

Socorro County Historical Society, Oral History Tapes

Abigail Bianchi interviewed by Sue Little

My guest today is Abigail Bianchi. You are Spanish? And you've lived in Socorro County all your life? I've lived here since I got married 25 years ago. I understand that you went to the convent? Yes. Why was that? Why when you're small my father - we were orphans - my mother died when I was ten years old, so my father and my aunt raised me. We lived in Albuquerque, and then we moved back to San Antonio and he brought my sister and I to the convent. And you were boarding students? I didn't know until this morning when I interviewed (---) that boys could go to the convent. Did they have many of them? Yeah, they had quite a few. I regret so much that they tore down that old convent. If we could just get that and the Park Hotel back and restore the Opera House we would be very, very fortunate because these buildings are disappearing all the time. Tell me what you remember about the convent. I've asked several people about the convent, but they didn't seem to remember very much about it. We would have the chapel and math every morning. And all of the teachers were sisters, huh? You didn't have any lay teachers. And were they as strict as the stories you hear about them? They were strict, and I think it was good, too. Could you ever go out? The sisters would take us to a show sometimes and they used to take us to town. I remember I used to go to town with the sisters and go shoppin'. But you couldn't go without them? No. There's discipline and what you need now is discipline because the world is in such a mess. When you went to high school here, were they having it in two languages? No, only one. Well (---) said when he first went to school they were having it a half day in Spanish and a half day in English and he was speaking more Spanish than English and that's one reason why they sent him to the convent. I'm Spanish, but I learned it by myself. I didn't take any. Did you speak any Spanish at home. Yes, we all spoke Spanish by ourselves and with the sisters. Well, so many children today are not being taught Spanish and that's bad. Well, whom do you remember in high school? In high school, I remember Holm Bursum, Alice Del Curto, she was my best friend. Alice Zimmerly, she used to be a Zimmerly. She's coming in tomorrow afternoon. What was it the boys said about you girls having to (----) Yeah, Holm Bursum used to pull our papers from our door. I used to be mad at him all of the time. Did you have braids that they could pull? Yeah, we had braids. What do you remember most about high school? What do you remember about the convent. I used to like it - I liked the sisters very much. We used to go frog leg hunting. You remember that little ditch at the front of the church - and the sister used to take us every evening to catch frogs. I remember that so much that it makes me hungry for frog's legs, and we used to like 'em - and another thing we used to like was a gravy we used to make, and I never did learn what kind of gravy that was. They used to serve us and I guess we were hungry and that's why it was so good. Well, you probably had a long school day. There was a girl there named Sadia? used to help the sisters cook. She knew how to make that gravy, and one time I saw her and I asked her outside of school and she said I'll tell you how to make that gravy and she told me but I forgot all about it. I could kill myself - I still want to make some of that gravy. I think it was made with corn meal or something, I don't know. It had a different taste. I remember very often the frog legs. Sister Serebra? was the Mother Superior, and she was very nice. I took violin and my sister took piano lessons and we used to play them. Another one that was in school with us was Gordon Herkimer He's some kind of supervisor or something. He and I used to play violin together, I remember that. But he was a baseball player. All the boys would have to be, wouldn't they? Outside of Holm Bursum taking your papers and (----) them what else do you remember about high school? It was in the old building where the cafetorium is now where Torres is now, and that was the high school. And later they built that other one. So many people here went to the little red school house. No, I didn't get to go to that. Well, I'll say again, one of the tragedies of Socorro is that they tore that convent down. Well, after you left high school, what did you do? Well, Mr. Lehr? from San Antonio needed a girl down there at Christmas time. He had a big store, a general merchandise store, and the girl who was working had left for Albuquerque, so he needed a girl, and he knew I was about to finish the eleventh grade, so he asked my father if I could go down and work for him. So my father called me and asked if I could go down, and I said, well I still have a year and a half of high school to go and I want to finish. But he said, after you finish you'll be working for Mr. Lehr anyhow, so you might as well start right now, and he promised to

help me with the bookkeeping because that's what I was taking in school so he promised to help teach me bookkeeping. I worked there 16 years until I got married. I was 16 years old when I started working for him. *And you didn't marry until you was 31.* I had to work because I had to help my dad - he had married again. His wife died too, his second wife, so I was the oldest child, so I kept on working. My sister got married. *Didn't you tell me she was very active in the Historical Society there?* Also in art. This train came from Michigan or wherever it came from so she called me in the morning, "You better rush down here and see this train." So I got some ladies to come over, two of my friends to come with me so we went down -- *It was in the Chieftain yesterday. Before you were married in San Antonio - let's talk a little about San Antonio.* --Bookkeeping and buying the merchandise - the dry goods - and I used to do the buying. He was very nice to me. *What about San Antonio, do you remember anything about Hilton, the hotel man?* Yes, I remember something about him - not too much, but I remember that building was there. Later on it turned into a dance hall. Louis Miera and his wife took over. The Zimmerlys were there- they ran that as a --not a grocery store -- a drug store. I know Mrs. Sarracino in Polvadera said they came by wagon one time a month to Socorro to buy. In San Antonio we still had the Midland train that came from Carthage bringing the coal to San Antonio. *How often did it come? Did it run on schedule?* Yes, there would be one car of passengers. *It wasn't narrow gauge, it was regular track, wasn't it?* Yes. You can still see where the mines were. You never have been out there? *No, there's so much to see around here ---* The cemetery is there. *I've seen it from the road, but I've never walked up there.* Those two little towns were very prosperous you know, and there were a lot of people working in the coal mines. There's a lot of coal still there, but they would have to take it out with pit mines. A lot of people from the east got interested in buying that ---. *Have you ever seen a strip mine? Where they go in with a big shovel and mine it. I was in Minnesota last year and they have just about ruined half of Minnesota. They have stem shovel that can pick up coal larger than this room and they turn it upside down, and all the good soil is on the bottom. And then your land is ruined because it's very expensive to re-sod it. Don't they give money for that or the state should. But the land is ruined -you should just see Minnesota.* They wanted to buy Tokay and Carthage -- most people are interested from the east and I hear it's on account of the minerals. *Oh, I really don't want strip mining in our beautiful New Mexico. I hope the state makes it against the law for strip mining because wherever they go the land is ruined. It's something fairly new and I've read a lot about it because it just ruins the country.* Well, they have to dig under. *That's too expensive to dig under and they have these huge machines. ---And the train ran very day.* Yes, I remember it used to bring packages, not very many. Considering there is no good road we had a lot of customers from there. *I know all the ranch people out there come in. We have two big arguments. I had two interviews and one said in 1922 the road to Magdalena was paved.* Indeed not, there was no paved road to Magdalena in 1822, *And they said the old road from here to Albuquerque crossed the river seven times.* I remember father had a big car - Oldsmobile - real heavy, and it was slow, slow, barely making it. *Some of 'em didn't make it. They moved the road from Blue Canyon and very narrow too with lot of curves. Well then you married, a man in San Antonio. Did you live in San Antonio?* ----then my husband died 16 years ago. Then I had my little store. *I remember your little store, I was in it a number of times. What are the big changes in Socorro?* It's very different - even this library. I wanted to come to the opening but I didn't have a chance. *It's a beautiful library. Martin Speare went to school when you went to school.* Oh sure, and his father was manager of Lehr's for a while when I was working down there. This library was named for Martin Speare. Well, I saw the old library when I first came, and I can tell you this is quite an improvement *What other changes?* The trailers. There are some on the other side of the tracks. Have you been out that way? There was nothing there before. *When you first came here, how did you come, did you drive?* Oh yes, it was still the old road, it wasn't paved. *Yes, this new road has only been finished the last two years. As a matter of fact I think the old road's prettier than the new one,* We came through the old road the other day when I went to a funeral. Not too good, but it's nice. *Were you out in any of the floods?* My father lost a farm. *In that '28 and '29?* We didn't lose ours because it was high but it almost did. *Well your father passed away in San Antonio* No, we lost several. In San Marcial people lost a couple of them. Did you see that flood? *No.* You couldn't even tell there was houses. - the water rose about three feet. We went down after the flood, but we couldn't get in. *Was your father able to salvage anything from the flood?* No. He didn't have time - it came at night. They moved to San Antonio where we lived in another house for a while - it served the purpose for a while. he had a very nice home before he lost it - a piano - you should see how the water came over the tracks there - what is it - the overpass? It came over the trains and the tracks and all that, it came over. *Somebody was telling me this morning how they rigged up canoes and patched them together and got most of their cattle out - they lost some calves but they got the cattle out in*

canoes. Here in Socorro. We all had a lot of trouble. Well, it's not supposed to flood any more, I hope it doesn't.. *Well, in 1895 there was a cloudburst. I wonder if you knew where the old TB San was. Up here there's a big canal.* Well, they built that to take care of the cloudbursts because that's protection for all the new homes here. *It has a big cement base. It's a flood wall. Before you know it, it's a flash flood. They come from the mountains. Real deep, real high water.* They barely got out on horses and in wagons. We were trying to save our lives. My grandmother put on a towel and a brush and just little things like that and handkerchiefs, I remember - she made a bundle. We didn't even think about suitcases or anything like that. You just see the water coming and it's going to go. They were calling, "Get out, get out!" At first you don't believe it you just don't want to get out. *Where did you go?* To town, to San Antonio, to the old town, we were in new town. So they told us to get out and go to San Antonio to the old town. Somebody even sent a wagon to get us. I think I took a dress and a gown or something. And then we had to wait two days before we could get back to the house. *Where did you stay two days.* Over at some friends or relatives in old town. We have a lot of relatives there. We stayed there until it was dry. *Now see, San Antonio for me is Frank's for hamburgers.* Haven't you seen where the depot used to be? We were a little bit east of there. Have you been up to Mr. Lehr's? Well we used to live right across the street from there. *And you could salvage nothing from your home?* Well from ours we did, because it was up high. The water didn't come too much in. ----- It was made out of adobe and the foundation washed away. The roof came down. We couldn't have saved anything, anyway because the water came all through the house. It was late in the evening, getting dark already. *We had a bad rain one day, and something broke in the river. The river came all over the railroad tracks. There is a record, En Camino? Comido? de San Marcial, have you heard it? The snows in the mountains melted so quickly and the rains ---* Do they have a book written of that? *Well, not one particular book. You know we have six publications from the Historical Society. Have you seen all six of those?* No. *It's a continuing problem even with all the dams we have. Some people think that when Cochiti Dam is finished it can hold all of the water. -----Well I think most people think that there are enough dams. That they can control the river. Did you ever have any difficulty with Indians?* No, my grandfather - they did because my grandfather bought a little boy a rifle. *I'm tellin' you right now, Mrs. Bianchi, tell me that nice story.* They knew my grandfather had a bet with that boy, but they didn't know how he had come, he followed a dead barranca?. My grandfather had a store about a half mile from San Antonio. That was the old days when the Indians was coming. *You can hardly believe that unless you watch a lot of TV.* My aunt used to tell it - it kind of made me shiver - so the last time they came and that was Geronimo they shot at the Indians and they brought this little boy without any clothes and all painted up - you know how they paint the M on the mountain? . And he lived with them until he was about six years old, and this little boy got close to my grandfather in the store and said (---) ---ninas. And my grandfather looked at him and he saw that he didn't look like an Indian, and he said, "How much do you want for this little boy?" And the Indian said do you really want to buy him, and he said yes how much do you want for him? And we wanted everything in the store - different things, like this whole box of dry goods and different materials and even the white mules that they had outside and the wagon. So my grandfather gave him everything he asked for - for that little boy and he kept him. So they left him there. they had killed his father in Mexico - he was a Mexican. They killed his father in Mexico. They were both destroying the farms and they killed the father. *What happened to his mother?* I don't know where she was. *He never did know where he was from?* He knew his first name, he said (Noam?) that's all he knew. So my grandfather adopted him. They took the mules and the wagon and a lot of groceries and dry goods. *What a wonderful story. What a wonderful man that your grandfather was willing to do that.* You know, that man was better than a brother to my father. *Did he leave any family?* Yes, he had a boy and a girl. *Do they live in Socorro County?* No. Every time I go to Albuquerque I talk to them. *I want you to make a list of stories that you could tell me because this has been very interesting. I've never heard that story of buying a boy, was that a common practice?* Must have been, but that's the only one I heard of that was bought. *And he came up o your grandfather and said, "I am not an Indian. Buy me."* He wanted a bolt of material, they wanted food, they wanted the white mules and the wagon, and my grandfather was so anxious to get the boy away from the Indians, he gave them everything they asked for. It is a true story. *That's why it' so wonderful. And Geronimo is the one that sold him?* Yes. We called him uncle, because we were born after that. *Is he still living?* No, no, he died right after my father.