

Interview with Marcella Barnett, December 6, 1983.

Annette Parks: What was your first experience with the Ukiah Senior Center?

Marcella Barnett: That's when they were starting the old center on State Street. See, Golda and the Progressives had already gotten up to that point, to where they had started the center.

A.P.: So you came in after it had been going a few months?

M.B.: Well, they hadn't served the first meal yet. They had done all the planning, the cleaning the building and getting it ready. Lynetta had an office in the front, and she was the one that was taking care of the funding. Through North Coast, see--she got the grant. Then she had to make up the orders for the government surplus food that we were going to be using in the kitchen, to cook with. The money that they took in, the 80¢ a meal, would offset a few things. And North Coast was paying the rent on the building.

A.P.: This was the building on Clara and State?

M.B.: Uhuh.

A.P.: What made you decide to come? What prompted you to first get involved with the Senior Center?

M.B.: Because I love old people. I always have. We talked about that, Lynetta and I, many times. About how I'd always grown up loving older people, you know. So many of the seniors kind of resent, seems like, younger people getting involved in their work, and they asked me many times--"Why do you want to be in Senior work and associate with old people?" And I said, "Because I love the elderly people." See, I've been working out of the Senior Center with the new program there, the MSSP program, and I love to be with those people and work with them.

A.P.: I have worked a lot with older people too. I think some of it comes from maybe our backgrounds. I don't know about you, but I was raised in a very rural, isolated community, and grew up listening to their stories of old people and having a great deal of respect for them.

M.B.: Yes. And any older person, elderly lady, that was in our town we were always anxious to go help her and wanted to do things for her. We just grew up that way, our family. And my daughter's that way, you know. Because when she was young we were always around older people, and she loved to go to the care homes and visit them, you know. And it's going on to my grandchildren now. They'll say, "Grandma, let's go see the little grannies", they call them.

A.P.: I'm trying to get ahold of what your early memories would have been of that center on Ukiah and State. What was it like? How would you describe it?

M.B.: Well, it was just a good thing. It was the first thing to happen in this community to aid and help the senior people. To have a place

to come, and meet, and those that were lonely, you know? And there was the nutrition part of the thing for those people that may not be eating very well--and would not eat, because they were alone.

A.P.: That was an important factor?

M.B.: That was very important. Then we gave them activities like the sewing--things like that, to keep them busy also--they had a day that they sewed.

A.P.: Can you remember anyone, that especially stayed in your memory, that you worked with? A person that you worked with in particular?

M.B.: Among the people that came to the center?

A.P.: Uh-huh. Are there any particular ones that stick in your memory?

M.B.: Mmm--not in particular. Because I never really singled out anyone. There was a lot of lovely people.

A.P.: Can you describe any of them?

M.B.: Mrs. Figone--she was 90--some years old. She was the one who helped us pick our name. For the Progressive Senior Citizens. That was Mabel mother.

A.P.: Do you know how to spell her name?

M.B.: Etta--E-T-T-A. Figone.

A.P.: She was 90 years old. And what did you say she did?

M.B.: She came to the center to eat, and she was a very witty little woman.

A.P.: She was the one who gave it its name?

M.B.: Yes, the Progressives, uh-huh. Her daughter was Mabel Savage. She was the secretary, for awhile, of meetings at the Senior Center, when the board was there. The first board.

A.P.: It seems an irony to me, what you said a minute ago. About the funds--that they can't do the legislative work, because they're federally funded. Wasn't one of the reasons the Center was founded, to do this? To get rights for seniors.

M.B.: Yes. To make a stronger group, to legislate, for senior citizens. But some people have such a negative attitude, like the other day this lady sitting next to me said, "Well, there's no use writing letters, don't do it," and I said, "Letters count--names count." Because, see, I was working at the Senior Center on State St. when they first wanted a cost-of-living raise on Social Security. We made up a petition, and I went to the center, and I stayed there and signed up all the people. We had 200--and--some names on that petition. People said, "Oh, well, we

won't get it," or some of them would say, "Well, they're talking about giving us 10%." And I said, "Yes, but by the time you get your 10%, the escalation in living is going to be so much higher that you should ask for more--ask for 25%. And when it came through, that's what we got. But without pressure, they wouldn't have done that." You know there's enough senior citizens in the country to get anything they want, if they would stick together. It takes the younger people to be able to get out there. Like when we made the survey for the total Mendocino County, for funding, for the center, we had to go way out, in Boonville area, to prove to them the senior populace, to be able to get the funding to start the center, see? And so then once this pilot project was going, then other communities like Fort Bragg, Lake County, and Covelo, Laytonville..there's twelve active centers."

A.P.: I know several people in Point Arena."

M.B.: Uh-huh--Point Arena. So there's a lot of senior branched off now.

A.P.: And they came from your group? Your group started it?

M.B.: Let's see--Willits started one after we did. And our center cooked for Willits, for quite some time, because there was no cooking facilities there. So we transported the food over the mountain to them.

A.P.: Now how did you do that?

M.B.: They had these big hot-pack things, and they put the hot food in there, and then sometimes they would have to put it in a micro-wave or another oven up there, to kind of reheat it maybe, you know, if it was too cool. They kept pretty well.

A.P.: Were you involved with that?

M.B.: No. Uh-hh. I wasn't involved with that.

A.P.: You mentioned you served the first meal?

M.B.: That was at the Center, where we were serving.

A.P.: Do you remember when that was? That was on Clara and State, right?

M.B.: 1972, I think it was, wasn't it?

A.P.: That's something we can always look up in records.

M.B.: I'm sure it was '72. The NCO came over with their cameras, and they took pictures of all the people when they were seated. They perhaps have all this on record somewhere. The pictures they took, when we served our first meal.

A.P.: 1972--then it was two years, before it started?

M.B.: It took them quite a long while to get that building done. And

then Progressives was getting, like Golda said, Progressives were working toward getting this funding, with Lynetta, because Lynetta worked for North Coast opportunities to begin with, in that same building. And so then NCO was going to move out of that building, so Lynetta thought it would be a good place for the first Senior Center. There was one elderly gentleman lived directly across the street, Henry Dohring. And he--the elderly man--came over and helped Lynetta go under the building, and--the floor was real saggy in places, you know--so he went under there and reinforced it and fixed it. He was a nice little man.

A.P.: How do you spell Dohring?

M.B.: D-O-H-R-I-N-G. He was a nice man.

A.P.: So there weren't any meals that first couple of years?

M.B.: It was activities and, see, they were in the Veteran's Building, and they were in--what--the building down on the other street Golda said and the Clubhouse at the park, and--just places where they could gather, you know.

A.P.: But they started out in the old Safeway building on Talmage?

M.B.: Yes.

A.P.: And then they were in the Clubhouse?

M.B.: Uhuh. And then that's where we finally wined up, was up at the pa We had our meetings every month there. They were very nice to us.

A.P.: That was before you got the building on State?

M.B.: No, no. That was where the Progressives wound up, not the Center.

A.P.: Oh--the Progressives didn't become part of the Center, t hen--I think I have that confused?

M.B.: Well, the Progressives were the ones that in the beginning started it.

A.P.: But then they continued on separately?

M.B.: Yes. They continued on separately.'

A.P.: Uhuh. I didn't realize the Progressives did that. I assumed they became part of the Center.

M.B.: And Lynetta Jones did so much. She was the secretary of the Progressives, and she kept the minutes at the Center also on the Board. And she was on the Mendocino County Senior Council, where all of the centers come together and talk their problems over. After Lynetta went away, I was the secretary of that, till '76, I think it was. And it's still going on. I think Mr. Grey, Orion Grey, attends those meetings in Willits now. It's a good thing, too, because it's a representative

from every organization of seniors, and the Centers come together there. And talk about things. And then they also go back to the NCO Board and bring back things, you know.

A.P.: How long was Lynetta there?

M.B.: She was there from the beginning, when they first started the Progressives. And then she instigated getting them into this building, and knew that they could get government funding, and helped them get the funding, see? Golda kind of likes to say that she did, but really she didn't have the knowledge to do that. She was president at that time and helped, just like any of us did. But without Lynetta's knowledge and knowing how to do it, they couldn't have done what they did.

A.P.: You know, something I think would be interesting, in line with this history, is some of the personal background of the people who have been involved in it. It would just add a lot of interest to know where everyone came from to get to this place of the Ukiah Senior Center. Do you mind if I ask some personal questions about your background? Where you came from?

M.B.: Kansas.

A.P.: And how long have you been in Ukiah?

MB.: I came to California in 1943, when I lost my mother. And my oldest brother was in the army. So I came to Santa Rosa, California, where he lived, because where I was raised there wasn't any work there. My grandparents didn't want me to come. But I said I have to go, because I have to go to a place where there's work, and I felt like out here I could find work. And I brought my youngest brother, who was only six years old with me, because my mother wanted me--when she passed away, she said, "I want you to always be with him and take care of him, because I know you will." Some grandparents said, "Well, you can't take care of yourself, how you going to take care of him?" you know. So I came to Santa Rosa, and I was with my sister-in-law and my brother for about a week and I got a job.

A.P.: Where did you get the job?

M.B.: There was a big laundry, on A Street, in Santa Rosa, and I went to work there on the pressing machine. And so then I had to find a place for my brother to board, so there was a Christian school in Healdsburg. So I went down and visited those folks and talked ~~to them and he lived~~ with them. And so he lived with them, and he came home on the weekends to be with me in Santa Rosa. And everything just worked out fine, you know? I was never without work, or anything. And then, later on, these folks were going to move to Lucerne, over in Lake County, with the children. They had bought a motel. They thought it was a better facility, for them to raise the children, and take care of them there and everything. They talked to everyone, and said, "Well, if you don't want your children to go, you'll have to make other arrangements."

So one day I happened to go in the Santa Rosa Hotel dining-room, and I was sitting there talking to this elderly, little lady, 75 years old.

And she said, "How about you coming to work for me?" I said, "Doing what?" and she said, "Just being a companion," and the driving her and everything. And so I said, "Well, where do you--where is your home?" And she said, "Well, I'm just about 5 miles from Lucerne, Lake County."

I couldn't believe it. Because that's where my brother, the people who were taking care of him, was going to go, see? So I said, "Do you know a place called Cottage City, in Lucerne?" and she said, "Yes, ^{she said,} "I own it."

She owned it. And I said, "Well. Where my brother is living, in Healdsburg with these folks, they're the ones that are going to buy that and make a children's home out of it." ~~And she knew that--so I said, "Well, I'll think about it"~~ She said, yes, she knew that. So I said, "Well, I'll think about it"--when we left, I said, "I'll think about it." Because I was working then at the Greyhound Bus Depot in Santa Rosa.

And so I went home, and I thought about it, and I thought, well, you know, it's going to be really hard to find a good place for him to stay, and..where I can be near him too. So I decided I would go, take the job. And I was living with another little--she was about 80-year old--lady in Santa Rosa, on 2nd Street. ^{So when I went to tell her} I was going to leave, and she was very upset--she didn't want me to go. So I said, "Well, I think it's the best thing for me, and my brother, you know." So I packed up all my things and shipped my things to _____ Lake County, because that's the only way they had of getting there.

And then, you know after I'd told the woman I'd take the job. And she said, "Alright, then I'll have a gentleman come from Lakeport and drive us home, get one of my cars and drive us home." And I worked for her for 2½ years, and then I went to work in Lakeport at the Oldsmobile agendy, in the office? And that's where I met my husband, in 1946.

A.P.: So all this happened over a period of only 3 years? During the war and toward the end of World War II?

M.B.: UHuh. And so then we married and lived there--he worked for the Chevrolet automobile garage there in Lakeport. We were married there, and we went to the Sacramento valley and worked there for International Harvester Company--he got a better job. Then we went from there to Santa Rosa, with International Harvester Co. Back to Santa Rosa again. And then he got a better offer up at--towards Eureka--and then we went up there and worked ^{for two} years. And then he had an offer to go to Phoenix, Arizona, with IHC, and we went there, and then we came back--he didn't care for it there, it was so hot, you know. So we came back to California. We had all our furniture and things in storage, because we didn't take it with us when we went to Phoenix, ^{we} didn't know how it was going to really work out. So when we came back--we had our storage in Ukiah--we thought, "Well, where are we going to land?" you know. He had decided at that time he was going to go in business for himself. So, I said, "Well ~~whys~~ is a good place, it's between Sonoma and Humboldt--which he was both ways. So we stopped and stayed in Ukiah. We bought this property, which was just part of a ranch then.

A.P.: What year was this?

M.B.: We bought this place in '49.

A.P.: So all that moving around was within a very short period of time?

M.B.: Trying to get together what you really wanted to do, you know? My brother was with me all of the time, and after I married he came to live with me. And he graduated from high school here in Ukiah. He went in the Marines. So I've been here 34 years. My husband passed away in 1969. My daughter's married now, and she lives on the back of the property here.

A.P.: How many children do you have?

M.B.: I have just the one daughter. I didn't have any children until I came here, but then I had my daughter. She has three children--I have 3 grandchildren.

A.P.: Did you continue to work when you were married?

M.B.: No, no. My husband didn't want it. He was one of those oldtimers who didn't want his wife working. Well, I worked before I was married, but never worked all the time I was married. Now I enjoy this place, and work here, you know.

A.P.: There's plenty to do on a place like this, I'm sure. Did you grow up on a ranch in Kansas?

M.B.: No, I grew up in town. My grandparents were the ranchers. So we spent a lot of time on the farm with my grandparents, and I just always really liked the country. And my daughter likes it too. She's raising her children in the country here now, which is very good for them.

A.P.: Well, it sounds like you have the background to work with old people, certainly.

M.B.: Well, then, see, I worked with my daughter in P.T.A., Girl Scouts and things that was in youth when she was in school. Then after she grew up and was gone, and my husband was gone, then I had to make another niche in life for myself. So I'd always loved elderly people, so I went back to working with elderly people.

A.P.: And so ever since 1970, when you came in there on State Street, you've been working with seniors. What kinds of changes have you seen take place since then? Just in general? Just a general picture of how it's evolved.

M.B.: It's been--there's a big change. We have a lot of people. But we don't have the homey, friendly atmosphere that we used to have. I mean it's different--they still have--people visit and talk, but they're kind of clannish like--you know, they're different, than the first type of people we had. And I think this is because--it comes from so many of them being in different organizations, and they kind of all vie for being the best group or the best organization, which, when you come into a center, you should forget that. And they're just there to be with

people, and someone asked me not long ago, "What would you like to see improved?" and I said, "I would like to see people be more friendly towards everybody." Not just come in and pick a table with your friends and just associate with that particular group every day. I go to almost all of them. I love them, and I talk with them, and they're all hollering for me, you know, and so--that's the way I think we should all be, not just...

A.P.: You've got that kind of warm personality, they're lucky to have you. What would you like to see go in this history? You're the first person I've really talked to, outside of George and Loretta, and I'm making guesses at the kind of questions to ask at this point.

M.B.: What do you think is important?

A.P.: I like the human experience of history, and putting the dates in rather as landing points. The factual history definitely will get down, just as kind as a scaffolding, but I would hate to see the factual history be all. What goes between the lines? What do we want to bring out in terms of the human experience of what's happened there? And when George asked me to do the history, that was what he had in mind.

M.B.: When you talk about human experience, for instance, about what?

A.P.: The experience of the people involved. You mentioned you served the first meal there. Can you remember, for instance, what that was like?

M.B.: Oh, yes. It was just like a big family. We sat down at the table. The first cook that they hired--I can't remember her name, she was a lovely little lady, and retired cook here in Ukiah. Cookæe, we called her Cookie, that's all I know, but _____ was her name. She served family style, and we put the food on the table in bowls. And there was probably--we had big tables, across the hall, every room was a long table, and if the room was large enough, we had two tables. And we passed it down, was the way that they did it, and then they had girls--like I waited on tables, when you seen a dish getting low or something, you took it back to the kitchen and filled it again.

A.P.: What did you have to eat?

M.B.: Oh, we had lovely food to eat. Whatever--you know. Vegetables, lots of vegetables and always a meat and gravy and potatoes and stuff--she was a lovely cook. And it was just like a family, like you'd set a complete meal. Always a dessert, ^{fruit} cake, pies--they baked the pies there.

A.P.: What was the cook's name?

M.B.: I don't know, you'll have to ask Golda when you talk to her. It's in the minutes, though. Loretta can find it for you.

And she was a lovely little lady. Had worked in Ukiah for years, cooked here. And just a friendly person, you know. And it was so lovely, when we first started. Everybody felt so warm and close to each other. And now it's so political. The kitchen staff is hired, and they kind of stand off, away from the rest of the people.

The girls that volunteer for serving the tables are all nice girls--very friendly girls. But they don't have any opportunity, naturally, to talk a lot to people, because they're very busy--you know. But they are very friendly, and they do talk to people

A.P.: That would be a change that has taken place? When things become larger, they tend to become more impersonal?

M.B.: And you see, the thing is now, it isn't like it was then. People now have more money, and people that eat there now--it's a nice place for them to come to, and they're welcome, but they have money, and ~~the people aren't the kind of~~ a lot of them. And those people are not the kind of warm type people that we had when we first started. This was really needy people and they were--I'd say the biggest percentage were widow women, that had no outside contacts with anything other than that Center, when we first started.

It's different now. Because, see, we have transportation now, you can go anywhere you want. Then, there was no transportation in this town. And we were working on that also, you'll find that in the minutes. Towards transportation for the senior citizens. So with progress, it's really grown, and we serve a lot more people now. But we don't have that warm feeling, that we did then. I try to stay the same. But I know there's a lot of other people that haven't, you know. They've gotten sort of money-orientated, and they don't think they need to be friendly, or need companionship from those people there, when they can go somewhere else and have it, you know. Just to eat. And you'll notice--if you go there, you'll notice--that people come in and eat, fast, and immediately leave.

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