

Voices of Dixon: Faith Berhofer

From the book
Voices of Dixon:
Oral Histories from the Embudo Valley
Interviews and Editing by Harvey Frauenglass
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(1924 - 2007)

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Interviewed March 13, 2003

Origins

I grew up in Superior, Wisconsin. I was the youngest of seven children in the Keaough family. My dad was killed in a car accident in Grand Rapids when I was a month old. My mother hadn't named me until after he was killed. Then I got the name of Faith. As a child I wanted to be a librarian or a nurse or a veterinarian. Somehow or other it worked out that I became a nurse. I took my nurse's training in Duluth, which was seven miles from home. I started training in 1942. My mother took me over to the training school, which was at St. Luke's Hospital. Nowadays eighteen-year-olds are all over the world, and I had to have my mother take me seven miles from home to start nurse's training. I was so green, Irish green, that is.

My last three months of training was in Grand Rapids. We lived in the homes of soldiers who were overseas. The people I lived with

had a relative who was drumming up nurses for Embudo because the hospital was so short of help that they were ready to take just about anyone. (Laughs) My first choice was to go to Kentucky, in the mountains. If I had, I probably would have married a man with a still. (Laughs) Anyway, this woman wrote to the Board of National Presbyterian Missions and told them about me. They got in touch with me. I graduated in 1945. I stayed home for three months after graduation to be with my family. Then, lo and behold, I was on the train to New Mexico on the first of January in 1946.

The only way I could have gotten here was to wear my cadet uniform. I was a nurse cadet. This was the program the government set up to train nurses during World War II. They paid everything once we got into the program. The only requirement was that you had to stay in nursing for a year. But there was an indoctrination that cost a hundred fifty dollars. This was during the Depression. My sister paid seventy-five dollars which she borrowed on her insurance policy. There was a man from the Presbyterian Church who paid the other seventy-five. Actually the money from the insurance policy didn't come in time, so he paid the whole thing. She was going to pay him back, but he only let her pay half. That was the Gates family, a wonderful family. They put my sister through college.

Early Years in New Mexico

I arrived here on the third of January. One of the doctors in the hospital where I trained had been to New Mexico during the war. He said I would have to take a burro from Santa Fe to get to Embudo. But we did have a road and the cars were driving on it. The teachers from Allison James, the Presbyterian junior high in Santa Fe, had a discussion about how I would get to Embudo and they decided they would take me rather than make me wait for a bus. So they drove me up to Embudo, which used some of their gas ration coupons. And the dirt road to Embudo wasn't anything different than the mud roads of Wisconsin. We used to live on Second Street in Superior and it was still mud when I left. It's a superhighway now.

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I loved the people and everything right from the start. Everybody was very nice and they welcomed me. I met a lab technician whose hobby was collecting shoes. She now lives in Truchas and has four grown children. She sang at my wedding. But that was six months later. Miss Mace, the head nurse, was one of God's angels. She was like a mother. Four or five days later—this was in the middle of winter—we went to Dixon. Christmas celebration had been postponed because of a measles epidemic. The minister was dressed as Santa Claus and he was handing out presents to all the little kids. I didn't take the pictures, but somebody gave me a bunch of them and they're now over at the Presbyterian Church in Dixon.

Being that it was the holiday season, the staff at the hospital decided to take some cookies up to Carl's parents in Rinconada. That's when I met him. He was just recently discharged from the Marine Corps. We played games and his mother told fortunes. The next day he came down to the hospital with a headache. I guess you know how many headaches he's had since then. Then we started dating and we went horseback riding in Taos. We had to take a bus up there. His dad wouldn't have let him have the car. I worked for six months and we were engaged, in February, I guess. I continued to work until June 28th, 1946. Then as a result of being married I lost my commission as a nurse, but I stayed on as local help until September, when Carl was transferred by Game and Fish to Aztec, New Mexico. We were over there until just before Windy was born. Then we lived in Red River. Not too long after that we moved to Taos and I went to work at Holy Cross Hospital. It was in the old Mabel Dodge Luhan house. It was a good hospital. We had the nuns and we had the local doctors and I got along fine with everybody. Then I got pregnant again. We decided that our house in Rinconada was finished enough to come back here. So then I went back to work at Embudo Hospital part-time. Then we were transferred to Las Vegas, so I worked there at the mental hospital for five years without any break, except when Gordy was born. I came back to Embudo to have Gordy. I stayed in the Embudo Hospital thirteen days because

they didn't want me to have the baby in the mental hospital in Las Vegas. (Laughs) I did little odd jobs while I was there, helping with supplies—you know, anything a person nine months pregnant could do. Dr. Bowen, Sarah Bowen, who had delivered Windy, now delivered Gordy. She did a lot for New Mexico and a lot for the hospital. We had three children, but we lost Gordy in a car accident, after he had been in Vietnam.

In 1954 we came back to Rinconada and I worked part-time at the hospital while taking care of the kids. Carl meanwhile worked all over the state. When the summer people came to the hospital, the volunteers, I was laid off, which was fine for me because then I could spend full time with the kids. Then I had surgery on my knee and afterwards I decided that rather than do heavy-duty nursing I would try something a little lighter, so I went to work at El Mirador with the old people. I worked there for about a year.

Memorable Experiences

What sticks in your mind more than anything is the little kids, the little pediatric patients. In Embudo Hospital we had everything. We had an ER, a very small ER, not anything like they are now. We had some very sick babies. We had newborn babies. We had pregnant mothers that needed a little help. We had surgical patients. We might have to do surgery at a moment's notice. Doctors came from Santa Fe to do surgery

Once we had a little boy come in acting like a monkey. He was about four years old. He had fallen out of the back of a pickup. A doctor in Taos had given him a penicillin shot and sent him home. He came to Embudo and we looked at him; he had a skull fracture. We transferred him instantly to Santa Fe. There were no ambulances then, so the parents had to take him in their private car. They were afraid their car wouldn't make it, so I loaned them my car. I would have gone with them, but we were doing surgery and I couldn't leave. From Santa Fe they transferred him to Albuquerque, to save his life. After we finished surgery—it was about two in the morning,

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I rode into Santa Fe with the doctor, who lived there, to get my car. The boy did survive, but he never was the same. He was hyperactive, troubled.

When I was working at the state mental hospital in Las Vegas a drunk ran into my pickup which was parked in front of the hospital. One of the inmates got the license number and he reported it. I asked him, "How come you could do that?"

He said, "I may be crazy, but I'm not stupid." (Laughs) And he was in there for life, but he had outside privileges.

I feel the whole Dixon and Embudo-area people are my family. I took care of their grandparents, I helped deliver the babies. One woman even named her baby after me because I helped her deliver. Here in New Mexico there were midwives, curanderas, who delivered out in the boonies, but not in the hospital.

I never delivered. We almost did once. I think the nurses' aids did more than I did. They knew more about delivery than I did. We were taught not to deliver. The doctors had to deliver. That was our training. But during my training in Grand Rapids two nurses and I did deliver—twins on a bedpan. (Laughs) That was during shoe rationing. They never wore shoes in that family, which had eight or ten kids, because the mother said they couldn't afford to buy them. So she left us her shoe stamps for helping her have her babies on the bedpan. (Laughs) And we were short of shoes. Even nurses didn't get help with shoes. I had good experience during my three months training in Grand Rapids.

When I came to Embudo I was paid sixty-five dollars a month as a commissioned nurse, plus room and board. I lost my commission when I got married. Embudo hospital closed in 1972, basically because it was too small to have the new equipment that was being put into hospitals. I had worked there, off and on, for twenty-two years. But I didn't have any retirement. I think there was twelve dollars and fifty-cents retirement built up. The Board of Missions, which ran the hospital, was not very generous. But who needs it? We can always get welfare. (Laughs) But I did get Social Security

when I got to be sixty-two. I also worked in all the other places around the state that I told you about. In 1988 I got out of nursing, after forty-six years. I guess it was long enough.

My sister was a librarian, but then she had to give that up because the city had a rule that you couldn't work for the city if you were married. So she became a nurse's aid. Then she was grandfathered in as an LPN and worked in nursing until she retired. That was in Superior, Wisconsin. But now all my family are gone except me, and two sisters-in-law who have outlived their husbands. One is ninety-six. She's in a nursing home in Iowa. The other, who is eighty-five, is still active visiting people who are in nursing homes. She was a registered nurse. She doesn't do any nursing, but she goes to see people. If you want to meet my family, they're all up here. (Points to pictures on the wall.) I even have a picture of my grandfather who shook hands with Abraham Lincoln.

Memories of Family Life

My father was a grocer. My mother was an Irish washerwoman. My mother used to hang the clothes outside at forty below and then bring them in to thaw and dry. We must have been rotten kids because I can't remember ever helping my mother with the wash. I had a brother eight years older than me and he used to steal my bicycle to go to the pool hall and leave me home to shovel the coal into the stove. (Laughs) He was a good brother when he got older. When I was in nurse's training I wrote him a letter saying that I wanted a picture of Abraham Lincoln on green paper for my birthday. He was a seaman on the big boats in the Great Lakes. He sent me the five dollars and I bought a skirt with it. Five dollars for a skirt! How things have changed. I sent my niece twenty dollars for graduation. She wrote to me four or five years later and said she had just found my check which she had stuck in a book. "I'm afraid to take it to a bank," she wrote, "because they might not honor it."

So I said to her that if that's how poor her people were, then let them give you the money. I never let her have it back. (Laughs) We

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were too poor to be sending twenty dollars to them anyhow. Carl probably didn't even know about it.

(Points to picture of her father.) My father was a sportsman. He loved to ice skate. He was a curler—you know what curling is? They take the big rocks and throw them the way you would a bowling ball. He was a hunter and a fisherman. He was killed on a fishing trip. He was the only married man, the only one with children. He was in the back seat and was thrown out. No seat belts in those days.

This is my family (points). This is the one who was a librarian and later became a nurse. This is the one who worked on the lakes for years until he got married and his wife wouldn't let him anymore so he got a job in a flour mill. That's my mother. That's my oldest sister, Josie; she was like a second mother. This guy worked in the shipyards. During the Depression he worked in gas stations. When he'd bring his lunch bucket home at night he'd always have a little something for me to eat, and it always smelled like gasoline. (Laughs) This was Eugene, but we called him Bud. The one who sailed was Rupert. This is my sister Mary and she was four years older than me. She had two years of college and then got married.

My mother was Florence Irene. She was a Sherman. That's where Lincoln comes in. Her father was the one who shook hands with Lincoln. Here's a picture of Grandpa Sherman. Elaine found all these pictures back in Wisconsin when she went back there last fall. You know Elaine? (*No, I know your daughter Faith.*) That's Elaine. Faith E. Berghofer, professionally, but she's Elaine around the house. Here's the thesis that my granddaughter Sharita wrote. You know Sharita? (*Yes, she sits in front of me in the choir.*)

Here's a picture of our club. It's just women, but on special occasions we invite the men, like our picnic—once a year. Thanksgiving, once a year. They don't come to Christmas—we have that to ourselves. I guess if they wanted to come to a meeting and give a talk they could come. Like Carl did one time. I don't remember what it was. (Carl: Oh yeah, I've given several talks to

them over the years. One was on CPR.)

Here's a picture of Elaine that an artist up in Taos painted. And here's a picture of me using that breather I'm supposed to wear at night. A flash in the pan. (*Shows other pictures of friends and family.*) This is a doll Elaine made for me. No one else is supposed to talk to him, or bother him. And here's the cat. Jumping in and out of things. We've had cats ever since I can remember. I even had a guinea pig for a pet when I was little. Now there are thousands more pictures if you ever want to come and look at them. I'm going to get them into books. One's going to be dogs and cats.

V-J Day and Graduation

And here's one more picture of my brother who worked in the shipyards. He was a good man. One day he got a piece of steel in his eye. It was so painful for him that they let me off duty from the nursing program to go stay with him one night. And for his wedding I missed one class. But I graduated right on time, July 13th to July 13th three years later. That was the last of my training. I went home to Superior to visit my family. I did that on my three hours off. It was only seven miles. When I came back, Duluth was in an uproar. It was V-J Day. Everything was so exciting that while I was riding on the bus, I threw up! That was also a part of my nurse's training. (Laughs)