

Ellen McGee

Interview Number 1

Navajo County Library District
Interviewed by Ann-Mary J. Lutzick
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Ann-Mary Lutzick My name is Ann-Mary Lutzick, and I'm the director of the Old Trails Museum in Winslow, Arizona. This interview is for the Capturing Arizona's Stories Project, which is a centennial project of the Arizona State Library, and this interview will be part of the Navajo County Library District collection, and it will be posted on the Arizona Memory Project. Today is January 21, 2011, and I'm interviewing Ellen McGee of Winslow, Arizona. And so here we go.

I'm just going to start with some background questions. What was the name of your father?

Ellen McGee Leonard F. Sanders.

Lutzick And where was he from?

McGee He was born and raised in Mexico.

Lutzick What kind of work did he do there?

McGee He didn't work in Mexico. He came to the United States when he was like thirteen years old, and worked in the copper mines.

Lutzick Where was that?

McGee That was in Bisbee, Arizona.

Lutzick What was your mother's name?

McGee My mother's name was Nellie Jones Sanders.

Lutzick And where was she from?

McGee She was born and raised in Mexico.

Lutzick And how did they meet?

McGee I'm not real sure how they met, but they were married in Bisbee in, I believe, 1926.

Lutzick And did she work outside of the home?

McGee No, she didn't work outside the home in that time. I was born in Bisbee in 1927.

Lutzick Do you have brothers and sisters?

McGee I had one brother that I was raised with. I had a step-brother that my mother had before she married *my* father. I didn't know him until he was sixty-two years old. His father had raised him in Mexico. I found him after I was grown and married.

Lutzick And where did you meet him?

McGee He was living in Chula Vista, California, when I found him. It was during the time that the Arizona copper mines were on strike, and I happened to see a young man on television. They were outside of the mining facilities and they were picketing. And his name was the same as my brother, so then I started looking. I knew about him, but I'd never met him. And so I started looking for him, and called places in Mexico. That's kind of a long involved story, but I finally found him, and he was living in Chula Vista, California. And he came to—we lived in Flagstaff at the time, and he came to Flagstaff, he and his wife

and his youngest son, and that's where I met him. He only lived two years after I met him, and he passed away with cancer.

Lutzick That is an interesting story.

McGee It's very involved. That's a story that could only be told on *Oprah* or *Sally Jessie Raphael*. That's how I found him, through a program.

Lutzick So were you older or younger than your brother?

McGee I was younger. He was born in '22, and I was born in '27.

Lutzick So what was it like growing up in Bisbee?

McGee I didn't grow up in Bisbee. My parents came to Miami, Arizona, and my father started working in the copper mines there. That was his vocation for many years, until just before World War II started. We moved to Phoenix, Arizona, where my father went to a vocational school and learned a trade. That was 1937. We lived in Miami, Arizona, until 1937, and then we moved to the Valley, and he went to a trade school. And then, just after the war started in '42, we moved to California and they worked in the war factories, he and my mother both.

Lutzick So where did you go to high school?

McGee I went to grade school in Miami, Arizona, until I was in the eighth grade, and that's when we moved to the Valley in '37. I started high school in San Diego, California, and we were there for—. School was out that year I was a freshman in high school. Then we came back to Arizona. We bought a little place in Glendale, Arizona, a five-acre little farm, and we had some cows and chickens. That little house was

starting to be built. It never was finished. And then my grandmother, my father's mother, came to live with us there. And she had a heart attack Christmas Day of 1942, I believe it was, and she passed away. My father's brother bought a home in Mesa, Arizona, so we could take care of Grandma, but she didn't get to move there. But we moved to Mesa in, I believe it was '43, because I was second year of high school when I left Glendale, Arizona. Moved to Mesa, and I graduated from Mesa High School in 1945.

Lutzick

So what kinds of subjects did you like when you were in high school?

McGee

Well, I was in home economics, and I also had a brother that I was raised with that was still living. He went to Globe, Arizona. My uncle worked for a dairy there, and he went to high school up in Globe. While I was in Mesa, he went to high school in Globe. He graduated from Globe High School, and then he went to Provo, Utah. He was going to go to college, but he joined the service while he was there, and was called to go to Korea.

He had been in the service—he went to Korea in August of 1950, and he was reported missing in action. He went the first of August. The first of September he was reported missing in action in Korea, and he never came home. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery. (long pause)

Lutzick

So did that happen when you were in high school still?

McGee

No, that happened after I got—. (sigh) When I came home—I went to—after I got out of high school in 1945, we were living in Glendale.

My grandmother lived in Pomerene, Arizona, and when I got out of high school my grandmother had a little farm down in Pomerene, Arizona. That was my mother's mother. After I got out of high school, I went to work in a telephone office in Mesa, and I worked there for probably a good part of a year I guess. And then I went to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah. I was there until—I went in '46 and '47 and then I came back to Mesa. My folks had moved to Pomerene, and so I went down there for the summer. I didn't go back to BYU that year. While I was working in the telephone office in Mesa, I met my husband. He was in the military, stationed at Williams Air Force Base. He was in the air force. That was after I came home from BYU, the second year after I'd gone to BYU. So we were married February 26, 1948, and that's when I came to—. He got out of the military, it was peace time then. We came to—his folks wanted him to come home and run Sunrise Trading Post at Leupp. They ran Leupp Trading Post, and his aunt and uncle had been running Sunrise, and they wanted to leave and go to New Mexico and buy their own trading post. So they got him out of the military to come home and run the store. And we got married, and I came to Sunrise Trading Post.

Lutzick

So you didn't return to BYU?

McGee

I didn't return to BYU after the second year.

Lutzick

And what had you studied when you were there?

McGee My major was home economics. I came to the Sunrise Trading Post and started working in the trading post.

Lutzick So there were two trading posts in Leupp, Sunrise *and* Leupp?

McGee There was two trading posts, Sunrise and Leupp. Leupp Trading Post was on the other side of the Little Colorado River, and Sunrise was on *this* side of the Little Colorado River.

Lutzick This side being the north side?

McGee This side being the south side.

Lutzick Sunrise was on the north side?

McGee I don't have good directions. I don't know my directions.

Lutzick But it was north and south?

McGee Yeah, north and south, yeah. On the other side of the river is Leupp, and on this side of the river—from Winslow. That's the Little Colorado River.

Lutzick So you were working at Sunrise Trading Post starting in '48?

McGee My husband and I were running Sunrise Trading Post.

Lutzick And how many years did you run that?

McGee We were there until 1950. The folks sold Sunrise Trading Post. My husband was kind of tired of living on the reservation. He went to work for El Paso Natural Gas when they brought the pipeline across the reservation. After they sold the trading post, we followed the pipeline and went to Ash Fork.

My oldest son was born the twenty-eighth of November of 1948, and he was going on two years old when we left the reservation. And we

were gone from there for—. We finally, my oldest son had really bad tonsils. He was only two years old, and we were having so much trouble with him that we went to the Valley and went to my mother's for a couple of months so we could get—we had his tonsils taken out. And then we came back to Winslow, and my mother-in-law and father-in-law owned a building here in Winslow that they had obtained from a business transaction. They obtained this building, so we opened a produce market there, which one had been there before. The people who had had it before, when my father-in-law obtained this building. Then we got acquainted with the receiver of the bank when Hubbell's trading company was going into bankruptcy. He wanted Ralph because my husband speaks such fluent Navajo, wanted us to go to Marble Canyon Trading Post, and run that while it was in bankruptcy. They had a lot of accounts out on the books. And so we moved to Marble Canyon.

Lutzick

Where is that exactly?

McGee

That is on Highway 89 going towards Utah, and it's just across the Navajo Bridge, which is just off the reservation. Hubbells owned that trading post, but it was not on the reservation.

Lutzick

This is still in Arizona, not in Utah?

McGee

It's not in Utah, it's still in Arizona, but it's not on the reservation. Navajo Bridge is the reservation line there at Marble Canyon. There was a trading post there. If I remember right, there was eighteen cabins and a big lodge on one side of the road, and the other side of

the road there was a trading post—actually, a curio store. We had a few groceries, we had lots of jewelry and Indian things to sell, and a service station in one part of the building, and the other half of it was a big dining room where the truckers stopped and ate. It was a beautiful place and a beautiful view, and we were there—. My youngest son is fifty-six years old, and I became pregnant at Marble Canyon with him. And so the Hubbells also owned Na-ah-tee Canyon Trading Post, and the receiver of the bank gave us the opportunity to go to Na-ah-tee Canyon and run that. They had a *lot* of accounts out on the books, and they were trying to retrieve some of that money. So we moved to Na-ah-tee Canyon, and my husband had the Navajos cut cedar. There was lots of cedar wood up in there. And cut cedar and hauled it into the trading post, and we applied it to their accounts. And then Hubbell's here in Winslow would send a truck up and bring that load of wood to Winslow. They put it on the railroad and shipped it to California.

Lutzick And that helped to settle some of the accounts?

McGee Some of the accounts, right.

Lutzick How do you spell Na-ah-tee?

McGee N-A dash, A-H dash, T-E-E. Na-ah-tee.

Lutzick And is that near Marble Canyon?

McGee No, that is out of Holbrook, out towards White Cone. It was up in a canyon where it was *very* beautiful. Most beautiful spot you'd ever want to—. It also was not on the reservation. It was on deeded land, so it didn't belong to the Navajo Tribe. And so there was a big trading post

there, and the back of that trading post, the same building—there was a living quarters. We had a small travel trailer that we parked behind there, and I had my oldest son, then I was pregnant with the second one. And it was beautiful there. I think we went up there like in July, and we stayed until August, September, whatever. The water there was from a spring behind the house, that came down out of the rocks. That was the best water you ever want to taste. The house had a big old wood stove in it. It was very sparsely furnished, but we were very comfortable. We had our little travel trailer parked behind it. Then we left Na-ah-tee Canyon because we had done what they needed us to do there, and I needed to get back to someplace, because my youngest son was expected in December.

So we came back to Leupp Trading Post and started working in Leupp Trading Post for Mother and Father McGee. There was a little house behind Leupp Trading Post, and we lived there for a while, until after my second son was born. And then the lease for Leupp Trading Post was like, I believe, ten acres. So a block from Leupp Trading Post is a big frame house that had been vacant since way back in the forties. And so we went in and reclaimed that and got it all fixed up, and we moved in that big house one block from Leupp Trading Post, which was still on the lease for Leupp Trading Post from the Navajo Tribe.

Lutzick

And what year was that?

McGee

That was, let's see, David's fifty-six. David was born the twenty-ninth of December of 1954.

Lutzick And so was this the start of your extended period at Leupp Trading Post?

McGee That was the start of my extended period at Leupp Trading Post, yeah. My mother-in-law was the postmaster there at Leupp. She'd been postmaster there since, I believe, 1947. They bought—this is before my time—they bought Leupp Trading Post from Ida May Borrinn [phonetic] in 1945. And so they were living at Leupp Trading Post. And my husband's aunt and uncle, who was my mother-in-law's brother and his wife, was running Sunrise. They came to Sunrise in 1938. Ralph was raised at Leupp from 1938, came to Leupp to go to school in 1938. The folks came to Leupp in 1938 and bought Sunrise Trading Post.

Lutzick What were your husband's parents' names?

McGee They were Elmer and Lucille McGee.

Lutzick And where were they from originally?

McGee They were from Farmington. My husband was born in Farmington, New Mexico. And my mother-in-law was born and raised in Kirtland, New Mexico. My father-in-law, I believe, was born in Missouri, because the McGees came from Missouri to Kirtland, New Mexico, or Farmington, New Mexico. They were all traders. My mother-in-law's family were all traders. My father-in-law's family were not traders. He was from California, and they lived in California. When my mother-in-law married him, they were living in Los Angeles, California.

Lutzick And so is that how your husband came to speak fluent Navajo?

McGee

Well, see, his mother and father owned a trading post before they came to Leupp. They owned—see, Ralph’s grandparents homesteaded in Kirtland, New Mexico, which is just a short distance from Farmington. My mother-in-law’s family were all traders. All of her brothers were traders. So that’s where his grandfather had a trading post in Kirtland. It was homestead land, and they had quite a section of land there. They had a lot of property. So he was raised—his mother’s oldest brother had a trading post up at Lukachukai, Arizona. That’s way up in the mountains of Northern Arizona. And his grandfather and grandmother had a trading post there in Kirtland. And then the other uncles had trading posts at Dennehotso and Red Rock, and like I say, Lukachukai. And his mother and father came from California when my husband was just a small child, and they moved to Lukachukai where his uncle—and they worked in the trading post with his uncle. He was a toddler at Lukachukai Trading Post, and that’s when he started learning [to speak Navajo]. And then the grandparents lived in Kirtland, and they did lots of Navajo business at their little trading post in Kirtland, New Mexico. So my husband just learned to speak Navajo. And he went to school there in Kirtland. And this is before they came to—

And then they bought a trading post at Mancos Creek. Mancos Creek is in Colorado. After Lukachukai, they left Lukachukai and they went and bought their own trading post in Mancos Creek, so my husband was a little boy there at Mancos Creek—he and his brother. Then he

had a little sister and another little brother that were born when they were in Kirtland. And then that led them to buy the trading post at Sunrise at Leupp. And so my husband, they came to Sunrise Trading Post at Leupp in 1937, and Ralph started to school there. So he'd always been among the people to learn the language. My mother-in-law and father-in-law both spoke very fluent Navajo.

Lutzick And that's who they were primarily trading with, were Navajo, all those years?

McGee Oh yes. Now in Mancos Creek they had some Utes. There were some Ute Indians that came. Their language is very similar to the Navajo language, but a lot of the articles, the store, different things were very close to Navajo, some of the items that you would buy in the trading post.

Lutzick So were the Navajo very anxious to do a lot of trading? What kind of things were they making that they wanted to trade?

McGee Oh, rugs were the main thing. Lots of Navajo rugs. Some of the Navajos do make baskets, like the wedding baskets. But mostly the things they brought into the trading post was their pawn, to pawn their jewelry, and the rugs to sell, the hides when they'd butcher a sheep, a lamb. They dried the hides, and they would bring the hides in and sell them. They stretched them and they were dried. And then we stacked them, and then we had a buyer that came a couple of times a year to buy hides, and they would come. We would store them in the warehouse until we had great big stacks of them. And then a lot of

times the hide buyer would come and buy the hides, and then we would bring them to Winslow and put them on the railroad and ship them to where the hide buyers would process the hides.

And so, they—in those early years, they didn't bring *new* jewelry in to sell it, they brought mostly pawn jewelry, to pawn it, to get by from one season to the next, when we were buying lambs or buying wool. They sold their wool there. And there was a season for the lambs, when the lambs were—the small lambs. Usually when the lambs are born it's cold weather, they have to take them in the hogan, keep them warm. And then after they get big enough, when it was time to shear them, then they would shear and bring the wool in to sell. And then we had wool buyers that would come and buy the wool then. We'd have to haul the wool in to the railroad. We had a big flatbed trailer. Those sacks of wool, when they were packed tightly, were around 300 pounds. I have pictures of the trailer when it was loaded, with the big sacks of wool. Then we'd haul that in to the railroad, put it on the railroad and ship it.

But the wool buying and the lamb buying were seasons that were—you'd have to be there to really appreciate what they did, and how we bought the wool, and how we bought the lambs, and how the market for what the price was of the wool, for the price was going of the wool, the different kinds of wool. It gets very involved. I could tell you a long, long story about how the wool was, and how we had a big shed. You built a rack in the shed, and those wool sacks were seven feet tall,

and we had a metal ring, and this rack had two big holes in it, and you put the—it was like a gunny sack that we put it in, and you put the gunny sack over that, put the ring in to hold it, and then my children, my two boys, and we had a Navajo man who we called Doi-oh-tee [phonetic]—that means “I don’t talk.” He was deaf and dumb, and he was very tall, and we always had him tromp the wool. The Navajos bring the wool in. When they shear, they shear on a blanket, and then they roll this fleece of wool out, and they tie it with a paper string. The reason it’s paper string—this paper string must be probably three feet long, and it’s paper that’s twisted into a string. And so when they tie each fleece of wool with it, that gave you something [to hold onto], and you put that in the wool sack, and then the boys get in there with their feet and tromp it tight so they can stack this. And the reason for that, what we call wool ties—they sold for a penny apiece, and they would come in and buy so many. They were going to shear. When they send the wool to the plant where they clean it and process it, that paper string dissolves when they put it in [the wash tub]. That’s why it was paper. But they’re very strong and you could tie that. So that was my sons’, my boys’, one of their chores when we were buying wool, when they came home from school, they had to get out there and tromp wool. Well, in those days, there wasn’t a lot of shoes that weren’t leather. The boys wore leather shoes. Boy, they were so shiny, when they’d get in there with that lanolin, you know; and their hands, handling the wool. Didn’t smell very good, but that was the process.

Lutzick

Did they have other chores that related to the trading post?

McGee

Oh yes, they had to stock shelves. Oh, absolutely, they all had chores.

We had pop machines outside. We had our own pop machines. They were Coke and Pepsi and 7-Up. Those used to be separate. So we put whatever kind of pop we wanted to in, because we bought our own machines. And the boys had to keep the pop machines out there. And so they got—whatever money was in the box, they would get a percent of that for stocking the pop machine. They'd empty the change, and then they'd get a percent of that for doing the chores. They had to stock shelves. They had to open cases, and stock the shelves. And what cases after it was opened, still what's left they put in the warehouse on the shelf so you could go get whatever you needed.

They also—at that time we didn't have—we had bottle pop for a long time before cans came out, and it came in wooden cases. So they had to take all the empty bottles that the Navajos brought back to the store, they had to put them in the cases and stack them out by the warehouse door for the pop man to pick up when he delivered the pop. Oh yeah, they all had chores. And I had two boys and one girl—she was the baby, and she could run the cash register before she—she had to stand on a box to run the cash register.

And then when we were buying lambs, every night when the boys came home from school, they had to brand them, because every trader had a brand. So when you sold those lambs, they had to know where they came [from], so we had a brand. So we had a different color paint, and

we had, I guess it was a steel rod that was formed into the brand on the end of it, and you dipped that in the paint and put that on the wool, on the lamb. And so the boys always had a really gay time doing that because they had paint everywhere in the corrals, and my daughter—chasing my daughter with a paint branding iron. Oh, they had a gay time, riding the lambs out there, because they had to catch them to brand them. So we had big corrals. Then we have pictures of when they were—.

Every night we had a couple of shearers, Navajo men shearers, and every night after we'd get through buying lambs today, we'd load the lambs in a pickup. They'd keep them in the corral all day, load them in a pickup, and they would take them out to the herd. We didn't keep them in the corral, because there were weeks and weeks there where we bought lambs. So we'd take them out to the herder. They had a sheep camp way out on the way to Sunrise. It's a station on the railroad where they used to have corrals where they load wool or load the lambs onto the railroad cars. It was a special place on the railroad. Then they would walk from the sheep camp when they got ready to ship the sheep. The herders would walk them to the railroad, so that was a long process. That was probably a couple of months in that era that you would buy lambs.

Lutzick

Tell me a little bit about what the trading post at Leupp was like. You had the sheep outside, but you were not only buying goods, but you were also selling to the public there?

McGee

Oh yeah, the trading post. Oh yes, absolutely. It was a store where we had customers come in every day. That was the only store in the area, besides Sunrise, and we had the big boarding school there. There's a huge boarding school there. In the early years that we were married, they had, a small boarding school there at Leupp. Leupp was condemned for the boarding school because of the river. There's a dike around Leupp, and the river used to flood and come up into Leupp, so that school was condemned. And that's when they moved across the river, up behind Sunrise Trading Post, and built a new boarding school. But when Ralph and I were first married, they had just a small boarding school there at Leupp. Some of the old houses there had been turned into little dorms, and there wasn't very many children there. When Ralph and I were first married, his little brother and sister were still in grade school, and Ralph and I were married, and they went to school at Leupp, the little public school at Leupp. The night that Ralph and I were married, February 26, 1948, we were married in Holbrook at my uncle's house. He was a bishop in Holbrook at that time, and we came home to Sunrise. We spent our wedding night at Sunrise Trading Post, and that night the teacher at Leupp was a woman from (clears throat)—excuse me—a woman from Farmington, and she had three children of her own. And at that time, Leupp was in Coconino County. And so my father-in-law was the only business there. And so he was the only board member of the school [board] there, so they had to have five students in order to have a

public school, so there was my little brother-in-law and sister-in-law, and then a Navajo woman who worked for the BIA office there at Leupp, she had two children, and then the teacher had three children. So the night we were married, my father-in-law had to get up in the night and take this teacher to the hospital. They found out she had cancer, so she had to leave Leupp. So the school closed there, so we had to make agreement with—Navajo County had to make agreement with Coconino County to bring those children into Winslow to go to school in Navajo County. And so the bus would go to Leupp Corner, which is on the frontage road going toward Flagstaff, ten miles out of Winslow, where you turn to go to Leupp. There was a big trading post there, and the bus used to come out there and pick up the children, bring them to school in Winslow, and my father-in-law would bring them in the morning because he's busy in the store in the afternoon. So the Navajo children's mother would come to Leupp Corner—it was seventeen miles to [Highway] 66 at that time—and pick up the children at night and bring them home.

Lutzick

As far as the trading post, it was for Navajo to shop there, but did non-Navajo come and buy rugs and things like that?

McGee

Oh, absolutely. All the people who were—. Yeah, we had quite a few tourists come that way, because for a number of years the road came from Winslow. There was a bridge that comes right into Leupp, right south of Leupp Trading Post. There was a little bridge there, and you could come right into Leupp Trading Post. But they finally

condemned that bridge because it was getting very dangerous for people to cross it, so they condemned it because the river runs right below Leupp Trading Post. And so they condemned that bridge, and they had to go clear around by Sunrise and come in the other way. So a lot of people from the boarding school, that were teachers at the boarding school—after they opened the boarding school in, I believe it was 1967 they opened Leupp Boarding School, and my children were going to—they didn't have a public school at Leupp when my oldest son was born in 1948, so the first two years that he went to school, he went to Mesa to live with my mother. They didn't have a public school there then. And then after they built the boarding school, El Paso Natural Gas built a pumping station there. And so at that time El Paso Natural Gas were big taxpayers, so my father-in-law didn't have to be the only business there for the school. So El Paso Natural Gas let the public school use their—they had a big recreation hall there, and they let them use it for the school. And so my oldest son came home and he went to school over at El Paso Natural Gas, I think until he was in the sixth grade then. He went to El Paso Natural Gas. And then they built a public school there, and he graduated from the eighth grade from Leupp Public School. And then they had to ride the bus to school in Flagstaff. That's fifty miles each way every day, after they got in the eighth grade. They didn't have a high school there at that time. So after they got in the eighth grade, he had to go to school in Flagstaff.

Lutzick So how many years did you and your husband run the trading post at Leupp?

McGee Oh my goodness! Let's see, we came back to Leupp just before David was born in 1954, and we didn't leave there until 1982. The Navajo Tribe didn't renew the lease for our land at that time. So we had to close the trading post, and then we moved to Flagstaff in 1982. And then we moved to Winslow in 1995.

Lutzick So what were some of your specific duties at the trading post when you were there?

McGee Oh my goodness! My mother-in-law was the postmaster until 1967, and that that time, the postmaster was by political appointment. Well, we used to have elections at Leupp. We counted ballots by lamplight, and we hand-carried the ballot box to Flagstaff after we—and we'd have maybe thirty, forty Navajos would vote there. We had the election in one of the old buildings. And like I say, there was no electricity there at that time. They didn't—when we lived at Sunrise, we had thirty-two volt electric system; we had batteries. We didn't have electric there, because when they closed the school there at Leupp, they had a power plant there so there was no electric. And the Navajo Tribal Utilities put electric back in at Leupp. So that was after, like I say, we used to have to count ballots by lamplight, because those old buildings didn't have any electricity in them.

Lutzick And they were electing the postmaster?

McGee No, no, no, no, that was a general election for the country. We had elections there.

Lutzick But that was part of your job as the—

McGee But I started to say, Ralph and I, they had to make up an election board, and they had to have an equal amount of Democrats to Republicans, and so we had always been—my family had always been Democrats—so Ralph registered as a Democrat, and I had to keep registering as a Republican, in order to have an election board. So to this day, we still—that's not the way we vote all the time, but we still are Democrat and Republican.

So the postmaster, my mother-in-law, had retired in 1967. They moved to Flagstaff. I was trying to think who the governor was then. He was a Democratic governor, so he wanted to—or I mean senator, not governor. He wanted to elect Ralph as the postmaster. Ralph didn't want the job, and so I took it as postmaster, and I was just—like I say, it was a political appointment—but I was just acting postmaster for the first three years. So my mother-in-law and father-in-law moved to Flagstaff and I became postmaster at Leupp, and I didn't get an appointment. I was just acting postmaster in '67 till I think about '69, I believe, I became postmaster.

Lutzick Did you enjoy that job?

McGee Pardon?

Lutzick Did you enjoy that job?

McGee

Yes, it was the one that I had—I had been my mother-in-law's assistant for eleven years, so I was real educated in the post office department, because when she would be gone, I was her aide. So it wasn't anything, because I was used to doing—I knew how to do the books. We didn't have computers at that time, so everything had to be done by hand, all the filing and everything, you know. So yes, I kept that job until 1982, until we left the reservation. I was fourteen years as postmaster there, after my mother-in-law retired.

And my mother-in-law, after she moved to Flagstaff, had been diagnosed with cancer, and she only lived a couple of years. She died in 1970, after she left the trading post. And her cancer was caused from the downwind of the homes that were being exploded out there. There's lots of people who have cancer, and are still having cancer from those. They call them the downwinders. I don't know if you know about that or not.

Lutzick

Where were the bombs being [exploded]?

McGee

They were way out on the reservation. In the areas where they would explode those bombs, they would even let the children out so they could go watch the clouds and things going up. That's how a lot of these people got cancer. My mother-in-law died of that cancer. And we all lived there at that time in the late fifties and early sixties, when they were doing that.

Lutzick

I want to make sure we have time for some general questions. You have said that you were at a lot of different trading posts, and a lot of

different places in Arizona. What do you think you liked most about your life being so connected to so many different trading posts? What is your best memory of trading post life, some of your best kinds of memories?

McGee

Leupp Trading Post was the longest experience, because the others were just periods like a year or two years or whatever. We were not gone that long from the reservation, and we came back in '54. We never left there again, until '82. Well, I think it was good for our children, growing up there. We always knew where our children were. A lot of experiences that other children never had the opportunity to experience. And the language, just knowing the history of being there. You know, I came from a different world when I came there. It was like living in a different world from where I was raised in my family. And we still have just many, many, many friends. I could call on any one of them at any time, you know, if I needed to. And I never walk into a store in Winslow that I don't meet some of them daily. And when I lived in Flagstaff, the same thing.

Lutzick

Are you talking about Navajo, or just—?

McGee

Navajo, oh yeah. And like you say, at the trading post, were you sort of wondering what-all was in the trading post? We had groceries, we had dry goods. We had a system on our cash register that when a non-Indian came in, because we paid taxes on our non-Indian sales—Indians were not taxed—but if a non-Indian came in and bought a loaf of bread, that went on our cash register. At the end of the day or the

end of the month, when I was doing the books, I would take that off, and we had to pay taxes on our non-Indian sales. And off the reservation, the trading posts that were off the reservation, like Marble Canyon, they had a luxury tax at that time. And it was off of the reservation, and sometimes the Native Americans had a hard time understanding that. We couldn't charge them tax on the reservation, but off of the reservation they had to pay taxes just like anybody else. So the luxury tax that used to be on jewelry, when Truth in Lending went into effect—and I don't know if you're familiar with Truth in Lending law or not. OSHA had a code too, you know. OSHA is still in effect. And the Navajo Tribe adopted the OSHA Code, parts of it that they wanted to go by. So there was a lot of regulations that we had to go by. But off the reservation, it was different.

Lutzick So when you were in Leupp, it sounds like it was a close-knit community.

McGee We sold everything that a family would need in the trading post—everything.

Lutzick But one of the things you liked about it, if this is correct, it sounds like it was a close-knit community.

McGee It very well was. And the Navajos, they very much depended on the trader. And if a new trader would come in at Sunrise—after we sold Sunrise, they had several different traders there, and they had a hard time, because the Navajos were always very suspicious of a new person, you know. And there were traders that were not maybe as honest as

some of the old traders. And so we had to really—they really depended on our—to trust us. They trusted us with everything. And you talk to some of them, especially the older ones, telling, We used to come in, and you always used to help us when we were having problems and we had our checks all traded up. See, we had an account, and our accounts run from lamb season to wool season, and they didn't pay their bill until—. So sometimes they'd come in and have to pawn everything they had to get through the year. And then when we sold their lambs and the wool, then they paid their account. So some of them had to be very frugal, you know, to get through the year. They used to have old-age pensions, and some of those older people lived on like thirty dollars a month. That was the old-age pension in those days, before all these government things came in. So that was an education for me and my children.

Lutzick

People, when they would live off the land, how tight that could be.

McGee

Yes. I mean, they had—most of the stuff had—I mean, they had cattle and stuff, but they didn't milk their cows. They didn't milk their cows to drink the milk, so we sold all that stuff in the trading post—you know, fresh fruits and vegetables. We didn't have a whole lot of those. We had big showcases, we had fresh meat, and when we were buying lambs—during lamb season—every morning we'd have one of the Navajo women come in and butcher a couple of fresh lambs so we could put it in the meat case and they'd come in and buy that fresh

lamb. It was just something that you don't get that education anyplace else. There were just things there that would have never happened. One thing I liked about it, because my children, there was no place to go get in trouble. We had all the recreation at Leupp the boarding school had. My husband sponsored a basketball team there. They had all kinds of recreation at the boarding school. El Paso Natural Gas—we had a big rec hall over there. We used to go over there and have square dances, and we had potlucks, and everything was there. My children, until they started going to school in Flagstaff, *everything* was there. They didn't go to movies, we didn't have—everything was at the school. And I always knew where they were. One time the Harlem Globe Trotters—do you know who they are?

Lutzick

Um-hm [yes].

McGee

—came to Leupp to play. And our basketball team played them. Well, this is something current. My grandson drives a tour bus for the Harlem Globe Trotters. So he was training in Phoenix. They have an archives in Phoenix, and they never play a game but what they don't video it. And so he was telling the Harlem Globe Trotters when he got this job—he drives for Greyhound, and Greyhound furnished the buses that they have. They have three teams, and they're all over the country now: one on the East Coast, one on the West Coast, and one in the Middle West. My grandson drives the tour bus for the Middle West team. One of the teams was in Phoenix this last weekend—not his team—but he told one of the officials of the Globe Trotters in

Phoenix that, “My granddad had a team on the reservation, and they played them in 1968.” He pulled that video out and showed it to my grandson, and my husband’s standing there. This is history. Nineteen-sixty-eight, he said, “Oh, my granddad was so young!” I said, “In 1968 he was!” He’s eighty-four years old right now. So this is history. The history is worth what my life was, you know.

Lutzick Well, it is a fascinating story. Just to give a little context to what happened after you left Leupp, you and your husband moved to Flagstaff?

McGee Yeah, we lived in Flagstaff for fifteen years. We moved over here in 1995. And we have 115 acres out here just off of [Highway] 87, past the prison.

Lutzick And after you left the trading post as work, what did you do for work after you left?

McGee When we left Leupp and moved to Flagstaff, my husband went to work for Long’s Drugstore for five years. And I did some merchandising for Long’s Drugstore for a few years. Then when I moved to Winslow, I worked for the school system. Well, I didn’t work for the school system, I worked for Head Start, and then I worked for Chartwells at the kitchen here for a couple of years.

Lutzick Did you like anything as well as you liked trading post work?

McGee Well, I have sixteen great-grandchildren, have seven grandchildren, and none of them live here. So when I went to work—I don’t have any of my children close and grandchildren close, so I love to work with the

children. That's why I went to work at Head Start. I was in my seventies when I went to work at Head Start, and I worked there for a couple of years. I worked in the kitchen. I did all the baking for the schools in the kitchen, baking for the schools in Winslow. I worked in the kitchen. There's five schools in Winslow, and I did all the baking for a couple of years for the schools.

Lutzick Well, trying to think of a good closing question, and one of the suggested ones is, Do you think your life was similar or different from most people? I think we know the answer to that question!

McGee Very different.

Lutzick Very different. So what would you maybe pass on to people, or what's one of the things you think you've learned about living life, or maybe life at the trading post in particular—something you learned there, that you would want people to know about in life?

McGee Well, I think you would learn just how unique these people are, and what history they have to pass on to us. And if you didn't experience that, it's really hard to understand how they lived. Those people, if they're your friend, they're *always* your friend. I mean you can *always*, always depend on [them]. If you would need something, you could always go—if you needed something from them, they would give you anything they have. I never meet one in a store but what, “Oh my goodness, how are you?” “I haven't seen you for so long!” “Oh, Mrs. McGee!” And when I worked at the school, I was known as Grandma Ellen. I was a foster grandparent when I worked at Head

Start. And I had lots—I think more of the Native American children there than any other of the children that were at the school. I worked with a lot of those children at the school, in both grade school and I worked at the junior high school in the kitchen. And I saw some of those children grow up that I knew when they were—and I see children that I knew their parents before *they* were born. And this is a daily thing when you walk around in this town. I see people that if I don't know those children, they know me, because they're grown up. "Well, whose family are you from? Oh, okay. And which one are you?" And there was maybe ten children in that family. It's an experience that goes on and on, it doesn't end. It still goes on.

Lutzick

I want to thank you so much for sharing your experience with us today.

Thank you!