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Interview with Betty Newman

Betty Newman

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NEHC ORAL HISTORY - MISSISSIPPI

Betty Newman Interview

You know that this oral history project is leading up to the 50th anniversary for the National Homemakers Council. Why don't we start off by talking about the Homemaker's Club itself. How did you happen to join the Homemaker's Club?

After I married I moved to Valley Park which is a small farming community and really my only social outlet for people who lived in the community other than church is the club. I was invited by some of my friends who had children my child's age, so I joined.

How long ago was that?

About 1947, so I've been in Homemaker's Club about 33 years.

Have you continued your membership all these years for that same reason?

No, I've gotten a lot out of Homemaker's Club over these years. It is a social outlet, especially in rural areas. Even in our county, it's the only countywide organization for women. The children go to different schools in our county, some go in Warren County, some go in Sharkey County, some go in Washington County, so you don't know all the people. People go to different churches, but there are Homemaker's Clubs in each community and it's an opportunity to know people in every community in the county, through Homemaker's Clubs.

Well your county is a little bit different from most counties, too, when you said your children go to schools in two or three different counties.

We don't have a school in our county. It's a rural county, sparsely populated, not very many people, and our children go out of the county to public schools in three different counties.

And I believe not even a county seat.

No, we've always had a county seat but not always incorporated.

So that limited the activities. You wouldn't be like a big city activities. There were not very many things that touched every community in your county.

At the time I joined our Homemaker's Club was the only Club in the county. We belonged to a council in another county. Then maybe ten years later we got a home economist in our county and organized clubs in other communities.

Do you meet in the homes?

Yes, always have.

What type programs do you have? How have they changed through the years? Do you still have the same programs you did when you first joined?

We've always had educational type programs. Of course, the emphasis has been different over the years as you would expect in 35 years. In the very beginning there was emphasis on canning, clothing, so we had cotton style shows always at that time when I first got in Homemaker's Clubs all your dresses had been made out of cotton. The construction was a big item in judging and after a few years construction did not become as important. The way the garment looked on you after it was made, as long as it held together and looked good it didn't make any difference how it was put together. Then we went into cotton blends after perma prest came in, then we would have maybe wool, then we got to where it didn't really make any difference what kind of fabric you had. The polyesters came in. Then for a while we got away from sewing as much as bigger emphasis as we did canning and freezing, we started freezing vegetables. Then you didn't have as much emphasis on your garden leader and on your exhibits because you didn't do as much canning so you didn't have as

big a canning exhibit. Crafts have always been a big item, still is. People still like to do things with their hands. At one time the crafts had changed. We used to make cypress knee lamps, hats. There are a lot of things that we used to do that just don't apply today. People have more money so they can buy things.

Do you think the Homemaker Club member herself has changed through the years?

Yes I sure do. The looks for one thing. The homemaker club woman, where we used to have homemade dresses, they're handmade now. The looks of the woman, her home, has improved. I think a lot of that has to do with Homemaker's Clubs. I can look through my home and see so many things that I have and that I have done because of things that I have learned in Homemaker's Club.

With communications like your TV, newspapers and magazines, do you think these changes would have come about without a Homemaker Club? The changes that have been made in the looks of your Homemaker Club member. If she had not been a Homemaker member, do you think she would have improved herself?

Some women would have. But there is a group of women who belong to Homemaker Clubs or the Home Demonstration Club like it was at that time, that the improvement they have made over the years has a whole lot to do with the fact that they belonged to a Home Demonstration Club.

The association with other people has maybe encouraged or spurred them on.

When I first got into Homemaker Club some of the things that they were doing and some of the people that belonged to Homemaker Clubs because of the things they could learn, the improvements that they can make in their homes that didn't cost them a lot, the things that were available to them through the Extension service at that time, weren't available any other way or they couldn't

afford them any other way. They couldn't help but improve themselves.

As rural people, they had to use their own ingenuity in some way, what they could do themselves.

That's right, and the lesson materials that they got through the Extension Service on how to improve their home, how to improve their environment, how to improve their community, and since a lot of them are farmers, how to improve even their livelihood through the county agent.

Any particular activities that have impressed you through the years or any incidents or anything that you can think of?

I can't think of any particular incident. One thing that has always impressed me as far as the relationship between the Homemaker Club and Extension Service is anything that we as Homemaker Club women or Home Demonstration Club women were interested in, programs that we thought we might like to have that might help improve our way of life or would be of interest to us, or even in crafts or whatever, an effort has always been made to make this information available to us. I think there has always been a good relationship between the home economist and Homemaker Club women. We've always been able to have any type of program that we thought we would like to have as well as programs that would be educational and be of benefit to other people, and then crafts or other type things that we might do with our hands.

Think about this as a homemaker, period. Not a Homemaker Club member, particularly. What would a typical day in your life have been as a newly wed, as a young homemaker? Has it changed?

Sure it has. It's changed a lot. When I first married my husband was in the service, I moved into a small community on a farm. I was pregnant before he got out of the service. We had one automobile for the whole family. I stayed out in the field a good bit of the time. Going to Homemaker

Club was an outing for me. After he got out of the service we still had one car. He used it to go to work. Things were just really different then from how they are now. We didn't have as much. It was after the end of the war. There wasn't rationing any more but there were shortages of a lot of things that you couldn't have even if you could afford it. A lot of us couldn't afford it. Over the years our income has increased and we're able to do things that we used to not be able to do. But I still see things that I won't do because I think it's a waste of money or because of things I have learned to do in Homemaker Clubs that I have a different set of values. If I can make a pair of drapes for my living room, it's no way that I would go spend \$700 even though I could afford to do it. To me it's a waste of money when I can make them myself and make them to look almost as well as those that I can buy. And I won't do it because I feel that it's one thing I can do and I'd be wasting money if I did.

Do you think a young homemaker today would feel that way? Would she feel that was a waste of money?

No she wouldn't feel this way. She wasn't raised the way I was raised and she didn't come up during the time that I came up. Young people today are going to start out with what their parents have. When they get married they think that they ought to have a home that is complete as their parents have at the present time. So many of them don't realize that they would be better off in the long run if they would start small.

They have a different set of values then probably because they didn't have to grow up doing without?

That's right. A lot of us didn't grow up having to do without. I was raised, we didn't have a lot of money but we weren't just dirt poor, but I

never realized that we were as poor as we were. When I was growing up my parents always had everything we thought we needed. We didn't realize that we weren't wealthy, we weren't disadvantaged, but we weren't wealthy. There wasn't a distinction at the time I was growing up between poverty level and wealth and middle income like it is now. But I think I have a different value about things by growing up in that period than I would have if I were growing up today.

Where they haven't had to weigh the value of a purchase, how important it was, they've had the money maybe nowadays to buy it without ever thinking. Anything they want, if they have the money to buy it, they don't think about tomorrow.

What are some of your biggest satisfactions as being a homemaker or Homemaker member?

I'm not the best housekeeper in the world as far as keeping house, I'll admit that. But a homemaker gets satisfaction out of cooking, I enjoy trying to improve the looks of my home. I like to do things with my hands and I like to improve the way my home looks and as far as being a member of the Homemaker Club the relationship with other people in the local Homemaker Club over the years and the things that we have done in our community and in our county and then as a member of the state organization, some of the things that our projects have resulted in I think have improved the looks of every community in the state as far as beautification projects and things like that and other kinds of projects that we have had.

Right now we find that a lot of women say that they are just a homemaker, and maybe society in general kind of looks down on somebody who is not working outside the home. How do you feel about that?

When we tell someone we're just a homemaker we're putting ourselves down. There isn't anything wrong with a person who wants to stay home and provide a home for their husband and their family and give support to the things their family wants to do.

In other words you think the homemakers maybe sort of brought it on themselves, that they put themselves down and help society to look down on them.

Well some of them do. Some people feel inadequate that they aren't able to do anything other than key type. Some people say they're just a housewife and not a homemaker, there's a lot of difference.

Don't you think homemaking calls on more skills than any other job you could hold?

It certainly does, especially if you have a family. I don't have any children so what I would be doing would be a lot different than people who have children. But especially in a rural area where your children go to school 20 miles from where you live you have to get up and get your children on a school bus, if they have any kind of school activity you chauffeur back and forth to school. Your life is really fuller and you have a whole lot more to do than if you did have a public job.

Do you feel like you've been short-changed, so to speak, by not holding a public job some place? Or holding a job outside the home?

No. I sure don't. I wouldn't have one if I could get it unless I absolutely had to have it. I have too many outside activities I like to do to get involved in a job. There was probably a time in my life when I wished I lived somewhere else or an outside job was available so I could have some things that I didn't think I could afford. But in retrospect I see that I didn't really particularly want them.

What about the social changes that we see now, like changes in attitudes that so many women do want to work and feel like they need to work? Do you think this change has been good?

I think it would be better if women did not have to work. I think it would be better for their family, especially if they have small children. I really think that sometimes their relationship with their husband would be better if they did not have to work. It makes it hard when a woman has to work, and so many do because of inflation, the expense of everything. Two people in the family have to work in order to make a good living and I think it is hard on those who would prefer to stay home. Of course I don't see anything wrong with them doing it. A lot of people who don't have to work really want to work and would prefer to work. But I think sometimes the fact that a woman puts more emphasis on work than she does her family, and this could cause a problem. Some say it's easier to hold a fulltime job than it is to be a homemaker, too. I'm sure it is. When you're holding a fulltime job and you have to be at work every day, then you have to neglect some things at home and have to depend on other people to do things for your family or your children that you would ordinarily be doing yourself.

With better transportation and better roads and so forth, we don't always think about having a small town or community anymore. Big city life is available to most everybody now it seems like. Do you think this is good or bad? We don't have to stay out in the rural anymore if we don't want to.

You can go to town every day and your children can be involved in things that at one time it would have been hard for them to be involved in, but I think we're going to get back to the other because gas is so expensive. But there was a time when people in a rural area didn't think about taking their children into town two or three days a week to dancing, piano and that type thing. That's just

one of the things that they don't think anything about it anymore. People run into town two or three times a day. I live 25 miles from town and it's a 50 mile round trip for me to run into town. But because of the part of the state I live in and the fact that it is rural and farming and it's big farms and not a lot of little communities all around, it's farther to go somewhere than it is in a lot of areas in the state. We've always been used to having to go 25 miles to the doctor, to the grocery store, the beauty shop, the bank. In the hills of Mississippi the towns are a whole lot closer than it is in the Delta. Your attitude is a little different when you've always been used to going 25 miles to town one way.

As a child would you say that you had any experience with homemaking, keeping house before you married?

No. I never had.

Do you think that was good or bad?

I thought at the time that it was good but I found out later that it wasn't. I knew how to cook. I think some people have an aptitude for things and I learned how to cook by watching other people cook and figuring how things ought to be put together, how you ought to do something without having done it all my life. I took home economics in school and my mother sewed a lot and I learned how to sew and do handwork and things like that before I was married. I didn't do a whole lot of it, but we always lived in small towns. My daddy was a lumber inspector and we lived in small sawmill towns in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas, and we always had help when I was growing up. My mother had a maid that did the washing and ironing. Then after I got up grown I worked and lived at home and my mother would do my laundry. It was just one of those things that she always did. I didn't expect her to do it, I would do it, but she just always did it. So when I married I had never done laundry, I had never done a lot of

cooking. I kept my own room, but we didn't have to do a lot of housework or anything like that.

Getting back to Homemaker Club, have the Homemaker Club been disappointing to you in any way? Did it fail to meet your expectations?

No. It never has.

If someone asked you how they could be improved....

It would be hard for me to say because I think the purpose of what Home Demonstration Club when it was organized the purpose was fulfilled and the only shortcomings that you would have would be if the local Homemaker Club woman did not want the type of programs. We've been able to have any type programs we wanted, so unless we ourselves did not determine that we wanted to do something it wouldn't be a disappointment. As long as you can do anything you want to do you're not disappointed.

Homemaker Clubs have been organized for over 50 years. Have they outlived their effectiveness? Should they be done away with?

I see a need for Homemaker Clubs. The younger homemaker is not interested in the same things that a person like me is, or very seldom is. When I first joined Homemaker Club I remember when I first used to go these little old ladies would sit around and talk about their neighbors and what they had been doing and who they saw and who they saw at church last Sunday that hadn't been there in a good while and visiting and all like that and I thought why in the world didn't we just get on with the business and get through. Then I can go home and they can sit around and talk. Now I like to sit around and talk to people. I'm sure young people still feel the same way. But with the way things are today young people with young families, especially those that are working, do not have the time. The young homemakers of today are better educated, a majority of them have

had an opportunity to go to college. They have a different outlook on life. Their values are different. The things that were of interest to me when I joined Homemaker Club are not of interest to them and I think we're going to have to change some of our programming and meet the needs of the homemaker for them to be interested. If we don't change the types of programs that we have now and put emphasis on different things, the Homemaker Club is not going to be in existence.

Do you have any suggestions as to what some of the changes might need to be?

The older homemakers and a lot of younger ones are still interested in doing things with their hands. They like crafts. We're still going to have to keep in our Clubs food preservation, we still need clothing because it costs so much to buy clothes today. It's important for a young woman to sew. Clothing construction is still important. But there are other things. Financial planning and energy conservation and things like that are of interest to them. Nutrition and that type of thing.

Some of the needs will always be there. The basic needs will always be there. Because of inflation and the high cost of groceries, people are going back to gardening, so food preservation is important and clothing construction and that type of thing. The basic needs never change really. There are so many demands today on young families and on their income that financing with high interest rates and everything they need to know a lot more about finances, estate planning and that type thing.

The basic needs will be the same but the ways we meet them would be different.

How are we going to meet these needs? Have you got any bright ideas for any new ways to meet them?

I really don't. But we're going to have to have input from younger women and men too. Of course we're having clubs for men and women now. We're trying to meet the needs of everyone, all ethnic groups and men as well as women. There are a lot of things that we can do that are of interest to all of them, but we're going to have to have input from them on what their priorities are; what are the things that would help them and make them want to join Homemakers Clubs.

More working women are going to make a different demand on the clubs too.

You're going to have to have alternate types of clubs. A club doesn't have to meet once a month on a certain afternoon at a certain time. You can have evening meets, you can have brown bag clubs for working people, or have a club in a mall for clerks who work in a mall. There are a couple of clubs for young or older people in their communities or subdivision or something like that where they like to get together. They can have outdoor cookery and an educational program. Some clubs don't want to have constructed clubs even. As long as you're getting educational information to a person that is doing them some good you don't have to have a structured club in all types of situations.

With the working women we may have more of this straight business meetings without the little gossip sessions as you said they did in the early club meetings that you attended.

That's right but sometimes they don't even care about having the business part. Just have a learning session or a workshop or training meeting. We might even in some areas get to where we don't even have clubs in the homes, just go to the Extension office and have printing type meetings and not have your local

Homemakers Club in the home or your little social group. But I think the social part of it has a lot to do with it also. You get in a relaxed atmosphere and get to know each other and do things you ordinarily might not do if you don't belong to the same church and your children don't go to the same school. It gives you an opportunity to meet different people.