INTERVIEWEE: Hattye Shields

PLACE OF BIRTH: Hitchita, McIntosh County, Oklahoma

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

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Preface

The interview with Hattye Shields traces one family's journey from Oklahoma to the San Joaquin Valley following the crops, back to Oklahoma and finally to the aircraft industry of southern California. This family's experience seems quite typical of many migrants from Oklahoma.

Judith Gannon
Interviewer
CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley

Oral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Hattye Shields (Age: 56)

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATED: May 24, 1981

J.G.: This is an interview with Mrs. Hattye Shields for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Judith Gannon at 911 Spring Street, Anaheim, California on May 24, 1981 at 1 p.m.

J.G.: Let's begin by going back to your childhood in Oklahoma with your earliest memories and come forward.

Shields: I was the seventh of a family of eight. Mother and Dad owned a little farm in McIntosh County just between Checotah and Henryetta, Oklahoma. My earliest memories are of that little farm which we called Doodlebug Hill because it was on a hill. I don't know where the doodlebug comes from. We did not live there long, however, because this was in 1925 and in the latter part of the 1920s, Dad lost his farm because he couldn't pay the taxes. We then became sharecroppers.

J.G.: What happened during that time that your father was not able to pay his taxes?

Shields: It was very close to the river and there were lots of floods along in that period of time, so it was just a matter of losing too many crops in a row. Then when the floods weren't there, the drought was. But we moved up to about five miles or so up into the plain area where the river was no problem. We lived there for several years. When we were living there on the plains, my oldest brother came to California for the first time. He came on a freight train with a friend as a hobo. He came at first to Corona and stayed with an aunt in Corona and from there he went to San Jose and he was working in the cannery in San Jose for a while. Then he went back home in about 1933 and the next time he came out he brought my oldest sister with him. So they both lived with an aunt in San Jose and worked in the canneries.

J.G.: How did they travel this time?
Shields: They came on a bus the second time. My mother said, "No" to my sister coming on the freight train.

J.G.: What did your brother remember about that trip on the freight train? Did he ever talk about that?

Shields: Yes, he did. He talked about that a lot. He mainly remembered the fact that he couldn't get off when he was hungry so he just went hungry. He had to hide an awful lot from what they called the bulls. Evidently at that time there were a lot of men riding those freight trains. So that was a very dramatic period in his life.

J.G.: What year was that?

Shields: That was about 1930 or 1931. Then in 1934 the older sister came home. This was in the period of extreme drought. We had no well on the farm that we were sharecropping. We had a cistern. If you are familiar [with a] cistern, you know you have to collect the water when it rains. Of course, there was no rain. So the cisterns were all dry. Everyone that had a cistern was feeling this particular problem. We had to haul the water. We had to haul the water not only for ourselves for drinking and all the household needs, chores, washing and all that. We also had to haul water for the cattle and horses, everything that you have on the farm. All your time was taken up with hauling water. So when my older sister came back from California that time, I'm pretty sure it was with her instigation that Mother and Dad finally decided that it had to be better in California.

J.G.: Now before you go on to California, how old were you?

Shields: I was ten. I was ten years old at this time.

J.G.: What do you remember of your life on the farm?

Shields: I remember it being a fun time. When you're young a farm is fun because you've got animals and we had a lot of brothers and sisters and mine were all older except for one. So it was a fun time living on the farm. It was hard that we didn't have anything. We really had nothing. I remember my sister just older than myself was always very upset with me because I would try to wear her clothes because I didn't have any. I was a tomboy and I would rip them. She and I were always fight about that. I remember we had one pair of shoes in the fall and that was to start school with. You had to make that one pair of shoes last till the next spring until it got warm enough to go barefoot. That was just a way of life. That was it and you were lucky to have those. Mother would make dresses for us to go to school out of flour sacks. In those days they had those nice printed flour sacks and that's what we wore to school except in the winter-time. Then we wore little zip up coveralls sort of like the new
jumpsuits are except they had the little buttons up. But they were warm, and that's what we wore to school in the wintertime.

J.G.: You went to school there in Oklahoma?

Shields: Yes, I went to school in Oklahoma. In fact, my dad drove the school bus. We almost froze. There was no heat in the bus. It was his own truck which he had converted to a school bus, and there was no heat in it. So naturally we got on first so we sat through the whole run which was sometimes twenty and twenty-five miles till we got to school so we really froze.

J.G.: You must have been one of the first areas to have school buses. Most of the people that I've talked to from that time walked.

Shields: Walked or rode horses. Yes. Well, our school bus was Dad's truck and the school board hired him to do this. This was their first school bus—my dad's truck. He had it fashioned with canvas flaps that rolled down for the weather, but of course, it didn't keep out the rain and the cold and the snow. It was very cold.

J.G.: It was a one-room school?

Shields: No, we had a school over at Hitchita where I went to school, and it had a little brick school. In fact, it even went to high school. But the primary grades had a little one-room school. Then, when you got up to the fourth grade, you moved into the brick schoolhouse and it had a water place outside with four spigots. Four or five people could get a drink at once and an outhouse down a little bit farther that had six or seven holes which the boys tipped over every Halloween.

J.G.: Tell me a little bit about the farmhouse that you had.

Shields: It was small. It was extremely small for as many as we had in the family. In fact, it's still there. I saw it about three years ago. You wouldn't believe that that many people lived in that small a house. There was a big fairly good-sized kitchen where Mother did the cooking and all that, and one big room which you would now call a family room which had the kitchen table. It was a long kitchen table that ten could sit at with benches. It had a big potbellied stove. That was our only means of warmth throughout the whole house. This was all in one room. It was the living room, eating room, get warm room all at once. There was actually one bedroom in that house for all these people but we had a sleeping porch so there were two or three of us that had to sleep on the sleeping porch. The rest of them slept in the bedroom. Bedrooms were big in those days and you had three or four beds in them. The overflow slept in the living room. That's the way we lived.

J.G.: There was not much privacy in those days.
Shields: No, no there wasn't. You didn't have many questions.

J.G.: Got your sex education early, huh?

Shields: That's right.

J.G.: What kind of crops did your father raise on his farm?

Shields: Up on that particular place, he raised some cotton and broom corn and corn, of course. In those days that was about the main staple crops that you raised in that area.

J.G.: Did you have animals too?

Shields: Oh yes. Yes.

J.G.: What were your duties or chores?

Shields: Well, mainly feeding the chickens. That kind of thing. Gathering in the eggs. Bringing in the water out of the cistern. Gathering up firewood because we had a stove that used just wood for cooking. Bringing in the coal for the big stove. We used coal in it. That and my homework was about my life as a child.

J.G.: What did your family do for entertainment?

Shields: Well, mostly you do for yourself. When we first moved up there on that particular place, just down the road was an old cousin. I don't think she was an aunt although I used to call her Aunt. She had one of those old pump organs and he played the concertina and we would have music evenings. In fact, in the area, your social life mostly revolved around music. None of us played except later my brother played the guitar. At that point in our life none of us had any musical instruments that we played. But this aunt and uncle down the road, we would have music evenings with them. Another neighbor—we would all go down there and they played an extremely good fiddle. Then the church had little socials. And the school was generally the focus of the social life of that type of community. There were parties in the different grades. Each grade sometimes had a party in which you go and play games and stay late after school. Then as you got older they would let the kids come to school at night for the older grades and have their parties there. Those were swinging parties.

J.G.: You must have been about a fifth grader then when you left Oklahoma.

Shields: Yes, well actually, I think, I was in the fourth grade and when I got to California they jumped me to the fifth grade. On our way at the time that we decided to come, Dad sold everything he possessed in the way of farming equipment. At this time he had a green Chevy truck that had a flat bed on it. He outfitted this truck with wood sideboards up to the top of the cab of the truck and then above that he'd bought a huge canvas tent. He went to a blacksmith shop to a
fellow that he knew and he fastened him some spokes so that he was able to put this tent up over the top of his truck and we looked like a Conestoga wagon. That's how we came to California.

J.G.: Do you have any idea of how much money your family actually started their journey with?

Shields: I would say not much. I say that just from the way we lived on the way out. I do say that they really planned pretty good before they started. Dad had in the back of the truck what they called the tailgate fixed so that it was easily lifted off and could be set on boxes and that was our table. And so all the way across the country we had a table to eat on and Mother had found this little metal type of stove and we stopped at three or four in the afternoon and cooked dinner. I'm sure it was just potatoes or gravy and biscuits, but we had a regular dinner. This was on our way out. Most every night we did this.

J.G.: Did you take quite a few of your household belongings with you or sold most of them?

Shields: Oh, the story of the feather bed is something else. We sold most of the household things except for the bedding. Dad had fixed bunks in the truck so that there were two full-size beds in big bunks and I think there were other mattresses besides that. So mainly we brought our sleeping things. Mother did bring an old trunk and in it she kept her pots and pans and all that stuff. So she did bring along her necessities. And she brought her feather bed which the border people wanted to desperately to take away from her, but we came to California with and went home with. They inspected it—would you believe that? They inspected the seams to make sure there were no bedbug in that feather bed. And, of course, my mother very religiously doused it every week with kerosene. You know that's how you do that. So there were none so let us bring it in.

J.G.: When you say doused it every week with kerosene, what do you mean?

Shields: In feathers, you know, you can get ticks. I'm sure that in any beds if they are old and don't get aired and stuff like that bugs can get in, especially if you have kids and dogs. Or just plain living. So on the seams around the edges of your mattress and stuff where the bugs would accumulate in the little seams is where you put your kerosene. You put kerosene in there or turpentine, anything that will kill the bugs. You just treat them. That's what she always did so she had no bedbugs on her mattresses.

J.G.: So you camped out?

Shields: We camped out. We stopped once in Big Spring, Texas because we had an uncle there that my dad wanted to see. He hadn't seen him for a long time. We had never met these particular cousins—the children or the littlest ones anyway. It was going to be a kind of
an everybody get acquainted type thing. So we stopped in Big Spring, Texas for a few nights and it was there that I had my first dust storm. It was horrible. Because we were so close to the river in Oklahoma we had never had that much dust. We had had dust and it was very dusty before we left. Just terribly dusty on the roads and stuff, but not that blowing wind that we had in Texas that night. My aunt knew what to do of course. She had lived there all her life. Her husband worked in the oil there in Big Spring. So she took the wet towels cinched up around the doors and all this. And of course, coming into that family with ten people and we had twelve people in the truck with us on the way out here—twelve and one dog. We called ourselves the dirty dozen and a dog. There was no room for us all to sleep in the house so the little kids got relegated to the truck. So we were in the truck during the sand storm. It was something else. I have never heard the wind blow so fierce. It's such a sound, such a terrible sound. Then you would get coughing spells. All of a sudden you would just choke. Even though you would wash your face and try to keep yourself clean, the ones with the worst problems just wet it completely and put it over their heads. You know there was just no way you could keep the dust out. The next morning there was dust. There was dust piled up inside the house along the window and under the doors when that thing quit. It was something else. I never want to live through another one of those dust storms.

J.G.: Imagine then being in a tent.

Shields: Really in a tent, even though it was tied down good. Oh, it was terrible. They finally came out in the worst and got the littlest kids and let the bigger boys stay all night in the tent. But it was very bad.

J.G.: Your father really must have had that thing lashed down so that it didn't blow away in the storm.

Shields: He did. It was well put together. It was well put together.

J.G.: So you had your family of ten?

Shields: An aunt. My Aunt Hattye whom I'm named after and her two small children. The youngest was just a baby and the oldest was about two. The other was just a baby. Her husband was already here in Arvin and she was coming out with us. And then, of course, the dog so we had twelve and a dog.

J.G.: And most of you then I assume rode in the back of the truck.

Shields: Yes. There was two that could ride in the front with Dad so that three could be in the cab. All the rest rode in the back. The way it was fixed we could lay on that top bunk and look out and that was beautiful. Coming across the country, laying up there and looking out, we had to fight, of course, about who gets
Shields, H.

... to look out now and that type of thing the way families do. But it was a fun trip. I know it was hard on Mother and Daddy because they were going into a very uncertain-type thing, but for the young ones it was just fun. It really was.

J.G.: So after you spent time at Big Spring, Texas then you came to Corona, right?

Shields: We came right on. We didn't make any other stops. One place this was on the old 66 [Highway 66] and I think it was at Bixby, Arizona, we found a hill so steep that we had to get out and unload part of them and a lot of us had to walk to the top. And coming through the Ute Pass which was quite exciting where they have those hairline curves. You know, you find yourself coming back on yourself.

J.G.: Right.

Shields: One of the things we saw coming across country that I thought was very interesting, besides a lot of people in the same situation were car caravans. These men were driving these cars evidently from somewhere in the midwest or around to sell in California. Well, the men in these cars were all going about the same speed because they had a heavy load just about the same as we did and we became real good friends with these men in those cars. We would pass the same ones and then the next hill they would be passing us and, of course, they were all friendly and waved at the kids and everything. So this was one of the most interesting things on the way out, was seeing the different people that were coming and what they were coming in and how they were arriving.

J.G.: A lot of different kinds.

Shields: Yes, everything you can imagine. Some little cars with people so crammed and some with people sitting on their laps even, just really crammed in there.

J.G.: We've got you almost to the California border, but before we do that, when you were living in Oklahoma sharecropping, do you remember anytime that our father talked about any of the farm policies that were designed to try to bring prices up during that period?

Shields: I wasn't so aware of it so much then as later. I'm sure that he talked about it with his friends and Mother, but just never discussed that type of thing in front of the kids.

J.G.: Do you remember any experiences of having to slaughter cattle or destroy crops or anything like that?

Shields: Oh well, I remember the part about the cattle. Some of that. And that hurt my father very much. You just can't know how much it hurts a farmer to have to do this type of thing. When he has
raised his crop and raised his cattle and stuff and then to have to do that type of thing just breaks their heart. I mean, that's just against everything they believe.

J.G.: Your dad was in a position of having to actually do that or were there other farmers that you knew?

Shields: Well, I know the ones that had more. You know, we probably never had that many, but I know there ones that had more that found themselves in this situation. I think there was a lot of selling of livestock along about that time so that they wouldn't get themselves into this kind of situation--practically giving it away so that people that didn't have any would have it.

J.G.: You talked before about the inspection at the border.

Shields: Yes, this was quite a shock, this inspection at that border. There were cars lined up you wouldn't believe. It was worse than any freeway thing you've ever seen. Long, long lines of cars waiting to come through, and there were cars that were pulling over. Anyone that was carrying any goods at all, any household goods or anything, was pulled over and just really checked thoroughly. This was the time that we had the business with the feather bed--with Mother and her feather bed. My family looked fairly healthy, so there wasn't a long wait for us, but it was just the manner in which they conducted the inspection. We'd never had that type of situation before with people in command. We had never run into that type of situation. I don't know if my dad ever had. I'm sure he didn't. He was at one time a county sheriff in Oklahoma. He was a very well-respected man in his area. Mother was a very proud woman. To be treated like that in that situation with these border guards or whatever they called themselves--inspectors--was very, very demeaning to them. They just didn't get over that for a long time.

J.G.: The attitude of the people was more than just an inspection to see if you were bringing in anything with you. It sounds like what you're saying is that they were [discouraging people from coming in].

Shields: They were trying to get people not to come in is what it was. They were trying their best--everything they could find to turn people back. And, of course, they just couldn't. I mean, if they couldn't find anything, they couldn't. They couldn't turn them back. There just wasn't that part of the law yet. So they had to let them through. So they came through. And we did.

J.G.: You came to Corona?

Shields: We came to Corona because Mother had a sister there. In fact, she had a lot of family in the Corona area. And this was where my oldest brother was at the time working in the lemon harvest. So this was about April as I remember it. So the smaller ones of us had to go to school to finish out that year. I remember we had a
nice little house. It was the nicest house we've ever had. It was on an orange grove and a lemon grove in front of us and an empty house next door that had a strawberry patch so we were in heaven. Father, of course, admonished us not to steal oranges—absolutely not to pick oranges. So every morning on our way to school we got one orange each. We knew we wanted an orange for lunch and that was our thing. We would all look to see if anyone was coming and we would go and steal one orange each to have for our lunch.

J.G.: What did you find the school to be like here in California? Did you feel that you were treated any different or anything that you remember about?

Shields: In Corona not so much as up in the Valley. Even though there was a feeling in Corona already that these people were different we felt a little bit of the difference. Kids were not as friendly as they would have been if we had been moving into town or something. They knew we were going to be short-termers. They knew we were just going to be there for a while so they didn't take the time to get acquainted.

J.G.: So your father had no plan to remain in Corona?

Shields: No, and he knew that and everybody else knew that.

J.G.: What did he do while you were in Corona?

Shields: He and Mother and all the older ones in the family worked in the Sunkist lemon place. They graded lemons. When that quit we moved on to the Valley.

J.G.: The San Joaquin Valley?

Shields: Yes. When we first got to Corona, Dad had taken a weekend to take the aunt that we brought with us up to Arvin and come back, and so while he was there he scouted out a little bit so he knew what he was going into. So we went to Arvin first and I think they worked just a little bit in the grapes there.

J.G.: Your family was only in Corona for a couple of months?

Shields: Two or three at the most. I'm sure it was until after school was out. I'm sure we finished school there and went to Arvin to the grape harvest. I don't remember doing anything in it at all because I'm sure that I was too small to do anything with the grape harvest. Now that I know what they do in a grape harvest I know that that was the reason. But the older ones in the family and Dad worked in the grapes. Dad was fortunate in a lot of ways because he had the truck and could contract out for trucking, helping move or haul things. He was unfortunate in that he wasn't very strong and so heavy lifting of the boxes was not good for his health so it was
a sort of a half and half situation.

While we were in Arvin, we pitched our tent on the aunt's property. We were not in the camp so to speak. We did have friends that were in one of the camps at Weed Patch. They have lived in Lamont all this time. Their children have grown up there and they have lived in Lamont area and are still living there.

J.G.: What do you recall their saying about the government camp? I assume it was the government camp at Weed Patch.

Shields: Yes, it was. It was the government camp at Weed Patch, and they weren't happy there for a lot of reasons. They were happy because the facilities were better. I mean, they had the bathrooms and that type of thing. But they were unhappy that everybody that was in there had restrictions. What they considered restrictions.

J.G.: Tell me about that.

Shields: I'm not real clear about it. I'm sure it's just a matter of --when you have a home and you're living and you come in with all these people, of course there have to be restrictions. But it's hard for people who are very independent people to be told that at a certain time of night you do this and a certain time of night you do that and nobody can wash except now and that type of thing. It's just awfully hard for an independent people. I think most of the people from Oklahoma that came out here in the 1930s were very independent people. I think it was just that type of life back there. At least all the friends that I know of that came out were that way. We did have one occasion where we lived in a camp. Only one time that I remember living in a camp, and that was in Wasco. I think we left Arvin and went to Wasco for the potatoes. I think that was our next stopping place which is not very far. And at that particular time it was not an organized camp. The organized camp was too full. We couldn't get in there. This was one of those little catch-up type things where everybody comes and settles on this empty lot.

J.G.: Was it a private grower-owned [property] or was it government [owned]?

Shields: No, I'm sure it was private land. I'm just positive it was private land because there were no facilities at all. It was just a bunch of people out here in this little place. We stayed there about a week. Dad said he just wouldn't have his children living like that. And so he found an independent grower who would let him come and live on his property. At the time we came we were the first ones to come there. They turned out to be wonderful friends, that man and his family.

J.G.: When you say your father didn't want his children to live like that, what problems were there in that?

Shields: Well, facilities for keeping clean. You just didn't have them.
J.G.: You were just talking about leaving the private camp with no facilities. How did your father locate this gentleman there?

Shields: Well, he was a very resourceful man, my father was. He would go out and get his own jobs. He didn't just wait for the call to come here. He just went and looked. This man couldn't hire us because he didn't have any crop of his own. He did have a place that had about fifteen acres there that was just in trees and stuff and it was a perfect place for a camp although there was none there. But he did allow Dad to move in and at this place we set up our tent and built a brush arbor and had a beautiful little camp. It was just so clean and under eucalyptus trees and just really lovely.

J.G.: What is a brush arbor?

Shields: I was hoping you'd ask me that. A brush arbor is a patio with brush around it. Of course, there's no cement. It's just hard dirt. You sweep it clean and then you take leaves or branches off of the trees and you put it up along the side to keep the sun out and then you put it across the top and make yourself a little lean-to. That's a brush arbor. They're really nice up in the Valley because you know it's so hot there. You just can't get any shade sometimes.

J.G.: The other thing is that if this place wasn't set up to be a camp what did you use for facilities?

Shields: Facilities? Well, it was obvious that with the crowd that Dad had the man's facilities couldn't be used. I mean, they would be overtaxed very fast. So he let us build a little outhouse out in the woods there in the little trees. So Dad built his own little outhouse and we had that. Then for bathing, of course, we had to do that inside the tent. But we had more room. That wasn't a problem.

J.G.: You carried water from his well?

Shields: Yes. We had a particular problem with that at first. But then just down the street from him there was a lady who owned quite a place and she had a reservoir and she gave us permission to use the water from the reservoir. We would take our buckets and go over and put it under the spout and the water came out of the pipe at the reservoir. We had nice, clean fresh water. So we really had it nice there. However, at this particular time in our trip was when my father and the sister that's just older than I am started having boils. They had to go to the doctor and have them lanced. Just these horrible carbuncles all over their bodies. Doctors said it was the living conditions of course, the living conditions and the dirt and all the unsanitary conditions, just coming out. You just don't have the way to keep your food as clean. You have no way of keeping it refrigerated. I mean, there's no way. You had to use what food you had that day and get more the next day if it
was perishable at all. Of course, potatoes aren't perishable. You can keep those nicely and mother made her biscuits every morning and every night. She made fresh bread every morning and every night. That was how we had our meals. We ate a lot of gravy in those days. In fact, we made a chocolate gravy. We got so sick of white gravy that we made this chocolate gravy. It's really just a thin chocolate pudding, but you eat it with biscuits like a gravy and many a morning that's what we had to eat. I actually liked it.

J.G.: I would think that if you liked chocolate it would be almost like having chocolate biscuits.

Shields: It was really good--chocolate pudding every morning.

J.G.: When you said that your father and sister started having boils, I've always thought that boils were some kind of a virus or infection or something.

Shields: They are a blood disease. They really are a blood disease.

J.G.: That has nothing to do with cleanliness or anything like that.

Shields: Well, the doctors didn't think so at that time. They thought it was mainly from the cleanliness or probably from the water more than anything else. The reservoir water people had to use was not very clean. Not like now.

J.G.: What happened? Did they continue to have that?

Shields: They had that all the time we were in California. They didn't get rid of those boils till we got back to Oklahoma. They saw doctors in Wasco, Tipton, Tulare and San Jose.

J.G.: Right up the coast.

Shields: They saw doctors in all those places, and of course as long as your conditions are that way, it's not going to go away.

J.G.: Did you manage to have the money to pay for the medical?

Shields: I don't know how the medical was arranged. I don't know if they really did pay for that or if it was any kind of a health care or what. I rather imagine that that was actually paid for out of the little bit that we had.

J.G.: So at this time you were living in the eucalyptus grove and your father was working the potatoes?

Shields: We all worked the potatoes. Every one of us worked the potatoes, even the littlest girl. And that was a dirty job. That was a horrible dirty job. It was not so bad for the younger ones because what we
did was we would pile the potatoes up in little piles. Then the bigger ones would come along with the sacks and put them in the sacks that we wouldn't have to carry the sacks. But those sacks were heavy. When they're full, that's a heavy sack, that's a lot of potatoes.

J.G.: A 100-pound sack, isn't it?

Shields: Yes. That's a 100 pound sack of potatoes. That's what they were. Later on we would carry little buckets.

J.G.: Were you able to keep some of the potatoes for your own use?

Shields: I'm sure that we did, because I remember that we ate an awful lot of potatoes. What it was was that we got the ones that were cut in two from the digger. That's probably the ones that we were able to take home and eat.

J.G.: Do you remember your parents talking about wages at that time? What you got [paid] for picking potatoes?

Shields: I don't remember. I know it was just cents. I know it was just really cents a sack. It may have been ten or twelve cents--something like that for a 100-pound sack. It was very little. I remember that part. But I know you had to pull an awful lot of potatoes to make any money at all. And I'm sure the reason that we had any money at all to pay for the doctor or anything was the fact that there were so many of us that were working.

J.G.: So your diet then consisted pretty much of potatoes and biscuits and gravy?

Shields: And gravy. I can't hardly remember along through that part of the Valley anything else. I really can't. I remember sometimes fresh fruit, but that was because we happened to be visiting someone that had fresh grapes or something like that or wherever we happened to be.

J.G.: Was there any time for social activities or was it pretty much work?

Shields: Oh, at this particular place where we were was fun time for social [activities]. This girl that owned that place, there was a daughter and a son that was just older than I was and then the daughter was about the same age as one of my older brothers. So they had parties, and this was where I was introduced to group parties. And this was really fun. We had one time a backyard party. It was just a lot of fun. And this was where I learned about Post Office and how you played Post Office and Spin the Bottle. And I don't remember what the name of the thing was, but you would just go out for walks around the place and it was just those types of fun parties.
J.G.: Just as a clarification, you lived in the eucalyptus grove in Wasco, right?

Shields: Yes.

J.G.: Go ahead. So how long did you stay in Wasco?

Shields: There after the potatoes went out? Probably along toward the fall because our next stop was Tipton where we stayed and picked cotton. The Tipton-Tulare area. And school was already starting so that had to be in September and October. That was our next stop. And we found a strange living thing which I enjoyed very much. We had different living places than a lot of people in California. We started off by living on this man's place just like a lot of people were at the time that was working for him. My father still did not like that living with so many people in such close proximity. I remember my two older sisters having a fight. I know this is what sparked the moving out situation. And it was simply over who was going to wear a pair of shoes to a particular party or a dance or something. Right after that we found this little cabin on the edge of this man's property. It was a run-down cabin. You have no idea. Out here in this cow pasture. But we moved into it. We went through the winter in this cabin so we had a roof over our heads. We had shelter from the rain and everything. And this was all through cotton picking season until the next spring. It was quite a place. I learned about cow chips and how they'll burn for fuel. They make a nice fire. You have to be awful careful. That was our chore. The young ones had to go out and round up the cow chips. We took an old tow sack, a potato sack, and went out and we learned that you take a stick and you poke it in the middle and if it doesn't go through it's dry enough to burn.

J.G.: How did you learn about this?

Shields: You learn that by trial and error I'm afraid.

J.G.: I mean that the cow chips burn.

Shields: That they burn? My father was a cowboy in his early days in Texas. Before he married he was a cowboy so he knew that you can burn cow chips. That was quite a place. We had a session with the bees. There were bees in that little old shack inside the walls. My older sister was the kind that had to have a clean house so she was up one day dusting the walls and discovered this hive of bees. So one of my brothers decided that he would get rid of the bees. She didn't like bees. We had the biggest flight of bees you ever saw. The bees ran us out of the house before we got them all killed. It was a nice area, Tipton was. I like the school in Tipton. I had a great teacher. I really loved that school, Tipton Elementary School. The teacher was a very warm, understanding woman and understood a lot about migrant children and tried her
best to help us ease into the group so that we didn't have as much problem there as we had other places. Tipton had a nice remembrance for me.

J.G.: Describe your little house in the pasture with the bees in the wall.

Shields: It was a place that had one big room and one bedroom off of that room so it really was just an open shelter. It had a good roof. It didn't leak. It had a wood floor and of course the planks had space between them. You know you had to watch for crawlies coming out of them. It was just set off by itself out there in the corner of this pasture. It had a place where Dad could drive his truck in. I think there was a shed or something out back but I don't think it was useable. I think it had just fallen down. It was in such disrepair that it couldn't be used.

J.G.: Did you have water there?

Shields: Oh no. We always had to carry our water. I don't remember having anyplace other than when we first got here in Corona where we had water available. You always had to go and get it in buckets and barrels or whatever. I don't remember ever having any running water or any water in a well-type situation at all.

J.G.: Now in the Tipton area--did your older brothers and sisters then work the cotton and your mother and dad also?

Shields: Yes. Mother and Dad--everybody worked the cotton fields. In fact, I remember we younger ones too would go in and work the cotton fields when we had the chance after we got home and stuff. And so we all worked, every one of us.

J.G.: Do you remember anything about how much you were paid for the cotton?

Shields: I don't remember exactly but my older brother would remember. I should have asked him those things. But I know it was just cents. It might have been $1 a hundred. I doubt it. I don't think it was even fifty cents. I think it was mighty low.

J.G.: So when you were in Tipton you went back to school. You didn't feel like there was any discrimination against you?

Shields: Right there was the best feeling I had. So I think probably there was a lot in my particular age group in my own class. The older students, I think had a little better feeling toward the younger ones, anyway. Like sixth graders were a little more understanding about fourth graders and so forth. But I think, especially with girls, they are afraid that a new girl is going to get their boyfriend, even if they're ten years old. They had this feeling. And I was the kind of a ten year old girl that I would do it if I could at all. So there was that type of thing
among the kids.

J.G.: But the feeling that it was a natural kind of rivalry, not based upon the fact that you were a migrant?

Shields: No. Not on the economic-type thing, not particularly right there. I didn't feel that too much, in fact, in the schools in California.

J.G.: Did you ever remember your folks talking about the way that they were treated by the local people in California?

Shields: I remember my father, I think this is why he always went to the independent growers, the small guy, you know, in stead of going with the big farms like a lot of people did. I'm pretty sure this is why he did this but he felt more of a kinship with them because he was a farmer himself and he felt that they would be more understanding of him and his problems and his family than the big companies so he really stayed away from the large places. I just don't remember us ever working for one of the big places. I remember in all the places that we worked, it was always a small grower. We usually lived right on their land. Just on that one incidence there in Arvin where we had to live for just a little while [near the camp].

J.G.: So you didn't feel that as far as you were concerned or as far as you ever heard your parents talk about this that there was a good deal of hostility by the local people or that you had to watch the growers every minute to keep them from taking advantage of you?

Shields: No. I didn't get that. They may have had it, but I may have just been too young to know that part of it. But they didn't talk about it in front of the kids anyway. So all my feelings and connections with people all up and down the Valley in that period of time were good. They were very good. That's why to me it was a fun year. I used to think it was only because I was ten. But now that I'm older and think about it more, I think, that it was a good situation as far as I was concerned.

J.G.: How was it for you having to change schools every few years?

Shields: That was hard. I didn't like that. That was very hard. I was more adaptable than my other sisters. I just happened to be more outgoing. They had a very hard time of it. The one that was sick and had the boils had a very hard time in school. She just knew everybody hated her and I think a lot of it was because of the fact that she was usually covered up with bandages here and there. And I'm sure that it was a lot her feelings, but she had that feeling. She felt like she was very looked down upon. Of course, then the younger sister, it didn't bother her a bit. She was too young. She was just eight so it didn't get too much on her.

J.G.: You stayed in this little cabin for the winter. Where did you go after you left Tipton?
Shields: After we left Tipton we went to San Jose. The next thing I remember, any work that we did, was in San Jose. Here again we had an aunt there in town so we stayed with her until the prune season until the prunes were ripe. That was all that was there in San Jose. However, along through this period of time the older ones of the family did work in the canneries. They worked in the San Jose area in the canneries and I'm sure they went up ahead of us through the winter. They could get work up there. So we went and landed in this big house in San Jose with my aunt and a lot of borders. I don't know how many people were there in that house. As soon as the prunes got ripe then Dad found another grower and we moved out onto his property again to pick up the prunes. It was a very hard time here because we didn't go to school in San Jose for some reason. I think it was a matter of distance. I don't think there was any buses for some reason we didn't go to school in San Jose. My older brother would have been in the graduating class in our school in Oklahoma and he missed his friends desperately. So we hadn't been in San Jose too long and he developed a very severe headache. He stayed home from picking prunes that day, everybody went but him and he stayed home. My mother went back to the place to fix lunch for everybody and here she came running and screaming, "Bud, Bud, Bud!" That was my dad's name. "Noel's gone! Noel's gone!" So we all got in the truck and ran home and he had left. He had left us a little note, saying, "Don't worry. I've got some money. I'll write you in a couple of days. I'm on my way back to Oklahoma."

Everybody piled into the truck and we all went to the police and put out this missing persons report. He must have been seventeen because he was going to be graduating that year. The policeman in San Jose was very nice. He told us, "Just relax. I'm sure he'll be okay. There's a lot of people on the roads. Everybody's safe. Nobody's going to hurt him. You'll hear from him in a few days." It was a week and it was a sad week. It was a very sad week. But finally a telegram came from a cousin in Oklahoma saying, "Noel has arrived and he will stay with us till school's out." But that was the straw that broke my father and he decided that, okay, this was it. After the harvest was over we would not stay in California any longer.

J.G.: Did he always not like California or was he just concerned about his son?

Shields: I think he felt--I heard him talking to Mother about this--that the children were going in every which direction. There was just no cohesion. The older ones were off in the cannery working. We had left one sister in Tipton to work.

J.G.: So your brother Noel was, at that point, back in Oklahoma, and you started to say that you left your sister in Tipton?

Shields: She was a housekeeper for one of the schoolteachers there in Tipton
so we left her there and some of the others had gone here and there so we were beginning to branch out and Father was very upset about that. He felt like for the older ones that was only natural, but he didn't want the young ones to be running here and there. He was afraid of that. He really was desperately afraid of that, plus he wasn't happy. He was still having boils. His health was still bad so he just decided he would be better off back in Oklahoma so we went.

J.G.: Before we go back to Oklahoma, do you remember or was your father involved in any strikes or attempts to organize the workers during this time?

Shields: No, he stayed completely away from that. Now I don't know about my older brother. I never asked him that. But I know that he knew that all that was going on. Whether he actually got involved in it I don't know. He wasn't with me at the time. I have a suspicion he did because later he was very much in the union in the aircraft industry where he worked and everything.

J.G.: This was the brother that you came to that was working the lemons in Corona?

Shields: Right. He's the one that came to California first. I'm sure he was involved in this in some way.

J.G.: So your father decided that rather than having his family going willy-nilly here and there that he would just pack up.

Shields: Take us back to Oklahoma.

J.G.: So you went back to Oklahoma in the truck like you had come out in?

Shields: In the truck, although this time we had a car with us. The older brother now had a car and so he took us all back but one. The sister that was in Tipton as a housekeeper stayed. Soon as we got back to Oklahoma the older brother and the older sister came back immediately. I mean, they stayed a month or so but then they came right back.

J.G.: Your one sister stayed here in Tipton, but your other ones that were here went back to Oklahoma with you to help you get settled and then came back to California?

Shields: That's right. You're not confused at all.

J.G.: What kind of work did your dad go back to when he got back there?

Shields: Farming. He went back to farming.

J.G.: Did he buy a farm?
Shields: No, he just sharecropped then for the rest of the time that we were there. We stayed until 1940.

J.G.: This would have been in what year?

Shields: 1936.

J.G.: You spent the year of 1935 and 1936 in California? In the fall of 1936 you went back to Oklahoma, back to sharecropping.

Shields: Yes, and stayed for four more years.

J.G.: What prompted you to come back out in 1940?

Shields: In 1940 he lost his last son. I mean he didn't lose him. He was graduating from high school and there's nothing there. All the other brothers and sisters were out here working so he wanted to come too so he let him come by himself. I think he only stayed a little while and then came home but that year Dad had to farm with three little girls and he learned that you cannot farm with three little girls. So that did it, plus ever since we had come back from California his health just deteriorated. He never recovered from the boils and that particular part of his life. He developed other health problems that I think were directly related to that so that when we came to California in 1940 in April, he died in August of that year. He just never recovered from that particular part of his life.

J.G.: When you came back in 1940 where did you come to?

Shields: We came to Hawthorne right here in southern California because the sister that we left in Tipton had since married and she and her husband had lived down here and he was already working in the aircraft factory. Then my older brother was already in the aircraft factory and one younger one, so that's where we came to Hawthorne.

J.G.: You must have been about fifteen?

Shields: I was fourteen then.

J.G.: And your mother had three little girls?

Shields: Three little girls still.

J.G.: How did you manage from the time your dad died?

Shields: Well, it was hard. It was really extremely hard. Everybody was married except the last son. He was living at home with us and was working. He had just gotten a job in the industry so the three of us were still in high school. But the one just older than me was already sixteen so she quit school and went to work and not long after that got married. We were close to the brothers and
sisters and they helped out as much as they could.

J.G.: Did your mother work there?

Shields: She tried to. She tried to work in our little school cafeteria. She tried to work for the hospital cafeteria. She was not afraid to do anything. She had never done anything except be a mother and housewife. It was awfully hard on her. Myself and the younger one had part-time jobs, anything we could find after school. So this is how we got by until I graduated from high school in 1943. Then I went to work in the aircraft factory, not in the factory but for the government.

J.G.: So the aircraft industry [saved you]?

Shields: Saved us, oh yes. That was really what took us from the farm. It was that particular time just before the war. The war was on. We just hadn't gotten into it yet.

J.G.: So was there any thought in your father's mind when he came back to California in 1940 to go back to the San Joaquin Valley?

Shields: He did. He died there. His health was not good enough to go into any of the factories or anything like that and he couldn't just sit and do nothing so he went to Arvin to some old friends. He was living with his sister at the time he died. He was working picking cotton for an old friend that had a little farm up there when he died. He died very suddenly. The doctor said a blood clot which was from his problem with the blood. He was 54 years old when he died.

J.G.: Sounds like probably all that hard work took its toll.

Shields: Yes, he just worked himself to death. Yes, he did.

J.G.: So you worked in the aircraft industry and then met your husband?

Shields: No. I was with the government in the aircraft factory. I supported Mother and the younger sister. Then we moved to Alameda because the older brother had moved up there. Not having a father around, we stayed as close as we could to one of the older brothers. He moved to Alameda so I moved up there too. I was going to school at Berkeley and working and when the youngest sister got married, I decided I would go away to college. She took Mother back down to southern California and I went to school in Pasadena. That's when I met my husband. He's an educator.

J.G.: You went to Pasadena City College down there?

Shields: It was a private college, Pasadena College, a private little college. We both went there. He came from Massachusetts. He came out here to college.
J.G.: We got you married off and living in Pasadena or going to school in Pasadena, but let's back up a second and talk about what your family thought of Roosevelt and his policies.

Shields: Mother and Father were both Democrats. They just didn't understand the Republican party at all. Most of that country was Democrat and still is, primarily Oklahoma is still Democratic. But he was not happy with Roosevelt. He was in the beginning, I think, probably. He thought Roosevelt was a great man and was doing all kinds of wonderful things. But as he came longer and longer in office, my father was just not happy at all with some of the things that Roosevelt was doing. He really realized that it probably was the best thing that could be done under the situation. My father was very up on current affairs. He kept himself very current on what was going on in politics and in the country in general. He wasn't happy with the party right at the very end of his life. I don't know of any specifics that he wasn't happy with. I know that Social Security to him was not a good thing, probably if he had lived his life out, he would have come to see that it was, maybe now he wouldn't.

J.G.: Who knows?

Shields: Right. But as I grew up and became a Republican myself I realized that my father was more Republican than he was Democrat. He just had joined the wrong party. He just didn't really know what a Republican was. Or didn't have a Republican party to join in those places. But his feelings and his individuality and his own resourcefulness and all of that I think was more in keeping with the Republican party than with the Democratic.

J.G.: Did your family ever have any occasion to be involved with the WPA [Works Progress Administration]?

Shields: Yes and that just broke his heart. This was in Oklahoma after we had gone back. Things were still very bad. They were bringing clothes into the school and giving away free clothes and they were bringing apples and that type of thing to help the people. That hurt my father very much. The fact that his family had to take what he called charity. It hurt him that his family had to take that but you just took it. There was nothing at this particular place so a lot of men were going to work for the WPA. He just insisted that he would not. Finally, my mother just kept at him and kept at him until he did. He did go to work for the WPA the last year that we were in Oklahoma. I don't know what he did. I can't remember what they were doing. I think it had something to do with the coal mine up in Oklahoma. They were doing something in the coal mines. But it just broke his heart to think that he had had to come to working for the government. He just didn't think people should have to work for the government.

J.G.: So he managed to be able to live in California that year without
having to have any help from the government?

Shields: We had no help from the government at all unless it was the medical. That's the only thing I can think of we might have had some help from.

J.G.: And those three years after you got back from California into Oklahoma, he attempted to farm the land without any help.

Shields: Without any help, without any assistance. Right. He finally had to give it up. I'm sure that's another contributing thing to why he came back in 1940. He probably would have stayed right there if he had been able to make it.

J.G.: When your family came to California many of them came with the idea of owning land. Do you think your father had that kind of a dream?

Shields: I think he did. I found the place he would liked to have had. I think it was up around in the Tipton-Porterville-Tulare area. He loved that little section of country. I think he would have loved to have had a little farm up in there. It was just out of the question as far as the money situation and everything else was concerned. But he did like that part of the country.

J.G.: So it wasn't so much that he didn't like California that he went back?

Shields: Oh no, I'm sure he liked California. He loved the weather. He loved the weather.

J.G.: Even up in the San Joaquin Valley?

Shields: Well, you know that little place that I was talking about, that little shack out there on the pasture that we lived in? I'll never forget the one winter we were there was a rainstorm. We were all in bed and all of a sudden my father gets up in the middle of the night and goes out in his night clothes and goes outside and takes one of the washtubs and turns it upside down and puts it under the eaves. The next morning I just didn't believe he did that. I said to my mother, "Why did Daddy turn the tub upside down?" She said, "He wanted to hear the rain." He said that it sounded so good that he wanted to hear the rain.

J.G.: You don't get to hear the rain too often.

Shields: That's true. Not up there.

J.G.: So did you live in Pasadena after you were married?

Shields: It's a funny thing about how I can't get away from the San Joaquin
Valley. My husband graduated there. I worked in Pasadena. I didn't graduate. I had my first child about a year after we were married so I didn't graduate. I worked and put him through college. His very first teaching job was in Wasco, California. Would you believe there I am right back in Wasco? A little old house in Wasco. I tried and tried to find that place where we lived and couldn't find it. Whether it had been taken down or I was just looking in the wrong places, I don't know.

J.G.: So you lived in Wasco for a while?

Shields: Just a couple of years.

J.G.: Couple of years and came back down here?

Shields: Yes. Then we were in Whittier. We were in Whittier and he taught there. After we left Whittier actually he became a principal and came to Garden Grove which is right next door here in Anaheim and he's been there ever since. Next year we retire and guess where we're going?

J.G.: The San Joaquin Valley?

Shields: No, no. We're going to Oklahoma.

J.G.: Why?

Shields: Why am I going full circle again? Well, in Oklahoma they took those rivers that used to flood and ruin the crops and cut it all up and made a beautiful lake. It's called Eufaula. It's just gorgeous. One of my older sisters went back four or five years ago and built a beautiful home there right on the edge of the lake.

J.G.: That sounds fantastic.

Shields: It's really nice now. It's not like it was. It's just not like it was at all.

J.G.: Will this be your first trip back to Oklahoma?

Shields: No, I made that about five or six years ago. It was interesting. It really was. That was my first trip back since I'd left. That was a long time. It was forty years in between almost.

J.G.: Sure was.

Shields: It was quite an experience meeting old friends that I had known when I was a girl. I wouldn't have known them, very few of them anyway. Some of the older ones I would have. They didn't change
and they're still there. They are in their eighties and nineties. I didn't believe that. But this southeastern part of Oklahoma, Lake Eufaula, is a beautiful lake, a beautiful fishing lake.

J.G.: Then your husband can go fishing?

Shields: He loves it. He's going to go back there and sit and fish.

J.G.: Is there any period or any experience that you can think of that we didn't talk about during your years' journey through California, anything that you would like to mention that I forgot to ask about?

Shields: You don't want to go through the war years in southern California do you?

J.G.: Well, you can touch on them briefly if you wish.

Shields: The reason I thought about that was because where we lived in Hawthorne there was an empty lot across the street from us. This was before I was out of high school. The big anti-aircraft battery moved in there. I don't know how many soldiers there were but they took up the whole empty block. The streets were all dark and everything and one night this anti-aircraft battery opened up just fierce. They were shooting like crazy out there. We all went running out to see what they were shooting at. It was at the time there were supposed to have been a Japanese plane come over southern California. It later turned out to be a weather balloon. They were never sure. Remember?

J.G.: No, I wouldn't.

Shields: I was out there watching this anti-aircraft battery shooting at this thing in the sky and the next morning we went out and picked up the shrapnel pellets. Crazy. It was quite an exciting time growing up in southern California.

J.G.: During the war years. I imagine that would have been quite an interesting time.

Shields: Yes, it was.

J.G.: It sounds like your memory of that year traveling through the San Joaquin Valley is a pleasant one.

Shields: It is. The people that we met in schools and by and large the teachers and a lot of the kids and the people that we met and wonderful characters that we lived close by. At the place we lived in Wasco after we came onto his land, he then let two or three others come on because he had a big place and he realized that we were the first and we were going to be all right and we had eight kids. He wasn't going to be ruined. His property wasn't going to be ruined.
So we met a few people there that came on the same way we did and it was wonderful. It was just a real good situation. Real friendly. Everyone was in the same situation. They had that in common. You weren't sure that you were going to eat the next day. You hoped you could find a job and that's mainly what we lived on that year was hope.

J.G.: That's probably not so difficult for a ten year old child.

Shields: No, but it was horrible for Mother and Dad. I know that. I saw what a toll it took on them. I know that that had to be the hardest year of their lives. And the older ones too. You know, living back and forth with relatives here and in little other places—that was awfully hard on them.

J.G.: I think that it would be being responsible for feeding eight kids and not knowing where your next meal is coming from has got to be a difficult thing.

Shields: That's got to be hard on you.

END OF INTERVIEW
James Ernest Rankin  
**b. 1887, Hempstead, Waller Co., Texas**  
[His parents from Arkansas & Georgia]  

Nancy Prudence Lamb  
**b. 1886, Knoxville, Arkansas**

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Hattye Lee Rankin  
**b. 1925, Hitchita, Oklahoma**  
**Church: Protestant**  
**Education: 14 years**

Frederick LeRoy Shields  
**b. 1927, New London, Connecticut**

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Louise Ellen Shields Whipp  
**b. 1950, Clerical worker**

Russell Dean Shields  
**b. 1956, Student**

Brian Hugh Shields  
**b. 1957, Student**
INDEX

Arizona
  Bixley, 7

Art/Music, 4

California
  Treatment in, 14, 16
  Corona, 1, 8
  San Jose, 1, 17
  Arvin, 6, 9, 10, 20
  San Joaquin Valley, 9, 20, 22-24
  Lamont, 10
  Wasco, 10, 14, 23, 24
  Tipton, 14, 15, 22
  Hawthorne, 19, 24
  Alameda, 20
  Pasadena, 20
  Garden Grove, 23
  Whittier, 23

Crime/Law Enforcement, 8, 17

Discrimination
  In schools, 9, 16

Education
  In Oklahoma, 3, 4
  In California, 4, 8, 9, 14-17, 20, 23
  College, 20-23
  Discrimination, 9, 16

Family Life
  Entertainment, 4, 13
  Chores, 4, 14
  Cars, 4
  Cooking/Food, 11-13
  Marriage, 20

Farming
  Land ownership, 1, 22
  Sharecropping, 1, 19
  Crops, 4
  Drought, 1, 2
  Floods, 1
  Dust storms, 6
  Government policies, 7, 8

Health
  Diseases, 11, 12, 19
  Health care, 11, 12
  Causes of death, 19, 20

Housing
  Homestead in Oklahoma, 3
  Homes in California, 9, 11, 14, 15
  Tents, 10, 11
  Ditch camps, 10
  Grower-provided, 10
  Government-provided, 10

Impact of Experience, 19, 25

Migration to California
  Attraction of California, 2
  Reasons for move, 1, 2, 19, 22
  Transportation, 1, 2, 4, 5
  Shelter, 5
  Belongings, 5
  Funds available, 5
  Cooking, 5
  Route, 7
  Border inspections, 5, 8

The New Deal
  Roosevelt, 21
  WPA, 21
  Politics, 21

Oklahoma
  Checotah, 1
  Henryetta, 1
  Hitchita, 3
  Eufaula, 23
  Return to, 1, 2, 17, 18, 23

Relief
  Type received, 21, 22
  Attitudes toward, 21

Religion
  Churches, 4
  Brush arbor, 11

Texas
  Big Spring, 5, 6

(continued)
Work
  Migrant labor, 8, 9, 12-15
  Oil fields, 6
  Odd jobs, 20
  Employers, 16
  Unions, 18
  Strikes, 18
  Wages, 13, 15
  During WW II, 20