**Oral History Interview**

**with**

**Donna Parker**

Interview Conducted by

Juliana Nykolaiszyn

August 4, 2016

Spotlighting Oklahoma

Oral History Project

**Oklahoma Oral History Research Program**

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**Interview History**

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

**Project Detail**

The purpose of the *Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project* is to document the development of the state by recording its cultural and intellectual history.

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on April 15, 2009.

**Legal Status**

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Donna Parker is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on August 4, 2016.

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**About Donna Parker…**

Donna Parker was born in 1942 in Centralia, Oklahoma. The family lived in Vinita, Oklahoma, at the time and her mother had gone to visit a family member in Centralia. Donna completed grades one through twelve in Vinita and graduated from high school in 1960. The summer after graduation Donna began working for International Host which owned and operated the Glass House Restaurant on the Turner Turnpike near the Vinita exit.

She worked as a waitress at the Glass House until February 1962 and sometimes she would be a split shift where for part of the day she would dress in American Indian clothing and interact with the public.

After leaving the Glass House, Donna enrolled in beauty school and completed the program in 1962. She has been a hairdresser for over fifty years and has owned and operated her own shop for many of those years. Donna is a lifelong resident of Vinita, was married to Joe Parker, and has two daughters, five grandchildren, and two great-grandchildren.

**About the Glass House…**

At the half-way point on the Will Rogers Turnpike near Vinita, Oklahoma, stands an iconic landmark. The arched building opened in 1957 and was the first restaurant built over a U.S. public highway. Conoco (Continental Oil Company) commissioned the building with an aim to serve the needs of motorists passing in both directions. The building housed the Glass House Restaurant, dedicated in 1958, and included a cafeteria, snack bar, and sit-down restaurant. On each side of the building, motorists enjoyed full-service gas stations, operated by Conoco initially. Over the years other restaurants and fuel facilities have operated at the service plaza. Host International, Interstate Hosts and Howard Johnson’s have operated the plaza at different times. The Glass House and the Conoco stations employed many of the area’s youth through the years and served many, many travelers. Renovation began on the service plaza in 2012 and in 2014 it re-opened with a new name, the Will Rogers Archway.

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| **Donna Parker**  Oral History Interview  Interviewed by Juliana Nykolaiszyn  August 4, 2016  Vinita, Oklahoma |  |

**Nykolaiszyn** *My name is Julianna Nykolaiszyn with the Oklahoma State University Library. Today is August 4, 2016 and I am in Vinita, Oklahoma, interviewing Donna Parker as part of our Spotlighting Oklahoma Oral History Project. Donna is visiting with us today to talk about her work at the Glass House Restaurant here in Vinita. Donna, let’s learn a little bit more about you. Could you tell me the year you were born and where you were born?*

**Parker** I was born in September, September 24th, 1942 in Centralia, Oklahoma.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Ok, and tell me a little bit about your parents.*

**Parker** When I was born, my father was in World War II. He was overseas, and my mother stayed at home and took care of me, I guess.

**Nykolaiszyn** *When your dad got back from the war, what did he end up doing?*

**Parker** Well he worked at the telephone company. There was a station outside of Vinita, it wasn’t the big place. But then he went to work for a lumberyard, then he ended up on the turnpike and working for the Turnpike Authority as a heavy equipment operator. He laid the asphalt and sometimes they would call on him to the Turner Turnpike. He was very good at his job and he had learned that in the service. It’s what they did was build roads.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And tell me a little bit more about your mother.*

**Parker** She was born in 1919. She and my dad were almost the same age, just three days apart, their ages. She always just worked, she was always a housewife and just raised three girls. I had two sisters. There was six and a half years between my middle sister and I and then I was fifteen when the younger one was born, so we were really strung out.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Centralia is not too far from Vinita.*

**Parker** No. It’s a real rural area, there’s hardly anything there now. I don’t think there was much then but that’s where her sister lived, and she went into labor there. Didn’t have time to get to the hospital so the doctor came to the house and delivered me.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And are you the oldest, the youngest?*

**Parker** I’m the oldest.

**Nykolaiszyn** *The oldest. And did your family, did you always live in the country?*

**Parker** No. We lived in town in Vinita.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay*

**Parker** I’ve always lived in Vinita.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. And tell me about going to school in Vinita as a little girl.*

**Parker** I started out and went to the Catholic school. They had a big, nice school then, at that time. I went the first three years there. Then I went to Hall-Halsell, and I was one of the first ones in the new school. It was brand new when we started. It was, oh my goodness it was all shiny and new and really nice but much smaller than it is now. And I went there two years. And then on to junior high in the old, the old high school building which has been torn down since but I went there, graduated from there.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And what year did you graduate from high school?*

**Parker** [In] 1960.

**Nykolaiszyn** *In 1960 you graduated from high school. And what happened after high school?*

**Parker** That’s when I went to work for Interstate Host. That was the turnpike restaurant.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So how did you learn about the job opening?*

**Parker** I think a friend, Ruth Hensley’s daughter told me about it. She was already working there, and that was the place to work for the young kids, so I went out and they hired me. Annabell [Southern] was so good. She really catered to the kids, you know. And she was such a lady. She just really was fair. They were strict, she and Thelma Nafus, who was the assistant manager. And they were always so good to the kids. You had to do your work, you know. They didn’t let you slack but they were very fair.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you have other jobs before that?*

**Parker** No.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So that was a transition period for you.*

**Parker** I didn’t know too much about working out, (laughs) so I probably made a lot of mistakes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What were you hired to do?*

**Parker** To start out with, I worked in the cafeteria. And I worked there all summer, that first summer. And then in the fall they wanted me to go to the Broiler Room. That was the dining room, the main dining room. And I mean it was just really nice and oh, you had to serve the people from the left, the food from the left, the drinks from the right. They had tablecloths. I guess probably in the evenings they had the tablecloths because I saw some pictures where there wasn’t any cloths on there. That’s what I remember. And they had cloth napkins that they folded real—they were called fleur de lis, and they stood up, and they had the little flair on the sides. They were pretty. And then set, you know, set those or no. I guess they laid them down on the table and then they put the set ups. Forks on the left, knife and spoon on the right and it was really elegant.

They had—oh, the desserts! They had the mile-high lemon pie, and I tell you these people’s eyes would just pop when they saw them, you know, carry them out. I bet that lemon pie was six inches tall, the slice of it, set up there, you know. It was really pretty and then they had the strawberry shortcake. It was in a dish. It was about this big around, (gestures) had a pedestal on it and then they had—oh I think it was the strawberry shortcake, then the strawberries, ice cream (I think two scoops) and then all this whipped cream. It was just covered with whipped cream. It was pretty.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you have a favorite?*

**Parker** I think that was my favorite. (Laughter) The lemon pie was delicious too. They were all good. They had, let’s see what was that? Oh, a parfait. It was pretty. It was in a little glass, a little slender glass, and I think there was ice cream and then crème de menthe. It was kind of a green dessert. Crème de menthe and then another layer of ice cream and then crème de menthe and then it had whipped cream on top. There wasn’t as many that ordered that. I don’t think I tasted it but once.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well how was the training? How did you learn to do all that?*

**Parker** Just by trial and error, (laughter) but we learned and Annabell was so good with us. There was some girls that were experienced, you know, in that and they did really good. They made a lot of tips back then, you know. I think like twenty-five a day or maybe more that they made, and back then that was pretty good money. I didn’t make that much. (Laughs)

**Nykolaiszyn** *What was your starting salary?*

**Parker** I don’t remember but I think for two weeks it was forty some dollars, for two weeks. And then I took home about twelve to fourteen a day in tips, and that wasn’t bad.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well describe what you wore. Describe your uniform.*

**Parker** Well when I worked there, they were white nylon taffeta and a white apron, and they had a little, tiny chef hat that you pinned on your head. They were so cute, had a little puffy top and they were really cute uniforms.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, you’re of Native American heritage.*

**Parker** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And so you, I’ve read, would also work in Native American attire as well.*

**Parker** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Could you kind of talk a little bit about that?*

**Parker** Well, I think I was about the first one that they had. On down through the years I think they kept it up, but she approached me, wanted to know if I would be interested in wearing an Indian costume and dressing up. Well I thought that sounded like fun. So I think my mother made the dress, they had what they wanted it to look like. It was fringed around the bottom, had little Indian things hanging around, and I had a feather in the back of my hair on a headband. And then I would go to the gift shop in the mornings, and I just worked half a day in that. You had moccasins, high top moccasins, white. And I went to the gift shop and they had turquoise jewelry in there. I would have to check it out in the mornings, eighty dollars’ worth of turquoise jewelry. That was a lot back then. And then I checked it in when I quit, when I got off work.

I had a squaw belt on with the uniform’s belt. The costume was belted and my feet would really hurt by the end of the morning. I just worked half a day thank goodness. I worked a split shift during that time, came back in the afternoon in my uniform, but children, they’d look at me. They’d say—my name was White Cloud, by the way, and they would look at me, “Do you live in a teepee?” (Laughs) I think there was some people from back east that really thought we were still living in teepees. They were not very well informed. They came through Oklahoma. There was some that thought we did live in teepees.

**Nykolaiszyn** *I was wondering what the reaction would be by the travelers, you know. They’re just passing through Oklahoma.*

**Parker** Yeah, most of them just—I mean they may have been from Oklahoma, it’s hard to tell. Some of them didn’t comment or anything but the children did. They were all excited about White Cloud.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And you also were used in some of their publicity materials as well?*

**Parker** I don’t remember that, probably.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. So you worked in the Broiler Room, you checked out the jewelry. How long were you at the Glass House? How long did you work there?*

**Parker** I worked there a year and a half. I started in the summer of ’60 and ended up leaving in February of ’62.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Was there a question a lot of the travelers coming through would ask? A common question that would always come up?*

**Parker** Being the Indian?

**Nykolaiszyn** *No. No, just in general.*

**Parker** Oh just in general? Oh I don’t know. I don’t know if there was any certain thing they’d ask. I can’t remember that far back I guess.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Do you remember other workers or managers that may have had an impact in your day-to-day work life?*

**Parker** I worked with some older women, the experienced ones, you know, that you always learned from. They were very good at their job, and so you could learn from them. They were all nice ladies.

**Nykolaiszyn** *When you look back on those days, what are some of your favorite memories of the job?*

**Parker** Oh just, you know, we was always joking around and laughing, and we just had quite a bit of fun.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Were there any duties you dreaded doing?*

**Parker** No, we were always busy. Anytime we weren’t busy, which was never in the summertime, in the winter it would get kind of slow but you were to be cleaning salt and pepper shakers, things on the table and keeping things spiffied up, shined. You always had something to do. I enjoyed working there.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you also spend some time working in the gift shop as well?*

**Parker** I never did.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Never did, okay.*

**Parker** No. I stayed in the Broiler Room. After I started working there, I never did work anyplace else. They had a snack bar and a cafeteria. When I first started out I worked in the cafeteria and I liked that, but you didn’t make as much money. (Laughs)

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you find many folks from Vinita visiting the Glass House?*

**Parker** There was a few, but it was hard to tell, you know, where they were from. There was some that came out there and probably more than I realized. I just assumed everybody was tourists. And it was so busy in the summertime. You would look down the hall and all you could see was heads. They were very wide corridors, I guess you’d call them, and it seems to me like they were just full. Just wall-to-wall full, all down the hall, and some of them would become angry for having to wait so long for a table.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Kind of describe for me the layout of the building. If somebody has never been inside it before, when you were working there, describe the layout.*

**Parker** Okay. If you were coming in from the north, you just went up the stairway, you know on the north side. There was a Conoco station out there, and there was the gift shop at the top of the stairs, and then there was that long hall. On the left was the Broiler Room. You’d go on down and the right was the cafeteria. Now at the very end was the snack bar, and they had an escalator which was really grand, it was a big escalator, and the elevator. And their bathrooms, they were just pretty fancy. They had perfume machines with expensive perfumes in them. I remember they had Tabu. Back then that was—everybody liked that one. You could just put some money in, push it and squirt it on yourself if you wanted to.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Do you recall anyone getting stuck on the escalator?*

**Parker** Oh, one time there was this little boy was on it barefooted and he let his toes scoot into it. It hurt his toes and it was kind of scary. I think it just skinned them up a little, bit but they got him off of it.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Are there any memories that stick out in your mind of any notable people coming through the restaurant?*

**Parker** Okay. I remember there was Robert Mitchum, and my experience with this man that he was a Mr. Heinz with Heinz ketchup. He showed me how to get the ketchup out of the bottle easily. He said, “You hit up.” Instead of, you know, banging on the bottom, you hit up on it. That’s the way I’ve gotten it out ever since. It works!

**Nykolaiszyn** *That’s a good way to learn.*

**Parker** Uh huh, yeah, from the head honcho. (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn** *Interesting, interesting.*

**Parker** And there was, I’m sorry.

**Nykolaiszyn** *No you’re fine, go ahead.*

**Parker** There was a lady that came through that, I mean she looked exactly like Doris Day, if you remember who Doris Day was. And everybody was looking at her and finally one woman went over and asked her, “Are you Doris Day?” and she said, “Oh, heavens no!” She just acted like she was so surprised that anybody would think she was Doris Day, but I think she was cause she wouldn’t have been surprised. She would have had that question asked before.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Interesting. You’re working there in the early 1960s. That’s an interesting time in our country with the Civil Rights Movement. Do you notice any tension within the restaurant, either with workers or the clientele?*

**Parker** No, no I didn’t. No, they were all very nice, nice people.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Do you have any thoughts about the features of the building? It’s a very unique building you know. Some people have told me, you know, you could feel the floor shake when a semi goes under. Are there any features that really stick out in your mind?*

**Parker** Well the archway with all the glass that went all the way up to the top and we would stand up there sometimes and look out at the traffic. It was, it was something. And that the ceilings had something, some kind of material blown on it. I kind of think that was asbestos, so we worked in that. And those ceilings came down pretty far on the wall, you know. They arched and I think some of them was picking it off there in the back where we ate.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So you did have a separate staff area where you could eat?*

**Parker** Just a little table behind the area.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And would folks from the service area come up to you? The service station?*

**Parker** Yes. They would come into the, sometimes, Broiler Room or they would go into the cafeteria or the snack bar. When I was in my costume one day, they had an Indian down on the, they called it “The Drive” where the Conoco station was. His name was Speedy Woolman, and I heard all this jingling coming down the hall and it was him. He had on a pretty feathered, just jingling, costume and he came walking down the hall, and he came into the dining room and he kept coming towards me. And when he got there beside me, he turned around to the customers, the audience, and said, “I came to get my squaw” and they just died laughing. (Laughter)

**Nykolaiszyn** *Sounds like you had some interesting characters working at the Glass House.*

**Parker** Oh we did. Yes we did.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well after your year and a half, what did you end up doing?*

**Parker** I went to beauty school and I’ve been a hairdresser ever since.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Here in Vinita?*

**Parker** Yes. I’m still working.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Wow. So you’ve been working for…*

**Parker** I have a shop in my home.

**Nykolaiszyn** *What, twenty-five plus years or so? A long time?*

**Parker** I worked fifty—well, fifty-two. I don’t know. I started in ’62 and up until now. I worked for this lady and then she sold her shop. We worked side-by-side and then when I put my shop in, she came with me. We worked together twenty-one years altogether. And now her daughter works for me.

**Nykolaiszyn** *That’s a long time. Well you’ve been in Vinita your whole life.*

**Parker** Yes.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Tell me about how the community has changed over time.*

**Parker** Well, there’s been quite a few changes. We had so many restaurants in Vinita, you know, different restaurants. We counted one time, it was— most of them are gone now, and there’s different restaurants now. There was one called “The Grand Café.” It was a nice place and one called “Arkie’s.” It was on Main Street, and it was just drive-ins. The Clown Drive-In, it was just a little, little place. And there was Scotty’s. There as a place out south of town called Scottsville and he had two or three restaurants there. There was one in Vinita and they were, you know, they did a lot of business. But Vinita doesn’t have that many restaurants now. We have a lot of Mexican restaurants and Clanton’s. Course you can’t forget Clanton’s. That’s a really good place. It’s been there all these years.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, when you look back on your time at the Glass House, is there one thing that you want us to know about your time as an employee there?*

**Parker** I can’t think of anything right now, but there is one incident. Back then there was a lion that was supposed to have been spotted in this area and everybody started seeing the lion. You know they really thought they did, and they formed a search party, you know lined up. They didn’t find anything. But it went nationwide, the story of it and people would come through. There was one woman and man that came up and their eyes were this big and they said, “We saw the lion, we saw it. It leaped right out in front of us.” And I think they really thought they saw it and then there was another one called in and said that they saw it playing on the lawn. (Laughs) I think some of them were playing a trick on us. But these two people, they actually thought they saw it. I don’t know what they saw but…

**Nykolaiszyn** *Did you marry and have kids?*

**Parker** Yes. I married Joe Parker [now deceased], and I have two daughters and five grandchildren and two great-grandchildren.

**Nykolaiszyn** *So you stay pretty busy.*

**Parker** Uh, huh. I had one of them last week and then this week I had their dog.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well, have you been back to the Glass House since it’s been reopened recently?*

**Parker** Yes, I went out there once.

**Nykolaiszyn** *And what’s your impression now of the remodel?*

**Parker** Well to me it’s very generic, you know. There was a McDonald’s on one end and a Subway on the other. Well the car is pretty impressive. It had that wire car there, but it was very plain. You know I look back and think of how fancy. After I worked there they remodeled it and it was even prettier.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Really?*

**Parker** They had beautiful windows, paned windows around where the Glass House, where the Broiler Room was and it was just really pretty. And I just hated to see them take all that out. They made a McDonald’s out of it you know, later. It has changed but they went in and redid the structure of it I think. So it’s probably there for a long time yet.

**Nykolaiszyn** *If those walls could talk.*

**Parker** Oh yes. (Laughter) There’s no telling what kind of stories they could tell.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Well what have I missed? Anything?*

**Parker** Well I can’t think of anything. I told you about the desserts, didn’t I?

**Nykolaiszyn** *You did.*

**Parker** And Annabell and Thelma Nafus. Yeah, I think I’ve covered anything I had.

**Nykolaiszyn** *Okay. Well you know we really appreciate your time Donna, sitting down, sharing your experiences about working at the Glass House and working for Annabell. We thank you for your time today.*

**Parker** Well thank you I enjoyed it.

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