

Chapter 01—1:14

Introduction

Announcer: This is the 100th interview for the oral history website Voices of Oklahoma and it features two ladies who have lived over 100 years. Rather than selecting a certain individual for this distinction, we chose to interview Opal Moss who is 103 and Vida Culvern 102.

Opal's story begins in 1917 when she became a resident of the Charles Page Children's Home in Sand Springs, Oklahoma. Vida came to Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1968 from Colorado.

These two ladies are very social and active in their communities. Listen and take tips from them, perhaps you will live to be 100.

We have a good start on the next 100 oral histories, having recorded seventy stories which will be placed on our website, as we work to attain our next goal of 200.

So enjoy our two centenarians in our 100th interview, made possible by individuals, foundations and the University of Tulsa, who believe in preserving Oklahoma's legacy, one voice at a time, on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.

Chapter 02—2:45

Centenarian Club

John Erling: My name is John Erling. And today's date is April 23, 2015. Opal, if you will state your full name, your date of birth, and your present age.

Opal Moss: My name is Opal Clark Moss. I am 103 years old come May 20th. I was born in Oklahoma, May 20, 1912.

JE: Where were you born?

OM: In a place called Hitchita, which is close to Pierce. It was really in Bennefield Town because my grandfather's name was Bennefield and he owned a lot of land. And my mother and father had a little place in the same town that he owned the land.

JE: Then, Vida, would you state your full name and your date of birth, please.

Vida Culvern: Vida Elsner Culvern, date of birth was April 10, 1913.

JE: Where were you born?

VC: Born in Ramah, Colorado.

JE: With us for this interview is Richard Zigler. Richard, tell us about the Centenarian Club. What is it?

Richard Zigler: The Centenarian Club was formed in 1991, in Oklahoma, to give recognition and honor to those Oklahomans that had the privilege of celebrating one hundred plus years. And since the beginning in 1991, we have inducted over nineteen hundred residents in our state.

JE: Here we are 2015, Here in Northeast Oklahoma, how many would be in the club?

RZ: Northeast Oklahoma, on a daily basis, has an average of seventy known centenarians.

JE: In the state do you know how many?

RZ: On the average of three hundred known centenarians.

JE: You don't know where we rank nationwide?

RZ: Other states don't have such organizations.

JE: Okay.

RZ: And the only statistic is through Social Security, and they will not give us those.

JE: What was the impetus to organize the club in the first place?

RZ: Well, I was not the organizer. Richard Amen of Oklahoma City had two members in his congregation that were celebrating over a hundred years and he thought something should be done to recognize them. So he took the initiative to get the Centenarian Club of Oklahoma formed.

I had five in my congregation in Tulsa, so when I went to a state conference on aging I met Richard. And then we joined up do this recognition. And when I retired I decided to form an agency that would carry on this tradition of recognizing centenarians and providing a special ministry for them.

JE: And what church were talking about that you were pastor of?

RZ: I was at First Christian Church, Tulsa.

JE: Okay.

Chapter 03—4:45**Charles Page**

John Erling: Opal, let's begin here with you. Your mother's name?

Opal Moss: Daisy. Her maiden name was Daisy Saunders. She married my father, who was Joe Bennefield.

JE: And they lived a rural life?

OM: And they lived in a place called Bennefield Town because it was on the little town that my grandfather had. He had five businesses so he called it Bennefield Town.

JE: Vida, your mother's name?

Vida Culvern: My mother's name was Clara Braselton Elsner. Her maiden name, Clara Braselton. And she married Alec Elsner, Alexander, but we called him Alec.

JE: Did you have brothers and sisters, Vida?

VC: I had one sister.

JE: And, Opal, you have brothers and sisters?

OM: My mother gave birth to ten children but only seven of them lived. And they were all girls except two.

JE: And then when you were three years old—

OM: Well, when I was three years old, my mother had been very ill. She couldn't speak for herself, she was in a coma and the neighbors were trying to help her, like they used to do. And she could hear what they were talking about but she couldn't do anything about it. But she heard them say that they were going to separate the children. Somebody wanted the oldest girl and boy because they could give their husband him to work on the farm and the girl could help with the little ones, and help her with the canning and things like that. And my mother couldn't say anything but she could hear what was being said.

They were going to give the baby to a couple that never had any children and they wanted a baby. But they didn't know much what to do with me because I was three years old, had yellow jaundice, and I was yellow and I didn't look like very much.

I asked my mother, when she was telling us about it, and I said, "Well, who asked for me? You didn't say."

She said, "Well, honey, you looked so bad, you were yellow with yellow jaundice and nobody wanted [you]—you looked like a doctor bill to them, so nobody spoke for you." But she said, "You were my best-behaved baby of all the children."

JE: Where did you go then?

OM: There was a woman who came by going to Sand Springs, taking her two brothers and going to see a man named Charles Page, who was taking people. There was an epidemic

of flu and measles and her parents had died with the flu, and some of the family. She stopped at my mother's house to get some water in bottles that she was carrying in the buggy, and she told her all about it.

So my mother, when she got sick and she heard people talking about taking us as little unpaid servants, well, she prayed for the Lord to let her live long enough to get her children to this man she'd heard about. And the Lord did. She got better.

But she was still very ill when she started out toward Sand Springs to meet this man. And she left her children with the nephew. A niece went with her because she was still sick, and she carried the baby because it was nursing. She carried it with her. The next morning they went to see Mr. Page.

JE: And who is Mr. Page?

OM: Mr. Page was a man who had bought a piece of land that I think just about eight miles from Tulsa. They said it was a worthless piece of land. And when he said he was going to build a town, he had vowed that he was going to build a town that would have jobs for even older people because his mother couldn't find work when she was left with eight children. And there were no jobs to help them and she had a very hard time.

And he took himself to be the one to take care of the family because his father died when he was eleven years old.

JE: And that's the story of Charles Page.

OM: Yes.

JE: That we know of in this community. And then you went to live as a three-year-old in the Charles Page home.

Chapter 04—2:35

Live Forever

John Erling: So, Vida, where did you grow up then, and go on into your elementary grades?

Vida Culvern: I lived in Ramah through high school and went to Carda College for two years.

JE: What year then, Vida, did you graduate from high school?

VC: '30.

JE: 1930?

VC: 1930.

JE: And, Opal? You graduated from high school what year?

Opal Moss: I didn't graduate, but I was in the eleventh grade when I quit to get a job, because I had nobody to support me.

JE: What was your job then out of the eleventh grade?

OM: I got a job with the man who was the president of the Tulsa Paper Company, Mr. Yokum. And I went to live with them because they wanted someone to keep the baby so they could have more freedom to go some places.

JE: Opal, how long did your parents live? How old were they when they died?

OM: Well, my father was killed in an accident two months before I was born. And my mother lived to be about eighty-nine.

JE: Vida, your parents, how long did they live?

VC: My father had a stroke but was able to live seventeen years after that, with the help of some therapy. He was eighty-four when he died.

My mother was a hundred plus a month and a day.

JE: So I was reaching for if anybody else had lived a hundred in either of your families and you're following—

VC: Yes my mother did.

JE: Right.

VC: I expected to because she did.

JE: So you've always expected to live this long?

VC: Well, it wasn't too much of a surprise perhaps—

JE: Yeah.

VC: 'Cause I had hoped maybe I would.

JE: Opal, is this a surprise that you lived to be a hundred and beyond?

OM: Well, I never did even think about my age, I just always had the feeling I was going to live forever. That's the truth, I'm not making it as a joke.

When I was a little girl in the children's home that Mr. Page owned, at night I would talk to Jesus. Because Mr. Breeding, who was a Salvation Army man, but Mr. Page hired him to be the superintendent of the home, he taught us about the end of the world, that if we were good we'd go to heaven. And I talked to Jesus at night and tell him that I wanted to go to heaven. I had no fear of death. I have never had fear of death, I just take it for granted that I'm going to live forever.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 05—1:20**Style of Dress**

John Erling: Let's talk about what we called the Roaring Twenties. You then would have been sixteen, seventeen, eighteen years old.

Opal Moss: Yes.

JE: Women also in the '20s were known as flappers. They were kind of a new breed of western women in the '20s. They wore short skirts and bobbed their hair, listened to jazz. What kind of clothes did you have to wear? Did you have to wear long skirts? Did you wear pants? Was that an issue of either one of you?

Vida Culvern: I particularly remember one skirt that was above my knees, and it had a little pocket on the back. And that's the only garment I can comment about.

JE: Opal, the dress style then? Long dresses, short dresses, did it make any difference?

OM: Well, I just wore dresses. We didn't wear jeans and overalls and things when I was in my teens. We just wore short dresses, they were pretty short.

JE: Jeans and all came along and when? Later on?

VC: Later on.

JE: In the '30s or '40s you think?

VC: Well, I don't know. My sister, I know, was wearing jeans.

OM: Well, I got married in '32, and they were not wearing jeans until my daughter was out of high school; '54, I think, is when they started wearing jeans.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

Chapter 06—1:35**Cars**

John Erling: How about your family? Did they travel by car? Do you remember when you got your first car? Did you walk before that? Was there horses involved? Opal, let's start with you.

Opal Moss: I can remember horses. I remember in the park, when I was in the home we'd go to the park pretty often, and in the playground and all. And I can remember wagons.

JE: And the cars? Do you remember when the cars came along and that became part of your life?

OM: The first car that we were able to buy was about '33, 1933. There are a lot of dirt roads.

JE: I want to ask Vida about cars and horses and when that transition went over to cars.

Vida Culvern: I have a picture of my mother and father in a wagon. But we always had cars, as far as I can remember.

JE: Did you have to get a driver's license?

VC: I do not remember getting, and I probably drove from the time I was thirteen, fourteen years old.

JE: Opal?

OM: I remember the first car that I rode in was the head matron at the home had a Lincoln, a big Lincoln, I believe, that had an extra seat between the back and the front seat. And she could take quite a few of we little, bitty kids when she took us for a drive. And that's the first car that I remember.

JE: Ah—

OM: I remember my mother still came to see me in a wagon for a while.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Well, that was a pretty nice car that you were driving in at that time.

OM: It was new. Mr. Page, whom we called Daddy Page, had bought it for her.

Chapter 07—2:20

Houses

John Erling: Vida, the houses that you lived in. The first houses that you remember, did they have electricity and plumbing and—

Vida Culvern: No, no electricity. I was fortunate that they built a new home that my dad was able to buy. We did not have telephone, we did not have electricity until it must have been in the late '20s, I guess.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). And what about plumbing, running water?

VC: I always had it but I know that many did not.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). So then in the evening, what did you use for lights in your house? With no electricity?

VC: Very nice lamps that had those little globes.

JE: Kerosene lamps?

VC: Well, we had kerosene lamps, but we also had one that was a gasoline lamp, I guess, because it gave much better light than the kerosene lamp did.

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives). Did you have to read by that light in the evening and read books by that light?

VC: Yes.

JE: Opal, about your early house, do you remember about the electricity and plumbing?

Opal Moss: I can remember the bulb hanging down.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

OM: With just a bulb showing.

JE: Do you remember in the houses that you lived in the kind of stoves you might have had?

VC: Our regular kitchen stove was four burners, I guess, that you used wood in.

JE: Wood-burning stoves?

VC: I would at that time.

JE: How about the icebox? We didn't have refrigerators.

VC: We had an icebox that they would bring a big chunk of ice, you know, and put in the top. We had that kind until we had electricity.

JE: So the iceman would come once a week or whatever? Do you remember, Opal, iceboxes?

OM: Yes. A man in a wagon would go down and he had black canvas curtains to keep the sun out so it wouldn't melt the ice.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

OM: He'd go up the street yelling, "Ice! Ice!" and people would run out and get their piece of ice. Or he would bring it in with those ice tongs.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

OM: I remember that.

JE: What about air-conditioning? Neither one of you had air-conditioning in this time, those days, so—

VC: Didn't need it in Colorado.

JE: You didn't need it in Colorado? You were in Oklahoma, here, Opal.

OM: We never expect it. It seemed like it was cool. It was closed off.

JE: Right.

OM: I think we had fans. Yeah, they had fans that fanned it.

VC: Yeah the fans.

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives).

Chapter 08—1:50

Great Depression

John Erling: In 1929 was the stock market crash. And that began the time of the Great Depression. Do you have recollection, Vida, about the Depressions days?

Vida Culvern: Our bank closed in '32, I believe, so that started the Depression as far as it affected me.

JE: How did it affect you?

VC: We lost everything that we owned, even our home, so it was a very definite troublesome time. Very hard for my dad. I can see him the night that we happened to be invited to friends for dinner. And he said, "Bill, I'm sorry to tell you the bank won't open tomorrow."
That was a sad time.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

VC: So the Depression certainly affected me. My dear aunt let us come live with her. Her husband had died and she had a nice big home. So it worked out very well that we went to live with her.

My sister was able to go to school. I was already out of college, which I couldn't go any more. So it was a sad time for us. My sister graduated then from high school.

My dad had belonged to the IOOF Lodge. I don't know whether any of you are familiar with that or not. And he was able to get a hundred dollar loan for Lillian and for me and we went to Denver and went to business school, Denver Business School. Which was wonderful, we both learned so much and learned to be able to get a job to take care of ourselves, pay back our loan rather rapidly, 'cause that was high on our agenda.

Chapter 09—1:45

Medication-Faith

Richard Zigler: Many of the centenarians tell me that the secret of a long life is staying off of medication. I'd be interested in knowing if these ladies are on any medication.

Opal Moss: I don't take any medicine except if I remember, I take something for my eyes. But I don't need it, I'm very healthy.

John Erling: At 103. Vida?

Vida Culvern: I do, I take a blood pressure pill.

JE: And that's it?

OM: I take a vitamin for my eyes.

JE: So then neither one of you had any health that threatened your life at all?

OM: No.

JE: How about your faith and church? Was that important to you?

VC: Very. I've always gone to church, First Presbyterian Church here.

JE: And then, of course, in Colorado you were—

VC: Colorado, Denver—

JE: So you were—

VC: Denver Presbyterian Church. I don't know, maybe when I was in that little town of Ramah it might have been a Christian church. How about that?

JE: Um-hmm, um-hmm (affirmatives). Opal, was your faith and church important to you?

OM: Oh it was. I had a Sunday school class for small children on Sunday morning and Sunday evening I had the young people's service and I always had parties and things for them. The church didn't believe in anything outside of church, nearly.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

OM: It was a Nazarene church. They didn't think they ought to go to movies because it was supporting the wicked movie stars. And I didn't feel that way. I let my daughter go to a movie when she was a teenager because I thought it was better to have some place to go than to just get in a car and ride around.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

OM: And that was all there was left whenever they don't let them do anything. So I let her go to movies when she was old enough.

Chapter 10—3:17

How to Live to 100

John Erling: As I talk to both of you it's almost like we forget how old you are, how you can recall, and your memories are so great.

What role do you think you played in living to this age? Now you had a mother who lived to be a hundred.

Vida Culvern: Yes.

JE: So in your DNA it was there for you to live that long. So do you think that food and drink and exercise, what would you say helped you to live to—

VC: Those things would be important, I'm sure.

JE: Were you conscious of what you ate and exercising?

VC: Perhaps I've become more thoughtful about what I ate than formerly. I'm sure I ate a little more meat in my younger days than I do now. But we always had vegetables. We had a vegetables garden as I grew up and so I guess you just eat what's available.

JE: So if somebody said, "What should I do to live to be a hundred, as far as what you eat and so forth?" you can't say that, "Well, I did a certain thing." You just lived a normal life.

VC: No I can't, no, I can't say it particularly.

JE: Right. What about you, Opal, food that you ate? Do you think that it contributed to your age today?

Opal Moss: No we ate just common food, just mainly beans and just a regular diet. But I did believe that the wife was responsible for the husband's health, as far as food was concerned. And I tried to fix a good meal for my husband, every meal. I didn't like keeping house but I didn't mind to cook. I've had two husbands and I always cook them nice pies and cakes and things.

JE: I'm sure then both of you have it balanced. You had the vegetables—

OM: I think that's true.

JE: ...and meat and so forth. And so that—

VC: I believe that is true.

JE: Right.

Richard Zigler: John, let me add in on there, 'cause that's one of the questions I ask the centenarians 'cause I want to be one myself. The one of our who lived to be the oldest, 115, she was full Cherokee. But I asked her what she attributed her long life to, and she said, "Living off of the roots of the land."

VC: Well, that's a good answer, isn't it?

RZ: So I think that's—and then other centenarians tell me that, "Hey, you'd better drink a glass of red wine every day and eat that dark chocolate." They're right.

VC: That's good too.

JE: Did you ever drink wine? I mean, alcohol was never a big issue in your life, I would imagine.

VC: Not a big issue but I didn't mind having a drink of alcohol.

JE: Right, but it didn't lead to your long life.

VC: No.

OM: Well, one of my granddaughters summed it up when somebody asked her why I lived so long. She said, "Well, she's slow and she eats slow and she likes lots of milk." And said, "I think that's it, she loves milk better than anything."

But I think I just ate a normal diet.

RZ: Let me tell you about one of our centenarians that lived to be 110. I asked her her secret, she said, "I take Geritol every day." So I called the Geritol people and told them that I had this 110-year-old who contributed her long life to that. So they sent a case of it for me to distribute to the people in Neats. When we got the bottle and looked at it very closely, 17 percent alcohol.

JE: Um.

Chapter 11—3:00**Stay Active**

John Erling: Both of you now could live to be 110, 111. Would that suit you?

Vida Culvern: That's immaterial.

Opal Moss: The last time I went to the doctor she was giving me a physical and she said, "Well, many a thirty-five-year-old woman would love to have your health."

JE: Yeah, isn't that great? So what are you doing for fun now? Do you play cards, do you—

VC: I play bridge.

JE: All right.

VC: Well, I play any kind of games. I like to play games. I play bridge quite often.

JE: Yeah, and it keeps your mind active, Opal?

OM: Well, I have all of this writing that I have done, and I guess what I'm doing now is trying to get it collected together to make books out. I've got about a hundred poems that I have written, and I've got stories and one prize-winning story that won the prize between all of the four colleges of Tulsa.

JE: Are you now at 103 still writing?

OM: I'm still writing, I'm still working with my writing. And I'm not working on new stuff like I ought to.

JE: We should point out here that you have written *The Life of Charles Page: A Fool's Enterprise* is the name of the book. And then you have a children's book here, *Lee Lord's Unusual Choir*. That's for children. The artwork in this is done by you and this is beautiful, beautiful artwork, Opal.

OM: Thank you.

JE: Yeah, it's absolutely amazing what you have done and you still have an interest in it.

Richard Zigler: I want you to go back to what they do with their time now because they are very outgoing ladies who are on the go. They do not sit in their apartments.

OM: Oh, dancing, oh yes I love to dance. I'm not a great dancer but I love to dance. I have good balance.

JE: So then, Vida, what is it that keeps you busy?

VC: Playing Bridge, reading the papers, watching the stock market.

JE: Do you go to the theater?

VC: I did buy tickets to go to the theater out in Broken Arrow so I have enjoyed that. I guess I stay busy all the time. I, right now, as you can tell, I have a whole bunch of stuff I should be writing notes about my nice presents I got for my birthday. Of course, it's so much easier nowadays, just call 'em up.

JE: Ah—

VC: Perhaps I should add that on Monday mornings at ten o'clock we have our knitting class. I have done knitting or crocheting all my life, I guess. I also try to go to exercise, but it's a little bit difficult to always get there.

JE: Richard?

RZ: These two ladies, I think it's going to be the third year that they have been in our annual fashion store. And I want to say these two ladies are very fashionable and stay modern in their dress.

JE: Do you enjoy those fashion shows?

OM: Oh I do, it's—

VC: Just, just one year that I have been.

OM: ...it's a lot of fun.

Chapter 12—5:25

Looking Back

John Erling: Most everybody else wherever you go is younger than you and they're all younger.

Vida Culvern: I've lost so many friends it's kind of sad sometimes.

JE: That is the downside, you get to live to be—

VC: That's the downside.

JE: ...this age.

VC: I've lost three friends just this last month.

JE: Does that bear on your mind—

VC: No.

JE: ...the end of life? For you?

VC: No, not at all. Isn't that our goal? To life we're happier after?

JE: Great.

VC: So no, that for me, at least for me it's not a worry.

JE: As you look back and view the world, and we hear all the things that are going on and we hear this terrorism and all this going on. Do you think in terms of immorality or indecency or corruption mankind has gotten worse?

VC: Television has made a big difference, I believe, in what we see, what we hear, and probably affects your thoughts. And terrorism is certainly something that seems to be getting worse.

JE: And, Opal, you have a comment along that line?

Opal Moss: Well, there are so many wicked things that happen and the Bible said man would get wickeder and wiser. Of course, they meant women too. And I think they can think up some gruesome things to do—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

OM: ...that they wouldn't have thought of long back before. But I think that they are wiser, it's true. And I think we have a lot of good people, most of them I think are good people. I just like people and I love everybody. They all seem like they're just wonderful.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). Do you think you both have a feeling of gratitude more today than you even did when you were younger? Thankfulness?

VC: Well, I'm thankful for the parents I had. I'm thankful for the happy marriage I had, much to be thankful. I count my blessings every day, I guess.

JE: Opal?

OM: Well, I think I was very fortunate. I had a good life. I don't think I could complain. I just hope that I lived up to my luck to be so well taken care of when it would have been otherwise.

JE: Yeah.

OM: I love people, I love to teach Sunday school to the little folks, tell them to be kind to people who are not well—

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

OM: ...and things like that. I just had a real good time. I've met so many wonderful people. And people have been so good to me that I don't understand why but they are.

JE: Both of you seem to have a positive attitude. You know, there are many people who are negative and they look—

VC: I'm not—

JE: ...dark on things, and maybe do you think both of you—

VC: I'm not negative.

JE: You've always been positive and had a positive attitude?

VC: I think I have always.

OM: I don't think of dying unless somebody brings it up. I just feel like I'm going to live forever.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). I want to thank both of you for sharing with us. We can learn something from both of you. And I think the biggest thing is being positive, having a positive attitude, liking people and being active.

VC: Being active has a lot to do with it.

JE: Isn't that kind of what we're summing it up? Right?

OM: Be positive, be positive.

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative). And so, Richard, you have some observations to make because you've been around many of these people who are a hundred and older. How would you sum up some of what we talked about today?

Richard Zigler: Well, I think they just really nailed it on the head. You got to stay positive, you've got to remain active. It's that old saying, "If you don't use it you lose it."

JE: Um-hmm (affirmative).

RZ: And I think the centenarians said I have the privilege of knowing those who do have good health and remain active. Don't sit in the rocking chair, intermingle with people, will have a longer life. I think we're on the move to have more super centenarians. That's when you reach 110. And we are having more of those now.

Maybe by the time I get there we'll be up to 120, who knows. The oldest one to have lived in Oklahoma lived to be 122. She was a woman so I tell our centenarian women, "You've got to go 123 years to set the new record."

OM: Don't think I'm going to make it.

RZ: That's a challenge.

JE: Yeah it is. Well, it sounds like both of you ladies could probably reach that age. But the key to this too, of course, is health. And poor health comes to some people and it's no fault of their own. So all of us in this room today are lucky that we have our health and we can do what we're doing right now.

OM: I was thinking about the Lord. One of the advice that I would like to say is trust in God. I used to tell my little folks, "There may be times in your life when you have something that's bothering you that you can't even tell your mother and father. So always remember you can talk to God and Jesus, and they will help you through your times and make you see things as they ought to be."

JE: That's great advice and a good way to finish our conversation here today. Thank you, Vida and Opal, I'm in awe of both of you. And if I can be like you then I want to be 102 and 103 as well. I'm sure Richard joins me on that. Thank you so much.

Chapter 13—0:33

Conclusion

Announcer: This oral history presentation is made possible through the support of our generous foundation funders. We encourage you to join them by making your donation, which will allow us to record future stories. Students, teachers, and librarians are using this website for research and the general public is listening every day to these great Oklahomans share their life experience. Thank you for your support as we preserve Oklahoma's legacy one voice at a time on *VoicesofOklahoma.com*.