I ask you up in Peshastin did you know Ruth Ortiz. No? Ok, she may have been too little when you were teaching up there. Well we're at about an hour aren't we?

JJ: It's 10:49. You're at an hour and twenty minutes.

NW: Oh gosh we better stop. Yeah darn Esther there's more to talk about, but this was lovely having a chance to talk with you. I think that you must have had a positive effect on so many students that you don't even know.

ET: I think I did.

NW: I think you must have. Well thank you.

ET: Every once and a while somebody comes up to me and I don't recognize them but-

JJ: They know her.

ET: They know me.

NW: Well thank you.