

## THORA BLYSTONE HARRIS

Interviewer: David Neal

Interviewed: July 18, 2003

**Interviewer:** Ok, let's start with your full name and spell it.

**Thora Harris:** Thora Harris

**Interviewer:** What was your maiden name?

**Thora Harris:** Blystone

**Interviewer:** What is your age and birth date?

**Thora Harris:** 90+, January 14, 1913.

**Interviewer:** Please tell us where in Franklin Township that you have lived.

**Thora Harris:** The corner of Fry Rd. and Old State Rd.

**Interviewer:** Through what years have you lived in Franklin Township?

**Thora Harris:** 1934-1978

**Interviewer:** Do you want to talk about your home there in the early years?

**Thora Harris:** When I moved there in 1934, we lived in the farmhouse with his parents because 1934 was the middle of the Depression. Nobody had any money; nobody was moving or doing anything. We couldn't rent a place. My husband had a business there that he couldn't leave, raising silver fox. So, we lived in for 4 and 1/2 years. During that time, I taught school for 2 and 1/2 years and then my 2 children were born.

**Interviewer:** Where did you teach?

**Thora Harris:** Silverthorn School and Townline School, both of which are closed now.

**Interviewer:** How was the home heated?

**Thora Harris:** Their home was heated with a big furnace downstairs, it was comfortable. There was a cook stove in the kitchen.

**Interviewer:** Was there indoor plumbing?

**Thora Harris:** Yes, there was indoor plumbing and a bathroom, a toilet upstairs and one down.

**Interviewer:** You mentioned that you lived with them, where did you move.

**Thora Harris:** In 1939, we built our home. Father Harris gave us 7/8 of an acre of land right close to the farmhouse and we built a house. That was interesting, it was what they called a "ready cut house", and everything came marked. A neighbor who was a carpenter and my brother-in-law put it together and built it. It was a very nice house. You can see it on Old State Rd. if you drive past there.

**Interviewer:** So you just had to assemble it? Where did it come from?

**Thora Harris:** Well, it was a company like Sears but it was not Sears, I forget the name of the place.

**Interviewer:** That house had plumbing and electricity?

**Thora Harris:** Everything, yes. We completed the downstairs in 1939 and we didn't do the upstairs until about 1942. It has four bedrooms and a bath upstairs and down and a full basement. It was a good house!

**Interviewer:** Do you want to talk about your family members, siblings, parents and grandparents?

**Thora Harris:** Well, my family, there were four boys, and I was the only girl. We lived on a farm and of course, everybody pitched in and did farm work. I can milk 7 cows night and morning, the hand way! We worked in the fields, pulling weeds and gardening. My father went to market, so he was gone Friday's and Saturday's to Erie.

**Interviewer:** Where was your family farm?

**Thora Harris:** Crawford County, 3 miles east of Crossingville, and it's still there.

**Interviewer:** Is that where your father is from originally?

**Thora Harris:** My father lived just a quarter of a mile away, around the corner. He was raised there.

**Interviewer:** What was his name?

**Thora Harris:** Chester [Leon] Blystone.

**Interviewer:** And your mother?

**Thora Harris:** My mother was a city girl. She was from Sharon, PA. Her name was Mary Ellen Buck.

**Interviewer:** You said you had four brothers. What were their names?

**Thora Harris:** Dale, Carl, Harry, Paul, and they are all deceased.

**Interviewer:** Did you have other relations that lived in the Township?

**Thora Harris:** My cousin lived in the old family homestead, where my grandfather lived. My Uncle Claude, that was my father's brother. Aunt Pearl lived a couple of miles away. In those days, people generally settled fairly close to where they were from. The boys married the girls next door and so on. Except my father, he married someone from away. That's because he went to market. He got out of the country, went to Erie, and met her there.

**Interviewer:** Who were some of your friends growing up?

**Thora Harris:** Boys! I had four brothers, boy cousins, I had one girl cousin but she lived a couple of miles away. It was country; you didn't have close neighbors. I learned how to play baseball along with the boys. I was the best boy there. That was good though. When I went to high school, I was on the basketball team there and when I went to college, I played speedball or basketball.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk about what Christmas was like.

**Thora Harris:** You would go to the woods and get a Christmas tree. My children can tell you that were one of the happiest things they did. My husband would take a tractor and a "stone boat". Do you know what a "stone boat" is? It's just a flat bunch of 2x4's together, and you used to put stones on it and they took it out to the fields to clear the fields. The kids would sit on the "stone boat", they would go into the fields over the snow, and they would cut a tree. They would bring the tree in and we would decorate it pretty much. We had some bought things but mostly the kids would make rings, and angels and stars and decorate the tree.

**Interviewer:** Let's talk about your marriage. Who did you marry?

**Thora Harris:** Byron Norman Harris. We married in the middle of the Depression so we did not have a wedding. We went to Pastor [Shreve] house [manse] in Northeast. We had two attendants and that was it. We went into my sister-in-law's and she had a nice luncheon for us and then we went on into Northeast and we were married. We came back and my brother was graduating that night from high school and my husband had to be home to feed the baby fox[es] (it was springtime). That was about it. We didn't go on a wedding trip until August because he had to feed the baby fox[es]. At that time we went to Niagara Falls and drove across New York to Albany to a friend's house and stayed there for a week. We toured New England and it was very nice! New England was beautiful then, no traffic like there is now.

**Interviewer:** How did you meet your husband?

**Thora Harris:** I went to school with his sister. All through high school, she wanted me to meet her brother because she thought we were perfect for each other. I was not interested because I was dating a couple of other kids in high school. He was older; he had graduated from high school and was working. Then I went to Normal School two years and got married. She went on and got married because she was 2 years older than I am. I am the baby of the class always. On graduation day, she called and said, "Now you can't say no anymore, you're not going to school anymore." So, I said, "Ok." I was still in town. We went to a dance; one of the local orchestra's had come out. We had fun! A couple of years later, we decided to get married.

**Interviewer:** Do you want to go through your children's names and when they were born?

**Thora Harris:** Janet Marie Harris was born on April 21, 1937 and Lucy Jean Harris was born on December 30, 1938.

**Interviewer:** Did they marry?

**Thora Harris:** Janet is married, her name is Westcott, and she married Dr. William Westcott. Lucy is married and her name is Knickerbocker, and she married Ronald Knickerbocker.

**Interviewer:** Neither of them lives in the area do they?

**Thora Harris:** No, when Jan graduated from college, they were engaged. She taught in Warren for one year, he went

down towards Philadelphia, and they were married the next year. Lucy and Ron, they were teaching somewhere south of Cambridge Springs in a little town called Greenville. He's very good in math; as a matter of fact, he is a brain. He was teaching junior high school and they couldn't add 2+2, and he hated it. One day he came home and said that there was a vacancy down near where Bill and Jan were. But it was only temporary; the person was on leave. I said, "go for it, you don't like what you are doing." I don't think his mother liked it very much because they were going to move so far away. But you have to enjoy what you are doing. They have been there ever since. He teaches college mathematics. He also was a "barbershopper" and his quartet won an international competition one-year. So, I got to go with them to all of those things and we got to go to Hawaii.

**Interviewer:** Where did you go to school?

**Thora Harris:** I went to a country school, Waldo, on Irish Rd. For ninth grade, I went to Edinboro. At that time, there were no school busses and as a matter of fact, there were no paved roads either. When it was time to go to high school, we went into the town and rented rooms. Many of the women rented rooms. That had no heat; it had one little electric bulb up in the ceiling.

**Interviewer:** You taught school in the Township?

**Thora Harris:** Yes, in Franklin Township after I was married. I taught at Silverthorn, [Franklin Center, Goodban] and Townline Schools.

**Interviewer:** What years did you teach?

**Thora Harris:** 1934 and 1935 at Silverthorn and 1935-1936 there too. Then I went to Townline and I only taught 1/2 year there because I was pregnant and they didn't teach right up until the end like they do today. I could have done it though and I would have been fine.

**Interviewer:** What are your memories of those schools that you taught at?

**Thora Harris:** Good and Bad! It was all eight grades, so I had children that were bigger than I was. Some of them thought they could prove it, but they couldn't of course. After I got them settled down, it was great. I sent one home one day. He went home and I went down to his house that night. His parents said, "What is he wandering around for?" I said, "I sent him home." I told them why I sent him home. Well, they were foreigners and his mother picked up a slab of wood. She said, "I tell him that if he does anything in school I will..." So, we got along fine after that!

**Interviewer:** How did you teach so many grades at once?

**Thora Harris:** They taught themselves. It was great! You listened in on what they were doing in fourth grade when you were in third grade. I could do long division in third grade same as fourth grade was doing. After fourth grade, fifth and sixth grade were combined. You had a curriculum that one year you taught fifth grade and the next year you taught sixth grade material and then you just reviewed. Seventh and eighth grades were combined so you just did that. You had about a 5-minute thing and you sent second grade to do math

problems on the board and you listened to first grade read and other people were studying. They had assignments and they became very independent. You didn't do anything for them. You gave them an assignment; you are in eighth grade, ok! You read about what England is doing, you learn the rivers and you come the next day prepared. Of course, a lot of it was repetition, but you learned. We went to Edinboro and no problem with the kids that had been in the town school. As a matter of fact I was top man, valedictorian, so were my children. And they were country schooled!

**Interviewer:** You mentioned the fox farm.

**Thora Harris:** About 1929, my husband sent to Prince Edward Island and bought a male for about \$1,000 and started raising foxes, which is a slow business. Up until World War II, then of course we didn't have any money when we married. I had a little money from teaching, \$100 a month, minus \$4.95 for retirement. If things hadn't gone bad, we would have been very well off. As it was, we raised \$200,000 worth of foxes and got 25% of what we paid for them to feed them. So, we sold out went in debt and sold out. From New York, they kept saying that the market was coming back. We believed them for a year or two and held it out. We sold the last ones for \$25 a piece. But I learned how to scrape foxes and turn them and repair them and all of that. Well that was 1947-48; we had no income, so in 1949, I told him that I was going back to teaching. In the middle of the winter, I got pretty bored and my kids were in school. I went down to Edinboro and saw an ad for bookkeeper at the lumber company. I walked in and they said, "Can you type?" I told them that I taught myself. They said, "Can you figure lumber?" I said, "Anything you want to give me!" Which I could! I got the job. I worked there through the summer. They asked me to teach before but I hadn't gone back, so I went back to teaching. It was 1950 [1949] when I went back, built my own fires, shoveled my own path to you know where! One for the girls and one for the boys.

**Interviewer:** What else was raised on the farm, besides foxes? Did you have crops?

**Thora Harris:** In 1949, my husband started buying cows. He was a very good dairy farmer. He was dairy farmer of the year or something. He's got medals for it. He also bought some mink; that was very successful until the cattle business got so that he couldn't do both of them. His brother, at that time, went into business with him and they made a good pair, because one was mechanical and the other one couldn't drive a nail. His brother got cancer and died in 1955. At that time, we had to pelt out the mink. It was a very bad time, my mother-in-law died and then my brother-in-law died the day of her funeral. My sister-in-law was getting a divorce. So, my husband had a nervous breakdown from depression. The day after Thanksgiving that year, I pelted over 100 mink!

**Interviewer:** Where did you sell the pelt?

**Thora Harris:** New York.

**Interviewer:** So you just shipped them there?

**Thora Harris:** You ship them there and they send back an evaluation, well we evaluate them ourselves according to

grade. So, when they send back the evaluation you either accept or say, "Raise it." At the time, when the fox business went bad, they really hadn't advertised too much and prices fell fast, you know a pelt that was worth \$250, came back \$160, you know any amount. Of course, we refused, that was awful low, so we thought maybe after Christmas it would go up. They said the same thing, the marketers. It never came back.

**Interviewer:** Why do you think that was?

**Thora Harris:** Russia shipped in furs. They had been storing them all through World War II. They flooded the market and the styles changed. Women don't wear long fur; they really don't do anything for you. They are bulky you know. My husband had one made for me and I told him to sell it. It made me look like a bear or some kind of animal.

**Interviewer:** Do you know anyone else in the Township that did any fox farming or anything? Were you the only ones?

**Thora Harris:** There was one in Waterford but not in the Township. The one over in Waterford we got a lot of information from. In fact, he's the one, I went over to after Thanksgiving and he showed me how to skin a mink because my husband had never done it, his brother did. Like I said his brother had died in the spring and pelting was in the fall.

**Interviewer:** What did you feed the foxes?

**Thora Harris:** From the slaughterhouses, liver, gizzard and lungs. Later we got whale meat, frozen whale meat.

**Interviewer:** Where did that come from?

**Thora Harris:** I don't know. All I know is that they came into Edinboro and that was when my husband was sick; so I drove the truck down to pick up the whale meat. I didn't know how to shift, or whatever you do with a truck so I came up the hill in the lowest gear. The neighbors probably thought I was crazy. Then you feed foxes grain of course and cereal from different companies like Alpo and them. Tomatoes, I raised a lot of tomatoes and we had a big freezer, a big room that you could walk in. We froze tomatoes, vegetables, and things.

**Interviewer:** Did you raise animals for your own consumption?

**Thora Harris:** When we were married, Dad Harris had chickens, but he sold out. He was failing and he died of cancer too. He had sheep, lambs. He didn't have cows, but he had the sheep, lambs, and chickens. But he was about retiring. He had been President of Erie County Milk and he was a Justice of the Peace.

**Interviewer:** Let's go through these businesses in the Township and see if you remember any of them. Blacksmiths?

**Thora Harris:** Not here, I don't know where they were if there were any.

**Interviewer:** Sawmills?

**Thora Harris:** You should talk to my sister-in-law; her father had a sawmill business. I don't know where it was, over in here [near Sterrettania] somewhere.

**Interviewer:** Were there any cheese factories, mechanics or merchants? What stores were in the Township?

**Thora Harris:** Crandall's had a general store at McLane. Franklin Center, there was a store there. A grocery store, and then later it became a saloon. I don't know how long it was a bar. Franklin Township, one of our renowned Senators called it the end of the world when he came out here for a visit.

**Interviewer:** Who was that?

**Thora Harris:** Senator Specter

**Interviewer:** Shoemakers, doctors or dentists?

**Thora Harris:** Not in the Township!

**Interviewer:** Feed mills, gristmills, leather goods or tinkers?

**Thora Harris:** No

**Interviewer:** Horse or cattle dealers?

**Thora Harris:** I don't know that there were any in the Township that I knew of. There were some in McKean and McLane; they used to come down through buying cattle and things. Franklin Township was totally farming back 60-70 years ago. We had 200 acres of the farm.

**Interviewer:** What was raised there?

**Thora Harris:** Well, one year we raised cabbage. I cut cabbage in the snow. That was when we were broke! Daddy Harris raised corn and we raised corn. Corn, cabbage, and oats, anything, lots of hay, made up bailed hay, you know.

**Interviewer:** Was most of the stuff taken up to market in Erie?

**Thora Harris:** Well, the corn and stuff we sold because we didn't have any way to use it. Well, Dad Harris had pigs.

**Interviewer:** Where did you do most of your purchasing?

**Thora Harris:** Edinboro, but we would also run down to the little store in McLane for bread. We didn't buy a lot of stuff like you do now. We canned a lot, froze, and raised food. We had our own meat. Dad Harris would butcher in the fall, a pig. You had a smokehouse; you smoked the meat to make the hams and sausage and so on. It was country living!

**Interviewer:** Do you remember prices of things around 1940? Like bread and milk.

**Thora Harris:** We had our own milk. Bread was 10 or 15 cents a loaf. When I went to market, we sold 3 pounds [of hamburger] for a quart

**Interviewer:** What was the price of clothing or did you make mostly everything?

**Thora Harris:** I made mostly everything; I could sew quite well. Mother could look at anything and make one just like it. I made the children's clothing until they were in seventh or eighth grade. Then we went into Erie, to buy clothing. I guess there was a clothing store in Edinboro, but not much.

**Interviewer:** What were the clothing prices at that time, do you remember?

**Thora Harris:** Cheap, you could get dresses for under \$5.00. It wasn't cheap because nobody had any money!

**Interviewer:** What were land values like?

**Thora Harris:** We were given our land.

**Interviewer:** What about furniture and household goods?

**Thora Harris:** Well, one thing I can tell you is that we bought a good mattress for \$37.50 and I used it for years and years and years. Last year I went to buy a mattress and it was \$450.00, so that's from \$37 to \$450.

**Interviewer:** What other jobs did you have besides teaching?

**Thora Harris:** I went to market with my father; I can take care of a counter and cash register and so on. Nothing else, I lived in the country and we didn't have transportation so girls didn't get a job. Girls that did generally went and lived with somebody and did housework that I knew. Have you seen Grace Pieper? She used to go and live with people and do house work, but like I said most of us just did work around the home.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember any Civil War or World War I Veterans in the Township?

**Thora Harris:** Clyde Davis, Russell's father was in World War I. No, I don't know anybody else. World War II, my brother was in the Air Force, he had 88 missions over Germany and France was shot down three times! He was on his third plane. The first one went up in flames and the second one, was shot to pieces. He had to land at an airport that wasn't his. But he didn't get a scratch and he didn't like it. He said, "There were men in those planes that I shot down and people where I dropped those bombs." Bad business!

**Interviewer:** Let's talk about churches in the Township?

**Thora Harris:** Well, there is a church Franklin Center Methodist church. Of course when I was married that is where I started to go because that is my denomination. It was a very small church; it had no heat and a little stove in the back that you lit in the winter. Later on, we raised the floor, put in a furnace, and built a new sanctuary. It's a very nice country church now.

**Interviewer:** Who was the pastor back then?

**Thora Harris:** I don't remember. We had a retired minister.

**Interviewer:** Did you have a constant minister or did you have visitors come in?

**Thora Harris:** No, it was a small church so mostly we had student ministers and they come out. Or we were on with another church; he would come to one church and then go to another one.

**Interviewer:** What kind of things did you do for fun, entertainment, and recreation, when you had time?

**Thora Harris:** Picnics, the kids had a good time. Our children will tell you they had a wonderful childhood.

Snowballs, built snow houses, go skating, they had skis. There wasn't much...the women met for Ladies' Aid, the church ladies, and did projects. We had parties in the evening. Not much dancing or anything. Of course, we went into Erie to Waldameer, the young people did. Christmas parties, New Years, just get togethers.

**Interviewer:** Did the township, church or schools have different gatherings, activities?

**Thora Harris:** We had Young Peoples' meeting and there was a group of several churches that had a very nice Choir. And we met a couple times a month and put on programs: Christmas, Easter and there really wasn't very much. You made your own entertainment.

**Interviewer:** I was told at one point about Box Socials?

**Thora Harris:** Oh, Box Socials, yes, the schools every year had Box Socials. The girls made a nice box and the guys bid on them. And of course, if you and somebody else bid on the same box, I've seen them run up as much as fifty bucks and that's when nobody had any money! Of course, the fathers, mothers, they all went. It was a family affair. The young people got in on that.

**Interviewer:** What do remember about politics and government in the township?

**Thora Harris:** Well, Dad Harris was a Justice of the Peace. And people would come to him with all their problems and troubles. He was Secretary-Treasurer for the Road Supervisors until cancer. He couldn't drive, and I went with him the last year and did the work. And when he died, they hired me and said you've been doing it anyway. So, I've been Secretary-Treasurer for about 17 years. And Dianne Horn is now. I think she's still, she was anyway. There isn't much activity in the township.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember the Road Supervisors?

**Thora Harris:** Well, when I was in, there was Frank Pertl, John Gnagi, and Donny Netzler. Netzler's dead I think.

**Interviewer:** What were the roads like back then?

**Thora Harris:** That deep with mud (hands about a foot and a half apart)! You could get stuck most anywhere in the spring. They were dirt roads, gravel they called them. But they went through in the spring and the fall...deep ruts lots of times, it was hard driving.

**Interviewer:** Probably better on wagon than car!

**Thora Harris:** My husband hitched a team to a sleigh one day, and he and a hired man and we couldn't get through to my school at Silverthorn. We couldn't get through with the team. We went through the field...you'd get snow!

**Interviewer:** Do you remember the Assessors, Constables nor School Directors?

**Thora Harris:** The Director, when I applied, was Washburn, he was School Director and Mr. Hough. But they're both gone now. They were old men then.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember anyone from the township that went on to higher political office?

**Thora Harris:** I don't think there is any.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember any of the roads that changed names?

**Thora Harris:** Yes, our road used to be called Townline, when I was married, and it's now called Fry.

**Interviewer:** Do you know why it was changed?

**Thora Harris:** To connect up with another road maybe. There was another Townline Road that interfered with addresses and things. That would be the main reason, I suppose, I never knew.

**Interviewer:** Do remember any natural disasters?

**Thora Harris:** Not in Franklin Township. Nothing happened in Franklin Township for heaven's sake!

**Interviewer:** What about winter life and snowplowing?

**Thora Harris:** Well, there wasn't any snowplowing when we got married. When my daughter was born, my second one, I just said I'll just stay home. And Mother Harris said, "You will not!" The neighbors started calling in. "The North Road is closed." Of course, everybody knew I was expecting any minute, after Christmas. "The East Road is closed," the next call came (motioning with her hands.) "The West Road is closed!" That left the South Road. This best friend of my husband's, where we spent our honeymoon in Albany, was down, visiting his folks on Townline Road and was heading for to Albany. They called came, "There is a caravan going down South Road, and you'd better get on it, tractors and what not!" So, I went in Erie and stayed with my sister-in-law until I went to the hospital. So, when they plowed the road, you couldn't see a car go pass from your house, the snow was piled higher than cars. Everybody used their tractors. I remember one winter, a baby was being born somewhere from out in the township, and the doctor had to come out on a snowmobile. It was safer for him than for her! (laughing)

**Interviewer:** Do you remember any of the immigrant families that came into the township, who they were and where they lived?

**Thora Harris:** That person who called me, David Henderson, his wife was what they called a DP-Displaced Person from Europe. Anna and John, they were first and second graders. They were my first second language students. They were cute kids. Anna came up and said, "This word I do not know," very carefully, very enunciated. I'd tell her and she said, "Why?" (laughing) Those were about the only ones I knew about. I had children whose parents were called foreigners, the parents didn't speak English, but the children of course, did. Since I moved, I spent the last twenty-five years [volunteer teaching] with non-English [students].

**Interviewer:** What diseases were prevalent?

**Thora Harris:** Chicken pox, my children had chicken pox, mumps. My husband's father's three brother and sisters died

of Diphtheria. He was the only survivor. That would be back in the 1800s. I think around 1888, I guess. My father had it too, but he survived.

**Interviewer:** Do you remember anything about a Flu epidemic?

**Thora Harris:** Well I wasn't here, but yes, it was 1918. I was 5 years old. Everybody was sick. All my family survived. We had very good nurses. My grandmother was like a doctor, I mean, she probably delivered more babies than doctors because they didn't get there, you know. She was the one who did. One of my neighbors came to do chores. My father was in bed. We were all in bed. He did chores for us, cows and stuff. He came in, I can still see him, isn't it funny I remember those things. I was only five years old, but I can see John sitting there, tipping the chair back and smoking. And my mother said, "You're going to get it." He said, "No, I'll just go home and have a good drink and go to bed." And he didn't get the flu. Maybe we all should have had a good drink, but we didn't drink! Some of our neighbors died. I don't know up here what the statistics are in Franklin Township.

**Interviewer:** Do you know where folks are buried from the township?

**Thora Harris:** McLane, pretty much. There is a cemetery over in Francis neighborhood, but I'm not too familiar with that area.

**Interviewer:** Anything that we missed that you'd like to talk about.

**Thora Harris:** If you shut off the thing, I'll tell you about my house!

**Interviewer:** You don't want that on camera?

**Thora Harris:** (smiling, shaking her head no)

**Interviewer:** Well, OK, thank you for your time.