

Transcript of Oral History Interview of Thelma Hess

Interviewed by Kathy Bradford on June 15, 2005

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Kathy Bradford: Today is June 15, 2005, and I'm speaking with Thelma Hess at her home in Tremonton. Thelma, I'd like you to tell me first where and when you were born and a little bit about your family and your growing-up years.

Thelma Hess: I was born in Grand Junction, Colorado, April 11, 1912. My grandparents grew up in Iowa, but Mother's health failed, so that's why they went to Grand Junction and were there when I was born. My dad worked on the railroad, and finally we ended up in Englewood, Colorado. We lost my brother at this time, and dad was part-time on the railroad. At the telephone switchboard in Englewood – my father saw Mr. Abbot, the manager who said, "I have to put in another position, and I'll have to hire another operator."

My dad said, "Oh, do you think my daughter could be one of them?"

KB: How old were you?

TH: I was 14 in March but would be 15 in April, and Dad told him that. He said, "Well, tell her to come and try."

For 9 years and 8 months, I worked at this Englewood Telephone Exchange for Mountain States Telephone & Telegraph Company.

KB: Was that when you said, "Number please"?

TH: Yes, ma'am, and took all the calls, called the firemen and doctors – you know, just wonderful work. I liked it.

In 1935, Walter S. Gifford, President of the Mountain States Telephone Company, placed the first call overseas, and I was part of that because he was in Denver. Here it starts out that the conversation was going to North America, Asia, Europe and spanned the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. When he finished talking about that, Pres. Gifford said, "I wonder what time it is in Java."

"I don't remember," Mr. Miller replied. "I have..."

"It is 10 o'clock in Java now," came the voice of a stranger.

On the other side of the world, the engineers in the control room in Java had heard this come across.

He said, "Are there any others on this line that I can talk to?"

“This is London.”

Now this is all history, but it’s so interesting. Look what you do now. You pick up, punch punch punch. And that was the first one. Mr. Gifford even came out to our exchange because we were so thrilled about it. I wonder what he would think nowadays.

KB: It would be amazing to him.

TH: Wouldn’t it! That was the start of the first continental lines, and I was part of it!

Anyway, my friend who was my future husband’s sister knew me, and she thought so much of me and of my parents. So when her brother graduated in Brigham, she called and said, “John, you get out here. I’ve got a girl picked out for you.”

That’s how we started. He loved to dance, and he was a good dancer. Wow! We went on streetcars in those days to Eliches or Lakeside or the Denver Dance Hall. For two years we did this. He stayed with his sister this whole time. She had two daughters, and finally they built a new home. We were coming home on the streetcar from dancing at Eliches. By the way, they had Lawrence Welk and all those name bands that would travel and we danced to them. Coming home from this dance, he said, “You know, Thelma, Ruby and her family aren’t going to have a room for me in this new home. How about us getting married?”

He never said whether he loved me, and that’s how he proposed -- on the streetcar. I thought that was okay. At 1 o’clock in the morning I woke my mother up and told her, and she said that would be okay. I was 18 then, and he was 23. In those days, you used to just go to dances all the time. These kids today need that so bad.

Anyway the 24th of August is President Hess’s birthday.

KB: Who is President Hess?

TH: He was from my husband’s family, so he said. “Let’s wait until the 24th and get married on that day.”

I didn’t belong to the LDS Church, but he did because he was born just up here in Plymouth. He belonged to the Church, and so did his sister. We got an apartment on First Avenue in Denver, and the Mission Home was about three blocks from where we had this apartment. He went over and asked President Elias S. Woodruff if he would marry us, and he said yes.

I got on the streetcar in Englewood. He met me when I got down there, and we walked over to the Mission Home and were married. I wore a dress I’d been dancing in. That was the beginning, and some of my family was there to watch. Mother cooked us chicken dinner. I got a box to put my clothes in. In those days, you didn’t have anything.

We got on the streetcar and went back down to the apartment, and we both went to work the next day.

KB: How long was it before you came here?

TH: In 1936, his dad died up here in Plymouth. He had 1100 acres of farmland, and his mother called and said, "Jack, you come out here and run this 1100 acres."

I didn't like farming, but Mother said, "Well Thelma, you're married to him, and you have to go where he goes."

So for 17 years I lived on this ranch five miles the other side of Plymouth. We had no phone. We did have electricity. His dad had put that in. There was no indoor water. We had to carry it in. We worked on the farm for more than 17 years.

Bushnell Military Hospital came into Brigham in 1942, and they knew I was a telephone operator because Brigham City's office was also Mountain States. They came up there 40 miles to ask me if I would come down and help take the calls when those soldiers came in on the trains to Bushnell. I did.

KB: Did you commute from Plymouth every day?

TH: No, we went down and paid \$22 to rent a room down in the basement of a woman's home in Brigham City, and my husband would come down and spend the weekend when he could.

I later worked at Thiokol for 17 years as a telephone operator. I have always said to my kids and have it written in my memoirs that of all the 35 years I spent being a telephone operator, those four months I was down taking calls from these boys was the most wonderful telephone time I ever spent!

Every one of those boys, when they landed at Bushnell, wanted to call home naturally. You'd pick them up and they'd say, "I'm so-and-so calling collect. I want to call my mom." They'd give me the number.

I'd get the number on the line, and I'd say, "This is so-and-so calling collect from..."

You didn't need to say one more thing because they both started crying. I would have to close my key because I couldn't stand it. Can you imagine? You watch them come home now greeting the families and everything. Oh, I could not believe it!

I'll tell you a little secret. I was an old, old operator, you know, and in those days you had to get your long lines out of Salt Lake. Well gee, they were tied up too. I went up to Pocatello and had an operator get me a line out one after the other. The little girl sitting next to me said, "How did you get that call through so quick, Thelma?"

I said, "Just lucky, I guess." I never told her how.

KB: Did you ever meet any of them?

TH: Not one, so here on the 9th of June here comes this picture in the newspaper of these boys on this train that came into Bushnell. I looked at that and I said, "I placed your call. I placed your call."

That was the first time I have ever seen a picture of any of them. That's 60 years ago. Some of those windows at that hospital had bars because some of those boys' minds were messed up. Instead of having to take the patients from one building to another, they built tunnels. A lot of people don't realize that, but it was a wonderful place for those boys.

KB: Do you think the people of Brigham were nice to them?

TH: Oh yes! Here's something else maybe I shouldn't tell you. I placed a call for this one boy, and they were so thrilled. Then he flashed me and I went in. He said, "Operator, my mother wants to come out here from Missouri. Is there a place for her to stay?"

All the hotels and motels were filled, but I said, "Look, at this place where I'm staying in the basement, I know the landlady has an extra bedroom. You call this number, and see if she'll let your mother come to her house."

I shouldn't tell that because I'm not supposed to talk to them. But Drusilla Iverson let his mother come and stay in that room. That's where we stayed, in the basement of her home. I stayed there four months.

KB: Why were you only there four months?

TH: Because I said, "I have to go back up and help work on the farm."

KB: Oh, because it was farming season.

TH: Sure, I drove tractor, pitched hay, and did everything.

KB: While you were at Bushnell, did you ever get a chance to see any of the entertainers who came in?

TH: No, we were so busy on the switchboard, we didn't have time to do that.

KB: How many were there on the switchboard?

TH: I think there were four at that time. Even out at Thiokol, where I worked for 17 years, you talked to all those people and placed calls, but you never saw any of them. You were just in this one room. As soon as the boys would come in, they wanted to call

home. It was wonderful, and when I saw this, I called my boys and said, “Now you take this picture and put it with the story I wrote about it.”

Now those boys would be 80 years old. Look this one has lost his leg. We were so busy placing those calls.

KB: Did you have a family?

TH: Not until after that. We were married 15 years before I had my first boy, and then in 5 more years I had my other boy, and that’s all I had. In 1951 Ed was born. My husband Jack has been gone for 29 years – I’ve been a widow here.

Jack worked as a flagman on the Utah Highways for several years, and people called him the “Happy Flagman”. He was always happy, and he always tipped his hat to the ladies. In 1971 the Tribune had a write-up about him and the wonderful job he did, and they had a picture of him flagging.

He never missed a day of work on the roads because he was in good health, but he came home one night with an aneurysm and bled to death. He died June 6, 1978. If he had lived until August of that year, we would have been married 48 years.

KB: Where do your boys live?

TH: John is in Persia, Iowa. He works for the Union Pacific Railroad in Omaha, and in a year and a half he will be retiring from there. His son is going to be a doctor. He just finished his internship and is going to Guatemala.

Ed lives in North Ogden, and he works for Kimberly Clark, makes those diapers. He gets a lot of SOS calls. He comes up and helps me.

KB: Did you and your husband build this house?

TH: We remodeled. We sold that up there because they put the road through, and we couldn’t handle it. His parents went up there (I don’t know how old she was), but 107 years ago they homesteaded 80 acres north of Plymouth. I still have it

KB: You still own that?

TH: Yes, because it didn’t go with that other part. I have someone that takes care of it for me. She had two babies in that log cabin, which was five miles from Plymouth. Grandma Steed came over and delivered them at the home. She came back the next morning and took care of them.

KB: Was that your husband’s grandma?

TH: No, she was just a lady there that delivered babies. She delivered around 500 babies up there. She wasn't a relative. They just called her Grandma. When we came out, I met her, and she told Jack, "You know, I delivered all 9 of your mother's babies."

Now this is history. She had some education, but not like the nurses have or doctors now. She never lost any either.

Well, in this log cabin that he built when they went over there, they had to live for five years. We've taken the logs that were left over here and one of my Hess cousins kind of put them together, so we can go there and have reunions.

KB: How many grandchildren do you have?

TH: Five, and four great.

KB: Tell me about Thiokol.

TH: Well, they were beginning in 1960 when they came out here. They needed operators, so I went out and applied. I should tell you how much I made in Denver first. You worked 48 hours; you didn't work 40; and you got \$9 for the 48 hours. I got that for a year, and then I got a dollar raise. Now you don't even work 40 hours for the week. When I quit after 9 years and 8 months (if I worked Sundays, I got a little extra), I made \$17.47. We were hard up, and I gave Mother \$5, and that fed the whole family for the week.

KB: I'm sure that was good money in those days.

TH: I paid a dollar to get my hair marcelled and just things like that. No one hardly ever had cars. You went on those streetcars wherever you wanted to go. That was the beginning back there.

KB: Did you make more money at Bushnell than you did in Colorado?

TH: Oh yes, because they had the Union come in finally, and then they had upped the wages. I was making more than the chief operator down there because they bridged the years that I had put in. Starting out at Thiokol in 1960, I worked there for \$1.60 an hour. I worked there for 17 years. When I was 65, they made me quit. I made \$4.27 an hour after 17 years. I'm just telling you this to compare things now. Kids now say, "Unless you give me 7 or 8 bucks an hour, I won't work."

You know, my boys did a really exciting thing for me this year. Jack's dad purchased a new Model T Ford truck in Brigham City in 1926, and they used it on the farm for many, many years. My two boys John and Ed took it and restored it, and all three of us rode in it in this year's County Fair parade! It was so much fun, and the people just loved it! Now I have it here at my place. The boys bought a trailer to keep it in. It was built especially for the truck, and we can back the truck right onto it.

After the parade, Ed took it to North Ogden to show some of his friends from Kimberly Clark and take them for a ride. One of them called his dad and said, "I just rode in a 1926 Model T truck."

His dad had flown B17s in World War II, and he said, "I want to ride in it, too." Ed got him in there and gave him a ride, too. It's been a fun and exciting time.

I was talking the other day to my boy. I said, "You know, Ed, I am fortunate. I can still see; I can still hear; I can still quilt; and I'm 93 years old."

He said, "Mom, the reason is that John and I have never pampered you."

KB: That's funny. You have given me a lot of interesting information. Thank you for talking to me.