

Oral History Interview
with
Mary Elizabeth Criswell

Interview Conducted by
Karen Neurohr
March 4, 2012

O-STATE Stories
Oral History Project

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O-State Stories

An Oral History Project of the OSU Library

Interview History

Interviewer: Karen Neurohr
Transcriber: Ashley Sarchet
Editors: Miranda Mackey, Latasha Wilson, Juliana Nykolaiszyn

The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of O-STATE Stories Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories revolving around Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC) and Oklahoma State University (OSU).

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on October 5, 2006.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Mary Elizabeth Criswell is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 4, 2012.

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About Mary Elizabeth Criswell...

Originally from Claremore, Oklahoma, Mary Elizabeth Criswell was born in 1913 to Henry and Flora Brown. Mary Elizabeth's father was a lawyer and judge in Rogers County, and her mother was a homemaker.

After graduating from high school in 1931, Mary Elizabeth enrolled at Oklahoma A&M College, and enjoyed living in Gardiner Hall and working for the Dean of the Graduate College. She wrapped up her education in 1936, graduating with a degree in education. Upon graduation, Mary Elizabeth married and had three children together with husband Gilbert: Kathleen, Gilbert, and Charlene.

In this interview, Mary Elizabeth looks back on spending time with her father, including traveling with him as he campaigned for county judge, meeting Will Rogers as a youth, attending college at Oklahoma A&M, and enjoying activities such as writing poetry and participating in book club discussions.

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Mary Elizabeth Criswell



Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Karen Neurohr
March 4, 2012
Stillwater, Oklahoma

Neurohr *Today is March 4, 2012. My name is Karen Neurohr. I'm a librarian at Oklahoma State University Library, and I'm here in the home of Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Criswell, whose maiden name was Brown. I'm here today to interview her about her experience as a student at Oklahoma State University and then also find out a little bit about her childhood. Thank you for letting me come interview you today. Mrs. Criswell, I understand that you grew up in Claremore.*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *And tell me a little bit about your father.*

Criswell Well, my father was county judge of Rogers County, and my mother was a homemaker. I have one sister, but she has died. Now, what do you want to know?

Neurohr *Well, you told me at the program the other night that when you were a little girl you met someone famous, and that was Will Rogers.*

Criswell Yes, yes.

Neurohr *So, tell me about that.*

Criswell I was a little girl and my father asked me one day, he was at the courthouse, of course, and a buddy came home and said, "Would you like to meet Will Rogers?" And I said, "Oh, yes! Oh, yes!" So, I did. He took me there to the courthouse and also, a big bouquet of prize peonies

that my father raised. And he was very gracious, accepted the flowers and thanked me, and I just felt so good. (Laughs)

Neurohr *About how old were you when that happened?*

Criswell I wasn't school age, yet. So, I must have been about five.

Neurohr *About five years old. Were there a lot of people around?*

Criswell No, no, there weren't very many people in the courthouse that day. And they didn't put me in jail. (Laughs)

Neurohr *Well, that's good. Well, so, what does Will Rogers mean to you?*

Criswell Well, I have admired him from being a little girl and shaking his hand. And he has been someone to look up to, and I was glad to meet him, and I'm glad that I'm still here. (Laughs)

Neurohr *Did you see some of the movies he was in when you were young?*

Criswell Oh, yes! Oh, yes! I did, but I can't tell you now what they were.

Neurohr *What was it like to go to the movie theater? Did you go to the movies on Saturdays when you were growing up?*

Criswell Oh, yes, yes. Yes, you could go to the matinee Saturday and it was cheaper in those days. I went quite often to the movies.

Neurohr *Is there anything else that you would like to tell me about Will Rogers?*

Criswell I'm reading the book and I wasn't aware of some of the things, of course, because I was still little. But he grew up in Oologah, of course, and I was there many times. My father was the county judge, and he had to be elected every few years. I would go with him when he campaigned, and he was a very wonderful man. And my mother, sadly, died early, so he raised my little sister by himself. She's ten years younger, but she isn't alive now.

Neurohr *You said that you went to a lot of the campaigns for your father.*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *So, what was that like? Did you go to schools or churches?*

Criswell Well, we just got in the car, and he would stop at various places in the country. He knew everybody. I think he knew everybody. And we used

to have—a long time ago, he came from Georgia, and they had what they called the Georgia Picnic every year for the people in Claremore who had come from Georgia. So, that was fun, and he took me on several trips that were just wonderful. And my mother was not able to go, so he took me and we saw a lot of the country. I had a wonderful childhood.

Neurohr *How did you travel for those trips?*

Criswell In a car.

Neurohr *In a car?*

Criswell Yes, yes.

Neurohr *Does any one particular place stand out to you that you went with your father?*

Criswell No, it was just everybody in the county. And generally, I'd stay in the car while he went and talked to people, but sometimes I went along, listened. I can still remember, in those days, I don't know if it's still true, to get married, the county judge could do that and a number of people would come to our house to be married. I would sit there enthralled. (Laughs) And I don't know, let me see, we went to—Honey, right now I can't tell you, but we went to a lot of different places in the United States, not outside—well, we did go to Mexico. When my husband was alive, we traveled a lot.

Neurohr *Did your father have an education?*

Criswell He was, a long time ago, and he took—what do you call it when you don't go to school but you take...

Neurohr *Some training course?*

Criswell Yes, and he did get his certificate to teach school, which he did for a little while, while he was a young man and before he moved to Claremore. So, my parents were very dear, and I had one sister and no other children. I had kinfolks, though, that lived in Claremore, and so I had a lot of people to go see.

Neurohr *Well, I guess let's talk about when you came to Stillwater. What was it that made you decide to come to Oklahoma A&M College?*

Criswell Well, when I started to college, not very many people had a college education. So, I think I was the first one or maybe just the second of my

family who went to college. And my dearest, dearest friend was going to go to Oklahoma A&M, and so my dad said, “You’re going to go, too,” and he made—in fact, he borrowed money to send me. But then I got a job in not too long, and so I helped with the expenses. I worked for the dean of—his name was Dr. McIntosh, and he was the Dean of...

Neurohr *Was it education?*

Criswell No, it wasn’t education. It was—Honey, I cannot even... [Dean of the Graduate College]

Neurohr *That’s okay. Well, when you came to Oklahoma A&M College, did you ride the train to get here or did your father bring you?*

Criswell Well, yes, but they didn’t come very often. It wasn’t far to Claremore, but in those days, we didn’t just go all the time. And can you imagine? (Laughs) All of us girls wore high heels to class and every place we went. (Laughs) Well, we had a wonderful time. My two best friends came at the same time I did.

Neurohr *Where did you live when you were in college?*

Criswell In the dormitory.

Neurohr *Do you remember the name of it? Was it Willard?*

Criswell No, no, it was... Oh, I can’t say.

Neurohr *One of the other ones? Thatcher?*

Criswell No, Gardiner Hall.

Neurohr *Gardiner Hall. Was one of your friends your roommate?*

Criswell Oh, yes. In the dormitory, we got kind of a suite so that all three of us could stay in the same place. We had a good time.

Neurohr *Do you remember Dean Stout, the Dean of Women? Ms. Julia Stout?*

Criswell Laura? No, no, that was the house mother.

Neurohr *Oh, you had a house mother?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *Oh, tell me about that.*

Criswell Well, she was pretty stern, and we had to be in at a certain time. But she was real sweet to me, so we had a... And while I was still in the dormitory, I met my husband.

Neurohr *Oh, tell me about that.*

Criswell Well, Louise and Dorothy and I went to church, and we walked everywhere because we didn't have cars, then. Not anybody—well, maybe some of the faculty, but not very many of the students had. And now, where was I?

Neurohr *When you met your husband.*

Criswell Oh, yes. Well, one day Louise and Dorothy and I were walking to church because we walked everywhere. We went by a certain place near the campus, and I looked over and there were some boys playing...

Neurohr *Basketball?*

Criswell Yes. And one of them I knew because he was in a class with me, and so he said, "Hello," and I said, "Hello." And that afternoon, I got a telephone call, and he told me what his name was, and he said, "What do you plan to do tonight?" And I said, "Well, my roommates and I are going to church." And he said, "Well, would you let me go to church with you?" And that was the start of our whole life.

Neurohr *What church did you go to?*

Criswell First Christian Church. Still do. (Laughs)

Neurohr *So, what did you major in when you were in school?*

Criswell Education and a minor in English.

Neurohr *Did you always want to be a teacher?*

Criswell Well, I guess I won't say I really wanted badly to be a teacher, but in those days when you didn't have very much money, you could go for a semester and then you could teach a little while and then go back to school and then teach a little while. So, that's what I decided to do. Being a teacher was one thing that I really thought I would like to do. But I took a lot of... I took a lot of... I can't say it, Honey. I'm sorry.

Neurohr *That's okay. So, did you teach some, then?*

Criswell No.

Neurohr *Oh, you never did?*

Criswell No.

Neurohr *So, you met your husband while you were in college.*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *When did you get married?*

Criswell When I graduated. (Laughs)

Neurohr *Was he already out of school?*

Criswell Yes, he was already, and we had a wonderful life, Darling.

Neurohr *Was your wedding in Stillwater?*

Criswell No, he came from Chickasha.

Neurohr *Oh, he was from Chickasha. Did you get married in Stillwater or Claremore?*

Criswell At Claremore. In fact, we decided that we would just go and took off work. He worked, too, and I worked in the graduate school. We took off one afternoon on a Friday and drove to Claremore. And let me see, *September in the Rain* was one of the new songs at the time, and that came on the radio and the rain came down at the same time, and it just seemed perfect, and that's what we... When I got there, my dearest friend's mother called and she said, "I have everything fixed for you. Don't go anywhere else." She said, "Just come to my house." She had everything fixed so beautifully, flowers and everything to eat. She was like a second mother to me. My mother was ill so much, and so Louise's mother was my second mother and she had everything fixed for us. It was so wonderful. I didn't expect it. I have been so blessed with friends and family. I just can't tell you how wonderful it has been.

Neurohr *When you were working at the college for the dean, what kind of work were you doing?*

Criswell Secretarial.

Neurohr *Was it a very busy job?*

Criswell Well, yes, it was busy because there were two other—besides the dean of the graduate school who I really worked for, there were two other men. They were professors, and they also brought me work to do. So, I did very well, I think.

Neurohr *Did you continue working there after you graduated?*

Criswell No.

Neurohr *Were you involved in some...*

Criswell Well, I did work a little while after I graduated.

Neurohr *I think I saw in the yearbook that your senior year was 1936. Was your senior year 1936? Was that the year that you got married and you graduated?*

Criswell Not my senior year, no. I can't tell you, now.

Neurohr *Were you in Kappa Delta Pi?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *What was that like?*

Criswell Well, it was a surprise to me, but I was glad. We just had meetings. That was nothing exciting.

Neurohr *Why was it a surprise to you?*

Criswell Well, because I didn't expect to get a job that easy.

Neurohr *What other memories do you have of being a student at Oklahoma A&M College? You went to church a lot. What other things did you do?*

Criswell Well, goodness. (Laughs) Honey, I can't tell you right now.

Neurohr *Do you remember any of your professors in particular?*

Criswell Dr. McIntosh, Mr. Orr.

Neurohr *What do you remember about Dr. McIntosh?*

Criswell Oh, he was a wonderful man, very kind to me. And if I hesitated when I took dictation, he would stop and wait for me. He was a wonderful man. And his wife was... I was scared to death of her. (Laughs)

Neurohr *Did she work at the college?*

Criswell No, but she was pretty stern. (Laughs) However, she was nice to me and had me to come have dinner several times and kind of took me under her wing.

Neurohr *After you and Mr. Criswell were married and you made your home in Stillwater then, and...?*

Criswell Yes, and he was in Stillwater National Bank. He was the vice president.

Neurohr *Did your husband go to the war after you were married?*

Criswell He didn't get in the war itself, but he was called up because he was ROTC, and he was sent to Bermuda. There was a lot of possibility for him to have been in danger, but they never did come there. And he felt that he hadn't done his part, but he was three years away from me, and I had a little girl. I got a letter every day, and I wrote a letter every day for three years.

Neurohr *Do you still have your letters?*

Criswell No. One night, we were sitting by our fireplace. It wasn't this house. But we were sitting by the fireplace. I had saved every one, and he had saved every one, but this was when the war was over and he was home. He said, "Let's burn all of these in the fireplace." I said, "Why?" and he said, "Because it's just between you and me." And we did. I'm sorry that I haven't got them now.

Neurohr *I understand that you like poetry a lot.*

Criswell Oh, yes. I've written some, too.

Neurohr *You have?*

Criswell Yes. I love poetry.

Neurohr *Tell me about that.*

Criswell Well, there's nothing to tell except that I just always, always, from the time I started school, I've memorized all the poetry in the books, and I still love it. I have written some myself.

Neurohr *Did you collect poems that you like?*

Criswell Oh, yes, I have a book.

Neurohr *So, what is one of your favorite poems?*

Criswell Well, I've got it written down in that book, somewhere.

Neurohr *Do you still write poetry?*

Criswell Not anymore.

Neurohr *I understand that you were a charter member of a book club.*

Criswell Yes. In that time, you had to—it was a whole lot—everybody in all of the things were together. Well, our group decided that we wanted to be by ourselves, and we were the Potpourri Book Club. And oh, the friends I had in that. It was wonderful. I still have a few living. Not many, but anyway.

Neurohr *Did that book club start right after you were married?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *So, what, '36 or '37? Do you remember what year that was?*

Criswell No, I don't, but I still belong to a book club.

Neurohr *You do?*

Criswell Yes, Potpourri Book Club.

Neurohr *The Potpourri Book Club. How often did you meet?*

Criswell Once a month.

Neurohr *What were your meetings like? Can you describe them?*

Criswell Well, we just all got together and we visited awhile, and then somebody did a book review. Then we discussed it, and the next time it was someone else's turn, and so it was fun.

Neurohr *Did you meet in each other's homes?*

Criswell Yes, yes we did.

Neurohr *Did you have dessert or food? Did you have coffee or dessert or food?*

Criswell Oh, we had desserts. (Laughs)

Neurohr *You did?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *And where were your children when you had your book club meetings?*

Criswell They were home.

Neurohr *They were home.*

Criswell Yes. But then, of course, they all graduated and I was still in a book club. (Laughs) Everybody did a review of a book. And some book clubs had somebody do it all the time, but we took turns.

Neurohr *Do you think that was better to have people take turns?*

Criswell Oh, yes. Everybody had something different. (Laughs) One, Lou Hillier, even gave a book review on cooking, on a cookbook! (Laughter) And everybody had different interests, and so it made it very interesting to hear everybody. I'm still a member of a book club.

Neurohr *That's wonderful. Did you go to the public library to get your books?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *Tell me what you remember about the public library from those days.*

Criswell Well, the library was just second place for me because I loved to go to the library, and I still do.

Neurohr *When you were going to school at Oklahoma A&M College, do you remember the library from college?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *What was it like?*

Criswell Well, I'm trying to think where it was. You know where—well, I can't, Honey. I'm sorry.

Neurohr *Did women wear pants when you were in college?*

Criswell No, oh, no! (Laughs) We wore high heels and dressed up. That's why I have bunions. (Laughter)

Neurohr *You said that your husband called—when you met him, he called you on the telephone. Where was the telephone?*

Criswell There was one place where not anybody lived. There were rooms everywhere, but then there was a big room where you could meet and have company and so on.

Neurohr *Was the telephone in the big room?*

Criswell Oh, yes, the telephone was there. So, somebody would answer it, and then they'd yell down the halls like, "Mary!" or, "Joan!" (Laughs) And you'd come to the telephone. There was just one.

Neurohr *Your Potpourri Book Club, who were some of the members of the Potpourri Book Club?*

Criswell Okay. Mary V. Rippy, you remember Dr. Rippy?

Neurohr *I didn't live here then.*

Criswell Oh, okay. Well, Mary V. Rippy, Lou Hillier, Ethel Cudd. I should have written all of this down, but I didn't know what you were going to ask.

Neurohr *Oh, this is fine. I think you told me Thursday that you have written out your memoirs.*

Criswell I'm doing it.

Neurohr *You're doing that now?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *Are you enjoying that? Do you enjoy writing?*

Criswell At one time, I thought that I would like to be a writer, so I have written a lot. I've written poetry, and then I read everything I can get my hands on.

Neurohr *When did your husband propose to you?*

Criswell When did he propose?

Neurohr Yes.

Criswell Well, it was very soon after I graduated. He was already—he had a car, a

real nice car, and we decided to go to see my dad. And on the way in the car, he asked me. And of course, I said yes.

Neurohr *Did you think he was going to ask you to marry him?*

Criswell Oh, I thought so all the time. (Laughs)

Neurohr *You did? (Laughter)*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *Then when you went to see your father, was that when he talked to your father about marrying you?*

Criswell Yes. My husband went, like I told you, was in the military, and so he was gone three years, almost three years from home. That was a lonely time.

Neurohr *Tell me what it was like when he came back.*

Criswell Oh, it was wonderful, Honey! (Laughs) I can't explain it. It was so wonderful because some people didn't come back. But you can't imagine the letters that we both wrote. He was a wonderful. I've got pictures of him.

Neurohr *Well, I think this was a picture that...*

Criswell Yes, yes. (Laughs) That was in college.

Neurohr *That was in college?*

Criswell Yes. We were both dressed up.

Neurohr *You were dressed up! Do you remember what you were dressed up for in this picture?*

Criswell Why?

Neurohr *Yes, where were you going?*

Criswell Let me see. Oh, it was when I graduated. Yes, yes. Don't you think he's handsome? (Laughs)

Neurohr *Yes, and you're beautiful. That's a very pretty dress. Did you sew your own clothes?*

Criswell Oh, I sewed. I didn't make that one, but I sewed almost all my clothes and all my children's clothes. I love to sew.

Neurohr *You do?*

Criswell Yes.

Neurohr *Who taught you to sew? Did you learn how to sew when you were in school?*

Criswell Oh, no. I learned how when I was a little tiny girl. I can't remember when I didn't sew.

Neurohr *Well, and I understand that you also paint.*

Criswell Yes. That's one of mine. (Gestures) This is one of mine. (Gestures) All of those up there are mine. (Gestures) And I've got a lot in the rest of the house. I love to paint. It's recreation to me. I love it. I haven't done any for a long time right now, but I'm going to do some more.

Neurohr *There's some embroidery pictures on your wall behind the couch.*

Criswell Well, during the war when my husband was gone and I couldn't sleep at night, and I'd put my children to bed, I had to have something to do. So, I did these two, the big ones then. And those down there are the Japanese—I can't think of the name now. A fabric company had a contest, and I just entered the contest. I didn't get first place, but I got honorable mention.

Neurohr *Well, that's wonderful.*

Criswell And I have pictures everywhere. I love to paint. Last few years I just do watercolors because oils got to where they were too strong, the smell, so I just did watercolors.

Neurohr *Did you ever meet President Bennett when you were in college?*

Criswell Yes, I met him, yes.

Neurohr *What do you remember about him?*

Criswell Well, he was just the president. I just knew him. That was all.

Neurohr *Did you have any favorite classes when you were in college?*

Criswell Oh, English, always. I took every English class I could.

Neurohr *Did you have a favorite professor of English?*

Criswell That's hard to—I can see him, but I can't tell you his name. He was a very gaunt looking man, tall and thin, but I can't think of his name right now. But he was a very good teacher.

Neurohr *What did you like about the way that he taught? How was his teaching style? What was good about his teaching?*

Criswell His teaching?

Neurohr *Yes. How was his teaching good?*

Criswell Well, I guess because I just liked the subject so much. (Laughs)

Neurohr *Did you ever hear about a poet from Oklahoma named Wilma Elizabeth McDaniel?*

Criswell No, I don't remember that name. Why?

Neurohr *Well, she left Oklahoma in 1936 and went to California, but she wrote a lot of poems about Oklahoma. Is there anything else that you would like to share for the interview today?*

Criswell Honey, I think you've asked me just about everything.

Neurohr *All right. Well, I thank you again and appreciate the time.*

Criswell Oh, I appreciate your coming, Honey, and come and just visit, sometime.

Well, thank you. I'll enjoy doing that.

Neurohr I know you're busy.

Criswell *Well, maybe you can come to another one of the Will Rogers programs that we have coming up.*

Neurohr Yes.

Criswell *Since we talked about the pictures, I think I will get those in the picture. Now, this is a scrapbook here that Gaye got out. Do you want to tell me a little bit about that?*

Neurohr These? (Gestures)

Criswell

Yes.

Neurohr

Criswell

This was my best friend, Louise. This was a poem I wrote. This was another one I wrote. This was my husband. This is me, and this is another friend in college and me. (Laughs) Oh, do you remember Swim's?

I've heard about it.

Neurohr

Criswell

Okay. This was Mr. Swim. He just took us under his wings, and that was me and my cousin—my roommate. I can't tell you who those were, too little. And some of them have faded. Here I am and a whole lot of my friends, and this is the same that that bigger picture is.

Would you like to read those poems?

Neurohr

Criswell

Well, do you want me to?

I think that would be wonderful.

Neurohr

Criswell

This is *In Class, On a Summer Afternoon*.

So dull are books, so flat are maps—
Important in their way, perhaps—
But prisoning to restive souls
On summer days.

When there are undulating hills
And sparkling streams where water spills
Into the cool blue pools
Incessantly.

When there are cotton clouds afloat
And waxen leaves to make a boat
To send upon the truant streams
Adventuring.

So much to see, so much to do—
So many by-paths to pursue
From end of earth to end of earth
Before I die.

That was that one. And this is *Silhouettes*.

Night slips quickly over the campus
Above Old Central silhouetted against

A sky of blue-green
Paling as it nears the horizon
Quivers the first crystalline star.
Ebon silhouette of trees against the silver sky
Lacy willows black against a moon that's
Riding high
Liquid golden darts within the waters onyx deep
Zig-zagging glints
Shimmering tints
Like needlepoints that dance to meet the moon.

Those are nice.

Neurohr

Well...

Criswell

Did you write those when you were in college?

Neurohr

Yes.

Criswell

You did?

Neurohr

Criswell

Yes. Well, this book is full of lots of different memories. My grandchildren and everybody. Honey, I don't think I've done a very good job.

Yes, I think it's been a nice interview. I do. I appreciate that.

Neurohr

Criswell

But I have had so many interests, painting, and we even did painting china for a long time. That's not as much fun as a picture, but I've done all kinds of artwork. I was in the Art Guild for a long time. I haven't gone, though, in a long time. It's too much for me to do that. Anyway, I have been so blessed, Honey, so blessed. I am so thankful for everything that has happened to me. Even the bad things aren't too bad.

What advice would you give to people today?

Neurohr

Criswell

To do what you want to do best and don't forget the things that you love and just keep on doing them, like whatever is your interest.

And it sounds like you've been able to do that with your life.

Neurohr

Criswell

Yes, I have, Honey. Oh, I've been so fortunate. I have a picture of—I did a quilt one time. I did a lot of quilting several years ago, and I got a Golden Thimble award from the newspaper in Tulsa—no, Oklahoma City, and had pictures of part of what I had done. I love to sew and I didn't want patterns. I did my daughter's wedding dress, and I love—I

can't anymore. My hands don't work that well, but I have had so many interests and so many wonderful things happen, Honey. I hope that you're just as happy as I am.

Well thank you, thank you. Thank you again for the interview.

Neurohr

You're welcome, Honey.

Criswell

----- End of interview -----