Interview with Betty Dressen

Interviewer: Vaughn Hamilton
Transcriber: Vaughn Hamilton
Date of Interview: April 11, 1986
Location: Dressen Farm, between Kyle and Uhland, TX

Begin Tape 2, Side 1

Vaughn Hamilton: April 11, the second interview of two. Vaughn Hamilton, with the oral history class of Southwest Texas State University in San Marcos. Interviewing here Betty Dressen. This is side one, the second tape.

Now we are going to start talking about the cistern again.

Betty Dressen: Like I said, it was dug by hand, and then they lined it with rocks. And this is what they used, the old people. They used that for water all the time. It’s about twelve or fifteen feet deep. And every year they had to clean it. Go down and clean it.

Hamilton: You mean from dirt getting in there?

Dressen: Getting down in the dirt and getting everything out. Cleaning it out. And after so many years, the rocks began to cave [in], so they went down in there, and they concrete[d] it out. And that was, been years up until we got our running water, which we got in about 1965. So, you know, that’s been back in the 1900s. That’s how long that thing’s been in the ground.

Hamilton: Back about what year?

Dressen: Oh, about 1925. That’s how long it’s been there.

Hamilton: They never dug a well on this place?

Dressen: No, this was all they had. There was no well to be dug on the place. There’s no water. Until about 1930, when they went out here behind the barn and they dug this well. They dug it by mules. This is with no equipment. It was with mules.

Hamilton: How did they dig that with mules?

Dressen: I don’t know. They just had the equipment like we do with ours today. And they dug it with mules and went down about ten feet, and they hit sulfur. And that was it, and they had to close it up. There was no more water, so they took their stock, their horse, their mules, their cows, and they led them down to the creek. [The creek is from a quarter to a half mile away]
**Hamilton:** Was that all part of the farm then?

**Dressen:** All on the farm here.

**Hamilton:** How big was that farm?

**Dressen:** At that time, they had about five hundred acres. But then, they gradually got rid of it, you know. It was too much. They couldn’t do it. But let me tell you, they took the horses, the mules, the cows, and led them down to the creek—down by Harbor Creek. And that’s where they gave them water, and then the kids would bring them back. And this was twice a day. They took the mules together because they worked the mules.

**Hamilton:** Harbor Creek?

**Dressen:** Down to Harbor Creek. That’s the way they got their water. And then when this [the cistern] went dry, see, they depended on our rains [a cistern collects the rain water that flows off of the roof and through gutters], when they didn’t have any water, then the kids would have to go haul water from the Harbor Creek. Set it out here in barrels, right here in the yard. And their mother [Betty’s mother-in-law] would wash with it, they would drink it, she would cook with it. And then if it was dry, the kids would have to go get some more water; “wet the wagon and the mules.” Or they would take a slide, if you know what a slide it.

**Hamilton:** Just like a sled?

**Dressen:** Yes. And they put two barrels on that and go and get their water.

**Hamilton:** That’s a lot of work.

**Dressen:** Right. But that time they didn’t have any chickens. Well, not as many as we do today. Not any hogs. They had maybe one or two hogs. It wasn’t like the animals we have today, you know.

**Hamilton:** What was it like when you all went into town? How often did you all go into town?

**Dressen:** Well, I can tell you the experience from my side now. My being a kid, I mean. As me being a kid, Daddy and I, we’d go in once a month into town.

**Hamilton:** Into Kyle?

**Dressen:** No, we’d go to Lockhart. Once a month, we’d go in, and we’d buy our groceries, our full bill of groceries for the month. We’d go with a little wagon and our little mule. We also had a buggy and a horse. We also rode our horses to town. Then my dad, if we needed bread or something like that, he would go into town and get it. But just a little town like Mendoza,
Creedmoor, Turnersville, and those little places like that, Daddy would go and get our things like bread and milk.

**Hamilton:** About when was this?

**Dressen:** This was back in the thirties. 1937, ’38, ’39, ’40, ’41, and ’42, on like that up until, well—Daddy and I never did own an automobile. We always just had our horses. And on up until ’55. Then I got a car, but Daddy still had his horse and his wagon.

**Hamilton:** And in ’55 you moved over here?

**Dressen:** I moved here.

**Hamilton:** Well, what was it like going into town?

**Dressen:** I wish we had it today, I enjoyed it.

**Hamilton:** What did you like?

**Dressen:** I liked to be riding in the wagon. I loved riding in the wagon. It was slow. It was okay, though. I always told Daddy that those people are fast and we are slow, but we’ll get there just as well as they are. It took two, three, or four hours, but that was okay. We’d go in, but we couldn’t stay long. We go in and get the things we needed, and we’d go back to our wagon and take our mules and wagon home, and it would take three or four hours to get back home. That’s just all we had, and I enjoyed it. I really did. I sometimes today wouldn’t mind if we had that. But things now have changed and you can’t do that anymore. You’d get run over. What else?

**Hamilton:** What about when you would go selling the animals, say, back in the Depression years?

**Dressen:** I couldn’t answer you there because we didn’t have any. I didn’t have any at that time.

**Hamilton:** Your father didn’t raise animals?

**Dressen:** No, just farming.

**Hamilton:** Corn?

**Dressen:** Well, he farmed corn for his animals and stuff like that. Only thing we had was just a mil-cow and a few chickens and our mules; that’s all we had. Most of the time, we didn’t sell because we’d keep our mules until they died. We never sold them. And of course, the milk cow wasn’t ours. It was my uncle’s. He let us have it to milk, and we kept her until she died.

**Hamilton:** What else do you remember about your childhood, things that you liked or didn’t like?
**Dressen:** Well, I didn’t like going after the milk cow every night. Daddy would make me go down in the pasture and get the milk cow and bring her home. I’d go down there and get her up to the fence and ride her home. That would keep me from walking. I had an old mule that I rode sometimes. Daddy would let me ride it to go get the cow. And I enjoyed riding because I’d get out in the pasture, and I could do what I wanted because Daddy couldn’t see me. I could do what I wanted to, so I’d get that old mule running and I’d fall off. And then I’d lead it back up to the fence and crawl back on and say, “Come on, let’s go.” And I get it to trot, you know it wouldn’t lope, it would trot, a heavy trot. And I’d fall off again. I’d get back on again, and I keep on going until I got the cow home. And I enjoyed that, which I wouldn’t do it again today. (Laughs) And I was an only child. I didn’t have any brothers and sisters.

**Hamilton:** How far from town did you all live?

**Dressen:** I guess we lived about thirty miles from Lockhart. We also walked to town. And we’d have someone to bring us back. That was in the old days; that was all we could do. We didn’t have any money to buy anything with. You know, we just had enough money to buy our groceries and our clothing. It’s not like it is today. They were really hard days. Back around ’36, I worked hard. I helped Daddy in the fields. I helped pick cotton; I helped chopped the cotton; I helped pull corn; I helped gather corn; I helped cut the corn tops, tie the corn tops, gather them in. I have helped to get our cane for the animals.

**Hamilton:** What type of cane are you talking about there?

**Dressen:** This is “row cane,” the sugar cane.

**Hamilton:** Row cane is the same thing as sugar cane?

**Dressen:** Yes. And we would cut that with a sickle. Down the row, cutting it with a sickle. Lay it out and let it dry, and then come back and tie it up. Or sometimes Daddy would go and shock it, take his pitch fork and shock it up in piles.

**Hamilton:** And then the cane would be shocked up so it would dry.

**Dressen:** It would stay out there for about four or five months so it would dry out good. Also, there was some cane that you would cut the tops off, the seeds, but I can’t tell you what kind it was. We’d cut the tops off to save for the next year to plant. I can’t recall right now what it was. It seems like they called it row cane.

**Hamilton:** I’ve never heard of feeding animals sugar cane.

**Dressen:** Yes, we had sugar cane. When I was a kid and that stuff got about this big, we’d go out there and cut it off at the bottom and peel the hull off, and we’d sit out there and eat it. It was just as juicy and sweet. Oh, it was good, that’s what we made our sugar out of.
Hamilton: How would you do that from the sugar cane?

Dressen: Now, I don’t know anything about that because we didn’t do any of that. Now, they did that going down around Corpus. I don’t know how they do that here. I have no idea. We also use sugar cane to make molasses. But we didn’t make it. They had machines to this. Over back at Buda that still has this machine there. But I have no idea how they do it. It was used with mules, also. It would be kind of interesting, if you would go out that way. But I really couldn’t tell you how they do it. It would be quite interesting to you. And they use sugar cane—the farmers would make their own molasses. You know, they would cut it and take it over there. I can remember some of it as I was a little tiny kid, can remember my grandfather having molasses made out of the cane and can remember having eaten it.

Hamilton: So your father raised the cane himself, and he never took any other there.

Dressen: No, my grandfather did, on my mother’s side. We don’t have that any more. It’s a shame, but we don’t. I think there was also a place back of Kyle that somebody had one that made the molasses also. And, you know, we make our own honey today. You know that.

Hamilton: Here on the place?

Dressen: We don’t have any on the place, but our next door neighbor has some.

Hamilton: How do you do that?

Dressen: I can’t answer you on that one either. I’ve never got around to asking them how they do that. It’s a way that they got this box, and from there on I don’t know how they do that. I don’t know if they have to have some kind of sweet water sitting around for them or what. I don’t know.

Hamilton: Well, is there anything else you can remember about your home?

Dressen: Yes. Like I said, my daddy had his own milk cow and fixed his own cheese. He took the milk clabber, then put it in a cheese cloth, hang it out on the clothesline, and let it drip for the day until night, and Daddy would go out and bring it in and put it in a bowl. He’d fix it up with green onions, salt and pepper, and a little cream in that, and fix that up for him and me to eat for supper.

Hamilton: Did you like that?

Dressen: Oh, I loved it. It was good. It was real good. Today, we can’t do it because our cattle are being fed with all this stuff with all kinds of proteins and all that stuff, it’s so strong and everything that it just don’t do right. But then when we were kids, all our cows got were hay and corn. That’s what our cows got when [we] were kids, you know. Today, we got all this other
fancy stuff for our cattle, and it just don’t do right. The milk don’t even taste right. That’s why I don’t drink cow milk. No, not raw cow milk. Just think, as a kid I grew up on that. Just think of all that good milk that Daddy would milk out there. I’d have my little cup out there, and Daddy would pour the milk in there, and I’d drink it straight from the cow.

**Hamilton:** While it was still warm?

**Dressen:** Yes, I bet your mother did it too.

**Hamilton:** Oh yes, she’s told me about that.

**Dressen:** I love to hear her tell about what she did when she was a kid. But I don’t know any more—that was the way I was brought up. I know I worked hard. In those days, I worked real hard. You didn’t have nothing; it was just a way of getting by.

*Pause in recording*

[Here we turn the tape off and decide to talk some more about the smokehouse and butchering]

**Hamilton:** After you’ve butchered the hogs and cleaned them up and everything, then you take them in the back side of the smokehouse, right? And cut them up?

**Dressen:** Sometimes they bring them in under the shed, and they cut it up. They cut out the bacon, and they cut out the hams that they want to keep. Then the rest, they cut it up. And they put this in a tub. Don’t let me forget, they cut out the lard too. That’s got to be taken out of there because a lot of this is fat. So they cut the lard out and put it in a tub. The lard is by itself, and the meat is by itself. After all this is done, the next day they have to cut the grease up and take it out there to those black pots, and they cook the grease until the cracklins come up. That’s when all the grease is out, you know. Then they strain the grease. When they get through with that, then we go back in the smokehouse where we make our sausage.

**Hamilton:** How do you do that?

**Dressen:** On sausage, they lay it on the table. It’s so many ounces of salt to so many ounces of pepper to so many pounds of meat. They get this all mixed up good, and then they grind it. It goes through the grinder until it’s all ground up. Then they put the grinder up and put the meat over here, and then we have our sausage stuffers, which I showed you.

**Hamilton:** What are those like?

**Dressen:** I showed you.

**Hamilton:** Like a canister?
Dressen: Yes, then you put your meat in there, and you close it up, and then you put your casing on there. And then you turn the lever, and the meat comes out the tube and goes in your casing. One person does that, and another guy stands over here and ties the casing off. You have rings, beautiful rings like I showed you. You do that, and after you get it made, then you hang them. In the smokehouse you hang them. You let them hang one day, and then the next day you smoke them. And you smoke them for about four hours.

Hamilton: How do you do that?

Dressen: By making a fire in an old can. And you get some chips and pieces of wood and put it in there.

Hamilton: Is any kind of wood better?

B. Dressen: No, as long as you got your chips and wood, it doesn’t matter. You get your fire going, you get a good blaze going, and you put a lid on it, and it smokes. It smokes about four hours. And you take it out and wait about a day or two, and you go back in, and if you think it needs more smoke, then you smoke it about two hours, and then that’s all. Then you let your sausage hang until it dries. It takes about two months, [and] then it’s ready to come down and ready to eat it.

Hamilton: And that room is all sealed off. You have to be really careful about that, don’t you.

Dressen: Oh, yes. It has to be very clean, and on one side you need to have it open for light because sausage does need a light because if it don’t, it’ll mildew. It has to have light.

Hamilton: And so it’s screened?

Dressen: Yes, it’s got screen on it.

Hamilton: Do you smoke any other meats?

Dressen: Hams. We did our hams, and we did our bacon this year.

Hamilton: How would you do those?

Dressen: Well, on the bacon, as soon as you get it taken out, cut it out, you take it, and you brined(?) by this brown salt, brown curing salt. You rub it over that real heavy and thick. You hang it for two days. Then you take it down, and you wash it with warm water real good.

Hamilton: Wash all of the salt off?

Dressen: Wash all the salt off real good. And then you hang it up and just let it hang, and it cures itself.
Hamilton: So you don’t need to smoke the bacon?

Dressen: You don’t have to. You can, but you don’t have to.

Hamilton: How long does it need to cure?

Dressen: It needs to stay in there for about two months. Then you take it out. We’ve had ours about two months. But you got to watch that it don’t mildew. The same thing with your hams. You do the same thing with your hams. And then before we had freezers, the people would have these big crocks, big round crocks. And they would make salt water.

Hamilton: What were they made out of, the crocks? Like stone?

Dressen: Yes, stone crocks. And they would take all their meat, this is before we had our freezers, and they made their salt water, and then they would put this meat in it, in these stone crocks.

Hamilton: The pork?

Dressen: The pork. All in stone crocks, meat and all that they wanted to keep and eat. Then they would come along and pour this brine over it, which is salt water, heavy salt water. And to test it, to tell if it was strong enough to keep their meat, they would put an egg in there, a raw egg. And if the egg would float, it was perfect. That’s how they kept their meat. And to keep their sausage those years, they would use the hog lard and put their sausage in these stone crocks, melt their hog lard, and they would pour it over their sausage.

Hamilton: And would you keep that outside?

Dressen: No, you’d keep it in. Also, when the ladies didn’t have pickles— now I’m starting away off from these hogs now. We’re going to canning. Okay, when they were bigger than what you could put away, I even did it, you’d use these crocks, these stone crocks, you’d get your pickles, and you take a layer of pickles on the bottom and a layer of grape leaves. You make a layer of that. You put a layer of pickles and a layer of leaves. A layer of pickles and a layer of leaves. And about half way, you’d get dill. You’d lay that dill in there. Then you’d stack it up until about so far from the top, say about six inches. Then you’d make your salt brine and you’d pour that in there. And then you’d cover it and let it sit five days, and you could start eating them.

Hamilton: And how long would those keep?

Dressen: Forever. And they’d get real good. I did that here several years ago. They was good. Try it.

Hamilton: What’s some other ways of keeping your food?
Dressen: Okay, other ways of keeping your food when you had chickens and you didn’t have anything to put them in, they’d have the jars, and they’d take the chickens and cook the chickens just like they would in a pot, and then they would put them in the jars, and they’d put grease in here. A little grease and the broth. Put it in those jars and seal it up and put them back on the stove and cook them, wood stoves now, cook them for two hours or so, and then cook, and they would take them out and set them up, and that’s how they would cook up their meat on their chickens. Also, you did it with sausage. If you wanted to keep your fresh sausage, real fresh, you’d do that, but you’d put them in jars and put them away in lard. But also, you’d seal them in there and put lard in there and put them on the stove to cook.

Hamilton: If you didn’t have a garden when you were younger, what did you mostly eat?


Hamilton: Did you all raise those too?

Dressen: No, we bought them in the store. In those years, you mostly would live off of brown beans and potatoes. There is a way of canning potatoes so they could keep them. It’s by cooking them and also putting them in jars and keeping them. Well, you know you can can your beans too, put them up in jars.

Hamilton: Mostly you ate, then, the brown beans and potatoes—

Dressen: Yeah, in those years, you mostly had your beans and your potatoes, and you had to have your sugar, coffee, and your flour. That was mostly what you had to have in those years. We didn’t have all this stuff like we have today. We didn’t have like our can goods like we buy: peas, corn, and all that kind of stuff. We didn’t have that. We lived off the hard things, you know. They just buy a big, old, long summer sausage, you could buy that. Cheese, big pieces of cheese, you could buy that. You don’t buy that today. They don’t have it. So that’s the way we lived. That’s the way Daddy and I lived. And I’m sure most everybody else did too. I’ve heard these here people say how they lived: beans and potatoes—of course, his mother made bread. But she didn’t have any yeast; she didn’t buy any yeast like we have today. But I don’t know how she did it, but it was somehow or another they did it with the dough and made their own bread. But how they did it, I don’t know. I wish I did. I would try it myself.

Hamilton: One more question about butchering. When do you butcher the hog here today.

Dressen: Today, we usually butcher about the second or third week in December. Always wait until you get your first frost. That you have no greens on the ground. No trees to be green because that’s a poison.

Hamilton: And how many hogs do you usually do?
Dressen: Six.

Hamilton: Six hogs a year? Tell me also about the planting. When you plant your garden now, and even your crops, how you plant by the moons and all that. That’s interesting.

Dressen: Well, with me planting the garden, I plant my stuff when (long pause while she thinks) –I plant my things that grow on top of the ground beginning in first quarter [of the moon], and then I plant everything that grows under the ground in the dark of the moon. What’s on top of the ground would be your beans, your corn, your cucumbers, your squash, and then under the ground would be your beets, your potatoes, onions, your carrots.

Hamilton: Where did you learn that?

Dressen: Well, I heard people talk about it, so I thought I’d try it. But I never had any luck getting out here and just putting it in the ground at any old time. So I thought I would try that, and I’ve had luck with it.


Dressen: Yeah, but you try that once. Have you ever tried it?

Hamilton: Why do you think that is?

Dressen: Because when you’re heading into the first quarter, see, that’s building into the full moon, so your first quarter is going into full moon, and that way that stuff is growing with that. If you go out here and stick it out here when it’s last quarter or dark of the moon, well, it’s not going to grow because there is nothing it can grow with. Everybody teases me, “Well, Betty, it’s not growing up in the moon.” I say I don’t care, it’s growing in the ground, but that’s the way I plant it. That’s my way of doing it. Some people can do better than I can. Also your tomatoes. Gus says with tomatoes it doesn’t make any difference because they are planted.

Hamilton: When do you plant yours?

Dressen: I plant mine full moon. I’ve got tomatoes this high. I haven’t noticed there’s anything on them. Gus said they are already planted. He said you’re transplanting them. I said that’s why. I said we got to plant them in the full moon so they grow. That’s me. (Laughs)

Hamilton: Is there anything else you can do around here that’s like that?

Dressen: No, not really. You need to plant your corn in full moon.

Pause in recording

[A short break and subjects change]
Dressen: Take the tank. That was dug with horses and mules. They’d get in there, and they would first go in with picks and a shovel until they got the hole started, and then they would come in with mules. They had a shovel behind the mules. And one man would take the shovel, and when the mule would pull, he would push down, and then it pulls it up. And that’s how they dug the tank out here.

Hamilton: When did they do that?

Dressen: It is old, let’s just say back in the thirties. I can remember my father digging a tank by mules, too.

Hamilton: On your all’s place?

Dressen: Yes.

Hamilton: He must have done a lot by himself.

Dressen: All his work was done by himself. Everything he did, he did by himself. He even dug a well by hand. My daddy did.

Hamilton: Was that the well for the water you all drank?

Dressen: For the water we drank, yes. I can remember that. I was just small, but I can remember him going down in there and just digging and digging and digging. They’d just dig, dig, dig. But of course, in those years, we had better water than what we have today. Because the wells were shallow, not deep like they are today, and it didn’t have to take too much digging to be done. And they’d put a pump on there. They’d put a casing down. Do you know what a casing is? It’s a pipe. They’d put that down in there, and then on the top we’d put a hand pump. And we’d pump our water out to drink or whatever.

Hamilton: Was he a lonely man, or did he ever have people work with him?

Dressen: Worked by himself all the time. He always worked by himself. He did milking by himself, everything that was done, Daddy done by himself. Everything.

Hamilton: Hard worker.

Dressen: Hard worker. That’s why I have him today. He’s not in perfect health, but we still have him. He’s going to be eighty-four.

Hamilton: He lives in Lockhart now, doesn’t he?

Dressen: Yes. I’m proud to have him. I won’t never live as long as my daddy did because we don’t work as hard as the old folks did back then. They worked hard.
End of interview