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An Interview With

MRS. G. L. NELSON

February 14, 1977

Interviewed by

Roberta Miller

Mississippi

Department of Archives and History

and the

Washington County Library System

Oral History Project:
Greenville and Vicinity

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Interviewee: Etha Agnes Nelson

Interviewer: Roberta Miller

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/ interviewed by Roberta Miller

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Scope Note: The Washington County Library System, with assistance from the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, conducted oral history interviews with local citizens. The project interviews took place between 1976 and 1978. The interviewees included long-term residents of the Greenville-Washington County area in their late 50's and older.

This is Roberta Miller, Oral History Interviewer with the Washington County Library System. I am interviewing Mrs. H. L. Nelson at her home at 1050 Fairview Avenue, Greenville, Mississippi, on February 14, 1977.

Mrs. Nelson, you came to Greenville in 1919. Is that correct?

NELSON: In 1919.

MILLER: And you went to work for the Telephone Company?

NELSON: In March, 1920.

MILLER: Where was the Telephone Company?

NELSON: On Washington Avenue. I don't remember the number of the street.

MILLER: It was on the block between the levee and Poplar Street, and it was next door to what?

NELSON: France's Studio. No, Loyacono Shoe Store was next to that instead of France's Studio.

MILLER: And on the other side was Russell Motor Company.

NELSON: Russell Motor Company.

MILLER: When you first started working at the Telephone Company, what was it like? How many people were there? What were you paid?

NELSON: About eight dollars a week and you worked

nine hours, six days a week.

MILLER: How many people worked there?

NELSON: I imagine there were about between twenty and thirty when I first started.

MILLER: Operators?

NELSON: No, that would include the Chief Operators and the evening Chief Operators, Assistant Chief Operators and the Supervisor, so I imagine in all, and clerks and all, must have been around thirty.

MILLER: That didn't include the linemen who worked outside?

NELSON: No, that didn't include them, just the women.

MILLER: Were all the operators women then?

NELSON: Yes. They didn't have any men operators.

MILLER: That's been recent, isn't it, that they have men operators?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: How long did you work at the Telephone Company?

NELSON: Thirty-seven years.

MILLER: Thirty-seven years. Tell me how it changed during the years that you worked there - in pay and hours.

NELSON: Well, you want me to go back there during

the depression? They didn't lay anyone off, they just cut their hours to five hours. Back then, I think they had come down to eight hours, but during the Depression they were five hours.

MILLER: They cut you down to five hours so they could keep everybody working?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: How much did you get then?

NELSON: Well, they had raised it some then. I think they raised it to ten dollars a week.

MILLER: So you were cut down to five hours, so were you making five dollars a week?

NELSON: Well, I imagine it was just about that.

MILLER: During the Depression that was what it was?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: Were you a night operator or a day operator, or did you change about?

NELSON: Well, I'll tell you when I first started as pay station attendant downstairs - they had booths down there - and I recorded the calls, and then the depression came on and I went upstairs. I first started as an Information Operator, and then they laid the clerk off and I was made clerk, and from then I was made night Chief Operator. I was night Chief Operator for about ten years.

MILLER: Now, during the flood, how did the Telephone Company operate during the flood?

NELSON: All the operators, Chief Operators and all, they worked from ten to twelve hours a day, because a lot of the operators left. They told them they could either stay or go, whichever they wanted to do, so Mr. Nelson said he was going to stay here, and I decided that I would stay, too; so I stayed here in the flood, and we had good provisions, food and all, during the time we stayed. I told you that we stayed at the Cowan Hotel and they built walks. At first, they would come in boats, and then they built a walk from the Post Office down to the levee and then from the levee down to the Cowan Hotel. We'd go back to the levee and we'd go down the levee and then down the street to the Cowan Hotel.

MILLER: So you could walk to work from the Cowan Hotel?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: What was that you said about the Russell Motor Company, that people had tents over there?

NELSON: Yes, the men slept there at night, - the linemen.

MILLER: The telephone linemen. This was the building next door. Was it out of the water, or were the tents on top of the building?

NELSON: The tents were on top of the building.

MILLER: The tents were on the levee or on top of the building?

NELSON: On top of the building.

MILLER: Well! How many of them were there?

NELSON: I think there were about three or four tents up there.

MILLER: And that's where the linemen lived, and you all were able to fix lunch and things like that at the telephone company during the day. Did anybody sleep there at night at the telephone company or you all just worked?

NELSON: We worked and then we went to the Cowan Hotel.

MILLER: But somebody was there manning the telephones all night?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: What was that you said about the first thing you did when you knew the flood was coming?

NELSON: We went back to the office and called every subscriber, every subscriber that we had.

MILLER: To let them know that the protection levee had broken.

NELSON: To let them know that the protection levee had broken.

MILLER: How many people were working at the Telephone Company during the flood?

NELSON: Now, they brought some linemen in here, and there were some engineers that were off that had come in here to do some repair work, and so they stayed on. I think they were from Greenwood and different offices around.

MILLER: Yes, because I am sure that the lines were down in various places. Were there many women working in Greenville when you first started working? Did many women have jobs in Greenville then?

NELSON: Well, not too many.

MILLER: What did women mostly do then?

NELSON: Well, they worked as clerks, that was mostly what they did.

MILLER: Clerks and secretaries and nurses.

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: And, so when you retired, what was your job at the Telephone Company?

NELSON: Night Chief Operator.

MILLER: Night Chief Operator. How did your salary end up, compared with the way it was when you started working?

NELSON: Well, I'll tell you, I'd say it was around fifty dollars a week.

MILLER: When you retired?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: And they did have a pension plan for the operators?

NELSON: Yes. We had vacation, too, back there.

MILLER: Paid vacations?

NELSON: Yes. Two weeks was the longest you would get then. Of course, if you worked six months, I think you would get a week.

MILLER: During the flood, do you think that people in Greenville had a hard time?

NELSON: Well, I'll tell you, they were trying times when you would get those reports that the water was going to get much higher than they thought it was. We knew we were under about four or five feet of water, I think it was, and you'd get those reports, and we used to say we didn't know whether that old building would stand it or not.

MILLER: Did you still live on South Broadway at that time?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: Did the water get in your house?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: How high did it get?

NELSON: It got about three feet in there.

MILLER: And you all just went off and left your house and went to the Cowan Hotel?

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NELSON: Until they got to stealing. And we had a grocery store.

MILLER: You closed your grocery?

NELSON: We closed it and left, and so Mr. Nelson came back to it and put down springs and a mattress on the counter, from one shelf to the other counter, and fixed a bed and slept there. He said he could hear the water sloshing under him.

MILLER: People did lots of things during the flood.

NELSON: Yes, they sure did.

MILLER: Did you lose anything from stealing?

NELSON: No, they didn't go in our grocery store.

MILLER: And not in your house either?

NELSON: No.

MILLER: But a good many of your things were ruined, weren't they, or did you put them up?

NELSON: We got most of our things up. We were lucky.

MILLER: You had enough time to do that?

NELSON: Yes, when we knew the water was coming into town, he went back down there and put the things up.

MILLER: The town has grown so much that you used to know who everybody was, who were the subscribers, a long time ago, didn't you?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: What is the biggest change that you have

noticed in the Telephone Company from the time you started working there until the time you quit?

NELSON: What do you mean?

MILLER: In the number of subscribers and service, and things like that.

NELSON: I don't know how many subscribers they have now, but back in those days I don't recall how many they had, but they had very few.

MILLER: And the numbers were just three numbers, weren't they?

NELSON: Yes.

MILLER: When did they change the numbers to make them bigger?

NELSON: I can't recall. It was in the fifties, but what year I can't recall.

MILLER: During the flood, I imagine you had some unusual telephone calls, didn't you?

NELSON: Yes, there were some of the colored folks that asked if we called them about the levee breaking. They would call in and say they couldn't get away from their homes, and they would like for them to send some boats out there. Of course, we only had a very few boats in town then, and we were unable to get to them.

MILLER: How many boats do you suppose we had in Greenville then? Someone said the other day that we didn't

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have very many boats.

NELSON: Well, I should imagine about ten or twelve, I think, at the beginning.

MILLER: At the beginning, and then they got more later on?

NELSON: Yes, when they brought more in.

MILLER: Did the Telephone Company do rescue work, too?

NELSON: Yes, they did some.

MILLER: They had a boat. Of course, you all got a lot of distress calls and people wanting to call their friends and relatives. I imagine it kind of jammed up the lines, is that true?

NELSON: Yes, and people trying to get in here, too, you see.

MILLER: Yes. But you didn't have any trouble. The lines worked and you had no trouble getting your calls in and out?

NELSON: Very few.

MILLER: The water didn't wash down any telephone poles?

NELSON: I think there were a few, but not very many.

MILLER: Now, the Telephone Company is on South Edison Street now. When do you think you all moved from the

building on Washington Avenue?

NELSON: I think it was some time in Fifty.

MILLER: And the reason you moved?

NELSON: They were going over to Dial.

MILLER: Going over to Dial, and the town was growing.

NELSON: Yes, and we had so many more subscribers.

MILLER: Have they made any recent changes in the Telephone Company? Are they planning any that you know of?

NELSON: They are fixing to move the office from here over to Greenwood, the traffic department.

MILLER: Now, what does the traffic department consist of?

NELSON: That is where all your calls go through.

MILLER: In other words, we won't have any more ..

NELSON: Operators.

MILLER: .. here in Greenville. They will be in Greenwood, so when we pick up the phone, we will get Greenwood instead of Greenville, is that right?

NELSON: Yes.

(End of Interview)

Final
8/19/77
A. C. Nagel

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