

Harris County Archives
Houston, Texas

Oral History Collection

4

An Interview with Mrs. Vera Harris

Place of interview:	<u>Houston, Texas</u>
Interviewer:	<u>AnnElise Golden</u>
Terms of use:	<u>open</u>
Approved:	<u>Vera L. Harris</u> (Signature)
Date:	<u>04/26/06</u>

Oral History Transcription
OH04 – Vera Dial. Harris
April 24, 2006

Tape 1 Side A

GOLDEN: This is AnnElise Golden interviewing Mrs. Vera Dial. Harris for the Harris County Archives Oral History Program. The interview is taking place on April 26, 2006, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Mrs. Vera D. Harris in order to obtain her recollections concerning Home Demonstrations.

GOLDEN: Good morning Mrs. Harris, how are you today?

MRS. VERA D. HARRIS: I doing real good today. How about you?

GOLDEN: I am fine, thank you for asking. First I want to thank you for taking the time to speak with me about your career in home demonstrations. This is really going to be a great interview. Thank you again. Where were you born?

HARRIS: I was born in Palestine, Anderson County, Texas. About four miles out in the rural area.

GOLDEN: May I ask what year?

HARRIS: November 10, 1912.

GOLDEN: What was your childhood like?

HARRIS: What was my?

GOLDEN: Your childhood like?

HARRIS: Oh, my....

GOLDEN: What was it like growing up?

HARRIS: Oh, we lived on the farm and I learned to do a lot of things on the farm. We had to milk the cows, and churn and get the butter and everything so we would have plenty of milk and butter to eat. We had chickens, we had to raise turkeys, we raised guineas, we raised hogs, even Papa had a mare and this mare had two colts, two births and they both were mules and one of the mules name was Shorty and we really loved old Shorty. But my life was brought up on a farm. I learned how to chop cotton, pick cotton, draw peas, and do everything that people did on the farm back in those days, because there was not too many manufactured machines to do the work. Most of it was done by hand.

GOLDEN: Where did you go to school?

HARRIS: I went to school in a two teacher elementary school up about a mile from our house. In my first few years in school we had meetings at school in a church, called New Canaan Baptist Church. Mrs. Swanson was the elementary teacher and Mr. Swanson was the principal at that time. And in between we had another principal named Miss Givens. And oh when I was in the sixth grade they built schools and they called them the Rosenwald schools and that was the first time we had the opportunity to sit at a desk in a school room. We had ink wells and heaters with big o' something around them and they would heat up the whole room. We had the floors with oil or something so they wouldn't get dusty

so when you swept they didn't have dust. And we also had playground equipment. So the last two years in elementary school was just really beautiful. And we called the school the Cuney Academy Elementary School.

GOLDEN: And where did you go to high school?

HARRIS: I went to high school at Lincoln High School in Palestine, Texas. And that was about four miles from my home. I had to stay with my aunties and cousins and friends of the family to go to school. But I finished high school May 1930.

GOLDEN: Did you attend college?

HARRIS: I started to college in 1931, September 1931. I went to Prairie View A&M College. At that particular time, that is what we called the college. My sister had gone to St. Louis and she had finished nurse's training and so she sent me to college. After I got me a little job so I could help her pay my schooling. I finished Prairie View in May 1935.

GOLDEN: And what was your degree?

HARRIS: B.S. in Home Economics, Bachelor of Science in Home Economics.

GOLDEN: And did you go on further in college?

HARRIS: Later on I received my master's degree in Education from Texas Southern University in Houston, Texas. And I also did advanced study at workshops and short courses at Prairie View and George Washington University in Maryland.

GOLDEN: Tell me about your parents.

HARRIS: My daddy was a teacher, a banker, a farmer, a good citizen and an outstanding father. He was the father of ten children, four boys and six girls and all of us were born and reared in the same house until we all got grown. My daddy went to Prairie View Industrial College in 1886. He went Prairie View so he was a teacher. The next thing about him he was a realtor. He and a friend of his named H. L. Price they sold land all over the neighborhood where we lived. So he was an outstanding person and we loved him very much. He passed away in 1938.

GOLDEN: Now what about your mom?

HARRIS: My mom expired in 1919 when the Flu Epidemic came through that part of the country and she had recently had a baby and she wasn't able to fight off that virus. She passed away in March 20, 1919. My baby brother was a little over two months old when she passed away.

GOLDEN: Who took care of the family?

HARRIS: My daddy took care of us. He let us all stay right there at the house and he was our father, mother and everything. But we also have to give credit to our neighbors. We had some very good neighbors who helped us do the things that we should do. We were particularly fond of Mrs. Garland and also Mrs. Holsey. They were just like a mother to us. My mother was a seamstress; she made all the clothes that we wore and all the clothes that she wore. But other than that she was a housewife, a seamstress and a good, good mother.

GOLDEN: Can you tell me a little bit about your brothers and sisters?

HARRIS: I had four brothers, my oldest brother was named Caesar and he went to high school two or three years and he worked for a furniture company in Jacksonville, Texas, and that is where he retired. My next brother was named George Amzie. He learned how to be a mechanic and he became an outstanding mechanic so when he passed away I think he had a radiator shop where he took care of people's car radiators and repairs until he retired. And my brother named Willard, he got married, had eight children, four girls and four boys. And all of them are doing very well and he passed away in the 1990s. He worked at the railroad shop and he was also good at trades and industries. He was an outstanding cement mixer and things of that sort. He also worked for the shops, I think it was the IGN (International-Great Northern) or Southern Pacific, one of those. And my other brother, my baby brother was named James Quincy and he went to Prairie View and received his Bachelor of Science in Agriculture. He taught one year but he liked to sell insurance. So he worked for two or three insurance companies most of his life and he passed away in 1966.

My sister, my oldest sister was eighteen when my mother died. She went to college one summer then she started teaching and she taught most of her life. Finally she came to Houston when she retired she was working for the American Cancer organization here in Houston. My other sister, Julie, was the one who went to nurse's training in St. Louis, Missouri. She helped me go to school and

she also helped my other sister that I want to talk about in a minute. My next sister passed away when she was nine months old, her name was Myrtle Eliza. And then came me and my sister sent me to Prairie View and I received my Bachelor of Science degree in Home Economics. I worked for Southern Newspaper Features for about three and a half years and then I became a Negro County Home Demonstration Agent working in Austin and Harris County. I helped my baby sister named Estella Bernice go to college. My sister named Willie Juanita, she went to nurse's training and I helped her go to nurse's training and also helped my baby brother, James Quincy, receive his degree from Prairie View A&M University and it was college at the time you finished. My baby sister, as I said I helped her go to college and she received her Bachelor of Science in Education and she taught in three different schools. I think the Sealy Independent School District, Trinity County Independent School District, and Houston-Harris County Independent School District. All of my sisters and all of my brothers are dead and I am the only one that's still living. But I have a quite a few nieces and nephews, great-nieces and great-nephews.

GOLDEN: When did you begin working for home demonstrations? You mentioned you worked for Southern Newspapers?

HARRIS: Well, that was a company out of Dallas. That was my first Job. It was a company out of Dallas and the owner of this company was named Mr. Cohen. He employed us to go around as home economic lecturers. Our job was to go into

a city and teach the people how to use the modern equipment like the gas stove, the electric stove, mixers and all the equipment that was coming out on the market at that time so the housewives would be familiar with it.

We would travel from one city to the other. Before we even started, they had a forerunner and I have forgotten his name, but anyway, he went into the different cities made arrangements for us to have the cooking schools and everything. So when we got there all we had to do was follow the instructions that they had given us to follow in order to make the cooking school a success. And I did that for about thirty-three months.

GOLDEN: And in what cities did you teach?

HARRIS: With the home economic lectures we were teaching them how to follow recipes, how to use the equipment, how to make nutritious meals, and how to serve them attractively. And we did that in a session. We had four sessions at each time and at the end of the session we would give prizes to the person who baked the best cake. The people that sponsored these schools were companies like Duncan Coffee, Admiration, and Bright and Early, K.C. Baking Powder, we had Mrs. Tucker's Shortening, we had Gold Medal Flour, I believe it was, we had a flour company, and they would furnish the material for us to show the people how to use these equipments and how to balance their meals and cook food using a recipe. It was quite interesting and I enjoyed it.

GOLDEN: In what cities did you teach?

HARRIS: I went all over South Texas some parts of East Texas and some parts of Arkansas and also I went into Louisiana. I went to New Orleans, I went to Gretna, I went to Baton Rouge, I went to New Orleans, and I can remember those cities that I visited in Louisiana. I did visit most of the cities in Louisiana.

GOLDEN: How did you get there?

HARRIS: Via the bus, at that time the Bowen Bus, they furnished us a ticket. When you left home you had a ticket, a long ticket with all the different places that you were to go. And all you had to do was present your ticket to the bus driver and get on the bus and take you right where you were supposed to go. When you got to the city, the minister of the church or somebody would always meet you because you would notify them that you were coming. They would meet you and take you to your place where you were to stay. And we would stay in rooms at that particular time with somebody.

GOLDEN: So you did not stay in a hotel or....

HARRIS: No, we were not allowed to stay in hotels at that time.

GOLDEN: So, they had no hotels for African Americans?

HARRIS: No, no provisions for hotels at that time. We stayed in homes.

GOLDEN: How did that make you feel not being able to stay in a hotel?

HARRIS: I never thought about it. I didn't, so many people have asked me that, "What did you think about it?" It never crossed my mind, I didn't think about going to a hotel. Just didn't think about it.

GOLDEN: Where did you teach? Did you teach in someone's home? Or was there a building that you went to go teach at?

HARRIS: Most of the programs were held in churches.

GOLDEN: In churches

HARRIS: Yes.

GOLDEN: Now how did you advertise for people to come?

HARRIS: They had a paper that they would send out. It was sent to the minister and they would have those papers already delivered when you got there. The people would know that you were coming and they would attend the sessions.

GOLDEN: And how many days did you do this? If you were in Baton Rouge how many days would you be there?

HARRIS: Four Days.

GOLDEN: Four Days.

HARRIS: I would be there for seven days but the cooking school would be four nights.

GOLDEN: Four nights.

HARRIS: Yes.

GOLDEN: Who were your clients?

HARRIS: The people that would come to the program.

GOLDEN: Both men and women?

HARRIS: Both men and women, girls and boys whoever came, that was our audience.

GOLDEN: Do you recall the economic status of the people that came? Did you teach in urban areas or was this just basically rural?

HARRIS: Most of them were in urban areas. Because there were little urban areas in all these little towns where the Negro people lived and that's where they were held in the churches.

GOLDEN: Who paid for all the supplies?

HARRIS: The company that I worked for Southern Newspaper Features. They furnished everything that we needed. There were companies that like I said they would sponsor the food like Duncan Coffee Company, K.C. Baking Powder, and I can't remember the flour, but we had a flour company, we always had somebody that furnished the shortening, like Mrs. Tucker's Shortening and things of that sort. It was really an advertising program to acquaint the people in low income areas how to save their money, how to cook, what to look for in new equipment and how to use it.

GOLDEN: So you were suppose to promote the products that you used?

HARRIS: That's right, promote the products that I used.

GOLDEN: What was your salary at that time?

HARRIS: Fifteen dollars a week and all my traveling expenses.

GOLDEN: And how did you get paid?

HARRIS: They would mail my check to me.

GOLDEN: Would you get paid weekly or monthly?

HARRIS: Weekly, paid weekly, every weekend, the check would be there.

GOLDEN: Now if you had travel expenses would you have to fill out a report and send to them?

HARRIS: No I did not make a travel expense report. I was provided bus travel via a bus ticket for my entire travel expenses.

Tape 1 Side B

GOLDEN: Again what were the dates that you worked for?

HARRIS: The Southern Newspaper Features?

GOLDEN: Yes ma'am

HARRIS: July 1935 until April of 1937.

GOLDEN: What do you think your clients got out of these classes?

HARRIS: I do believe that they learned a lot. They were at least introduced to new equipment and convenience. How you can save time when you cook, when you shop and then how to use the equipment after you got it. I think they were all benefited.

GOLDEN: What do you remember most about these clients?

HARRIS: What do I remember most about, I remember how some of the women, at the end of each session we would have a contest and the ladies would bake cakes. And when the lady would win the first prize in the cake baking contest the expression on her face just made you really feel good, she was so happy. In a lot

of incidences it was the first time that some of these women had ever won a prize, and that added to it. So it was a learning experience, it was interesting to see how they'd grasp what they could in that short time.

GOLDEN: Now, if you were teaching someone and they did not know how to read how did you think they did?

HARRIS: You show them, you have a demonstration. See we had a demonstration and we would show them how to measure using the measuring equipment and how to be sure that you measured correctly. We had standard equipment for measuring like spoons and cups and things of that sort so they would know a half a cup, a third a cup, or a fourth of a cup.

GOLDEN: Now who did you report to?

HARRIS: To the Southern Newspaper Features.

GOLDEN: Did you have an office that you worked out of?

HARRIS: Oh, no, no we stayed out on the road. You stayed on the road, you did all of your work in the room that you stayed in.

GOLDEN: This Southern Newspaper Features was that an African American Newspaper?

HARRIS: No that was company, this gentleman I understand was of a Jewish descent his name was Cohen and I shall never forget Mr. Cohen. C-O-H-E-N was his name. And they tell me that he was descendent of the Jewish race.

GOLDEN: When did you begin to work for the Texas Agricultural Extension Services?

HARRIS: Let me see? May the 1 1937.

GOLDEN: How long did you work for them?

HARRIS: Until January 31, 1973.

GOLDEN: So you had a long run with them?

HARRIS: I surely did. Most of my work was done with them.

GOLDEN: Now how did you find out about this position?

HARRIS: The home demonstration?

GOLDEN: Yes.

HARRIS: I had wanted to be one for a long, long time and I had told several of my friends who were Home Demonstration Agents that I wanted to be one. So I was conducting a cooking school in Paris, Texas and it so happened I stayed with one of my classmates, and her district agent, Mrs. J. O. A. Conner was visiting her at that particular time. So I just told Mrs. Conner I wanted a job so when they had an opening for an extension agent I would like to be considered. So she told me to write Mrs. Rowan at Prairie View and get my application in and everything and that's what I did and I started to work May 1, 1937.

GOLDEN: And who was your supervisor or supervisors?

HARRIS: My supervisor was Mrs. Iola W. Rowan and she was a smart person. She helped me a whole lot to develop into an individual.

GOLDEN: Where was the main office for this?

HARRIS: Prairie View A&M College, Prairie View A&M College at that time, was the headquarters. There were two extensions programs at that particular time. One was strictly for the white population and then we had one for the Negro population. Our titles were Negro Home Demonstration Agent and we worked with the Negro families in the county in which we were appointed to work.

GOLDEN: Now do you recall how many other African Americans worked for the Extension Services?

HARRIS: At one time, if I can remember correctly, it was a little over one hundred. Between, let's say between ninety-five and a hundred and five. As I remember the total population of the extension service, as I can remember it, was between ninety-five and one hundred at one time.

GOLDEN: Now what about the men did they instruct classes too?

HARRIS: They did similar, they worked with the men and they had their district agents too. They worked with men and boys and they had their district agents. We worked with women and girls and we had our district agents. And headquarters were at Prairie View A&M University.

GOLDEN: And do you remember what your salary was at that time?

HARRIS: My salary was a little over a hundred dollars a month, I have forgotten exactly, but it was more than a hundred and then at that time I had a small stipend for travel.

GOLDEN: And how did you travel?

HARRIS: You had to buy your own car. That was one of the requirements. You must have a car. So I had to buy a car.

GOLDEN: Do you remember what car it was?

HARRIS: Uh huh, it was a green Chevrolet with a black top and it was a two door, a 1937 Chevrolet. Doris Day was advertising them. I think her name was Doris Day. See your Chevrolet in the USA [HARRIS singing car jingle].

GOLDEN: [Laughing]

HARRIS: I think her name was Doris Day?

GOLDEN: Yes, I think Doris Day, you're correct. She was a singer, actress.

HARRIS: The car I wanted and that's the car I bought.

GOLDEN: Was your salary comparable to that of the whites?

HARRIS: I do not know because at that time I was not curious and nobody ever told me. The only thing that I do know is that we were not paid the same amount. But how much more they got than we, I just really don't know.

GOLDEN: That's good enough. Now did you have an office?

HARRIS: No, I didn't have an office. In Austin County my room was my office.

HARRIS: Everything I did I had it in my room. I bought a manual typewriter and a card table and then for my files I used an orange crate. At that time they were putting oranges in these wooden boxes that had two sections to it and that was my file. And the county superintendent was really good in Austin County. He would give

me folders for my files and he would also give me stencils. I would cut my own stencils and he would run it off for me. So that was really nice.

GOLDEN: That's my next question, how did you obtain your office supplies and then supplies for your demonstrations?

HARRIS: You bought that yourself other than just what I told you that county would furnish for me.

GOLDEN: So you had to buy your own envelopes and stamps?

HARRIS: When you worked with the Extension Service you had what they called the penalty privilege. When you write to your district agents anything pertaining to extension you don't pay postage, its penalty free, but you have to be sure that it's pertaining to extension. If any personal matter that I had to write, like when I wrote to a company if it was not extension related I had to buy my own stamps and stationery.

GOLDEN: Yes, Ma'am.

HARRIS: People at that time we were working strictly with rural people. You worked with the rural areas. Mine were Negro women and girls. You made up, developed your own organization. You would go to the church or go from house to house and tell people that you were there and things of that sort. And you would ask them to come to a meeting and they would come and you would get your club and start to working with them and that's the way we did it. It was either through the church or a large hall, whatever they had in the neighborhood,

and then from door to door. And then sometimes you would contact a key leader in every neighborhood that you went to at that particular time there was always one or two people who were the leaders in that community. So you contact them and they would help you get your audience together.

GOLDEN: Where did you teach them? Was it like before in churches and....

HARRIS: Sometimes you would meet in the church, most times you met in the home, most of them. I think that is why they call it Home Demonstration because most time you met in the homes, meet in the church or the large hall, or whatever place they let you meet.

GOLDEN: So your clients found out through word of mouth through their community leaders.

HARRIS: That's right

GOLDEN: Now why was it that you just had to go to the rural areas?

HARRIS: At that time to what I understood from the way they were interpreted in the Smith-Lever Law that is was designed mostly for rural people. But when I read the law myself it didn't say rural people it said all people except residents of land grant colleges. And that was the job, that's what we are doing now. But at that particular time we were working with the world that was mostly rural.

GOLDEN: True, true.

HARRIS: Mostly rural.

GOLDEN: Now what kinds of things did you teach them?

HARRIS: Oh we had foods and nutrition, leadership development, you talk to them about budgeting, you talk to them about landscaping, anything pertaining to home economics and related fields and whatever they wanted to know. That was your job to find out for them. If you did not know what it was, then you had to call on the specialist. The specialists were all at A&M. All you had to do was write them or call them and they would tell you where to get the information so you could pass it on to your clients.

GOLDEN: Now, did you have to take any classes before you started home demonstration?

HARRIS: Yes, I had to be trained. I took a week of training at Prairie View A&M College emphasizing how to be an effective Home Demonstration agent. After I became an extension agent sporadically we had training meetings. Both individual and county and the specialist and district agent would train us and give us information on the things you could do to help the people.

GOLDEN: Who taught you these classes? Were they other African Americans or were they white?

HARRIS: Yes, my bosses were African Americans, headquarters at Prairie View.

GOLDEN: Can you describe some of the activities that were taught to the women?

HARRIS: Some of the things we taught them how to cook, how to follow a recipe. We taught them how to sew, how to follow a pattern, how to put the pattern on the material so that it would be in the grain line. We taught them how to knit. We

taught them how to crochet, we taught them leadership development, we taught them informational landscaping, how to landscape the backyards and the whole yard; information in the areas of Home Economics and related fields. Everything, anything that they had a problem with, that was our job to help them.

GOLDEN: Now how did they differ from your clients in the cooking classes? Did you see any big difference?

HARRIS: I didn't see very much difference in the people in home demonstrations and at the food shows, the food classes. Because, if a person couldn't read they didn't tell you that they couldn't read. They just watched you and they would do what you did and that's why we had to show.

GOLDEN: Right.

HARRIS: See, we had to show them how to do it and believe it or not sometimes those people who couldn't read could out do you after you taught them. Beat you cooking, beat you sewing, and everything and couldn't even read. And that is the truth. And it was interesting to see how the people could develop just by being shown and told what to do.

GOLDEN: Now did you ever go back to, maybe a certain town and see progress or change?

HARRIS: Oh yes, even if you didn't go back you be reading it in the paper. You see where the people have changed. Because after being in Austin County those three years, the kids started going to college, they started wanting better schools, they

got bus transportation and they even went so far to get a high school so that the Negro kids could go to a new high school. And they did a lot of things.

GOLDEN: Good.

HARRIS: But they just needed some help and somebody to motivate them. And that's my idea about it.

GOLDEN: So they really wanted to learn?

HARRIS: They really wanted to learn. Now that's the idea that I got from it. And it would encourage you to help them because you would see that they could learn and do things, but they just needed somebody show them how what to do.

GOLDEN: Thank you. Now were you ever involved in 4-H?

HARRIS: Yes. I worked with 4-H youth and we taught the 4-H club members the same identical thing we taught the women but we taught them demonstrations on a junior level rather than on a senior level. And they were also given information in all those areas that I have mentioned: clothing, foods and nutrition, budgeting, leadership development. You name it; they had the same kind of program. And we were given information in how to work with 4-H club members. And recreation they were just real good with and they learn how to take their meeting and have a business part of it :



4-H members participating in a 4-H awards program in the 1960s. Original photo located at the Harris County Archives. 2006.026

GOLDEN: Now, was this part of the Home Extension Program or was this something that you did separately?

HARRIS: No, no this was an extension program.

GOLDEN: And where did you have to go to teach these children in the community?

HARRIS: When I first started to work, 4-H met in schools and homes. That's where we would have our 4-H meetings. Then, after a certain period of time we didn't have meetings in schools. 4-H clubs became community clubs. So that's the way we got the groups together.

GOLDEN: Now was this just for African American children or was this a mixture of whites and African Americans?

HARRIS: No, my job was just to work with the Negro children. The white agents worked with the white children. And that went all the way through all my tenure except the last four, five years. That was the way it was. I worked strictly with the Negroes and the white agents worked with the whites.

GOLDEN: Now was this nationally recognized, African American clubs were they nationally recognized?

HARRIS: Oh yes, we had our own set up for that too. We had National Boys Club programs in Washington DC, we had our own regional 4-H club groups, we had county groups, we had regional groups, everything they had we had.

GOLDEN: How long did you work with 4-H?

[HARRIS: Until I retired]

Tape 2 Side A

GOLDEN: When did you move to Houston?

HARRIS: January 1, 1941.

GOLDEN: And why did you move to Houston?

HARRIS: My home demonstration supervisor transferred me from Austin County to
Harris County.

GOLDEN: Did you have a problem with that? Was that okay with you?

HARRIS: It was fine with me because that was a promotion.

GOLDEN: Oh, okay, okay.

HARRIS: That was a big promotion you see because when I got to Houston I had a
whole lot more than I had when I was in Austin County. That was a big
promotion and I often wonder how did I do it because I was one of the young
agents. I really think the fact that we made that first mattress and we did a lot of
things in Austin County that were unusual and that might have been the reason,
but I never did find out why. I just accepted it.

GOLDEN: Did you have the same program as you did in Austin County?

HARRIS: Yes, to a degree. The programs all over were similar and our objectives were
similar due to state wide needs.

GOLDEN: Who did you report to in Houston?

HARRIS: Reported to the Harris County Commissioner's Court and to the Prairie View Office.

GOLDEN: Was Mrs. Rowan still your supervisor?

HARRIS: Yes, she was still my supervisor. I think she was my supervisor until I believe it was 1946 or somewhere along in there. I think I got when she left the extension here. [Harris browses through some papers] I know I have it but I don't see it right know. I'll tell you when she left in a little while.

GOLDEN: Where were your offices located?

HARRIS: When I came to Houston the office was located at 212 Pilgrim Building, West Dallas at Bagby, in what was called the, I said the Pilgrim Building didn't I?

GOLDEN: Yes.

HARRIS: And we were on second floor. We had two rooms. There was a room for the County Agriculture Agent and a room for the Home Demonstration Agent and we had one secretary. We had files. The county furnished everything we needed. We made out our own budget and planned our own programs. It was a big promotion. [Laughter]

GOLDEN: Well good. Now were these offices segregated? Did the whites have their own offices?

HARRIS: Yes, the whites were in the court house.

GOLDEN: And did you know if it was equal?

HARRIS: No, I don't know. Well, in fact, no, it wasn't equal because see we were in the Pilgrim Building which was a building in the Negro neighborhood and these people were downtown in the court house. So no, it wasn't equal.

GOLDEN: So did you guys have the same budgets, did you have the same monies that they did?

HARRIS: No, we didn't have the same monies but we could make our own budget. See, we could ask for what we wanted, what we thought we needed. You made out your budget at the first of the year and you used as needed. If you had some money in one department and needed it for something else, say for instance in your general department you had some money but you needed a typewriter or something like that and there was no money there so you could write the court and ask them to transfer some money from the general fund to this equipment fund and you would be able to get your equipment. Now that's the way it worked way back in the old days. And we had a full time secretary. She worked full time.

GOLDEN: Now did that bother you at all? I know it didn't bother you in the past but has it ever bothered you that you know you were segregated? That you had to use a different fountain and different bathroom?

HARRIS: No, it never did bother me. It never did bother me. It bothered a lot of the agents. But it didn't bother me. Because I learned a long time ago that anything you can do something about you do it. And then the things you can't do anything about you accept them and be happy.

GOLDEN: Yes, ma'am.

HARRIS: I think that they call that the Law of Serenity and god gave me the serenity to accept the things that I cannot change. The courage to change the things I can and the wisdom to know the difference.

GOLDEN: Yes.

HARRIS: Now Mrs. Rowan taught me that when I was appointed Negro Home Demonstration agent in 1937. I used to could say it real because I say that almost every day. That's why it didn't bother me. I couldn't do anything about it.

GOLDEN: True.

HARRIS: And I was wasting energy worrying about it. So why worry?

GOLDEN: Yes ma'am, that's correct.

HARRIS: [Laughter] I tell people that everyday of my life. Don't worry about things or events that you can't do nothing about it, that's wasted energy.

GOLDEN: Yes, ma'am that's correct. That's a good philosophy.

HARRIS: That's my philosophy of life, if you can do something about it do it, if you can't pray to the lord and ask him to help you forget it. He usually helps me because I can go to sleep after the first night. I worry about it that first night and I ask him to help me forget it and it will gradually go away and finally I will forget it all happened.

GOLDEN: That's good.

HARRIS: [Laughter]. And that's just the way I live. That's the way I live.

GOLDEN: Yes Ma'am. Who were your clients?

HARRIS: I saw the people in the neighborhood the different communities same as like this community called Cambridge Village I would have a group of people in this community to have a meeting and it could either be girls or women. And then another community the same thing and that was our clients, the people in the neighborhoods.

GOLDEN: Where did you teach them?

HARRIS: In homes, in community buildings, and wherever you saw them, maybe on the street, over the telephone, wherever they needed that's where you helped them.

GOLDEN: How did you advertise in Houston?

HARRIS: I didn't do a lot of advertising in Houston, but I did have a column, I had a weekly column in *The Informer* for about twenty-five years. And then we had a radio program over KYOK about twenty years, early in the mornings. I would write circular letters that would go to the churches and that allow certain things and things of the sort. So you got your audience which ever way you could, which ever way was convenient for you to get your audience.

GOLDEN: Now the newspaper, what newspaper was that?

HARRIS: Well, now I was real lucky when I got to Houston I had a schoolmate that worked for the *Chronicle* and I got articles in the *Chronicle* just before World War I [World War II] and right after, but then after that we didn't get them in as much as we did while he was working. The *Informer* and also *The Forward*

Times, which were black newspapers, would publish anything that I would send to them.

GOLDEN: It was called the *Informer* and what was the other one?

HARRIS: *The Forward Times*.

GOLDEN: *The Forward Times*?

HARRIS: Yes.

GOLDEN: What kind of articles did you write?

HARRIS: I wrote articles pertaining to all area in home economics and related field.

Sometimes I would write about nutrition, sometimes it would be about clothing, sometimes about leadership development, and sometimes it would be about recreation, and then sometimes if I made a trip and I saw something interesting I would tell them about my trip.

GOLDEN: What was the column called?

HARRIS: One pilot was called "The Murmuring Brook" and then it was changed it to the "Report From County Home Demonstration Agent."

GOLDEN: And the radio station that you broadcasted on what was that predominantly African American?

HARRIS: Yes it was, but I did get my 4-H girls on KTRH. A young man from A&M was over the Agricultural Department and I believe his name was, I forgotten his name, but anyway he was from A&M and I called him one day and he let my 4-H club people be on his program.

GOLDEN: Good, I forgot to ask you earlier when you moved to Houston did your salary change?

HARRIS: Oh yes a big salary change, everything changed it was a big promotion, just like I say.

GOLDEN: Good.

HARRIS: That was office equipment and supplies materials for demonstrations and the telephones and secretary. You did not have to do anything but do your work, because the secretary kept the files for you. We got more in salary and the travel remained the same because that would come from the state office.

GOLDEN: Now how many days a week did you have to work?

HARRIS: When I first started it was five and a half days and then finally we didn't have to work on Saturday mornings.

GOLDEN: And how long would your demonstrations last?

HARRIS: We would not try to make our program not over an hour and a half. The quicker you could get through with it and be assertive as possible as you can the better. After a certain length of time people don't learn so you try to get them while they are nice and fresh and they will retain it better than if you just prolong it. So you make your demonstration as thorough as you possibly can so they can see every step, you don't go too fast nor too slow, but so that they'll see it and understand everything that you are doing. And then you let them do it.

GOLDEN: So it is hands on?

HARRIS: Because if you see it and you do it yourself you will remember it.

GOLDEN: Correct, correct. Now did you ever showcase the work that the women did?

Did you ever have little fairs?

HARRIS: Oh yes, we had plenty of fairs. We had community fairs, we had county fairs and that was in both of the counties and we had both of them, and Harris County and also in Austin County. In fact we had the first food vegetable show in the county court house in Austin County. Where the women had grown like vegetables and things of that sort and we called that foods and nutrition, you know food production. And they had that exhibit in the county court house and than later on that Fall they let us use the fairground and we had our fair.

GOLDEN: Well good, now did they win prizes?

HARRIS: Yeah, won prizes and things, ribbons we didn't have nothing but ribbons, we didn't have much money.

GOLDEN: Right.

HARRIS: And some of them just got mentioned you know honorable mention and things of that sort. And then some of the merchants in Austin County if the people had won blue ribbons or red ribbons they would let the product in their window we called that, there was a name for that kind of exhibit were you showed your products in the store windows. And the merchant would let us show them.

GOLDEN: Now did you have to travel a lot while in Harris County?

HARRIS: Yes, you traveled everyday, most days you went some place. There were some days you maybe spend the whole day in the office. You worked out your own schedule. And you met with your people and sometimes would come into the office for meetings and bulletins and information. We had what we called the County Home Demonstration Council where the women would meet all the presidents and elected delegates of the clubs. We would get training in leadership development. We also had the same thing for the 4-H Council, training the kids in leadership development.

GOLDEN: I should have asked this before but I know we talked about supplies. But what kind of things did you have to have to teach these women? Let's say if you're going to maybe teach them how to bake a cake and things like that. Now did you have supplies to bake a cake to show them and did you have enough supplies so they could bake a cake?

HARRIS: Now, in Harris County they would furnish, that was in my budget I could buy some of the things to give the demonstration. When I was in Austin County I bought the materials and would give the demonstration.



Adult sewing class members modeling dresses they made. April 1970.
Harris County Archives. 2006.026

GOLDEN: Now did you teach them how to make dresses or maybe a couch covering?

HARRIS: If I were showing them any clothing I would buy my own pattern, buy my own fabric and it would be my own garment you know. But I would show them how and then if they wanted to make one for themselves, they bought their fabric and pattern and we would lay it on there and show them how to cut it and everything and they'd put it together.

GOLDEN: Now what impact did World War II have on the program?

HARRIS: Oh, World War II made the program interesting I would think because we were able to hire some specialists in gardening and things of that sort. It made the people, you know, come in good numbers along about that time too because they needed that information. But it helped us out a lot with helping the people.

GOLDEN: Now was your budget cut during to the War? World War II?

HARRIS: No.

GOLDEN: No budget cuts? Did you have a different program maybe at that time? Did they push you to do like the Victory Gardens? I know that during World War II people had Victory Gardens....

HARRIS: We worked with the Victory Garden program. We emphasized it very much the Victory Gardens we surely did. There was something else they had going there and I just forgotten what it was, but they had two or three program that were real interesting during the war. I remember the Victory Garden very well.

GOLDEN: Can you talk to me about the men who taught in the Home Demonstrations?

I know they did work with men and did agriculture. Do you recall any of these programs or anything like that?

HARRIS: I do know that the men had programs in growing corn and pigs and things of that sort and that's why I want you to talk with Mr. Shaw. Because he could give you what the men did a lot better than I could. I do know we cooperated and have fairs when they'd have fairs and the young men would bring something and things of that sort. But they had a good program for boys and men too.

GOLDEN: Now did you have more clients once you came to Houston? I am not sure how big Austin County really is, but Houston is a pretty big city. Did your clients increase in number?

HARRIS: Surely, they had increased in numbers because we had more communities to work with and more people to work with. So naturally, our enrollment increased. And that was for both women and girls. When we had an opportunity to work with 4-H members in schools, we had a nice big enrollment you know. But then we started the meeting in homes the enrollment would decrease but we still had kids that would come.

GOLDEN: Now what about 4-H in Houston? How did that differ than in Austin County?

HARRIS: There was no difference we taught them the same things.

GOLDEN: Same thing?

HARRIS: Uh huh. There was clothing, leadership development, bedroom improvement, and an area in home economics, they were taught the same.

GOLDEN: And obviously more children in Houston?

HARRIS: Yes, you had more children in Houston because you had more children in Houston than you do in Austin County, small counties like that.

GOLDEN: Did you have to go to schools or did they have like a club outside of the schools?

HARRIS: Now we had it both, when I first started, as I said, we had clubs in schools and then they did not let us meet in the schools.

Tape 2 Side B

[GOLDEN: How did the kids know about 4-H?]

HARRIS: So many people by telephone and news articles, and then just by seeing them in meetings and different places like that. Anyway, if you see anybody if you can help them and they ask you questions, you answer. If you don't know the answer for it, you call the specialist and they made it to them later.

GOLDEN: While in Houston when you were working doing your Home Demonstration, did you have to make any reports to let anybody know how well you were doing? Maybe the Commissioners Court did you have to let them know how successful you were? Did you have to send it to Texas A&M?

HARRIS: Every month you had to make a monthly report. The monthly report was due to be mailed the last working day in the month and you reported on all the activities that you had done that month. And that was a must. You must make a report, you must send one too. We had to send one to the Commissioners Court and one to Prairie View, and you keep one in the office, and that was every month. And then at the end of the year, you had to make an annual report and you sent the annual report to the Commissioners Court, to Prairie View, and you kept one in your file.

GOLDEN: Now did you have to do that separately yourself or for the whole, maybe for Harris County did the Negro Home Demonstrators all had to do an annual report together or do one separately as an agent?

HARRIS: We did them separately. I had to make my annual report and Miss Punchard had to make her annual report. I had to make my monthly report and Miss Punchard had to make her monthly report.

GOLDEN: Miss who again, I'm sorry.

HARRIS: I just called her Punchard. That was her, an agent, was one of the white agents. Her name was Punchard.

GOLDEN: Okay, Okay. Now let me ask you another question, how many African American agents were in Houston? Were you the only one?

HARRIS: I was the only one.

GOLDEN: The only one and serviced all the African Americans who wanted to come to the meetings?

HARRIS: You see I was the only Negro Home Demonstration Agent that was my title and I worked with Negro families. And the white agent was just called the County Home Demonstration Agent and she worked with the white families.

GOLDEN: Now what kind of relationship did you have with her?

HARRIS: What kind of what?

GOLDEN: Relationship.

HARRIS: Oh, we were just like this [Mrs. Harris holds up two fingers crossed]. Miss Punchard and I we got along beautifully.

GOLDEN: Did you ever have to come together at one time and work together on anything?

HARRIS: Oh yes. We did and sometimes we called each other over the telephone or I would go to her office and talk with her.

GOLDEN: Now getting back to 4-H, another question just occurred to me did the African Americans in Houston have their own schools, like own high schools?

HARRIS: Oh yes. We had our own schools, we had elementary schools, our junior high schools and we had the high schools. They called them middle schools, now they call them junior high, I think they call them middle schools now. And they have a high school just like it is now. But they have about the same ones here. We still have those same Negro schools we had when I was working. They may have

closed one or two of them, because of population or something. But they still have them.

GOLDEN: Now, did you ever teach any whites before integration?

HARRIS: No, no.

GOLDEN: Now were African American the only ones you ever taught? Did you teach Mexican Americans or maybe Asian Americans?

HARRIS: Now I taught Mexican Americans before we integrated. I had two beautiful groups of Mexican Americans that I worked with, I taught them. They were interested in clothing and I taught them how to make a skirt. One of the groups was at Looscan Elementary School and the other one was in the Fourth Ward area and they were strictly Mexican. I did not work with any white people until after integration.

GOLDEN: Did you teach them separately from African Americans or...

HARRIS: Yes, the program was held in the school, Looscan was at the school and the one at the Fourth Ward was at the community building.

GOLDEN: Now, did somebody approach you to teach them?

HARRIS: Yes.

GOLDEN: Did they ask you...?

MRS.HARRIS: They asked me to. The counselor at Looscan called me and asked me to work with her group and I did. And then the First Methodist Church introduced me to the group in Fourth Ward. I've forgotten the lady's name that called me but

that was long ago. And we had a clothing project and when it was finished we had a little exhibit. I had some pictures of them but I couldn't find them today, where they had finished their little garments and had a little style show at the last meeting, they were happy and proud.

GOLDEN: How long did you work with the Mexican Americans?

HARRIS: Just carried through one project each, each group was carried through one project. Four to six weeks, until all garments were made.

GOLDEN: You said that they were interested in clothing so you basically taught them about how to make clothes?

HARRIS: Yes, how to make. We made skirts. I believe it was with the little kids.

GOLDEN: Where did you teach them? You said that you went to the schools?

HARRIS: Now at Looscan we taught at the school and the one at the community building we meet at the community building.

GOLDEN: Now were these for anybody who wanted to come?

HARRIS: Well, it wasn't for anybody who wanted to come. This lady had her own group.

GOLDEN: Her own group?

HARRIS: That's all I know. I know she had them when I got there. So she must have selected them herself, I didn't have anything to do with selecting them and I didn't ask her how she selected them, I just helped them out.

GOLDEN: Okay, where did the money come from? Did you have to use your own money or was this money from the County?

HARRIS: We didn't have any money. They wanted to learn how to sew so they provide their own material.

GOLDEN: So this was something separate from Home Demonstrations, from the County?

HARRIS: No, it was when you work with the County you don't discriminate you just work for the County.

GOLDEN: Okay, okay. Now what happened if you had a client who did not speak English? Was there someone there to translate or did you have that problem?

HARRIS: I didn't have that problem.

GOLDEN: You didn't have that problem.

HARRIS: I didn't have that problem. The groups that I worked with could speak English. I didn't have any problems with trying to interpret Mexican.

GOLDEN: What other activities were you involved in? You did the newspaper, you had your columns in the newspapers, did you do anything else?

HARRIS: We worked with other clubs too. We worked with community clubs and teaching them leadership development, how to conduct their meetings properly. We worked with the Garden Clubs here in Houston giving them ideas on how to select their shrubbery using ideas and suggestions from the landscape specialist at

A&M. And we also worked with just other people who wanted information and would call and ask, or write and ask, or whatever.

GOLDEN: When you came to Houston did you take more classes on Home Demonstrations? Did someone come and give seminars for you? Did you try to increase your knowledge in Home Demonstrations?

HARRIS: The specialist had a program where they would call us in and give us training and that happened all the time. Just whenever their programs, see they had a program when they were going to train us and that's when we had to go to those meetings. Um huh, surely did.

GOLDEN: Did you ever have to prove to anybody or report to anybody on what you were doing? And I am not really talking about the monthly or annual reports. Did you ever have a meeting with your supervisor Mrs. Rowan on how you were doing? Did you ever have to meet with somebody, like a review?

HARRIS: I don't remember that I just remember making reports. We had to make a monthly report. And I don't think that I was ever late making my report. Because we had to report to Prairie View, to the Commissioners' Court, and keep a copy for yourself in the office. Keep a copy in the office. And you were supposed to do that the last working day in every month and then in December you had to make an annual report and had a deadline for the day in December when that report was due.

GOLDEN: Same as in Austin County you told me that women would showcase their work, did you do the same thing here in Houston? Have your fairs and...

HARRIS: Yes, same thing, you had district shows, county shows, community show, and you do that in we did that in every county.

GOLDEN: So you did have a little bit more work than just going from home to home and demonstrating. How many times a year would you have a show or fair?

HARRIS: We have a fair once a year, you have a community show once a year and we would have a bake off where the kids would make their cookies and things of that sort. We have what, oh they called it a food show. We had a food show and we had a county show, a county food show, we had a district food show, we had a state food show.

GOLDEN: And the men would come too? The men agents would bring their clients and would you guys combine this or was it just basically for women?

HARRIS: Now the food show was strictly for 4-H members and I remember we had food shows for kids, for the 4-H club members. Anybody who wanted to could come to the food show. It would always be in a public building at a public hour when it would be convenient for anybody that wanted to come, to come. It was just like any exhibit that you have and you invite people to come. You know whoever would come would be there.

GOLDEN: Now would any maybe what we call dignitaries from the county come like maybe the Mayor, the city council, would people like that ever come and see?

HARRIS: Now we would have what they called a Gold Star Banquet that was for the most outstanding 4-H club member in your county and we had one and one of our officers in our Pilgrim building and Judge Elliot came to our show. And then we had another food show out in Gulfgate and a Commissioner and also a State Representative came to our show so we did have County people to come in sometimes. But you always invited them.

GOLDEN: Right, correct.

HARRIS: You always invited them. I have a picture both of those I have a picture Judge Elliot at one of our programs and I have a picture of Commissioner Chapman at one of our food shows.

GOLDEN: When did the program integrate?

HARRIS: January 1, 1966.

GOLDEN: What kind of changes occurred with the program?

HARRIS: We moved into the county building with the white agents and we integrated.

We combined the County Home Demonstration Councils. We combined the 4-H Councils and you could attend the Home Demonstration club meetings if you wanted to. But we did combine the 4-H Councils, the Home Demonstration Councils and the regular meetings.

GOLDEN: And where was the main office?

HARRIS: Down before I retired it was at Caroline and Prairie I believe. But it was in a building right across the street from the court house. That's where the offices were, on the second floor, 406 I believe it was Caroline.

GOLDEN: Now during integration was there any kind of change, budget changes? Did anybody loose their jobs due to integration? Did they cut back on staff?

HARRIS: We did not loose any jobs. Instead of the Negroes having the chance to make your budget, you turned your budget over to the white County Agricultural agent and he would request it.

GOLDEN: How well did you know the white agents?

HARRIS: Very well, I knew both of them both the Home Demonstration agent and the County Agricultural agent very well.

GOLDEN: Did you meet any kind of resistance with integration? Did it really work well?

HARRIS: We thought ours worked very well and I don't know what somebody else would think about it. But Mrs. Punchard and I we got together before integration because she just said, "Come over here Vera, we got to get this thing together." And we just worked it real good.

GOLDEN: So there were no problems with, if she had an idea and you had an idea and you didn't meet on those ideas you just worked it out really well?

HARRIS: We did beautifully I think.

GOLDEN: Now how did integration, did it really change the program at all any for you?

Do you think it was better after integration? Did it stay the same? What kind of improvements did you see?

HARRIS: I'm trying to think what improvement did I see? I can't remember any improvements that I saw. Because I think we were doing some things that they weren't doing and they were doing some things we weren't doing. And when you combined them together you had a pretty good program. Because we were doing some things and they were doing some things and then we got together and we did some things. So we worked it real good.

GOLDEN: Now once again my questions on supplies was there any problems, did you see any problems with supplies, getting supplies to do this...

HARRIS: We didn't have any problems with that.

GOLDEN: Did you ever notice when you integrated that the whites had maybe better, just a little bit better conditions and things than you did?

HARRIS: Well, to tell you the truth, I thought we had better equipment than they had.

GOLDEN: Now what kind of equipment do you think you had?

HARRIS: Cause we had a Xerox machine, we had all the electric typewriters, we had something else the secretary had that they didn't have. So we had some things they didn't have when we integrated.

GOLDEN: Did you have any resistance at all when you taught white women? Did you see any resistance? Did you see any kind of problems?

HARRIS: I didn't see any whenever I was up conducting a demonstration. I think they accepted it very well. I don't remember any resentment with the women.

GOLDEN: Or were you not even looking for it?

HARRIS: Maybe that's what it was.

GOLDEN: You just weren't concerned?

HARRIS: Yes, maybe I just wasn't concerned. Because Punchard and I had worked so hard on it. I just accepted it, this is part of the job and this is what they said do, and it is policy and we'll have to do it.

Tape 3 Side A

GOLDEN: What about the African American clients? How did they feel about integration of the program?

HARRIS: The few that I know of didn't, they felt just like I felt. We had discussed it and we had decided that whatever they said for us to do that's what we were going to do, and we just accepted it.

GOLDEN: Now do you think you lost clients due to integration?

HARRIS: Do I think I lost what?

GOLDEN: Clients? Do you think they stopped coming due to integration?

HARRIS: I don't remember losing any because of that. I surely don't, I don't remember losing any. Because the same people came to council meetings, that was the main thing we integrated was our council meeting. And those same women that were

coming to council meeting continued to come. I don't remember anybody not coming.

GOLDEN: How long was it before you went into a white home to demonstrate?

HARRIS: Oh, I never did go into a white home.

GOLDEN: You never did?

HARRIS: No, no the programs that we had that I helped with would always be in the office. We had our auditorium where we had programs and that's where we would conduct the programs. I don't remember ever going into any white homes.

GOLDEN: What about 4-H what kind of impact did...

HARRIS: With 4-H I did never go into any white homes at all with 4-H. Never did.

GOLDEN: What about the integration of 4-H? Do you think that was good? That was beneficial?

HARRIS: Now with the 4-H, I didn't see as much cooperation there as I saw with Home Demonstration. But I didn't see any just any resentful because I think most of us understood that this is what we had to do.

GOLDEN: And how long after integration did you work?

HARRIS: Let me see? It was sixty-six to seventy-three, seven years.

GOLDEN: Now did you go onto something else after...

HARRIS: No, when I retired I just retired.

GOLDEN: How old, may I ask how old you were when you retired?

HARRIS: Let me see that was in 1973 and I was born in 1912 I was, two from three is one, I must have been sixty-one, no I was, I have to figure it out. [Laughter]

GOLDEN: You were in your sixties when you retired.

HARRIS: Let me see, 1973 and I was born in 1912 and two from three leaves, I was sixty-one.

GOLDEN: Sixty-one.

HARRIS: Yes, I was sixty-one, yes sixty-one.

GOLDEN: Yes, sixty-one. Did you want to retire?

Were you ready to retire?

HARRIS: Oh yeah, I had it all worked out.

I retired five years before I decided to quit.

I had my thing all worked out five years before

I retired.

GOLDEN: You did marry here in Houston

is that correct?

HARRIS: Yes. I was married when I retired.

GOLDEN: When did you get married?

HARRIS: 1963, October 23, 1963.

GOLDEN: 1963? Okay. When you did Home Demonstrations you obviously had to dress professionally when you went...



Vera Dial Harris at her retirement party May 19, 1973
Harris County Archives.2006.026

HARRIS: Oh, yes we dressed professionally wherever I went. We always wore our hat and gloves. It was real important for us to look professional.

GOLDEN: Now, while you worked for the Home Demonstrations did you get any kind of benefits? Maybe life insurance, medical, dental?

HARRIS: We, I have a paid up insurance with both the County and the State.

GOLDEN: Okay.

HARRIS: Now with my County insurance I don't pay anything and I pay a small fee with the State for insurance. And I get a pension from the Civil Service and a pension from the State of Texas. I get two checks from there, so I have a pretty good retirement.

GOLDEN: Good and what year did you get your Master's Degree? I know you got it at TSU?

HARRIS: I got it in 1953.

GOLDEN: Okay and what was that in?

HARRIS: Education.

GOLDEN: Education. And after you retired did you just retire? Did you do anything else along the lines of Home Demonstrations?

HARRIS: No, I did a lot of traveling. After I retired I took a trip with the Peoples Program. I went to see my sisters in both Kansas City and St. Louis. And I went back to the country and stayed a week, where I was born and I just didn't do nothing else but just go where I wanted to go and do what I wanted to do.

GOLDEN: Do your clients ever contact you? Do you keep in touch with some of your clients?

HARRIS: Oh, yes with my people I worked with? Oh yes I keep in contact with some of them, and I'm still keeping in contact with some of my 4-H club girls I met in Austin County.

GOLDEN: We'll that's good to hear.

HARRIS: And some of the club girls my 4-H club girl members here are members of the Retired Teachers Association. So I see them whenever I go to Retired Teachers meeting.

GOLDEN: Now when you got your master's degree did you see an increase in your pay?

HARRIS: No, didn't give me an increase in pay it just made me feel better.

GOLDEN: Yes, yes. Did you get salary increases yearly?

HARRIS: Yes, we get salary increases. Every year I get a little bit of something.

GOLDEN: What do you remember the most about working for Home Demonstrations? What things stick out in your mind the most?

HARRIS: Oh the thing that sticks out in my mind the most is how people learn and how good people are if you talk to people right and don't make them look or feel inferior they're the most beautiful people in the world. And I think that all people like to be praised

GOLDEN: So you don't think that your time was ever wasted doing Home Demonstrations?

HARRIS: Say do what?

GOLDEN: Your time was never wasted doing Home Demonstrations?

HARRIS: Oh no, this was the most beautiful thing that ever happened to me, to be a County Home Demonstration Agent. It taught me so much that I picked up being a County Home Demonstration Agent, about people. And I believe people are genuinely good. It depends and it all depends on their environment and I think that you have to learn to accept people as they are and remember that everybody is different and even your sister and brother that you've been brought up with in the same house and you don't think alike. And you've got to realize that every person is different and accept them where they are and rather where you think they should be. Now that's my philosophy, you don't worry about nothing you can't do and accept people where they are. Because there are a lot of things that you don't know that they know. Just like there are a lot of things they know that you don't know.

GOLDEN: Correct.

HARRIS: And when you don't know you just don't know. If you haven't had the experience you don't know. Cause I am having a hard time getting adjusted to being sick. Never been sick in my life, I don't know what to do.

GOLDEN: I'm sorry.

HARRIS: [Laughs] I told the girl the other day, I said "Honey you have to help me, I don't know what to do." I've never been sick, I've never been through this

before, I don't know nothing about no pain and all that kind of thing. That's what I learned being a Home Demonstration Agent, you've got to put yourself in the other persons shoe in order to be happy. And remember that you can't rule everything, there are a whole lot of people in the world that are smarter than you.

GOLDEN: True, that's true.

HARRIS: Now, that's my philosophy and I try not to worry about nothing even this arthritis that had me, I said, "Well I had it coming I had no business living so long." [Laughter] If I had died young I'd wouldn't known about it.

GOLDEN: True, that's true.

HARRIS: The doctors kept me here so I accept it. So I just accept it and the thing that makes me do that most of my friends are gone and they always had to take medicine, always had to go to the doctor and they are gone. And I never did go to the doctor so now I am getting my part.

GOLDEN: Maybe, but maybe not.

HARRIS: Yes, I've been at work, but anyway that's the way I feel about it. But I wanted you to know Harris County has always had real healthy extension program.

GOLDEN: Now are they still running? Do they still do Home Demonstrations?

HARRIS: Yes, we still have an extension agent. They have an office out in the Bear Creek area. A beautiful building out there.

GOLDEN: I guess I'm just too young to remember Home Demonstrations. I wasn't familiar with Home Demonstrations.

HARRIS: That's right see a lot of people were not familiar with it. Even though we had radio programs, we had news articles, we worked with a whole lot of different kinds of people and we still didn't reach a lot of people, they never heard of it.

GOLDEN: During the Depression, I know that you kind of worked at the tail end of the Depression, but were any of the Federal work projects, were you ever involved in any of the Federal work projects.

HARRIS: Yes, some of them when I came in at Extension those first few years they had the AAA (Agricultural Adjustment Act) that helped farmers, they had the WPA (Works Progress Administration) that gave the fellows work to do. They had a whole lot of alphabets during the late thirties you know, in the late thirties. So we had to work with some of them, especially with the agriculture programs until most of them went away or whatever happened to them. But, we had to work with them too. They were part of the Federal Government and we were a part of the Federal Government. Extension work is.

GOLDEN: Yes, tell me about that being a part of the Federal Government. How many entities did you actually work for?

HARRIS: Oh I worked for three agencies: I worked for the County Government, the State Government, and the Federal Government [USDA]. We were the only

people that had that privilege; the Extension workers are the only people that had that privilege.

GOLDEN: So you had to send reports to the County, the State and to the Federal?

HARRIS: No, I didn't have to report to the Federal, I just had to report to the County and the State and keep a copy for the office. Those were the three companies...

GOLDEN: And who paid you? The County or...

HARRIS: The County paid some of my salary; the State paid some of my salary; and the Federal Government paid some of my salary.

GOLDEN: And when you were here in Houston you said that you got paid monthly?

HARRIS: Yes.

GOLDEN: And where would that check come from?

HARRIS: Well that one check came from the State, I'd get another check from the County, and I would get a check from the Federal Government.

GOLDEN: So you got three different checks?

HARRIS: Yes, three different checks and I still get three different checks.

GOLDEN: Do you. [Laughter]

HARRIS: [Laughter]

GOLDEN: Now which one paid you the most? Was it all equal?

HARRIS: No, no, the Federal Government paid the most, the County and the State pays the least. The Federal Government paid the most, the County pays next, and the State pays least.

GOLDEN: And who gave the biggest raises? Or did you...

HARRIS: The raises most time were about the same. Because it depends on the CPA or whatever that is, whatever that is, that's what we get.

GOLDEN: Now did you get that check at the end of the month or did you have to wait a longer period of time to get your check? Or?

HARRIS: I retired in one month and my check came the next. I worked it out like that. That same day you retired your check keeps coming like it always comes.

GOLDEN: I was really referring more to while you were working, did you... When I work I get paid twice a month and I get paid get paid twice a month I don't have to wait for my check. Did you ever have to wait for, lets say you were paid once a month and lets say you got paid the thirtieth and you got your check on the thirtieth and you never had...?

HARRIS: I always got my check on the first or second or whatever, my check was never late.

GOLDEN: Do you have anything else that you would like to talk about or add?

HARRIS: No, I don't think so I think we covered it just about.

GOLDEN: We did, we spent a good couple of hours here talking.

HARRIS: But it is interesting profession, you know you're helping people and the people to a degree show you that they appreciate what you are doing for them. And they don't forget it, they remember it. I remember one day I went to a meeting and the lady was up presiding and when she got through presiding and I

talked with her about it, I said, "I'm going send you a bulletin on how to preside."
And I sent her that bulletin and just about four or five years ago she told me she
still remembers that bulletin.

GOLDEN: That's good.

HARRIS: So people are hungry for information if we can just get it to them. Some of
them want to learn and you are always going to find some people that don't so
you let those alone that don't want to learn and help those that do.

GOLDEN: Well Mrs. Harris I thank you for taking the time to talk we with me on Home
Demonstrations and your career in this and I really, really appreciate it very
much. Thank you.

HARRIS: I like to talk about it because it is a beautiful vocation.

GOLDEN: Sounds like it. It sounds like it. Sounds like you were perfectly fit for it.

HARRIS: And I just love it I say I couldn't got into another profession. And Mr. Shaw
thinks the same thing. We talk. He has retired and every once in a while we talk.
We're both crazy about Extension, it is one of the best education processes I
think. And it all is a part of the Smith-Lever Law. I think it was in 1862 they
passed that law and it is still going. I hope they don't ever do away with it.

GOLDEN: Good, thank you.

HARRIS: You're welcome.

Addendum:

Tape 4, Side A

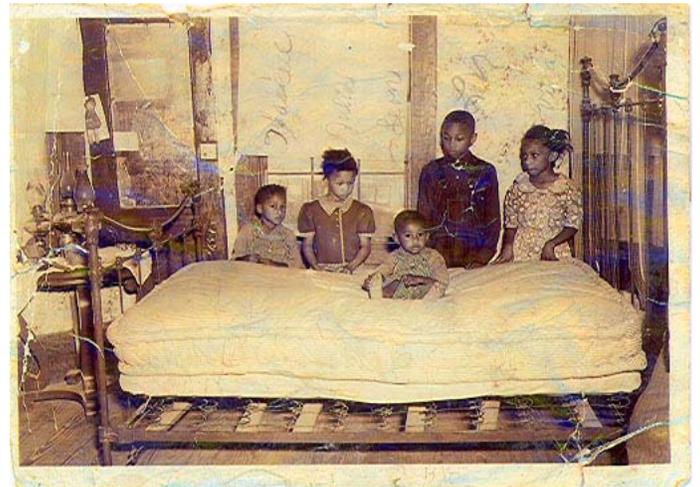
GOLDEN: This is Annie Golden interviewing Mrs. Vera D. Harris for the Harris County Archives Oral History Program. This is an extension to the interview that took place on April 26, 2006, in Houston, Texas. I am interviewing Mrs. Vera Harris in order to obtain her recollections concerning Home Demonstration. Today is August 3, 2006. Good morning Mrs. Harris how are you today?

HARRIS: I'm doing real good today.

GOLDEN: Good, good. Thank you for doing this. Thank you for allowing me to come back and ask you some more questions about the previous interview that we did. I appreciate it very much.

HARRIS: And I'm glad to do it because I just love extension.

GOLDEN: Good. Now in the oral history that we conducted in April, you talked about making mattresses for some of your clients and could you expand a little bit more on that for me please.



The first mattress made under the Federal Mattress Program in the late 1930s. Pictured are the Harvey children of Bellville, Texas. L to R: Haskell, Julie Mae, L.V., Vira Mae, Leon (sitting on bed). Harris County Archives. 2006.024.

HARRIS: Now as I can remember that was in the late thirties and that was a federal government program, it was sponsored by the federal government. At that time there was a lot of cotton on hand and the government had decided to give it to the families in counties that were served by the extension agents. And the people would make their own mattresses because that was one of the things needed at that time. So the cotton was brought into the county and was distributed to the families making less than four hundred dollars all that year. And that was nearly everybody in some of the counties because of the area in which we lived.

GOLDEN: Okay...

HARRIS: Yes, and the mattresses were made in the community. We were trained by the specialist at A&M how to make a mattress and then it was our responsibility to train leaders in the county how to make a mattress so they could show the people in the neighborhood how to make their mattresses. So mattress centers were set up in most communities where the people would go and help make their own mattress and then take it home. They would pay a small sum, it seems like it was twenty-five cents and that was all they had to pay. The ticking was furnished, the cotton was furnished and they had to make their mattresses. That, as far as I know was in every county where there was a home demonstration agent either Negro or white. Because at that time there was two distinct extension services', one out working out of Prairie View and the other one at A&M. And A&M was our headquarters.

GOLDEN: And what was your responsibility?

HARRIS: My responsibility was to train leaders. After the specialist had taught us how to make mattress then it was our responsibility as the county home demonstration agents to train leaders in the community to make the mattress. And the leaders in the community would serve as what we called the mattress center manager. She would be the person that saw that everybody helped make their own mattress. We set up the center with a machine, long tables so that they would have a chance to make the mattress, make the mattress cover, and then put the cotton in there like it should be put in there and finish it off.

GOLDEN: Now how many were per family? Could they just have one mattress or...

HARRIS: No, one mattress per family.

GOLDEN: Per family...

HARRIS: One mattress per family.

GOLDEN: Now for a lot of these families in the county do you think this was the first mattress they ever had or do you think they had mattresses before?

HARRIS: At that time statistics proved that a lot of peoples their first mattress, a lot of families had that was their first real mattresses.

GOLDEN: Do you remember how big they were, the mattresses, I know that is a strange question to ask?

HARRIS: Double bed mattress.

GOLDEN: Double bed, okay. Now how were they put together? Can you explain that to me please? Do you remember how they were put together?

HARRIS: Yes, we had the pattern for making the mattress and you cut out and make your mattress cover. Then you spread it on a long table that all the centers had these long tables in it. Then you would be given 50 pounds of cotton and your mattress cover or whatever you want to call it and then it was your responsibility to make your mattress. We taught them how to make the mattress by putting the cotton into the mattress in layers so that they would know what exactly when they got their fifty pounds in there and then they would sew it up and make that roll around the mattress using a mattress needle and mattress twine and make it look like just a real mattress.

GOLDEN: Are you referring to the Depression era federal projects? Like the WPA?

HARRIS: I don't know about it being the WPA but I do know that it was done during that era.

GOLDEN: Okay, good thank you. Now how many families in that county did it serve?

HARRIS: Merely every... Oh at that time I was in Austin County and nearly every family in the rural areas got one mattress because that county didn't have too many people that made four hundred cash dollars every year.

GOLDEN: Okay, thank you. What I wanted to discuss with you is you talk a lot about the specialist from Prairie View. Exactly what were their responsibilities and how were they involved with you during the Home Demonstrations.

HARRIS: Now these I talk about a lot about were really from A&M.

GOLDEN: Okay, A&M.

HARRIS: They were really from A&M and these specialists would talk with us in groups. We would have meetings in churches or wherever a public place were we could have a meeting and they would come from A&M and teach us how to teach the leaders. That was their responsibility to teach us how to teach the leaders and then it was our responsibility to go back into the county and teach the leaders how to help the other people in their neighborhood.

GOLDEN: What were these specialists, what like in clothing or landscaping, farming, home economics?

HARRIS: Clothing that was my specialty; I think I liked clothing best than I did anything else. But the clothing specialist would teach us exactly how to teach the people to use a pattern, how to show them how to keep a record of what they had bought and how much it cost and things of that sort. How to select the size and how to take measurements and teach them how to do all those things, that's what the specialist would do with us. Teach us how to teach the leaders in the counties.

GOLDEN: So lets say for a scenario, if you were working with some ladies on a certain project and you needed help with that project, lets say flower arrangements you could call on a specialist to help you out with that. You know, to give you some training on how to do flower arrangements, things like that and I am just making that up.

HARRIS: We had a landscape person and I don't remember us making flower arrangements but I do remember us teaching the people how to make their surroundings beautiful. How to landscape the yard and how to select and know the different kinds shrubs, trees, grasses and things of that sort that grow and that were adapted to the neighborhood in which they lived. And that's what they did; they would teach us how to teach them in that.

GOLDEN: Because I remember one of the questions that I asked you during the previous oral interview was about the Victory Gardens during World War II and you had mentioned that some specialists had come down and helped you with that. What kinds of things did they help you with? Obviously it was through agricultural...

HARRIS: They taught us how to take a soil sample and send it in and if your soil needed if you wanted a soil sample. They also taught us how to help the people select different plants. They would have demonstrations and they would have a cutting perhaps of different shrubs and trees that were adapted to our neighborhoods. They would show us how to teach the women how to do that. They also taught us how to make a scrapbook, like taking specimens from different trees, shrubs, and flowers and then they had bulletins they distributed to each person, each agent and then there were bulletins that would be given to the people in the county.

GOLDEN: Now did you have regular meetings with the specialist? Was this something that you had to continue with them or did you just call upon them when you needed their help?

HARRIS: Most times you met in groups, but if you needed them for some particular thing you called them on the telephone and they would give you the information. Or you could write them a letter and they would send the information back to you.

GOLDEN: Now, did they ever work directly with your clients or would you just get the information through them and then give it to help the clients?

HARRIS: They usually talked with us in groups but I did have one specialist visit one of my clothing demonstrations and I can't remember her name but it just so happened she was visiting that day in the county and I had this club meeting and I told her that I had one and she just volunteered to go. But usually they didn't go to the club meetings they taught us in groups.

GOLDEN: Now were these specialists African Americans and they worked with the African Americans or were they white?

HARRIS: They were white, all of the specialists were white, and they worked with the Negro agents, but they were real good about giving us information and making our bulletins and memo-gram materials and sending it to you. So they were very good leaders they would train us. They even taught you how to have recreation play games and sing songs, lead songs so that you could teach your clients how to

do the same thing. And they would send copies of songs that were available and we even had a 4-H club song book with songs in it.

GOLDEN: Oh did you. There was another question that I wanted to bring up. During integration I had asked you some questions about if you experienced any problems during integration and you really seemed, your answers really didn't seem to be any problems, but you did mention that the 4-H did not really accept it very well. Do you remember the details on that?

HARRIS: No, I didn't know about that, I can't remember. Because I think most of the people that I knew accepted it. You know at least among the Negro agents we accepted it because we had no choice.

GOLDEN: True, true. Now maybe the clients did they have any resistance?

HARRIS: I beg your pardon?

GOLDEN: The clients, the members of 4-H, the students, or even their parents?

HARRIS: I don't think we had too much in Harris County. If it didn't cause a lot of talk or anything of that sort. I think we integrated real nicely in Harris County. Because at that time the Home Demonstration Agent and I had already become friends before integration so it wasn't hard for us just to get together. We did at least we thought, I thought we did a pretty good job of getting all the people together.

GOLDEN: I don't think that I have any other questions for you other than the points that I wanted to bring up. Was there anything that you wanted to talk about or you wanted to add?

HARRIS: The only thing that I thought that would make this more informational would be to include the names of some of the people in the community that served as leaders and some of the 4-H club members that finally finished high school and made a contribution. Those are the kinds of things that I thought and names of the communities that in which we worked and the names of the leaders in that community.

GOLDEN: Okay.

HARRIS: Now if I think we can add that then it would give the extension program all over the county a little bit of credit. Like the office material the office for the extension service, the part the county agricultural agent played in providing things through the county commissioner's court I think it would make it more interesting.

GOLDEN: Now did you want to talk about that now or did you how did you want to proceed with that?

HARRIS: Which ever way you thought was best, but I did want to say that I can't remember the year that extension started in Harris County but I do know that the first county agent here was L.G. Luper

GOLDEN: L.G.?

HARRIS: L.G. Luper

GOLDEN: How do you spell Luper.

HARRIS: Luther...

GOLDEN: Luther?

HARRIS: L-U-T-H-E-R was his first name and L-U-P-E-R was his last name. And he was a person who was a people's person. He was able to do a lot of things and get a lot of things from the court. Because when I came here in 1941 they had office space, two rooms of office space, one secretary and all of the supplies that you needed to work with extension was furnished to you and I thought that was very unusual.

We were also allowed to go to, at least I was, we had the chicken project, the 4-H club girls had to raise a chicken. Sayer's (Sayer's and Sons) would give us fifty chickens and they would raise the chickens and then we would have to have a chicken show, a poultry show. And I remember that Mr. Luper was influential in getting them. I went to the barn where the Fat Stock Show is held and got the cages for the chickens and took them to the place where we were going to have our 4-H poultry show. I just thought that was so unusual. I drove my car to the plant put the crates in my car, had the poultry show and carried them back to the barn wherever it was and it was just real nice.

We also had a telephone. Each agent had a telephone. Each agent finally got a secretary. And I think if we were to name those people it would help us give a true picture of it.

Now I wanted to add that Mr. Luper was influential in getting the use of the San Jacinto Monument. All of the 4-H club girls and boys, and women and men that wanted to we had access to San Jacinto Park one day every summer. And at that time there was no running water up there and the people would furnish a big o' water truck with water in [it.]

Tape 4 Side B

GOLDEN: So Mr. Luper was influential in getting a lot of this stuff for you?

HARRIS: That's right for the whole extension service.

GOLDEN: And what were his responsibilities or his...?

HARRIS: He worked with the men and boys, Negro men and boys. I worked with the Negro women and girls.

GOLDEN: Is he still living?

HARRIS: No, he passed away in 1946.

GOLDEN: Oh, okay, okay [laughter].

HARRIS: I think it was 1946, I think that's when he passed away somewhere along in there. But he sure was an influential person I thought. He was the first agent in Harris County. When he retired Arthur J. Arthur James Bundage became county agent and when Mr. Bundage resigned, then came Mr. Ernest K. Shaw. When Mr. Shaw retired then there was a Mr. Arnold Brown that was the county agent and now I can't remember the name of the person who is the county agent, I think he's county director now. And when it comes to the home demonstration, and remember Mr. Luper worked with both men and boys, boys club and the men's club, I was the home demonstration agent that worked with the girls and the women. Now the first the agent I can't remember her name, but the second agent was Annie G. Hall Edwards, and then came Vera D. Harris, that is I. Then after I retired Clemejean Wilson became the county home demonstration agent and I think she retired in 2006, but I forget what month it is. So now I don't know whether if she has been replaced or not, but I do know both were home demonstration agents that I know about in Harris County. And extension service started in way back in the early in the late teens I think when Mr. Luper was appointed. And I thought too that we would name some of the communities and some of the leaders in that community and name some of the 4-H club girls and boys that I could remember.

GOLDEN: Sure, go ahead.

HARRIS: I had the list all made out for you but I filed it away I got to make you another one.

GOLDEN: Okay.

HARRIS: I'll have to mail it to you.

GOLDEN: Now you talked about the communities what communities, other communities?

HARRIS: Some of the communities that we worked in were Acres Home, we worked in Louetta, I think they have a new name for it now but we called it Louetta, we worked in Hufsmith, we worked in Highland Heights, we worked in Alief, we worked in Piney Point, we worked in those are the ones that come to me right away. But I have a whole list of all the communities in which we had at least one or two or both clubs. Either a home demonstration agent club, an agricultural club or a 4-H club, in some of them we had both.

GOLDEN: Now this just came to my mind, when was the last time after you retired did you ever go back and attend any kind of meeting on home demonstration as a visitor or a guest?

HARRIS: The first year that I retired I went back to I think about to two or three meetings they had, but then I stopped going and I haven't been back. Then when I first retired, sometimes I would go to the office and pick up bulletins and things of that sort. But that's been a long time ago.

GOLDEN: Well, Mrs. Harris I thank you again for taking the time to speak with me on answering some questions that I had and I appreciate it very much.

HARRIS: Now can you think of any other questions you want to ask me?

GOLDEN: No, no, those were the three questions I wanted to follow up on. Making the mattress, the specialist and the question about 4-H.

HARRIS: Well, that was it and in our county at that time that was the first mattress that was made all over the United States, we made the very first mattress.

GOLDEN: Very first, now what did they sleep on? I just, I just can't fathom this.

HARRIS: Well you see, let me explain to you. At that time you see most people either had a feather mattress or a mattress made out of hay or straw and that's the way most of the mattress were.

GOLDEN: What kind of covering did they have?

HARRIS: They had regular ticking. Ticking I think has always been available you know this regular ticking that you could buy at the store by the yard. Cause I know that our house most of our mattress were feather mattresses and we'd been saving feathers all of our lives every time we would kill a chicken we would save the feathers.

GOLDEN: Oh, okay.

HARRIS: And if the mattress got thin and if you had slept in it a long time you would just add some new feathers to it. A lot of people used hay or straw and as it would sink down they either make a whole new one out of straw or add to the

straw and that was the way it was. And then some people did not have mattresses they just slept on the maybe a quilt or something over the springs and cover it up.

GOLDEN: Okay, wow.

HARRIS: Now I never did see that I but I heard people talking about it. When I came along they were using feathers and straw, and cotton, but it wasn't a mattress, you know it was just a bed, cotton.

GOLDEN: Gotcha, well thank you very much, I appreciate this very much.

HARRIS: You're welcome.