

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin Valley

Oral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE:	Ethel Oleta Wever Belezzuoli
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Marlow, Stephens Co., Oklahoma
INTERVIEWER:	Stacey Jagels
DATES OF INTERVIEWS:	March 18 and April 10, 1981
PLACE OF INTERVIEWS:	Tipton, Tulare County
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PREFACE

Mrs. Belezzuoli is the Postmaster of Tipton, California and lives with her husband, a retired farmer, in a comfortable home there. She is a very busy person and made special arrangements for the interviews. Mrs. Belezzuoli was very friendly and open and did not seem to censor any of her recollections. She did not think that her experiences were particularly unique and did not feel that what she had to say was of much consequence. At one point she became upset--when talking about her mother's death.

Stacey Jagels
Interviewer

to California I was a year ahead of most classes. In fact, my my last year at Porterville I took mostly electives. I had some typing and cooking with freshmen. I had so many freshmen classes but that was because I had had all my solids so I didn't need to take any more.

S.J.: It sounds like your life on the farm was kind of an idyllic life. But what happened when the drought came?

Belezzuoli: I don't know if we stayed at the first place one or two years because children don't really know or care. We moved to another place. The house wasn't nearly so nice but it wasn't that bad. My mother was a very clean person. It doesn't matter where she lived. The place was clean so it wasn't that bad. But we moved to a small place. I remember the first sandstorm that I had anything to do with. We were walking home. Of course, we walked a lot then. There were cars and we had a car, but people thought nothing of walking. Everybody walked. So we were walking home probably three or four miles and this huge, huge black cloud came. We thought it was going to be a thunderstorm or a rainstorm but it was only dust. And it just blotted out the sun. It was just like night. People had to use their car lights. The town lights went on. It was very, very bad but then there would be awhile without any storms. Then we'd have more sandstorms and more sandstorms. Afterwards sand piled up two feet high in front of your door. It went through your windows and everywhere. It just permeated everything. Those were bad.

S.J.: Do you remember your father talking very much about how that affected the crops?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. The big question was, "Will it rain?" We noticed every little cloud. But it didn't rain. There was quite a long period there that it didn't rain. The farmers would sow their crops. I shouldn't say there was no rain because I remember my dad did grow some broomcorn and cotton. I remember those two crops. It was very exciting for the young girls in the community when the broomcorn johnnies came. Broomcorn that they make brooms out of grew up and then someone would go along and bend some of them to make a table and then other ones would come along and cut them and lay them on top until the wagons came along and laid them down. Then they were put in drying racks in big sheds to dry. So crews of broomcorn johnnies--as they called them--would join a crew and they'd go from town to town and farmer to farmer. All the women would go and help whoever was having them that day cook the dinner. The young girls would serve and get to meet all the handsome men. That was interesting for me too. I liked that.

S.J.: But as the storms grew worse and the drought grew worse what happened to your financial situation?

- Belezzuoli: I rather imagine it was pretty bad.
- S.J.: But your parents didn't talk about it?
- Belezzuoli: No. But of course we were in the same position that everyone else was in. We weren't unique so the men all talked and the women all talked and the children had fun.
- S.J.: But you still remember having enough to eat and the necessities?
- Belezzuoli: Oh yes. The necessities. I remember my mother did sell some chickens to buy me a dress so I could be in a play. I needed a new dress and there wasn't the money and I think probably the dress cost \$1.50. Things were cheap. She did sell some chickens that time so I could have my new dress to be in the play. The school was putting on a play and I was in it. But we always managed. Back then neighbors were most helpful. Everybody helped everybody else.
- S.J.: Do you remember helping neighbors do work in the fields and then having them come over to your fields?
- Belezzuoli: My dad would go over and help a neighbor with whatever had to be done and they would in turn come and help him get out a crop.
- S.J.: Were there other ways that neighbors would help one another?
- Belezzuoli: I can't really think of any except that people were close.
- S.J.: Was there much more of a community feeling than there is here in California?
- Belezzuoli: Yes.
- S.J.: Did you feel like your family really belonged to that community and was a part of it? I've heard some people say that they had such a community feeling in Oklahoma and that when they came to California they lost that. They were very much alone. Did you feel that way too?
- BElezzuoli: Yes. There was quite a bit of resentment because jobs were hard to find here at that time. There were people out of work. I heard some remarks that they wanted to stop people at the border.
- S.J.: Some people have said tractors started coming on the scene about the time of the drought and that's one of the reasons that people were driven from the land. On the other hand other people told me that there were very few tractors.
- Belezzuoli: I don't remember any. As far as I can remember we still had teams and mules and horses. I don't think the mechanization

was primarily the cause. It was just simply no rain and the drought. Of course, the first people that came to California were laborers. They had worked for the tenant farmers in Oklahoma, and when there was no work the farmers couldn't hire them to work. The laborers came first and then later the tenant farmers came. The ones that could hang on to their own farms came out of it when it finally rained. But many of them lost their farms.

S.J.: Was your father able to hire some workers when he was a tenant farmer or did your family do most of the work?

Belezzuoli: No. As far as I can remember we did all our own work.

S.J.: Do you remember how large the farms were that he worked on?

Belezzuoli: The first one was probably 160 acres or maybe more. I know a lot of it wasn't tillable land. It was just open gullies and whatnot. There was a good portion where they planted the cotton and there was a garden. In the east corner maybe there was a cornfield. I would say it was in the neighborhood of 160 acres.

S.J.: Do you remember much about the farming methods then? I've heard some people say that they did not rotate their crops the way we do now and they often would plant a field with cotton year after year after year and it would drain the soil of the nutrients.

Belezzuoli: I think that's probably true. That was true and they didn't know to till across land and make the borders.

S.J.: In curves rather than straight?

Belezzuoli: Yes. It was to hold the water back. I remember one place in particular when it would rain all the top soil just washed away down these little gullies. They have learned considerably since then.

S.J.: So you think that some of the farming methods might have contributed to the problems they had in producing crops?

Belezzuoli: To some extent—although I think if it hadn't been such a prolonged drought it wouldn't have been quite as serious as it was.

S.J.: Do you remember ever hearing about special government programs where they paid the farmers not to plant or to plow under their crops?

Belezzuoli: Oh yes. I remember talk about it. I don't know that my dad had anything to do with any of that.

S.J.: But there was some talk about it?

Belezzuoli: There was some talk. In later years they planted trees to break

the wind to keep from blowing away all of the land and there are still many of them back there now.

S.J.: Do you remember hearing about farmers being paid to slaughter pigs or cattle for government programs?

Belezzuoli: I heard about it. We didn't. My dad didn't participate in any of that.

S.J.: Do you think that any of your neighbors or people in the community did?

Belezzuoli: I don't remember. I don't think so. I think that came perhaps a little later after we left.

S.J.: Was there any one thing that finally made your family decide to leave Oklahoma? The economic situation was growing worse and worse and they had probably seen no hope for the farm, but was there something that finally made you decide to come here?

Belezzuoli: Yes. My sister had lived in California for several years. We were raising her children and she had begged us to come for years. She said there would be a good job here for my dad. She had taken her youngest and my parents missed her greatly. They had had her since she was two and she took her when she was six so my parents missed her very much. So that and the possibility of a job made us come to California. We had a glowing picture painted of a good life.

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S.J.: Could you tell me a little bit more about the glowing picture of California?

Belezzuoli: My dad had a sale and we sold everything we owned. We brought what we could on a little two-wheel trailer. I don't remember if we had mattresses on top or not. That's the picture you get of Okies coming to California. I doubt it very much if we did. The trip was pretty hard. We stayed in some little motels or cabins along the way. It was a very long, hard, desolate trip. I'd left all my friends. Sixteen is a very hard time for kids. When we got here we stayed at a friend's house. They were living on a grape ranch in a cabin and we stayed with them until we could find some housing. It was quite awhile before we found any decent housing. People would not even talk to you about renting a house if you were from Oklahoma.