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Jean Jean

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Anna Gibbs
(Agent of Receiving Organization)

Phyllis Clogg
(Donor)

August 9, 1996
(Date)

TAPE #1

SUBJECT: Life Histories

AN ORAL INTERVIEW WITH: Jean

CONDUCTED BY: Anna Gibbs

DATE OF INTERVIEW: August 9, 1996

TRANSCRIPTIONIST/TYPIST: Anna Gibbs

Anna: Today's date is August the 9, 1996, my name is Anna Gibbs, and I'm meeting with Jean to conduct an interview for the Oral History of Appalachia Project and the Community Action Program Family Interview Project. Jean you're aware that the interview is being recorded and will be used for these projects and do you give your consent for the recording and for the interview?

Jean: Yes.

Anna: First of all, were you born here in West Virginia?

Jean: I was born right here in the west end of this city.

Anna: Do you have brothers and sisters?

Jean: I have one brother and one sister. I'm the oldest of the three children.

Anna: You've lived here in this city all your life?

Jean: All my life. I'm fifty-nine years old.

Anna: Are you married?

Jean: I'm a widow. My husband died when he was thirty-eight, left me with three small children. My son was five. My middle daughter was eight, and my oldest was twelve. And I had to send them through school by myself.

Anna: Bet you faced some real problems with them too.

Jean: Quite a few.

Anna: How old were you when your husband passed away?

Jean: He was thirty-eight and I was forty-one. I was four years older than him. I have two daughters who were both married and divorced. One daughter has two children, two sons, and the other one has one son. My son is still single. Right at this moment he's staying with me at the high-rise which he's not going to be able to stay there. He had joined the service but because of a problem at childbirth - he had to wear braces on his legs from the time he was thirteen months old until he was about three. Despite this he never had any problem. He was in football and played and it never gave him any problem, but later on he hurt it again but the Army still took him, and after he was in there, well he would have finished his Basic in February and on

December the twentieth they discharged him because of his leg. And he has nowhere to go. He's working and - he was working - he went to work in Kentucky - had a good job there as an electrician apprentice but we've never had a car, he never had a license, he doesn't have a car, he's twenty-three years old, and because of no transportation or anything, he could not keep the job. Plus the man he was living with had a heart attack so he had to come back home. And so that's quite a problem because he has nowhere to go. And he can't stay with me in the high-rise but a certain length of time. And there's other women in the same situation at the high-rise that I'm in. They still have children young enough that they need somewhere. When we were without a home we tried to find a place for me and him, but none of these HUD approved houses will accept just me and him and we were not able to get in those, so he went out on his own and worked a couple years until he went in the service. And that's one problem I can see wrong. There needs to be something for people between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-five like me who are widows but still have children at home. After he was sixteen, we were without any income whatsoever cause I had just lost my job a couple of months before that and he was not able to get a job right then when he got finished with school and for two months we were without any income whatsoever and if it hadn't been for my mother and my aunts we would have had no food. I had to move into a cheaper home because his Social Security stopped - we were on Social Security - his Social Security check and that had stopped. And it has been rough.

My girls have had a rough time with their marriages and right now they're both in a poverty level thing too, because they are working mothers who have to get work, but the benefits have been cut off, the one has lost her food stamps now because she went to work, but she still does not have the money to continue, so I try to help them, I'm there as a baby-sitter when I can be there, and just a lot of - a lot of poverty. A lot of it.

Anna: It makes it very hard.

Jean: It makes it very rough on us. The whole family.

Anna: Why did they cut off your Social Security?

Jean: Because he was my last child, and when he turned eighteen and he was still in high school, and when he reached eighteen they cut his off.

Anna: This was like a survivors benefits?

Jean: Yes. And—we had nothing. So there was nothing coming in, because I was not eligible for anything. And until he found a job and I was able to find another job, for two months there, we had nothing coming in. And that has happened a couple of times last year - I had a very serious operation, was in the hospital seventeen days, and was off work two months, altogether it was almost three months. In that time there was no income whatsoever coming in. I had gone to the Welfare, I was not eligible for anything, except my food stamps. I said 'I have no way to buy the essentials like toilet paper, toothpaste, - the essential things.' To get to the doctor we had no car, I said 'I have to have money to take the bus or a cab,' there was no way they could help me. I had a friend who works with the Health Department, who used to work here, when she was taking her social service work, and she came and gave me some money to help me, and the church gave me a little bit. I wouldn't have been able to make it if it hadn't been for them, and the help of the Good Lord.

Anna: Is your health better now?

Jean: Its----I have medical problems, and I have missed maybe three or four days work since then - off and on. I have good days and bad days. And with my height and everything, that has been a problem all my life.

Anna: Jean is—how tall?

Jean: Four foot five. And I was trying - I have a hearing problem, I have hearing aids in both ears - the hearing in my right ear is five percent - that's all I have. And the left ear is twenty-five. With the hearing aids, I am able to hear. And I tried to get my Social Security on that because it is difficult with the job that I am doing as a receptionist. And I went to school after my husband died, I went back to school, we lived with mother for two years. And we lived with my mother and she watched my children while I went to business school, I got my medical receptionist degree. But I have not been able to use it because my hearing started going bad. I can not use the Dictaphone, and things of that nature. And with no transportation I cannot take a job in the evening when there's no bus service to get home. Plus it would not

pay me - on a minimum wage job to take a cab. I would be spending all my money out. I lost a fairly good job at a local hospital because of that. Because I could not take the job with no transportation.

Anna: Your daughters, I know you've helped them out a lot - what obstacles have they faced - do they have medical insurance for their children?

Jean: My daughter has been denied her medical card when she went to work, she still has it for her two sons but they have denied her coverage, and she is having some breast problems, they found these lumps in her breast, and she really needs to have that checked out further but with no insurance, no medical insurance she just cannot have that done. And she was having some stomach problems and the doctor wanted her to go in and have some tests, but she is unable to do that. And now her food stamps - she got a letter this month that her food stamps have been cut to seventy dollars, because she has gone to work. And they're both trying to better themselves - to help themselves, she is a licensed beautician, but she cannot afford to have her license renewed, at one time she worked at Fantastic Sam's. And they are well educated and can do anything that's put before them really. The opportunity just hasn't been there in this town.

Anna: So you think the employment opportunities in this city are very limited?

Jean: Very limited.

Anna: Do you have any solutions to offer?

Jean: I can think of a lot of solutions in this new reform they're doing on the Welfare and everything and the job situation. With my situation I was working five hours - I was working four hours with the Senior Employment Program, which has helped me because it is under a Title V program. Under this Title V, I do not have to pay rent. If I was not under this Title V program and had to pay rent, there's no way I could make it on four hours a day at minimum wage that I'm making right now. Sometimes I have to borrow money to get from one payday to the next. I have no transportation, so I have to take the bus.

Anna: Do you get the Trip tickets?

Jean: I do not get the Trip tickets - they say I am not eligible for them - I'm not sixty, I'm not disabled, and I feel I should have been able to get those with no more income than I have.

Anna: You're afraid of losing your apartment now because of your son?

Jean: Yes. Because he can only stay so long and he would have no where to go.

Anna: Does your son have any plans or any ideas what he wants to do?

Jean: Well he would like to be in electronics, electrician apprentice - that's what he was doing in Kentucky. He realizes that that's what he really wants to do - but he has to work to be able to live, and he has no transportation where he could go like to Vo Tech and take it in the evenings. So its at a standstill - he can't go forward because he does have to work, and that is holding him back - because there's no transportation for him to get to Vo-Tech to take his classes. So he has decided now that he may try - he's already spoke to the Navy - and since he was turned down in the Army - because of his running and his leg - the Navy says that he would not have to run but maybe three miles, two to three miles, and he can go at least five miles before it starts giving out. And they said if he could do the three miles he could get in the Navy so that is what he is thinking of right now.

Anna: Does this seem to be the only option right now?

Jean: Right now.

Anna: Have either of you contacted any agencies other than the Navy and talked to them?

Jean: Yes he's been to several different places.

Anna: Can you give me an idea of what he was told?

Jean: "We'll get in contact with you" - you know - that's just about it.

Anna: Don't call us we'll call you?

Jean: Yes. We just can't afford to go to a university or anyplace like that - it would be the same situation - he has to work and to get enough for him live on, to have his own place and everything. Plus I am not able to help.

Anna: How many hours a week do you keep your grandchildren?

Jean: I usually keep them from Friday night - she'll bring them on Friday and I'll keep them all night Friday because she works, has to get up at six o'clock, and instead of her getting them out, I'll watch them on Friday nights and Saturday nights.

Anna: How old are they?

Jean: They're eight and six. The other one - her ex mother-in-law takes care of him - I haven't taken care of him as much as I have the other two.

Anna: With your health problems is it hard to take care of them?

Jean: Sometimes. The older one is a hyper-overactive child, and it has been very rough dealing with him. They have him on new medications now and he is doing fairly well on it.

Anna: What would like to do in the future - as far as getting a better job?

Jean: Me I would like to take more training in computer, I feel like that's the next option for me, because all the jobs I have looked for need the computer training. I have had some computer training, I took it once a week for about six weeks, they had a class here learning the basics. To get into it I really need more of the computer classes. I have been to the employment office the last two weeks about eight times, it's the same situation with me - to get in the computer classes I would have to go during the day because there's none in the afternoons that I could go to and I would not be able to go at night because I have no transportation. We're just at a standstill. Seems like no progress.

Anna: What do they tell you at the employment office?

Jean: Well, I've took all these tests and mine came out that I should be a police officer - can you believe that - look at me - fifty nine years old - that's what they said. That or tour guide - which I would like to do that. I was always active when my children were growing up - because of them losing their father - I was always right there into everything with them - working trying to be at school. I helped with the second graders with reading and arithmetic. I helped them one day a week. I was the PTA hostess, I coordinated the PTA meetings for every month. I always made sure we were there to greet the people, and we had the decorations for each month and anything that went on for the PTA I was called in to get it organized.

Anna: How many years have you actually spent working at a public job?

Jean: Well I'd say probably twenty-five years. When my husband was alive I did not work - he did not want me to work. He was a welder for a local mining equipment company and had a good job. He said there was no reason for me to work. We were buying our own mobile home and I had to sell it when he died, because of no transportation - I had a license at one time - but I had to sell the car and everything when he died.

Anna: Is it difficult for you to drive because of your height?

Jean: Not really. That is another thing - we really need to be financially able to have - seems like a luxury - but it is a necessity when you are in a job sometimes. We really need a car. That is one of our goals - my son and I - to one day have a car.

Anna: How far do you have to walk to come to work everyday?

Jean: Now that I'm at the Manor, I'm just right at the door. It's very convenient.

Anna: Can you tell me about when your husband died?

Jean: It was quite a shock because he was on kidney dialysis for three years and the income was limited because they would not let him work. He was unable to work those last three years he lived. We learned

then that we had to be saving. But with him so sick we were not able to save anything whatsoever. Then I had to give up my home. I had just lost my father six months before I lost my husband. That's when I moved back in with mother because she said "I'm all alone why don't you all move back in with me." So we moved in with mother and lived there two years until we got in the housing project and we lived there for eight years, while the kids were in school. My daughter married and moved to Georgia, and my son was old enough, he stayed with her in his sixteenth year, he stayed all summer and worked in a grocery store as a carryout boy down there. My children have always worked, they've always baby-sat when they were growing up to try to help with the expenses and things. But all through that they still had another life, my youngest daughter was a cheerleader, my son was baseball and football, my oldest daughter was into different things. When they were in high school they were both in the band, my son was the lead soloist, I'm very proud of him. Even now he'd like to pursue his music, that's another thing - when he came in and told me the other night about going to the Navy and talking with them, that's how he told me about it - he said, "Mom, where is my trumpet? Is it still at my sisters?" because he had lived with my daughter for awhile. He said; "is it still at my sisters or when she moved did she take it to mothers?" I said; "I don't know - why?" and he said; "I'm going to try to get in the Navy and I may try to get into the Navy band. God's give me this talent and I need to use it or I'm going to lose it." That's another aspect of his life that he would like to get further in too. I would like to see him go on with it too. Right now he's - we're all at a standstill - we're all financially bound down and its going to take a miracle to get us out.

Anna: Do you feel you have been discriminated against by any Government agency?

Jean: Well-----

Anna: Or that they could have helped you when they didn't?

Jean: They could have helped at times when they didn't. I feel like they could have helped at certain times. When we had no income whatsoever there should have been something to help us. I raised those kids by myself after he died. We had no help for ages from anyone. I worked and they worked and we asked nothing from anyone, and when we needed that-- (starting to cry)--I'm sorry. When we needed that - there

was no help,--(still crying)-- there was me - and I know people who are cheating the Government - I know what they're doing - and they shouldn't even be allowed to have checks or stamps - and here we were in need - and because of people like that - we couldn't get no help.--(still crying)

Anna: Do you feel like it was maybe a specific person who kept you from getting help, or the regulations - the way they were wrote up, or the policies?

Jean: The regulations - yes. Just the regulations. Because I am not the only young woman at that time who needed help, living in the housing projects, I've talked to other people living in the same situation as I am, living in the high-rise now, these older ladies like me are on fixed incomes, do not have much coming in, there is one, my best friend, she was given about seventy dollars food stamps, she got a thing this month, her food stamps have been cut to twelve dollars, and she only gets four hundred a month, besides she pays her rent which is about two-hundred-eighty, and she has a couple bills she pays, she has nothing, really, I don't know how she'll be able to eat now. And another lady, her step-daughter has had a good job since January now, and they have cut her step-daughter completely off food stamps, just because she has gone to work now and she has three children, and by the time she pays the baby-sitter and wear and tear on her car, and all this she says she does not know how she will feed her children now. This whole system is just really - I agree there needs to be new reform - a new welfare reform - but they need to talk to these poverty people like me, they need to go into the homes and see for themselves what is actually going on.

Anna: Do you think their reform is not the type of reform they need?

Jean: Their reform is not the reform needed at this time.

Anna: Are your health expenses covered or is it an out of pocket expense?

Jean: I go through the clinic, the local hospital's clinic, and I was able to go through the clinic to have this operation, but just for little things like severe colds, and I've had pneumonia seven times, and when I get a severe cold I like to go have it checked because I don't want it to go into pneumonia again. Well I have no family doctor - if I go to the clinic, I'm going to have to pay for it. At Saint Mary's clinic you have to make your appointments months ahead, and if you have an emergency like that, that's not helping, that's not

helping one bit. I don't have the extra money to go to the doctor. Just like my daughter, she did not have the extra money to go to a doctor. Well, there you've got a hospital bill if it comes down to going to the emergency room, you've got an emergency room bill, and so I just don't go. I put it off as long as I can.

Anna: The welfare doesn't help at all with your medical bills?

Jean: No. I get no help whatsoever.

Anna: Does the hospital hassle you over your bills?

Jean: They most certainly do. Some of them have been turned over. I cannot get credit now because they have been turned over. Therefor I am not able - my credit is no good now because of this.

Anna: Do you feel like the more you try-----?

Jean: The more I try the worse it gets.

Anna: How long have you been working here?

Jean: I've been here almost four years. I work four hours a day, I was working five hours and the funding - I worked the four for the Senior Employment, on the switchboard, and then I was working one hour with the Occupational Training Program, typing and filing, typing resumes, and filing and doing clerical work for them, well the Occupational Training did not get their funding, and that took that hour away. They will not give me another hour, so I'm just working the four hours now.

Anna: Are you physically able to work a full time job now?

Jean: Not really. But if I could find one I would try it as long as I could. I'll be sixty in April and I have been told I will be able to get my widows pension at sixty, so I'm looking for that right now to try to help me out.

Anna: So you're just trying to hang on until then?

Jean: I'm just trying to hang on till then. And then I don't know what's going to happen. Probably what will happen I will probably go ahead and quit work and baby-sit for my daughters so they will not have this problem. And that is another thing, there needs to be a system for them to have a baby-sitter for their children because they still - they say they have this where you can take them to daycare - but they still

cannot work and cannot afford to pay for the daycare - they cannot afford daycare on what they're making. They make too much to be on LINK program where they will pay, but they don't make enough to pay for daycare themselves so it's a hassle with their children everyday. Who's going to watch them, who's taking care of them?

Anna: Does worrying about your children and grandchildren add to your health problems?

Jean: Yes. Worrying about them. And it's hard on my daughters. It's very hard on them.

Anna: Do the fathers help out at all?

Jean: No. The one with the two children, her husband walked off, was gone for four months, she didn't even know where he was. He was a long haul truck driver and he went on a trip and never showed back up. And when he did show back up, they got a divorce, went to court, he was supposed to have her car fixed, it was in the divorce decree. The car was to be fixed because he was employed at the time, the insurance was to be paid on it, it was to be put in her name, and that they would allow so she could get to work, she told the judge "I have to work, because he will not - and I can not get to work without a car." Well the car was never fixed, he never fixed the car, it set until they came and towed it away. And all that the child advocate said he should have to pay is fifty dollars a month for two children because the oldest one is a hyperactive child - has been since he was three years old - she has a lot of problems with him - and he was on Ridlin at the time - she was getting a three-hundred dollar check for him. They considered that as his child support. And it was not coming out of his pocket whatsoever, but they considered that his child support. The other child only got fifty dollars. The father even confronted the judge with that - he said "that is not coming out of my pocket, this child has been on this since he was three years old - we were told by the school to have this done because he's always going to have to be on this" but they considered that - which I don't feel like should have been - the father should have been paying out of his pocket. He will not work, just so he doesn't have to pay.

Anna: As long as he is not working they can't make him pay?

Jean: As long as he's not working - he is living with his parents.

Anna: Does your sister and your family still help you out?

Jean: No. My mother is on a fixed income herself. If I'm really bent she'll loan me maybe fifteen or twenty, sometimes. But she has very little herself. And my sister lives in Florida, she's very well off, her husband is a professor of journalism, and a computer graphic artist at a college in Florida, and she also works. And they're very well off themselves. I never see her anymore that much. They were in over the fourth of July, and we were having our forty year class reunion, and I wasn't going to go because I didn't have the money to go. There's just a years difference between us and we always ran around with the same crowd, and she said "I would love to go" so she paid my way. She did help me on that. Other than that I get no help from anybody.

Anna: I know you give emotional support to your children, where do you get your emotional support from?

Jean: Nowhere really.--(crying)--My mother is eighty years old, not in good health and I can't go to her. I have one girlfriend I can talk to a little bit, she's not close enough I can really talk a lot of personal things over with.--(still crying)--

Anna: Are the people you work with supportive?

Jean: I had one girl here that when this job training thing stopped, she's been here ten years, she lost her job, she's not working here now, I was able to talk to her quite a bit. She called me yesterday and said she was going to come and see me, and we would go out to lunch and have a talk.

Anna: What do you think would be the best changes they could make in their policies?

Jean: Hmmmm

Anna: What type of help do you feel is mostly needed for someone in your situation?

Jean: There needs to be something for women between the ages of thirty-five and sixty-five.

Anna: Such as a job training thing to get them into a job? Or is the job training not helping?

Jean: It's not helping. I have been in so many job training programs, it's not helping.

Anna: Is it because the training you're getting is not what you need to get a job? Why do you think it's not working?

Jean: There's just too many people out there hunting for the jobs. And once you get the training there's just no jobs.

Anna: Are they flooding the market?

Jean: They're flooding the market with younger people, and there's just no jobs there once you get that training. I have one friend who would like to go back to work as a home care helper, but she has no transportation, and that's keeping her away. There's just nothing - I see no way out really because the job training programs have not - they have helped me in some ways - but in other ways - I knew all this - from business school - all these classes I have been in - I've had all this in business school and every job training. I've been in Rehabilitation job training, because of my shortness and my hearing. They had me in that. And then I was in the three month job training they had here. That's how I got my job here.

Anna: Rehabilitation - is that like the West Virginia Vocational Rehabilitation?

Jean: Yes

Anna: And the three month program - is that like N.O.W. or O.I.C. or something like that?

Jean: No. It was through Rehabilitation. It was just a job training like resumes - I've set and typed resumes all day in this job training program. I have been in so many of them and have done so many of them I could teach one of these classes myself.

Anna: So you think the biggest problem is there's just not enough jobs out there?

Jean: Just not enough jobs out there, in my opinion. There's jobs, like McDonalds and places, low paying jobs, but now days you cannot make it on four-twenty-five an hour and part-time and most jobs are part time anymore. That's where they're getting you, not having to pay the insurance and all this, they put you on part-time and they don't have to pay insurance. I get nothing here. They have insurance here, but I am considered part time so I can not get the insurance benefits. Those job training programs are good for someone in the Appalachian parts that have not had this education, but when you have had this education, that is not going to help you. When you already know, and you know how to fill out these applications and your resumes, that is not going to help you one bit to send you to school and to spend that money - I mean - I could tell you word for word what that instructor is going to say before he even says it.

Anna: Did the employment office give you any hope for a job?

Jean: Not really.

Anna: Are they pretty well honest with you?

Jean: Honest. As they said they have nothing right now.

Anna: Have they sent you to any interviews?

Jean: No. Not for a while. That's how I got this job, was through the JTPA (Job Training Partnership Act) I came here on that three months plan, and I worked here three months, with the winterization part, she wanted to keep me, but she could not hire me. She could not keep me, because it was the three month thing. When I turned fifty-five I came back and signed up for the Senior Employment Program. That's how I got on here, I've been here ever since, through the Senior Employment Program.

Anna: Did JTPA give you any other alternatives or any other suggestions?

Jean: Not really. No. Just to take the computer class, but there's no way I could take the computer class because I have to work to live. The computer classes are during the day and there's none in the evening.

Anna: Where do they offer these classes?

Jean: O.I.C. or Goodwill either one.

Anna: Those are pretty far away - aren't they?

Jean: I'm fairly close to Goodwill, if they had a class in the evenings or the afternoons - after I get off work I could go down to Goodwill and take the class and then walk on home. But they don't have an afternoon class.

Anna: You feel like you could find a job if you did have the computer classes?

Jean: I could probably find a better job. Yes. I'm sure I could, because most of the jobs want the Lotus and all this other, which I don't have. I just have the basic training. I'm a very fast typist.

Anna: How many words a minute can you type?

Jean: When I came back from Georgia I went to a local business- JTPA sent me to this business- and where I hadn't used it for years, I was down to thirty-five words a minute. By the time I had finished at this business I had my typing speed back up to ninety-four words a minute. My last typing speed was at ninety-four words a minute. They were really surprised - with my little fingers and everything. That's working with it everyday - it would probably average sixty. But on the one typing test I got it up to ninety-four words a minute.

Anna: So, you feel like if there were something for women in your age group, and a little younger, it would help out?

Jean: It would help out tremendously. That woman told me when I went out to the Welfare - she said "why are you even here?" I told her "I'm unemployed, I've been very ill and I have nothing." She said, "There's nothing in the state of West Virginia, we do not have anything for women, unless you have children under the age of sixteen years old." I said "what are women my age who are not old enough to get their Social Security, and have no disabilities to where they can draw disability Social Security, but they need the help, like me just being sick, supposed to do?" She said "There's nothing for them." I was not even eligible for a medical card or anything. All I did get was some food stamps.

Anna: You feel like you met up with a brick wall?

Jean: Yes. And that brick wall has been there for years. For years. My biggest mistake was leaving the one job I had at the City Mission and moving to Georgia. I thought I would do better there. My son had gone there and he would call me and say; "Mom come on down here, we can do a lot better here." His sister had found us a place. Well there was no transportation in this town in Georgia. It was a fairly big town, but there was no transportation so I couldn't work. If he hadn't still had his Social Security then, we'd have been in the same situation. I gave up a good job and went there - I had insurance and everything. That's where I made my mistake. I just wanted to be closer to my grandchildren and my son liked it there. I thought maybe this is what we needed - a change in life - but it didn't work out.

Anna: West Virginia drew you back?

Jean: Yes.

Anna: How many applications for employment would you estimate you have put in over the years - how many each week?

Jean: Gosh - I couldn't begin to guess - quite a few. Before I got this job - at least ten or fifteen a week. I had to ride the bus to do it.

Anna: Is there anything else you have to say?

Jean: No - just that the lower income people really need something to give them hope - I know so many of them have just given up. If it wasn't for my family - I would have probably given up, but I knew we had to go on. Something needs to be done to give them the incentive to go on to try to better themselves.

Anna: I really do appreciate your co-operation with this interview. Thank you.

Jean: You're welcome.

~~ek. I had to ride the bus to do it.~~

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End of Interview
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