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Interviewee: Nina Faye Anderson  
Interviewer: Mary Melcher  
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Mary Melcher: Faye, you came with your family to Montana when you were about 11 years old?

Nina Faye Anderson: Yes.

MM: What state did you come from?

NA: Nebraska. But we had lived in Kansas most of my life. That’s where my parents grew up. They came there in covered wagons very early time, when they were young children.

MM: And they just kept traveling West?

NA: My father was a retail lumberman but wanted to come West. He did, and he was out here for about a year before we came from Nebraska to Belfry [Montana]. He felt this was growing community and it was. Elk Basin was a good coming oil town at that time—was just starting.

MM: Elk Basin [Montana]?

NA: Elk Basin. And there were a good many oil wells coming into being just then and he sold lumber for those people to build their houses and that sort of thing. But not too long after we got to Montana my father got sick -- right after the World War.

MM: After World War One?

NA: Yes. He got Parkinson’s as many people did after the flu in World War One. And he really was not able to work to grow a salary after that. He could move and get around but he wasn’t able to really go out and support the family entirely. So, our situation was a little different than some people. I had four sisters and we all went out to work. But my mother was appointed post mistress in this little town and she also had a little drug store with it.

MM: Where did she get the drugs? Did she send away?

NA: No. There were people coming through, you know. She wasn’t a druggist but she sold, oh [laughs] mints and medicines, you know, over the counter. Stuff like Kleenex and that sort of thing. But most of the income, of course, was from the post office.

MM: And you were born in 1905, is that right?

MM: 1904, okay. Where were you in the family line up, were you the oldest?

NA: In the middle.

MM: Right in the middle. And you had all sisters? Four sisters?

NA: Two older sisters and two younger sisters. And when we came out here my oldest sister was through high school and my next sister was a junior high school and I was down the line a little bit and there were not any high schools in Belfry so Jessie had to go away to school. Ruth worked in a store -- there was a big store in Belfry Creek. It’s hard to realize that they were that big because people came in from all of the ranches around and bought their materials. There wasn’t any going someplace else to a big store. These little towns had big stores.

MM: And your oldest sister worked in one—

NA: Worked in one of those stores for a year or so and got money to go on to school. Jessie taught school—country school—before...I don’t know how she...She taught a country school before she was through high school. It could be done then. We moved one year to Missoula and thought maybe we would go over there to live but it didn’t seem as good as Bell Creek. So my parents went back to Belfry but I had one year of high school in Missoula. And then the next year I lived in Belfry and went to Bridger on a little car that went back and forth between Bridger and Bell Creek.

MM: What kind of car was this?

NA: It was an electric one. It carried mail and passengers and that sort of thing. Quite a few people rode on it. And it went clear to Bear Creek out when there was a little railroad that ran through there that was quite prosperous because it carried the coal from Bear Creek on down and the man who had started that little railroad line -- it was called Montana-Wyoming and Southern -- and he had planned to take it to Cook City and take the ore out of Cook City and Belfry was to be the headquarters for it. And we were fortunate because we had a very secure, good house to live in. It had been built with four foot brick walls -- stone walls -- and built into a side of a hill but it was very strongly built. It was supposed to be their printing shop.

MM: When you say four foot brick walls how do you mean?

NA: The windows were just set in the bottom of it, you see. It was all set in the side of a hill and when you came up to it just looked like a bungalow but it had another section below with these great huge beams and when they were...when the town was growing some, they had a school down there. Some of the kids were downstairs. It was hard for...They built a new school that was a consolidated school and they ran buses to it from quite a ways off. So they had more teachers...
and they started and they started a high school.

MM: There in Belfry?

NA: Yes. There weren’t very many people...places for these teachers to live and the superintendent came up and asked my mother if she would take them in at our house, and my mother said, no, that we were too busy because we all were helping out to keep things going. We had one girl there that...there wasn’t any place for her to live except for a pretty raunchy hotel, and so she said, well, she’d help us get the meals and that sort of stuff cause one of us always stayed home and helped mother to see things through going and the rest of us were running yonder in various kinds of jobs and my younger sisters, of course, were still in high school. Anyway, when Anne (?) came up to live with us and she hadn’t been there very long until she said, “You know, I’ve got an aunt that’s an awfully good cook, and she doesn’t have any job and her husband doesn’t have any job. They’d come up here and live in the basement and cook for us, I’ll bet you.” They did [laughs] and stayed there for years. She was there for 17 years and then other people came after that, but we just made the basement over to...for them to live in down there and they cooked for all of us. So they cooked for all of these school teachers, and some of them lived upstairs in the rooms that we had lived in because most of us were away, you see. Then Mother didn’t have to cook. She could take care of Dad.

[Telephone rings; break in audio]

MM: You went to Belfry when you were about 11 and then you went through grade school there?

NA: The rest of the grade school. Seventh and Eighth grades and then I went to Missoula the next year, and stayed at home and went to Bridger the next year, and then the next two years I went to Carbon County High School in Red Lodge [Montana]. You know, you don’t have to pay tuition for a county high school if there aren’t...weren’t any high schools in a...for us to go to then we didn’t have to pay tuition. But I worked for a lady...I lived in with a family and worked for my board and room. When I was talking to you the other day about jobs, that’s the kind of jobs that we took to do to get through school.

MM: You, like, did housework?

NA: Yes. I’d help her with her washing and do dishes and make beds and things like that general girl and I made...But quite a few people did that if they had to go away from home to school—there were several schools around. The Rocky Mountain was a polytechnic at that time, and that was sort of the same thing. Kids came in there and they ran the farm, and some of the kids—the girls—did the cooking, and so forth. There was quite a bit of that done to get through high school. Kids that went there lived on ranches a long way away and they couldn’t get to a school. Now, I went Carbon County High School and took Normal Training.
MM: During high school?

NA: During high school. I went out of high school at 17 and taught at a grade school at Clark, Wyoming. I had good training, too. We did get good training at high school. We were the last class that did it. They took it away after that. It was good for me because I didn’t have to go to normal school before I could teach so I could teach and then go in the summertime and catch up with the rest of them.

MM: What year did you graduate from high school?

NA: ’22.

MM: 1922. And where were the high schools? Were they spread around in the various towns or?

NA: A lot of towns had high schools but they were real small, you know, they didn’t have many kids in them because the towns are kind of sparsely populated then. Now, the Bridger School that I went to took in several of the smaller towns around. But I went before they ran buses to take the kids. Now at Belfry they have a consolidated school and they run buses clear up to Clark, Wyoming, and they have a lot of kids in high school and there bigger high schools and that’s better. We got good training. We got good normal training but because we did it we missed out on some of the things that we should have had—some of the sciences, and math and stuff that you’d normally take in high school.

MM: So you were studying education and you didn’t take science and math?

NA: Yes, we had...and we went...The last six weeks that we were in school we went by horse. Well, it was cold, we went by sleigh, really, to Fox that’s just out of high school and we taught at that school, there were seven of us that went out there with our critic-teacher and because I was Anderson, I took the first grade the first week and the second one the second one the second week and so forth and we really learned. Our classmates sat and listened to what we were doing and so did the supervisor and the classroom teacher. So if we got anything wrong we really got hollered. But the next year, then, I went up to Clark to teach and I had 30 kids in 8 grades. I had two that were taller than I was and I didn’t look very old in those days and I grew a little taller [laughs] I’m still not too tall but I’m still taller than I was. I took one of these big tall kids to Cody [Wyoming] to a spelling contest and they put me in the child’s seat and pronounced the words to her [laughs] before they finally realized that they were giving the words to the teacher rather than the student. I got kidded a lot because I was so young. But the year after that, then I went to Bearcreek to teach. And out of all the teaching I have done, I think that was the most interesting. Of course, I was real young, but we had been taught to teach not with phonics—that was a bad time. Oh, they just dropped phonics, but we taught Mother Goose rhymes. I had a bunch of them printed up, and they’d learn the whole rhyme and then a part of it and then a part of it and then finally get down to the word. Unfortunately in those days we didn’t teach any phonics which was wrong, and they finally dropped that pretty fast because
they found it was wrong. But I had a whole trunk full of Mother Goose rhymes all printed up and I had 30 kids there but they couldn’t speak English.

MM: Not a one?

NA: Six of them could speak English, not...Well, six of them could speak English well, and the rest of them couldn’t speak English at all and really needed to help their parents very much. I was just floored. But we did have some books that were very good for that, and I don’t know why I’ve never seen one again. It had a lot of action in it. We made a name of a seat or a chair or a window or something and put them on in printing, you see, then just printed there and they could see that and then the action words they really had to learn—run to the chair, run to the teacher, run to the back room, so on and so on. It was amazing how fast they could get it.

MM: Would you act out the motion?

NA: Sure did and sometimes almost stand on your head! [laughs] Bearcreek was having a bad time then. That was, oh...I don’t know why it was such a bad time for the miners. They were all miners—coal miners—but they were from all kinds of backgrounds. I had help because the kids at (unintelligible) could speak Finnish and they could talk to each other. We had a little trouble with them because I couldn’t talk to them. I couldn’t talk...speak their language. The regular classroom teachers couldn’t. I think maybe they did sometimes. But anyway, these children had to have English for a common language so they’d learn very quickly. But it was really fun to hear them talk, you know, and so forth.

MM: At Bearcreek they learned quickly?

NA: From these books, you see. They, most of them, learned amazingly fast. And I have often thought it would be interesting to make books like that for slow learning children but it was a time when we were doing a lot of bootlegging and a lot of them had nothing to eat but these sour grapes and they’d come to school with just about that in their lunch pale and they lived in the part of Bearcreek called Stream Town — it was just on the Bearcreek, you see, they just had houses there. I remember one time I...the word I was trying to establish was bed. I did everything I could, and I finally realized I was wrong. They didn’t have any beds. They slept on the floor. They slept in the car and all kinds of places. But they knew what I was talking about but they didn’t have beds.

MM: It was hard for them to understand.

NA: It was. I felt real sorry for them. But there were two first grades in Bearcreek then, and the other one was up in what they called High Boat (?). Those children did speak English, but I was glad that I had the non-English speaking ones.

MM: For the experience?
NA: For the experience.

MM: What nationalities were they?

NA: All kinds. But now, if we’d been over in Red Lodge where I went to high school they were Finns and Italians, and there weren’t many others. But we had Montenegrins, and we had a whole Scotch settlement, and oh, all kinds of southern Europeans. But they had to speak English to speak to each other. It was interesting, and Bearcreek was close enough to Belfry so I could go home every week. Sometimes I even walked home.

MM: Were the miners paid poorly? Do you know?

NA: No, they weren’t paid so poorly but it was such a bad time, you know. They were laid off. Another thing that bothered me terribly there, there were accidents. There was an awful accident that killed a lot of men. They couldn’t get them out at all. Those things bothered me. They didn’t seem to bother the kids. I guess their parents had always been in that sort of a situation. It was a rough town. We didn’t go downtown after dark. There was a lot of drinking. But there was an awful lot of bootlegging. Sometimes these poor little kids were boosted through windows to steal and that sort of thing. That sort of stuff just bothered me terribly.

MM: How did you find out about that?

NA: Oh, it was right on top of us all the time. One day I sat and looked at two children who sat in front of me and their fathers had gotten in a fight the night before in a bar that was right down at the end of the hill and one of them had killed the other one. And I was the only one there who seemed very disturbed by it and was upset and I looked at both of those children and thought it was just about as bad for the one as it was for the other.

MM: Did they fight, the kids?

NA: They got in a fight. They were drinking and—

MM: Did the children fight in school?

NA: No, no, it didn’t seem to bother them. They didn’t refuse to it.

MM: Well, what would the widows do after their husbands were killed?

NA: Probably marry another miner.

MM: Did they have any little businesses in town?
NA: No, they didn’t seem...they didn’t have any businesses. But they cooked and took care of their families. It was a good place, like many camps that they were used to in Europe. Most of them are right from Europe. I had trouble learning their names because when people brought them to school I couldn’t speak to the mothers either because they couldn’t speak English. The second grade teacher said to me, “I think I would just take them by the hand and take them to...all around and see if you can find a brother or a sister and then you find out what the name is”—what the last name is. That worked out fine, but I got one little boy who had a step-father and gave me the wrong name and [laughs] that wasn’t very good. The father—the second father came in and was very unhappy because I had given his youngster the former husbands name because it was the same as the other child’s, you see.

MM: So you didn’t have too much contact with the parents of these children either?

NA: Not too much.

MM: Because they couldn’t speak English.

NA: But you know, some of them did. Quite a few of them taught them how to read. They’d take their books home and teach their parents out of those books. I think that it made me feel more close to many children they had so much trouble. I hadn’t lived in that sort of a situation before. The people around were I lived, we weren’t very rich but everybody was about the same, you know, and we certainly weren’t poor like that.

MM: So it gave you more understanding—

NA: Yes, more understanding of the children and their problems and often when I see...I didn’t have children that were as deprived as that again but I’ve often thought of those children and many of them did very well. They went on and pulled themselves up by their boot straps and got along fine. But I went after that to a...I went back to school for a while. My sister Jessie...You were wondering how we got along with our education. Jessie was teaching. So I lived with an aunt and Jessie sent me my tuition and money and the next year I taught and sent her money to go. We got through that way, sort of, and then we’d go in the summertime.

MM: You helped each other out, supported each other. Was she the sister that was—

NA: She was just older than me.

MM: And what was the other sister doing? The oldest one?

NA: She got married and she, she went to Chicago. She taught in Winnetka [Illinois], which is a very fine school. But she had taught in Billings before that. When I came back from Oklahoma, from going to school, down there I had planned to go back down and get a job in the office and do it the next year. My father was still living but he was not at all well and Mr. Dietrich in Billings
said to my sister down there, “Where are your sisters?”

She said, “In Oklahoma teaching school...learning to teach school.”

He said, “There’s no use for Montana teachers to go down there. Send them up and I’ll give them a job.” I didn’t think much about it, but my father wanted me to do it. I had planned to go on back and finish my four years, so I went in to Billings to teach then in 1926 and I didn’t leave. I stayed there and taught second grade. But it was a good job and our salaries got awfully poor and in those days instead of having a strike or something I guess, they instead of taking children away, they couldn’t have any more teachers so they gave us more kids and it was really pretty rugged going.

Another thing they did about that time, about the first year I went into Billings, they had, I think, 60 teachers when I went there and about half of them were married women. They decided that that was Depression, really, Depression times, and they could have only one job a family. So if a married woman’s husband had a job they weren’t allowed to teach. So that year they sent in to take the place of those people that had had to retire and most of them were older women. I felt awfully young when I went in there. I was 20 when I got in there but I was young for that sort of a job and [laughs] I looked it in those days. I really looked awfully young. But people would question me once in a while. But a lot of teachers about my own age came in and those gals are almost to a person my best friends yet. The gal whose funeral I went to the other day was one of them. You know, it was just...Well, I just stayed there for 43 more years except that one year I was sent to Akron, Ohio, to teach, and there teacher came to Billings and just exchanged that way.

That was an interesting year. But from that, when that school year was over, I had lost a very close friend in the Pearl Harbor, and I wasn’t quite ready to come back home. I was really disturbed. But one of my friends who was back there was from Cheyenne, Wyoming, and she was also on an exchange like I was and she wanted to go to Washington, D.C. to stay. Well, I had promised that I would go back to Billings at least a year to do this exchange and...Anyway, she said, “Well, if they give a test to two people for a civil service job and they were looking for people to work”—you see the war had just started [World War Two] and they wanted people really badly. So she got me to take this test, and it was just an easy test. It was a typing test, and I had had all this typing stuff. I had a typing certificate from back in Oklahoma, but anyway, I took it planning just to take it to help her and I passed. I was taken out of there almost before school was out, but I went to Washington then, just to work in the summer. I would have been stuck if I hadn’t gotten this bad strep throat so I went back to Billings for one year.

NA: Wait, I think...I wanted to talk more about when you were just beginning as a teacher and what your social life was like and you were telling me you went to dances and had been going to dances in Red Lodge and a little bit about the community -- what the community did when they, when you socialized.
MM: They always had a party for us when we went in, even Billings, they’d have a special party for the new teachers. We played quite a lot of bridge. There were boys around at that time, because the War hadn’t started too much. We had a good many dates. We always went to dances. We danced more than anything else, I think.

MM: And would you go with groups or date or—

NA: Oh yes.

MM: Both. Either in a group or with one person? Was there any chaperoning when you were in high school?

NA: Well there were for high school dances. But when we got to be teachers we weren’t very much older, and no we didn’t get chaperoned. We probably should of then. [laughs] I was just saying to the girl who went to Billings with the other day, we were thinking back over our young days and moons. We thought we didn’t have too much right to talk about what the kids are doing now because we did quite a few things that weren’t just right. It was Prohibition time. You couldn’t drink. We had a little book that told us what we could do. It was made up by the school board. One thing, we couldn’t smoke. If they smelled smoke on us we were through, right then. If you got married you were through.

MM: Did you ever want to get married? Were you tempted to get married at some point?

NA: Yes, but it was not economically sound right then. Yes, and some people got secretly married, which wasn’t so good.

MM: It wouldn’t have been economically sound to get married?

NA: No, because the fellows didn’t have very good jobs either. You just couldn’t drop your money, you see. In all of this time my father was sick and most of the time my father was in bed or almost so. That was one of the things that I had on my mind always.

MM: That you had to support yourself?

NA: I had to support myself, but I also had to be available to help my family if they needed it as they often did. But—

MM: So that kept you from marrying—

NA: We had real fun and most of the time...When I first went to Billings, it cost a lot to live, you know. AWe, two of us, we’d get a hotel room downtown, and then they were mostly residence hotels. But we would live in one room that would cost 25 dollar. Well, that was 12 and a half dollars each, you see. We ate downtown. We’d get a doughnut and coffee for breakfast,
probably, and take something to school or sometimes we’d cook our lunches at school. We would eat downtown at night, and we could get a good dinner for 50 cents. My food never cost more than a dollar a day.

MM: What was your wages when you first started?

NA: Nine hundred dollars a year. One hundred dollars a month.

MM: Do you know if men got more than the women teachers?

NA: No, they didn’t. Not there. Because we had a pretty strong...We didn’t have a union, but we had a pretty strong organization of our own. No I don’t think...And I don’t think...Well, I don’t think any of the time, actually, men got more than the women. Now, right now, once in a while, they give men extra money for things like basketball or taking tickets and things like that, and the women do resent that because I think the women can do about those same things and I don’t think it should be done. It is done in some places and once in a while but not very much. We had a lot of women, and we threw pretty much of a weight in [laughs] an organization.

MM: What would you do, say, if they did try to give you less wages than the men? What would the organization do?

NA: Oh...I don’t know just...Now, one thing we did that I thought was better, much better, than trying it a little later, our salaries were not...were never as high as they should be. I don’t think teachers ever were paid as well as they should be. But we did strike. But we did say, one year we heard that somebody had gone to the chamber of commerce and said that teachers wages were not to be raised the next year. So, we just got together, we had this organization, this MEA...BEA, Billings Teachers Association [Billings Educators Association?], and what we decided to do, we just said to them we would not sign another contract at this price and that was it. We wouldn’t. But we didn’t tell it. We didn’t go around putting it in the newspaper and all that sort of stuff. But we just decided and that organization would not do it again. We got pretty much what we wanted that way being fair about it and honest about it. Once in a while we argued. One time, one of my friends came...I told you about this business about firing teachers just for nothing. That was bad. We had one superintendent that did a lot of that.

MM: I don’t remember this? They fired teachers for no good reason?

NA: I thought for no good reason. We had one superintendent, now this was in Billings, and...The school board was not being fair to us, and one of them was particularly bad. Two of us lived in...Well, we were living downtown in these apartments and that sort of thing. I smoked, and we drank a little, yes. But we did not do it where people saw us or it was conspicuous. I felt always that it was my job to be so I could be an example to kids and they wouldn’t see me doing things that looked like that. But we did smoke. But we did it in our own rooms. One of the gals that belonged to the same bridge club I did was married to a man that was downtown all the
time and knew what was going on. She came into me one day and said, “I think you better know that this one man has written a letter to the school board saying that he knows a lot of women teachers living in the Babcock Apartments are smoking.” So she said, “I think you maybe should do something about it before it reaches the superintendent’s desk.” That would mean that we would be fired right out quick. They did that to one or two girls, and it was not right at all because they didn’t give them a chance to talk to them. But there was this one superintendent that was there just two years. But this fellow that was...I don’t know if he was the president of the school board or what. Anyway, he didn’t make much money either because it was in this Depression time and he was a lawyer. I just took myself up to his office and I said, “I understand that you have a letter on your desk ready to go to the superintendent saying that the teachers in the Babcock are smoking.”

He said, “Yes, I do happen to hear that you’re smoking” and so on.

I said, “All right as soon as it reaches there, you’ll be in a lawsuit. You broke into my apartment. You got the maid to let you in, and boy you’re going to have more trouble than you ever knew!”

MM: Did you know that?

NA: Yes, I knew that.

MM: He’d actually been in your apartment?

NA: Yes, he got the maid to let him in, and he even went through the dresser drawers. One or two men that were on that school board went up and listened at the door. I said, we lived in these hotel rooms. They’d listen at the door to see if any hanky-panky was going on inside. Well, that’s a fine job for a businessman to do to go and listen through the doors. But we finally, the young men that we were dating as school teachers pretty much just got their backs up, and they went and said, “Now look,” to this man that wrote the letter got almost all of his income from this one organization that he was secretary for here there and everyplace. Anyway, these young fellows said, “All right you cut out, or you’re going to lose all of your jobs. We’ll see to it that you don’t have any jobs at those organizations that they belonged to too.” We finally got it ironed out...until those few years were really bad.

MM: What years were those?

NA: They were the depth of the Depression when you just couldn’t lose a job, you know.

MM: 1930s somewhere?

NA: Around in there. Just a little bit before there. And then things began to pick up and we gradually began to get more money.
MM: He was an attorney, this man who had the...Who were the people that were sneaking around?

NA: They were from the same organization. I don’t believe I’d better tell you which one it was, you might guess. But one that I had belonged to until I was—

MM: And had the idea that women shouldn’t smoke or drink?

NA: I still have someplace this little grey book that says the rules for us, and that’s one of them. We had to stay in town at least half the time on the weekends. Well, that was a little hard on me sometimes because I wanted to go home.

MM: Why did they want you in town?

NA: They thought we should teach Sunday school or be there or something like that, you see.

MM: They wanted to control your whole lives?

NA: Controlling, more or less. But at that time...Now my best friend, when I started to go to summer school, she went in to be a nurse. We were together quite a little bit, but I still think my job was better than hers and kept on being better than hers.

MM: Why is that?

NA: I just thought I had better breaks and got more money and enjoyed my life more than she enjoyed hers. She got married twice, which probably didn’t help too much.

MM: Was there any idea about women should marry at a certain age when you were growing up? Were women considered old maids or—

NA: Oh yes. That’s always been true. If you didn’t get married, nobody wanted you. Nobody happened to think that maybe you didn’t want all the people that might want you. [laughs]

MM: Maybe you didn’t want them, yes. Did you feel that when you were a young woman?

NA: Yes. I was sort of unhappy. I had wanted to marry a boy that was Catholic, and my parents and his parents didn’t think it was a good idea.

MM: What religion were you?

NA: Protestant. And not a particular Protestant, but my parents were just as much to blame as his. I think probably...I don’t know. I have a feeling that my life has sort of been settled for me. The things that have come to me...I’ve had a good life. There have been many things that have
been pleasant and unusually good to me. But I now, right now, of all times, I miss children. I
don’t have children. My married sisters didn’t either. Just one of my sisters had two and there
were four sisters, but just one of them had two children and one of them is being buried today.
So that’s one of my problems this week. He died in Texas, and his funeral is this morning.

MM: Your nephew? Oh, that’s too bad.

NA: But he was hurt in a war, and he wasn’t in very good condition for quite a while so it was all
right. I think that he...He wasn’t getting any fun out of living. But he had three kids that I like very
much, and we had thought we’d be gone. We had planned to go down. But we found out that it
would cost us about 1,000 dollars to go down there for two days and it was just Keith. The
second one is in college and we’ll just send him the money. We thought it would be much better
than for us try to go down there and he was at...probably would have been a little trouble. But
now, that’s early life.

MM: Yes, so you were a young woman and having trouble with the superintendent—

NA: Now I didn’t have too much trouble with the superintendent because I’ve always been a guy
that sticks right up for what’s got to be done. I think my father’s illness helped because my
father called me son all the time I was growing up. I didn’t have any brothers. But if I had
something to say, I said it. I think maybe, it...It didn’t cause me any trouble.

MM: You went there and stuck up for yourself?

NA: Yes. I wasn’t afraid to go. I could have been fired and had an awful time, but I just thought it
was about time he quit that. That’s the kind of a fellow I am. I’ve always been pretty much that
way.

MM: Now, religion was an issue then when you were a young woman it would stop people from
marrying it sounds like. It was a concern.

NA: It wasn’t any more than now, I don’t think, because there are a lot of Catholics and
Protestants that don’t want to. I think they do more now. That just happened to be one spot I
got in.

MM: Did you think about eloping?

NA: No, because my father was sick. I just wish if my father...I wouldn’t do anything to hurt my
father anyway, and I think that that helped me growing up because during this time when they
had so much bootleg stuff going around and all that sort of stuff there was an awful...Kids
weren’t good in those days. They did an awful lot of things that were wrong.

MM: What sort of things?

Nina Faye Anderson Interview, OH 049-063, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library,
University of Montana-Missoula.
NA: Drinking.

MM: So they drank more during Prohibition times?

NA: Oh, boy yes.

MM: Than they had before?

NA: When you tell kids they can’t do something then that’s when they want to do it.

MM: What age group was this?

NA: Oh, kind of all of them. But now at these dances that we went to when we were younger, I think that was when I was teaching more. But when I was in high school we wouldn’t dance with boys that had been drinking.

MM: Did you smell it—

NA: If they’d come into the hall drinking, we just didn’t dance with them. They didn’t do it very much. All the time I was just growing up, when I got out on my own, it was as if stuck in the ’30s that really hit us hard.

MM: The economic times?

NA: That’s when we had the most trouble with money.

MM: You felt like you had to keep your jobs, or you’d be in bad trouble?

NA: Yes. Yes. They had a time when they closed down all the banks when Roosevelt called a...What do you call it? He closed all the banks, just bingo. ‘29, you see, was really the bad year. That was the year that all the stocks went down and everybody killed themselves and stuff. But they closed the bank, and we were living in these downtown hotels eating out and paying as we went. I had a month’s warrant in my pocket and two cents. You couldn’t cash the warrant. A lot of other people were in the same situation.

MM: So what did you do?

NA: Oh, they gave us credit in the places where we ate and that sort of stuff. But it quite a little while before they got that...I can’t remember how long it was before they opened the banks up again. But everyone was having that. That wasn’t just, just teachers—

MM: No, it was everybody. So did you know the—

Nina Faye Anderson Interview, OH 049-063, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
NA: We had kids that were so hungry, and that was an awful time because people wouldn’t take anything. Couldn’t give our kids clothes. We couldn’t give our kids food. It hurt their feelings so. We had a lot of children in the Broadwater school where, oh probably, their parents drove trucks or worked with their hands and that sort of thing. The worst thing you could do was to give them things, and we knew that some of our children were hungry. That is when we started giving them milk at school in order that they would not be conspicuous. They gave them graham crackers and cod liver oil and milk at least once a day, but they weighed every child and anybody that was ten percent under-weight had to have milk. Well, now you see that didn’t make any... We kind of pushed a couple in and said they were under-weight when we knew they needed the food. But that much food really helped a lot to help keep those kids going because sometimes they just didn’t have anything at home and that’s what started this—lunches at school. We don’t really need it now, but it was necessary to have it then because some of those children were really hungry.

MM: How could you tell?

NA: You could almost look at them, and you just knew. You didn’t dare give them clothes, and you know there were a lot of people that would be glad to pass their clothes on to somebody else but there weren’t very many people in those Depression days that were too well off. Nobody had an awful lot, but it was just awful to take anything, and instead of going to a place like this you lived with your kids and they sort of took care of them. And I think—

MM: Instead of going to a retirement home, you lived with your children?

NA: Yes. Of course people didn’t live as long. That makes a lot of difference. There are a lot more people, and we live longer. My sister will be 80 tomorrow—the one that’s in the hospital. Now it doesn’t seem to us that she’s so old. I’m 77. My parents were both gone before they were as old as I am. My next birthday I’ll be 77, and somehow or other I don’t feel terribly old. But the people here, I think the average age around here right now is around 90. It makes a problem. It really is a problem because you’ve got more people and more of them are old.

MM: Well, you taught throughout the Depression?

NA: I taught during the Depression.

[End of Side A]
NA: I can't keep my dates straight.

MM: After the war?

NA: No, the first year of the war.

MM: The first year would have been '41.

NA: It was right after Pearl Harbor. Anyway, I'm not very good with numbers anymore. But anyway, we went to England first, and I was in a post office battalion and we went to Birmingham—that's far up in England. We were there six months taking care of mail, and then the day after D-Day three of us and our commanding officer went to Bushey Park, which is right south of London. We were with the U.S. Troop Control Council there, which was the filing body for our army of occupation. They started it right after D-Day, you see, to do what would...How they would take care of things after what things were...after all was over. It was interesting. It was rough. We were shelled all the time. They were aiming their shells at us. We were in Eisenhower's camp.

MM: Well, what made you decide to do that?

NA: I wanted to. I wanted to if I could find—

MM: What made you go?

NA: Well, I had lost this man that I was really interested in. He was in the war, and I thought maybe...I just didn't want to go home.

MM: You wanted to serve your country?

NA: Yes. And I felt that I could keep a fellow from going overseas and somebody could stay home. I didn't have any dependents. I had said at the end of the First World War when I was still in high school that is there was another one I thought maybe I'd just go. I guess that's why. It was a very hard experience but it was interesting. I'm irritated when people ask me if I had a good time. We did a bunch of same things that thousands of the men did and they don't ask them if they had a good time. It was a different kind of experience.

MM: Did those people that asked you that think that you were just over there dating the men or something?

NA: We couldn't write home the trouble we had. All the mail was so censored, you see. One night...In Bushey Park, they had a lot of trees and these, this constant shelling kind of weakened...
the roots of them. These big pine trees don’t have any roots anyway, and they fell down on 
these little huts we were living in. They’d wreck them, and I lost all my clothes three times in one 
month because they hit our barracks but they just didn’t happen to kill us when we were in it. 
One time they took the whole top off of the barracks, but the people that would have been 
killed had they been there were on leave. You just couldn’t believe that we had as many good 
lucks as we did. But anyway, then when I came back, it was not a good time to go back to 
teaching. It was, I think, the first of November and school had started. My job was held for me. It 
was supposed to be, the same as for the fellows. So I went to California and started working on 
my master’s and finally got my master’s there. When I came back to Billings, then I taught one 
year after I got back, and they asked me to take a principalship. So from that time I was not a 
classroom teacher, I was principal of the Little Rocky School. It was more fun. It was more like 
that first one I did. It was a four-room school and just young kids. I was reluctant to go into a 
principalship because I always enjoyed children and I enjoyed teaching children. I feel when 
people say, well, you must have had a bad life because you weren’t married, I had hundreds of 
children and I was interested in too. I was interested in children, and I don’t feel that I missed 
too much. The only thing I really want now that I don’t have are children of my own, and that is 
a thing that I really...But lots of people get married and don’t have children.

MM: And they don’t have a happy marriage either [laughs].

NA: So I taught for 43 years before I retired.

MM: You are including the time you were a principal when you say that?

NA: Yes. That was teaching experience. But I was a principal for 25.

MM: Were you happy to be principal or—

NA: No, not as much as being a teacher. I missed being a teacher. It is a different kind of a thing. 
I was uneasy for fear I would have discipline problems with older children. When I got my first 
fifth grade...sixth grade, I didn’t know about that. But I just loved those kids. They were just 
great. If you’re honest with them, they’ll be with you. I didn’t have trouble. I’ve got a book 
downstairs that’s about this big by this big by this big that I can hardly lift that’s got pictures and 
letters from the kids from when I retired, and I’ve got a lot of little things. I was looking at them 
the other day. Little notes that I’ve saved. There was energy. “You run a good school. The kids 
here are happy.” [laughs] That kind of thing that you do, you keep. But it does seem to me that 
in teaching what is interesting is the one to one contact with the children. You don’t have that 
when you are the principal—the teaching.

MM: That’s right. You lost that.

NA: You’re the second one, and even if the teacher does something that’s really wrong you can’t 
just come right out and say to the kid, “The teacher’s wrong.” You’ve got to do something to
MM: Well, What role did religion play in your early life? Did you go to church and Sunday school and things like that?

NA: I didn’t have to. My father said, “You can go if you want to if you go you behave. But you don’t have to go.” I was never told that I had to go. When I was a little tiny kid, I wanted to go to church. The church was right across the street and George, that preacher’s little boy, was my best playmate. I remember very well, I think I was about four, I was... But the teacher told us about heaven and how beautiful it was and streets of gold and had jewels all over it. I’ve always had too much light in my eyes and it was awful, glitter and stuff. I just sat there and kind of curled up and pretty soon she got around to saying “Do you want to go to heaven?” Guess who said “No.”? Well, that was one thing that gal was wrong with. I didn’t want what she was talking about. But she was teaching me to lie. That I should say yes. I didn’t believe that. I didn’t think there was much bad with that, and I didn’t want to go to heaven. So, anyway [laughs] she made a fuss about it, and she told my mother. My mother was a small nervous lady, and she got awfully upset because that woman thought I was a bad kid and she started talking. Then my father caught her and he said, “Let that kid alone! If she doesn’t want that she doesn’t have to have it!” So you can see how I adored my father. That was his idea of raising kids. He had been raised by a father who, when we went to Grandpa’s house we had to get down and kneel by the chair to say our prayers but we didn’t just say, “Good Lord, let us eat,” anything like that. He prayed for a long time, and I got tired of doing that. Dad had been raised like that, and he just had had it with too much strong religion.

MM: So he left it up to you?

NA: Yes. My father was a wonderful person, but I don’t think that he ever belonged to a church.

MM: Did you spend more time with your father than your mother when you were a child?

NA: My mother had so many kids she didn’t know what to do. She was sick quite a bit of the time, and when I was a little kid, see there were two babies underneath me. A middle kid does have some trouble, I think. These kids that I’ve been thinking about so much today, and Keith, the one that we decided to send the money to, they were out here two years ago and he was looking up the family genealogy and I was helping him do it. So when he sent me a copy of what he got, it had a little note in it about this big written real little on it and said “Dear Aunt Faye, I think...This is just for you, not my other aunts.” The other big thing was for everybody. But he said, “I think we have a special bond. We’re both middle kids.” You can say what you want to it really did give it to you to be a middle kid.

MM: You didn’t fit in with the younger ones, and you didn’t fit in with the older ones?

NA: That’s right, and I wasn’t quite big enough to take care of myself. Then he said, “I’ve
observed two other things. Jessie has another family and Margaret has another family, but you
don’t have another family. Can I be your family?” So you can see why I like that little boy and
he’s the one we sent the money to so.

I’m afraid he...his brother is in the Air Corps now. He got through, and he’s been there one year.
He got in on ROTC. Last year Keith had an ROTC. See, their father was sick, and that was some
hardship too and but—

[Break in audio]

MM: Well, you and your sisters became teachers, but what if a woman didn’t want to be a
teacher, what would she do?

NA: My sister Emily didn’t want to be a teacher, and she had quite a lot of trouble. She really
didn’t. She went to business college for a while. She taught for one year. She really had trouble.
And she finally got married.

MM: She had trouble supporting herself?

NA: Yes. Because she wasn’t going to be a teacher like the rest of us and she went to business
college. I don’t think she stayed long up in the business college. She had a good voice, and she
wanted to take music. Well, you have to be terribly good to get anywhere with music. She didn’t
want to teach. She wanted to perform, and she wasn’t that good and besides you have to have
an awful lot of grace to get it. Now, quite a few of my friends went into nursing. My best friend
went into nursing.

MM: How was that viewed? Was nursing viewed as a good profession?

NA: Yes, it was a good profession. It was hard. I think nursing, well now she had to go to...She
was an apprentice, I guess you would call her. But we came on the same plane away from home,
and she went to Saint Vincent’s School to study nursing. I think she just kind of worked and
learned. I can’t remember all what she did. I don’t think that she ever did get to be a certified
RN. She got married twice. But I don’t remember that. Of course, girls worked in stores quite a
lot, that sort of stuff.

MM: Could they support themselves doing that?

NA: Oh, yes. Waitresses made more money than we did, if they were good ones, but they
weren’t very well respected.

MM: They weren’t?

NA: No, they weren’t. A waitress was not. They were hash-slingers, and they weren’t too well
respected.

MM: Were they considered loose or just not talented?

NA: Kind of easy, maybe. But they can see that made their money with tips. I’m trying to think in the gals I knew, the ones that got married. Quite a lot of them got married. My father said to me several times as I was growing up things, something that I think was very good, “I would like you to have an education so you do not have to be married.” And that was about true.

MM: That a woman that did not have an education would have to get married?

NA: There was not much left but to get married.

MM: Did you think that women often got married for that reason?

NA: Yes, I’m sure. One of the gals I knew in eighth grade who got married about that time had a whole bunch of kids. But she married this handsome cowboy, and she thought she was something, kind of lording it over the rest of us. One summer after I had gotten established, she came into the store. I was working in my mother’s store in the summertime. That’s another thing, I worked in this mail room all the time, but I couldn’t have gotten that job alone, it was my mother’s job. Anyway, she said, “Well you’ve been awfully lucky.”

I said, “Well, here I am. Well, you’re the guy that went off and thought you had the world by the tail.” She was having one heck of a time getting enough food and taking care of the kids that she raised.

MM: So sometimes the women who were married had a harder time economically than the women who were not married?

NA: I think so.

MM: Did you ever hear in the communities you were in, did you hear women talk about birth control?

NA: No, not then. I might have...I guess I did some later, not then. Because my mother had a drugstore.

MM: Later on she might have had some things?

NA: And I heard it then.

MM: Did she believe in that?
NA: My mother?

MM: Yes.

NA: I never heard her talk about it.

MM: But she carried the prescriptions?

NA: I think...Well, you know, there’s medicines that they come in and get syringes or something. I didn’t pay much attention. It wasn’t in my mind or thought right then. But I think there was some of that sort of stuff then.

MM: Did you ever hear anything about abortion?

NA: No. They were all bad, you know.

MM: Did midwives perform abortions?

NA: Some of them did, I think. It was all very hush hush if anybody knew of it happening it was a pretty bad thing to have it done.

MM: Did you know any women who had abortions done?

NA: I don’t know any women who admitted it.

MM: It was considered a bad thing to do?

NA: That what was bad about it, you see. They’d probably go just to any old place and it wasn’t sanitary and that sort of stuff.

MM: They would be women who had several children and couldn’t handle another one?

NA: Well, no. A lot of them were not married. I have always thought that girls, well maybe not now, but girls that got just married because she were pregnant didn’t have a very good chance of being very happily married. It seemed like a man might have been kind of unhappy about it or something. I don’t know. I just wasn’t in that frame of mind and it wasn’t particularly important to me.

MM: Were there any unwed mothers in the community?

NA: Yes.

MM: Did they keep their children?
NA: Some of them did.

MM: How were they viewed? Did people hang around with them?

NA: Well, for a far. One of the young gals that worked for my mother had twins. She kept them and raised them. I had a girl who worked for me in the office at the school who had twins, and she was my helper in the office when I was principal. I told her—to the teacher—I said, “That little gal’s pregnant.”

“Why,” she said, “lots of people have said that to me, and you just can’t say that. I won’t let her be out here if you talk that way about her. Everybody’s talking that way about her and I’m not going to let her come out here and work.”

I said, “I didn’t say that to get her in trouble, but I think she needs help. She doesn’t have very much at home to help her.” I said, “I know that somebody’s just binding her up so tightly that she can hardly breathe to keep her from showing.” But I couldn’t help but know it, having her around every day. Pretty soon she had twins and that gal who was the supervisor at school...But she had listened to me when I first told her that I thought that girl was in trouble I think she would have helped her. I don’t know what she ever did with those twins. I let two of my kids out of school that had kids—had babies out of wedlock. They were working in the office and somebody said, boy, you must be doing something out there.

I said, “I said I don’t know how we don’t have any men in that school and it kind of takes two!”

MM: Well, how do you think women’s lives have changed since you’ve been young and in your lifetime?

NA: I don’t believe in women’s lib the way it’s done in a lot of ways. I think that you can get what you want without this bra burning and all this ruckusing. There is something in women that should be finer than that, I think. I like to have men open doors for me, and if I get in a tight spot I like to move over and let somebody drive the car. I have worked with men in a man’s position for all...When I was in this principalship and got to the place and it was only one women and 29 men. But when I went into, it was a women’s job. But I would have had to leave it in order to get...Now, I don’t think that I was...I don’t think that I was discriminated against in anyway. I never felt that I had anything harder than men. I think the men got discriminated once in a while about something.

MM: Well, what if you wanted to be married and they didn’t allow married teachers?

NA: Well, I never did want to be married. I don’t know what. There are five times that I thought about it, and then something would really happen to me. You ask me if I have religion, yes I do. I guess I’m a theosophist and it’s a way of, I believe in reincarnation which makes a lot of

Nina Faye Anderson Interview, OH 049-063, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
difference in the way I view things. I don’t talk about very much. We’re not really supposed to push ourselves on somebody else, but I’m as sure as I’m sitting on this chair that things just don’t happen to me by happenstance. I think I have been able to meet things better because I didn’t have that until after my father died. My father suffered terribly for a long time, and he was a very fine person. I couldn’t see why he had to suffer that way and the fellow across the street that had been in jail for robbing a bank and what have you, was perfectly hale and hearty. Anything that I got out of a church was that you got what you deserved. Well, my father wasn’t getting what he deserved. Well, I finally went to a lecture once, and this man was talking about and I kept thinking why did somebody terrible...

Well, now when my father died, I was away. He had been very sick, and I was so tired I was about ready to drop. My sisters were all away. Two of them were not married but they were away working, and I’d been home and I needed to get away. The doctor said to me and get a little rest because, he said, if you’re away your mother will go to the store and this lady will help. We had a good lady with Dad, and so I went away without wanting to really. But I had an a bargain with Mrs. London that she would write to me every day and let me know how things were getting along and she would wire me or call if anything...if I needed to come home. Well, I didn’t. Her son was drowned in the river. That’s the only thing I didn’t think of. So my mother didn’t write me or call me right away but she finally...I can’t remember what she did. Anyway, I knew then Mrs. London was out of the picture, and I knew that it would be hard on Dad because she was the one that took care of him, so I got on a bus and started home from Chicago. I got outside of Miles City, and I had been sleeping some and I heard my father speak to me as plain as if you did. What he said was “Faye, hurry up.” I was up walking down the aisle of that bus. I had just come out this deep sleep that I had from riding all the time and sleeping soundly, but one of my normal students was on the bus and she saw me and she said, “Where are you going?”

I sat down kind of confused, and I said to Sally, “My father has died.”

She said, “Now, how do you know that just on the bus?”

I said, “I’m sure as I’m sitting here.” So I got on into Billings, and a friend that I’d been dating quite a little met me at the bus and he said, “God, you look awful!”

I said, “I think my father’s died.”

He said, “Now don’t be silly. There would be somebody here to get you” and so forth.

I said, “I know, but I think I’d better go right up to Belfry.”

He said, “I’ll take you up there if you want to go, but why don’t we go down and call and see if you need to go home and if you don’t need to go home you certainly look like you need the rest.” So I went around—I stayed at the Acme’s (?) then—and I went around the corner to call
and Mr. Bunny who was our neighbor at home in Belfry was on the street coming toward me. Now I saw him there as often as I saw him anyplace else, but it didn’t dawn on me that he wasn’t there after me and he was. He walked up to me and he said, “Faye, your father passed on at 8 o’clock this morning.”

I said, “I know he did. I want to know where my mother is.”

He said, “She’s right here,” and said we came down but the bus got in a little early. But when I saw my father’s face after that, after all the stuff he’d done, I’d never seen such a beautiful face in my life. His hair was as black as could be. He was only 60, but he...something good had happened to him and I didn’t know what so I started out looking for it. I looked everyplace, and I found this idea of reincarnation and it fits everything I’m told. I go to church all the time, and I’ll think, yes, that’s true but it’s...I kind of get...but it means a great deal to me. I don’t think that I could stand up under what my sister’s though now. My sister is very ill, and she’s been three years now in the extended care here and sometimes she aware of it. She’s terribly nasty to us. That we could take her home, that we could take care of her if we wanted to. I don’t think I could get through it.

But you see, I’ve still got something to learn before it’s my turn to get through with this incarnation but I will. If I make mistakes, they’ll come back to me. As I said, I have been put in places, and I know I’ve been put in places because that’s the place I was supposed to be. For some special reason to do something. But my life has been satisfactory really. As I said, I have missed children. One thing I did, I had an operation and I had a ruptured appendix and the doctor told me that I have exceptionally strong muscles in my abdomen. I said, “Is that bad?”

He said, “No, unless you want to have a child.” He said, “You’ll never be able to have a child.”

I had said that I’d thought if I’d ever find a man that I thought would support me and unusually good and so forth and one that you had to love and one was around just about that time and I thought, Boy, no! No way am I going to want a man without a child! That was probably a silly thing to say...But it just seemed to me like...But I had a lot of satisfaction with other people’s children.

MM: Yes. And you didn’t feel discriminated against as a woman?

NA: No, I didn’t. I had done many things that men had done.

MM: What about in the case where you were...they snuck up and listened while you smoked and—

NA: Well, that sort of thing...They were doing bad things to the men too. But almost all the teachers then were women, you see. They weren’t discriminating me...against me because I was a woman as much as because I was a school teacher. There are times when school teachers have
taken a rough road and have...These gals that came up early and (unintelligible) in a little old school house and married the first cowboy that came along. No, I think that no more was I discriminated against than lots of other people. That was just one of things that went with school teaching was that. I don’t think everybody gets everything that they want. But there were times, now when you say that teachers now have, there was a time we had to protect ourselves because we fired for nothing. We did get together and we got this organization, but we didn’t have to strike. I think the teachers are being wrong. They aren’t given a good job. They aren’t doing a good job. I feel awfully sorry for quite a few teachers that are around in their 50, 55s—around that age—that really want to do a good job and are mixed up in all this ruckus that’s going on. They have to teach a few more years because to get a pension they have to teach to have it. We have given so much money—

[End of Interview]