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### Oral History Interview: Anna McNeal

Anna McNeal

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ORAL HISTORY

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*Anna W. Lee*

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Date APRIL 30

*J. Rene Hartford*  
(Signature - Interviewee)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address

Date APRIL 30

*John Hansen Jr.*  
(Signature - Witness)

*Ms. Hartford signed for her mother*

The following is an interview with Mrs. Anna McNeal of Helvetia, West Virginia, recorded in her home on April 30, 1976.

J.H: Mrs. McNeal, when were you born?

A.M: Uh, well,.... you made me nervous with your machine.

J.H: Oh, sorry.

A.M: October 12, 1880.

J.H: OK. You were born here in the Helvetia area?

A.M: Helvetia, yes.

J.H: And, uh, your parents were Swiss immigrants, is that correct?

A.M: That's correct.

J.H: Uh, they were prob-... I suppose they were among some of the original settlers in the valley here.

A.M: Yes, some of the first ones, um hm.

J.H: Were you brought up in a farm atmosphere? Were you brought up on a farm?

A.M: Oh, yes... no, well, we had a, we had yes, a lot in Helvetia and then we had a farm back here; this farm.

J.H: Um hm. The farm that you're living in now.

A.M: Yes, that's right.

J.H: OK. Did you have any brothers and sisters?

A.M: Yes, I had three brothers, and one sister.

J.H: Were the uh, the duties on the farm when you were, when you were brought up, uh, did the boys and the girls perform the same types of jobs on the farm? Did everybody share equally?

A.M: Yes, mostly.

J.H: When you taught, did you teach in the local school here, the one room school?

A.M: Yes, it was a one room school. That's all there were around here..

I.H: (Irene McNeal Hartford, Mrs. McNeal's daughter): Yeah, but you taught in Webster County.

A.M: Yes;

J.H: Um hm. You also taught in Webster....?

I.H: Do you remember any of the people in school with you?  
Who were your pupils?

A.M: Oh, some Calders, an' it's so long ago, it was 1902.  
There were Taubers, and uh, Gobels.... McClures, I, I forget  
what the names were, all of them.

J.H: What do you remember as some of the particular problems in  
growing up when you did? Like, for instance maybe health prob-  
lems; uh, was the health care pretty adequate in this area?  
Was it mostly home.... did you take care of your own in the home?

A.M: Well, we mostly had a doctor here. Dr. Stuckey he was here  
and, uh, my father did all his building he, built him a house  
and some furniture, and everytime he needed something done he  
was always calling my father; they were good friends.

J.H: He and the doctor.

A.M: He and the doctor; and, uh, when anyone got sick, they  
called the doctor, you know.

J.H: Um hm.

A.M: And ah, and otherwise they took.... had teas and uh, and  
would try to get people well that way before they called the doc-  
tor.

J.H: Were... like herb teas and that type of thing?

A.M: Uh huh.

J.H: Uh, was your father a carpenter?

A.M: Oh, yes. He worked at... when they first came to America  
from Switzerland they had.... my mother had a brother living  
there, and uh, they lived there for two years in Cleveland, and  
he worked at the carpenter trade.

J.H: Uh huh.

A.M: And then, uh, before that he was a superintendant of a  
weaving factory. And then, he worked at that trade for two years,  
and then when they heard of Helvetia, you know, of the people  
would get land and how, oh, how nice it was and everything and  
they, my father came to see, and of course it, everything was  
woods and all and they was, they were fixing up a, they had a  
log cabin, they called it the settlement house, you know, that's  
what they had, that was up when he came here....

J.H: Um hm.

A.M: ...and, uh, and, but it had no windows; they had to hold--  
they hung the sheets up around for to, when they, uh, it started  
to snow, and they'd uh, would put those sheets up you know to  
keep it, keep it light and keep it dry, but I guess it wasn't so  
very dry always!

J.H: Um! um hm.

A.M: But of course they, nobody complained, you know, while they were being there, everybody helped build the uh, cabins. As they came, you know, they'd build the cabins for them and....

J.H: Uh huh; the neighbors would build the cabins for them?

A.M: How?

J.H: The... neighbors would get together and raise new cabins?

A.M: Yes; all of them got together and they- they'd build them a cabin an' then of course that was their home; and uh, the new ones that came, they'd go into that settlement house, you know?

J.H: Um hm. Did uh, did any of the children in your family take up particular trades? For instance, carpentry or blacksmithing or seamstress or....

A.M: Oh, they did; they all learned. My sister, she taught school also in (?); my brothers, my father had a sawmill and, uh, my brothers an' my father they.... run it.

J.H: Uh huh.

A.M: And, uh, sold the lumber. And some.... other people came; there were a lot of sawmills later on then, you know; they... they sold it and some people bought the timber and took it out.

J.H: Uh huh. Did they have to.... they take it out, they hook it up to horses and snake it out that way?

A.M: Yes, they had to use oxen; they'd do their haulin', you know. Of course that was later; they didn't do that when they first came.

J.H: Uh huh. Did you, do you recall your, your parents ever mentioning, uh..... (end of tape)

J.H: Was your father familiar with agriculture and farming when he came here?

A.M: Well, not as.... yes, he did, uh; you know in Switzerland, they had, they had, they all had a certain piece of land, or... I don't.... and, uh, they would, they'd go every Spring they'd go to the vineyards, you know, and they'd have to hoe that, and stake them, and tie them up and things like that.

J.H: Um hm.

A.M: And then they.... they'd uh, they'd go back on their job, you know. Of course those.... those out of the factory, I don't exactly know just how, how they did that in Switzerland but, I'd hear them say, you know, in the, the grapes, how they'd work. And then children had to stay out of school and help there also. So they, they knew how, about planting and all that even if they

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didn't work at it.

J.H: Um hm. Uh, did you maintain contacts with family in Switzerland while you were growing up?

A.M: Oh, with the family they'd get a letter now and then.

J.H: Um hm. When did you learn English?

A.M: When I went to school.

J.H: You spoke Swiss up until the time you went to school.

A.M: Yes. I still do....

J.H: Yeah. You speak Swiss here in your home with your daughter?

A.M: No.... not much, with her....

I.H: With me?

A.M: Sometimes she gets things kinda' backward, but she gets 'em out by a tiny bit. But she can understand it.... oh, she can talk it allright. Only sometimes she's, uh, well, she gets the wrong word in the wrong place.

J.H: Um hm.

I.H: Tell him what I said once....

A.M: Oh, I don't know..

I.H: I told him I ... (?) with someone.

A.M: She said she met somebody she, went to Helvetia and she said she met somebody and she told me in German; that I didn't know what she was saying but I knew what she wanted to say. She said uh, she said it backwards anyhow, and, I don't know whether she.... can say it right now or not. But most of it she gets out all right.

J.H: Um hm. Now, at the time of World War I and World War II, were the people in Helvetia.... severely criticized for, if they spoke in their native language?

A.M: Oh, no.

J.H: No?

A.M: No, they were, they never got that bad here.

J.H: Um hm.

A.M: And they had to go, those that were drafted, you know... they all...

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J.H: Yeah.

A.M: ... you didn't hear nobody, problems; of course, they gave their opinion, the way they felt, like they do today.

J.H: Um hm. How did the Depression in the 'thirties effect this area.... the Helvetia community?

A.M: The what?

J.H: The Depression.

A.M: Oh, they had a hard time getting along. They had to work hard and they did. They always ate.

J.H: Most people kept their own crops?

A.M: Oh, yes. They did always. Everybody.... everybody worked and planted like they always did, you know.

J.H: Uh huh.

A.M: And nobody was on relief, either.

I.H: Mama?

A.M: Huh?

I.H: Tell him what you got for the potatoes and the cabbage during the Depression.

A.M: I don't know-- you come in here and remind me of a few things. I'm... you know, that didn't, interest me so much anymore because there was enough to eat all the time....

J.H: Yeah.

A.M: ...if you worked for it.

J.H: Um hm. So the town, the town was pretty self-sufficient, supported itself, huh?

A.M: Oh yes. I think they just..... a few people had moved in you know, and uh, and they were about, I don't know, two or three families who were not that really.... were given food when they came in, and uh, one fella, he called it the 'gut wagen', they'd come in with a truck and, in to Pickens and he said someone said 'who is, who's in that truck?', and someone said 'oh, that's the gut wagon', and of course then, uh, they didn't give him anything to eat. (?); he didn't get any that day.

J.H: Hm.

A.M: So of course everybody laughed and called it that after that. Of course, not to the man that came.

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J.H: Huh! In your family, uh, did you celebrate or recognize, Swiss holidays?

A.M: There were no Swiss holidays here, that I can remember. They had, the fourth of July they'd, they'd all; but I know my father, and those, uh, I guess they weren't so very old either, but they were here a long time, and they'd get up at 5 o'clock and go out and they'd shoot; they didn't have dynamite, they had powder, I don't know what they did; but at least they made an awful lot of noise and oh, did they celebrate! And then they had a dance, they brought their children, and baskets full of food, and everybody waited the year round for those days to come around.

J.H: Um hm.

E.M: (Mrs. Eleanor Mailleux) Did they have the Fasnacht dances?

A.M: Yes, they had those.

E.M: Now, they started then in your time, or, or, when you were a girl?

A.M: Oh no no. That they brought from Switzerland.

E.M: Oh, they did bring that.

A.M: Oh, yes, they did that in Switzerland. They had Fasnacht. And uh...

E.M: What did you do at the Fasnacht time?

A.M: Well, they, they celebrated just like they would the fourth of July. No, not exactly like that. They had that, they always had that at night.

E.M: Yes.

A.M: They had a dance, and uh, and that's about all.

E.M: You know Ella told me once....

A.M: And they had all kinda baking, too.

E.M: Oh, uh huh.

A.M: They made doughnuts, and uh, what else...

E.M: Hoseblatz.

A.M: Well, what is that,... crullers?

E.M: Yeah. Yeah.

A.M: What in Europe they call it 'panspatch' or the 'hose-



blatz' are they heard like today....

E.M: Uh....uh... you mean 'rosettes'? Not rosettes.

A.M: No, no. Not rosettes.

E.M: Yeah.

A.M: What's the name, Irene?

E.M: 'Emelees'? (?)

I.H: You don't care for 'em?

A.M: Huh?

I.H: She doesn't like the name 'hoseblatz', which is a pans-patch.

A.M: You know, those, uh,.... they're not crullers, are they?

I.H: Yes.

A.M: Are those the ones, crullers?

I.H: Yes. Crullers an' doughnuts an' rosettes an'....

E.M: I just went through that.

A.M: That's usually for Christmas; Christmas, they had all kind-a fried stuff, bear---- it was fried stuff, you know, they always used shortening to it.

E.M: Did they dress up in those days? I mean like....

A.M: Yes; they uh, they'd uh, masquerade; it was a masquerade.

E.M: Yeah. It's like.... like the.... mardi gras; it's the Swiss mardi gras.

J.H: This is Fasnacht?

E.M: Fasnacht. And we, we've started that again.

A.M: But of course that has gone clear out, they almost forgot; well you know the jobs they've had layoffs; it's usually during the week.

E.M: Ja.

M.B: (Mrs. Brown, a guest at Mrs. McNeal's) Could I ask a question? In the schools, did you teach the children any of the Switzerland culture? Culture?

A.M: No, they had nothing like that. They had....

M.B: ...the history, or the traditions?

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A.M: No, not in school. Oh, well you know, what came in the books, but uh, otherwise, not; they had...

M.B: What did the youth do? What did you do as a girl; what did you do for, having fun?

A.M: Oh, we had parties and dances.

I.H: Got lost in the fog.

A.M: Woodcuttings, corn huskings, you know.

J.H: Did you make your own toys?

A.M: Dolls and doll dresses and stuff like that.

J.H: Um hm.

A.M: And parents, that uh, the parents usually made tops an' things for their children. But you could buy them, they had, always had, they had things at the store that you were able to buy. 'Til now; you can't anymore! Unless you have a big pocket book!

J.H: Hm! Yeah.

A.M: No, and they, they were satisfied with what they got, when we got a toy; and, uh, I know I..... one time I got a little swing, it was made out of wire; and a little doll, about three inches long or maybe a little larger; sat in the swing and I...I remember when I'd give it a push, I would do it, would play, swing for me, you know, And I could never forget because I thought 'twas so wonderful. I guess maybe it cost ten or fifteen cents.

J.H: Um.

A.M: No, at the store they would always buy decent little gifts, you know, that people could afford to buy. I don't think they had any expensive stuff.

J.H: Yeah.

A.M: And, you could get it too, you know; you could get it, high price dolls or cheaper dolls, and they were always.... nice enough to....~~give~~ give. Or get, they'd appreciate it.

J.H: Uh huh.

(end of recorded portion)

interviewed by John Henney