

SAN PIERRE REVITALIZATION PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY

ST: Sarah Tannehill, interviewer

JK: Jean Kennedy, interviewee

ST: This is Sarah Tannehill speaking, and it's December 30th 2007; I'm in the home of Jean Becker Kennedy, and she has agreed to participate in the oral history portion of the San Pierre Revitalization Project. Thank you! Can you begin by giving, for the tape, your full name, and the names of your parents.

JK: Jean Veronica Becker Kennedy.

ST: Do you have a confirmation name you want to stick in there?

JK: Probably did, but I forget!

ST: Okay. [laughter] And your parents' full names.

JK: Henry Frank Becker, and Christina Catherine Becker... [maiden name] Fitting.

ST: So can you tell me the year of your birth?

JK: 6/16/25.

ST: 1925. And names of your brothers and sisters?

JK: James Charles Becker; Mary Helen Becker Tannehill; Catherine Becker Kneisler; and mine is Jean Becker Kennedy... which we did the first time!

ST: We did that, but that's okay. And your position in that family lineup?

JK: Okay, I'd be the third.

ST: Okay, so you're the second from youngest?

JK: Right.

ST: And where were you born?

JK: San Pierre... at home.

ST: Do you know if there was a doctor assisting?

JK: I was too little to remember.

ST: No one told you!

JK: No.

ST: Alright, and your ethnic background? What nationality?

JK: American... German.

ST: German. And what was your mother's family?

JK: I think German, too. I don't think there was any Irish in there.

ST: I thought that mom said grandma's family was Scots-Irish, but...

JK: Possible.

ST: Fitting could probably go either way. And how long were you a resident of San Pierre?

JK: Probably 25, 26 years... 'cause we lived in Tefft for a couple years.

ST: And what were your first memories? Do you have any first memories of San Pierre?

JK: It's a very friendly town. It seemed like everybody got along well. And today, if it had been the same, I would have moved back. [If it was the same as it was] when we left.

ST: *Were there any events from childhood that stick out in your mind?*

JK: It's the family... dinners in Monterey. We had... anytime somebody come out from Chicago, we all traveled to Monterey for dinner.

ST: *Because who was in Monterey?*

JK: My two aunts and uncle, and it'd be my two aunts and my one aunt's husband that would come out from Chicago.

ST: *Can you name those people? Name the people in Monterey and the people who came out from Chicago.*

JK: Okay, let's see. Charles Becker, Jenny Becker, Agnes Becker; and Chicago was Frona Becker, Lina LeClaire, and Art LeClaire. And Lois Reeves came out, too, with her parents, which was Eva and Vic Reeves.

ST: *Okay. You said Lois Reeves?*

JK: Right.

ST: *They weren't related, but they were family friends?*

JK: Right.

ST: *What did your parents do for a living?*

JK: My father farmed; he had two milk trucks; and he hauled stock into Chicago. Then they sold that, and then they moved to town, and he ran the filling station there. And then he went and he worked for the county.

ST: *And didn't he work in Chicago when he was younger? Was that when he had children?*

JK: That was before Jim was born; 'cause there's about seven years difference between Jim and Catherine.

ST: *That's quite a space!*

JK: He was all they could handle! [laughter]

ST: *So when Henry Becker—your father, that's who you're speaking of—in Chicago I understand he worked on the streetcar? As a conductor, or driver?*

JK: Conductor, I think.

ST: *Okay. Do you know how long he did that?*

JK: No, I don't.

ST: *So that was in his past by the time you were born.*

JK: Right.

ST: *And you mother, did she work outside the home, and what did she do on the farm?*

JK: There was enough to keep her busy with the kids; and then there'd be a hired man, you know, when they'd be harvesting. When they'd come in she'd have to cook big meals. And then after she got Mary in her last year of school, then she went back to teaching.

ST: *Of high school?*

JK: Grade school.

ST: *Like eighth grade?*

JK: No, first and second.

ST: *No, no, I mean, you said, "after she got Mary in her last year of school"?*

JK: Yeah, she was a junior... no maybe she was teaching before that. Anyway, it was in there that she went back to teaching, 'cause they wanted her to come back during the war, and my dad said, Stay home! Well, there were three of us at home.

ST: *Did she want to go back to teaching?*

JK: She loved it. She loved it. 'Cause Catherine and I were gone, just Mary was home. And I can remember when I was going to school, every morning she'd get each one of us in the window—make sure we didn't have any lice! [laughter] You had to be careful then, 'cause they'd be in school. But she took one at a time and combed the hair right in the window where she could see everything.

ST: *It's still a problem, you know! [laughter]*

JK: I know! [laughter] But I don't think everybody took that much care, like she did! [laughter] I don't know if your mother remembers that or not.

ST: *She's never mentioned it!*

JK: You'll have to ask her.

ST: *I will. So she taught first and second grade, you said, and she really liked it.*

JK: Very much.

ST: *She must have been very happy to get back to that then when...*

JK: Right, 'cause she first started at English Lake, and she had all the grades there. And then they closed English Lake, and then I think she was in San Pierre for awhile, and I don't

know what happened there, but anyway, she and another lady from North Judson, they drove to Grovertown every day for school.

ST: Oh. After she taught in San Pierre?

JK: [Nods]

ST: And she retired... do you have any idea when she retired from teaching? In her 60s... or...?

JK: Wouldn't your mother know?

ST: I didn't ask her yet. It's okay. I can look into that. What sort of work or career have you had?

JK: I went through the South Bend Business School, and I went to work in Chicago.

ST: Doing?

JK: Office work. And Mary and John moved me to Chicago; they said if I didn't like it they'd move me back! [laughter] And then Catherine was there, too, and Catherine and I stayed in a home, where we rented a room. And we were right across the street from Lois Reeves.

ST: From Lois Reeves! Oh, so was it a kind of a boarding house, or a family home?

JK: It was a family home.

ST: Okay, and they just rented out a room or two.

JK: [Inaudible] our family of two.

ST: How did you find that?

JK: Probably through Lois, 'cause bein' in that neighborhood.

ST: *Okay. And so, how long were you in Chicago?*

JK: Let's see... I think your mother was married to John. Oh, and Catherine decided that she was going to get married, and I decided that I was coming back to San Pierre! [laughter] Because at that time it was a little frightening, because I went to business school downtown, and coming home, I had an experience with somebody following me. So that kind of took care of my Chicago... and I wouldn't live there today. [laughter]

ST: *I see. No. And so when you left Chicago you came back and worked somewhere else, I guess.*

JK: Right. Worked for Mr. Gehring, the largest potato and onion grower.

ST: *So sort of a large scale farmer?*

JK: Right. It was eight miles west of Medaryville. Then I decided there weren't any benefits with them. I think Torchy Knapp didn't want his people drivin' back and forth every week, so I quit there, and I moved with Ronald down to, I think, Kentucky. Well, I moved to Kentucky, and guess what? They moved him on Southern Downs in the eastern part of Kentucky, so I was there alone all week!

ST: *Oh, great!*

JK: So I had a chance to go back up to Rochester, and this Paul Brooker got me in at Dean's, where you had security, good benefits, and pension when you retired.

ST: *That's Dean's Dairy.*

JK: Dean's Milk; which was a nice job.

ST: *And how long were you there?*

JK: Only 16 years because I came from Torchy Knapp's... which I shouldn't have quit, but you know, they moved Ronald back up to Rochester, and I said then, I'm never going to move again! [laughter] I moved to Kentucky, and what do they do? They send him on farther southeast—so there I was at home, too, during the week. So I said when I got back to Rochester, I was going to stay put—which I did!

ST: *For how many years were you there?*

JK: In Rochester? Close to 50 years.

ST: *I guess I didn't realize you'd moved there that long ago—that you were that young when you moved there—because I remember you living in LaCrosse, too, for awhile.*

JK: Right. And then we moved to Rochester.

ST: *When you were a child living in San Pierre, did you imagine that you'd spend your life there, or did you imagine moving to different...*

JK: I had no idea.

ST: *Didn't think about it!*

JK: No. Too young.

ST: *So, your educational background—you attended San Pierre School throughout grade school and high school. Any teachers that you remember?*

JK: [Laughter] I remember the English teacher, Mrs. Jones—she was rough!

ST: *And then you went from there to business school.*

JK: Right, in South Bend.

ST: *How long of a program was that?*

JK: A year and a half.

ST: *Have you observed changes in the town in the course of your life?*

JK: Oh my, yes! Quite a bit.

ST: *How would you describe them?*

JK: Not very good. I hope in time they will get things back the way it was.

ST: *What would you say you'd like to see back there that isn't there now?*

JK: I'd like to see a nice grocery store, filling station, and I think the bank's even gone there, too, right?

ST: *The building's still there!*

JK: And if I had those three... of course, probably a medical doctor, too.

ST: *Some kind of health care facility.*

JK: Right.

ST: *I'm just looking at the questions that maybe don't apply so much since you haven't been a resident of the town for awhile... How would you describe your role in the community?*

JK: I enjoyed it! [laughter]

ST: *[Laughter] It was a happy role? Do you have a way of describing the role of women in the community—talking about them?*

JK: I thought they were nice! Some of 'em were at the age when they were kind of boy crazy.

ST: *That's another interview! What was the most damaging thing that's happened in San Pierre?*

JK: When they closed the school and they lost the grocery store, lost the filling station, and the bank. Those were the major things.

ST: *It seemed like things took a turn downhill from there. A lot of people agree... usually people start with the school closing—and taking it down! Even if it still stood there and could be used for other things...*

JK: The grade school is still there, 'cause mother taught over there.

ST: *There was something about that old building, though, that was the heart of the town. It really seemed to be a center for a lot of community activities.*

JK: Well, you went there probably.

ST: *Yeah, I did. I did 'til fifth grade. So you've kind of said what you would most like to see happen there—kind of restoring it. Do you have any concerns or fears about the town?*

JK: I think they need some police force around there, 'cause with all these... with the bank being in the shape it is... and I'm surprised Dolezal's store hasn't been... same thing. And I wish they'd get rid of that filling station there, too. It's a sore eye [sic].

ST: *How did your family do during the Great Depression? Do you remember it?*

JK: No, because we had aunts in Chicago who took care... [laughter] We went to Chicago and bought clothes; and in Monterey they had the sugar.

ST: *The sugar?*

JK: Yeah, there was so much sugar that they bought [laughter]—your mother'd remember that! Upstairs in their attic it was all... 'cause you know, that was what you couldn't buy! [laughter]

ST: *How did they get it?*

JK: Don't ask me!

ST: *The black sugar market?*

JK: Right [laughter]. I hope this doesn't go out to anybody!

ST: *Oh, no. [laughter] Were you aware of things being harder, or could you look around at the people around you and see that things were harder for them during the depression, or was it not such a striking contrast.*

JK: Really at our age, I don't think we realized...

ST: *That there was a struggle going on.*

JK: Right. It seems like things were just handed...

ST: *Well, it sounds like you were blessed with the people around you; the relatives... If you were asked to name a person in the town as you were growing up that had a major influence on you—or any kind of influence, it doesn't have to be major—who would that be?*

JK: Ardella Paulsen, for one. And Mr. McCauley, who was our principal. And the gal that took care of the telephone—she knew what all went on! [laughter]

ST: *Who was that?*

JK: Phyllis Matthews.

ST: *Now is that the woman that we called Babe? Babe Matthews? Or was that...*

JK: Okay, who took care of you?

ST: *That was, I think, Mrs. Matthews... I think her name was Evangeline Matthews.*

JK: Then her granddaughter.

ST: *Not her daughter.*

JK: No, granddaughter.

ST: *Okay. I don't think I knew her.*

JK: With the old telephones, they knew all that was going on! [laughter]

ST: *Because it was all party lines then.*

JK: Right.

ST: *Of the people that you mentioned, how did Ardella have an influence?*

JK: She was my classmate. She was always a friendly person... her family was, too.

ST: *And Mr. McCauley?*

JK: He was our teacher, and he had two daughters, and one was in my class—Catherine and mine—and she died early, so we didn't get to enjoy her too much.

ST: *Was that Janice?*

JK: Yeah. And Mr. McCauley was a teacher, plus a postmaster, too. He also knew everything! [laughter] He said my brother, Jim, would never make it with chemistry... Jim came out on top!

ST: *So obviously he didn't know that.*

JK: But I think Jim brought it back home.

ST: *Are there any other things that I haven't asked, that you would like to say, or any people whose names you want to mention.*

JK: Well, you know, Mary Margaret Sparks Good... she was in our wedding, and she was another one, where we all ran around together—went to dances. And Ann Vendl, who's deceased, too—but we all ran around together. Ann Vendl is the one that drove us to Mr. Gehring's place out in the country, eight miles west of Medaryville. But we had a good time going back and forth. And of course we had... southern people... in the area where we were going. And Ann said, "We could be nice to 'em, but we don't have to take 'em home!" Which was true! You had to be careful, you know. So I thought she put it pretty nice.

ST: *I think that Don Good also was in your wedding, and he passed...*

JK: No, his wife was.

ST: *He wasn't in. It was Bud Goetz that was in your wedding.*

JK: Right. In fact I called Bud Goetz at Christmastime, when I got his Christmas card, to tell him I wasn't sending out cards. And I said, "By the way, Bud, there's only three of us left; that's you and Sherry and me!"

ST: *From the wedding party. [laughter]*

JK: He said, "Oh, my gosh!" And he's not in very good shape, either.

ST: *No? Well thank you for including me in that group, since I didn't actually perform as expected. [laughter]*

JK: Well, you were in the party, so I mean...

ST: *I was in the right costume, at least. [laughter] Okay, well if there's nothing else that you want to add we can wrap this up.*

JK: *If I think of something else, next time you come through, why...*

ST: *We'll plug this tape in again! Thank you very much.*

JK: *You're welcome.*