

John E. & Mary Keogh

Interviewed by: Jean McDowell June 2002 at Moab, Utah

Mary Keogh: I was born in Detroit, Michigan, and lived in Detroit until I was four years old and then I lived in Dearborn, Michigan, until I got married in 1948..

John Keogh: I thought I was born in Plymouth, Michigan, but Mary tells me I was born in Detroit too in the hospital there. And my folks lived in what in those days was called a “house wagon” on a construction site. It was the forerunner of a house trailer except it was just a wagon with a house built on top of it and that was my first home. And that was in Wayne County, Michigan, and the town of Wayne is where I grew up, spent my summers on the family farm up in St. Clair County, and then I lived in Wayne, Michigan, for a couple of years after the War.

Q: What did your parents do? What business were they in?

John: My father was a highway engineer and a surveyor. He worked for the road commission there and before that he worked on construction surveying.

Mary: I was born in Michigan because my mother was working in Detroit and my father was working in Detroit where they met.

Q: An Irish name but you're far removed from Ireland.

John: All my ancestors came from Ireland. My Pa's grandparents came to New Tyork. Both of my grandparents on my mother's side were born in Canada. Their parents came to the U.S.A.

by way of Canada because it was easier to enter the U.S.A. from Canada than directly from Ireland.

Q: So Mary, you're Irish too?

Mary: No, my father's father came over from Germany when he was 17 but he was the only member of his family that came and he went right from New York to Saint Louis because he had a job waiting for him there. He was a stone mason and neighbors of his family in Germany had migrated to the U.S. and lived in St. Louis and so my grandfather's former neighbors in St. Louis had gotten him a job there. My heritage is German, English, and Scottish from both my parents.

Q: So did the two of you get married out of high school or when?

John: Well, we met when we were in high school but she didn't know I existed but I had my eye on her. But then I didn't see her for some time. That was in '39 when we first started high school and then I didn't see her until '46 or '47, I think, after the War, and then we got married in '47 or '48.

Mary: '48

John: '48, I guess, if she says so.

Q: So you were in the Service?

John: I went in the army after I got out of high school. That was in '42 and then I got discharged in '45, right at the end of '45. It was a couple of days before Christmas that I got out. I was in the Pacific for better than 2 _ years. Went to lots of islands.

Q: You saw a lot of action?

John: Well, certainly some. I saw a couple of island paradises where there wasn't anything going on. They were nice. And then I saw some pretty miserable places too. I should have been a sailor because they shipped us around so many times. Many soldiers in the Army went to New Caledonia. That was the staging area and there they'd assign you to outfits that needed new troops (replacements). Then after we would go somewhere, we'd go back there and get re-supplied and get rested up and so forth. And I went there three times. I was at British Samoa and America Samoa. Those are real nice places. And I went to what they call the Bismarck archipelago. There I was at the island of Emirau island, and later at Tinian in the Mariana islands and Iwo Jima and then they sent us to Okinawa. About the time the War got over, that's where we came home from.

Q: So I know you're still real active in the Veterans' Association here in Moab

John: Well, in the American Legion. I used to belong to VFW but I don't anymore. But in the legion the only activity we really have is burying people. We're the firing squad, you know. And we're running out of "firers." But that's about the only activity. They say those guys are cashing in at about 1800 a day or so, the veterans of the second war.

Q: After the War you went back to get married? Or that's when you got reacquainted?

John: I guess she'd just finished school about a year after I came home and then I started school at Michigan State Normal College and I went to it three different times for just a semester or so and then I went to work and soon we got married.

Q: What school did you go to and what did you major in, Mary?

Mary: I graduated from Mary Grove College in 1946 right after he got home from the service. I worked in a VA hospital in a lab. I worked there for two years until where I lived wasn't going to be convenient for me to keep on working there after marriage.

Q: When you got married did you stay there in Michigan for awhile?

John: I built a house out of an old horse barn. We lived there about a year. We left there in '49, I think, didn't we? I had a job with a construction company there and then I...

Mary: We left there for him to come to Colorado to go to school.

Q: I was wondering, didn't you go to school at the School of Mines.

John: I went to the School of Mines but then in '50, that's when the Korean War come along so I signed up in the Army again. And then I got stationed in South Carolina and Mary came down. We got out of there in about a year.

Q: Did you go to Korea?

John: No, they had a deal that you could sign up for a year and so I signed up for that year and by the time that year was over they sent me home. I got hurt when I was in the Army anyway and that was in '51. I came back to Colorado to go to school but it was too late to sign up that year at the School of Mines so I went down to Colorado Springs to what they called Colorado College.

Q: Oh, Colorado College at Colorado Springs?

John: Yeah, so I went to school there until I graduated in '53.

Q: So were you taking civil engineering?

John: No I was majoring in Geology and that's the only time I really got serious about school. When we went down there, I worked at it pretty hard. I had good luck though, I didn't get all A's but that didn't mean that I didn't work pretty hard. I graduated *cum laude* and was *phi beta kappa*.

Q: So were you also working a job along with school?

John: I was working with a surveyor there.

Q: That's how you started surveying?

John: Yes, it just so happened that our landlord had a surveying business. I worked for him, not steady, but while I was going to school.

Q: And your father had been a surveyor too?

John: Yes, my father was a surveyor.

Mary: Jack came to Moab for a job but he quit the job within a few months after he was here because he was going to make this big discovery on his own.

Q: This was uranium?

Mary: Yes, uranium. And I remember I was still living back in Manitou Springs and he called me one day and said he had quit his job because if he made some big discovery while he was working for this mining company while he was their engineer then it would be theirs and not his and so he decided to quit and go into the surveying business so that he could prospect on his own. So he was a prospector at heart.

Q: So the surveying business lasted for 50 years or so?

John: It lasted from '53 when I first came to Moab to '88, 35 years.

Q: You were the County Surveyor?

John: Yes, I was the County Surveyor and City Engineer. I was a City Engineer until I retired in '87 or '88 and then I think it was about a year or so after that when I was still a County Surveyor until I quit. Over the years, I held Land Surveyor's licenses in five Western states. County Surveyor is an elected office. In the early '60s I was elected to the School Board where I served as a member and as President. I enjoyed that.

Q: And now your son Tim is a surveyor?

John: He took all of my work and then I have two other boys working surveying in Nevada.

Q: So how many children did you have?

John: I have eleven, four girls and seven boys, and all the boys are working at something to do with construction or surveying. The girls.....

Q: (to Mary) I can see why you didn't have much time for a job outside the home.

John: Well, if she'd have hurried she probably could have.

Q: What was that event you were about to tell me about going down on the icy river?

John: Oh that was when I was going to school in Michigan after the War. When I was a kid in that country when there's a big thaw, the ice breaks up. The ice, you know, is a foot and a half thick on those creeks. And then it always jams up as it breaks up. Behind my house was a river and there was a big flat. It was about a half mile wide. Water would come way up over that and upstream the water would flood onto the floodplain all around the creek. Anyway my pal and I took his canoe up the river four or five or six miles and put it in the creek and came down to where we got off the main channel into the woods where the canoe got hung up in the top of a tree and it tipped us over there. Boy, it was cold, I'll tell you! And I can remember tying that canoe up to the tree with my belt. Then we made our way over to the shore. It was cold. I pulled from tree to tree, wading. My pardner was a big husky guy and had lots of fat on him and it didn't even bother him but boy! It nearly froze me to death. And then when we got off of the creek, we were only about a half mile upstream from my house but we were over on the other side of the creek so we had to walk all the way around to a bridge to get to the house. When we got there, my Pa had been out with some other guys and they were searching for some kids who had been playing out on the river. He was kind of out of sorts with me for doing that stupid thing when he'd been out looking for those kids. I remember him saying, "Well, you better have a drink of whiskey to get warmed up," because I was blue. And then he found out he didn't have anything to drink so he went to get the car out of the garage and the garage door was frozen closed as there was a lot of ice in there. That was the upshot of it and that was one of the more brilliant things I did.

Q: So you stayed in Moab all these years because you liked surveying and had a good job, or did you like Moab?

John: I always liked the work I was doing. I really enjoyed it and it wasn't really unpleasant work although there were some disagreeable parts of it. But I liked Moab too. I always liked the people here. I still enjoy going downtown because I can always see people I know.

Q: What are you doing since you retired from surveying?

John: We're catching up on finishing our place here, making it neat and orderly and I never have accomplished it yet.

Q: You raise chickens too?

John: I've got a few chickens and I had horses up until a year ago. I got rid of my horses.

Q: So what do you think of Moab these days since you've seen it over the years?

John: Of course, it's a different town than it was, as far as I'm concerned. It's a real nice place, the tempo is a little different than it was. The real attractive part of Moab when we first came here, to me, was that everybody had unlimited enthusiasm and high hopes.

Q: During the uranium boom?

John: Yes and the attitude was really "up" so much that you can't hardly believe it or visualize it, because everybody was going to cut a fat hog. I went into the mining game one time but instead of getting rich I got even broker and so that's when I took off to Alaska. But that's a different story. I've thought of different places a guy might go but you couldn't go somewhere when you're past middle age where you wouldn't know anybody. Even if it's the nicest place in the world, if you don't know anybody, it's nothing as far as I'm concerned.

Q: Well, people are important.

John: Oh sure and I don't have a whole lot of real close friends but I've got a lot of acquaintances.

Q: For a while you were active in a land group?

John: That was the Western Association of Land Users and that was an organization which was primarily to prevent the environmentalists from closing everything down. We thought that was their motive and I guess it was, and so the Land User Association was pretty active in the 80s. Then I stayed on and was the Vice President for about ten years. We kept having meetings but it kind of petered out. We were just trying to sponsor the multiple use concept to the public land and that was the whole motive, I think.

Q: Mary, now you've got John at home instead of the kids?

Mary: That's right and I was a member of the Dan O'Laurie Museum.

Q: You were there during the construction of the new building?

Mary: Yes, I was there through that and after the building was finished.

Q: How did you happen to get involved in the Museum?

Mary: Someone on the Board called and asked me if I would be on the Board and I accepted.

Q: Was this when the Museum was just starting?

Mary: No, we were beginning to make plans to build the room on the back of the Museum at that time, I think, or shortly after I joined anyway.

Q: So you knew Dan O'Laurie?

Mary: Yes, I did. He was the benefactor of the Moab Museum and what is there.

Q: I gather he was the benefactor even of the old building before they built the new building.

Mary: Yes, he was. He hired Virginia, I think, to be the receptionist for just that one little old building and she's still there, isn't she?

Q: Oh yes.

Mary: I thought so.

Q: I think it's forty years now.

John: Forty Years? Is it that long?

Mary: I would think so. And he paid for her salary up until the new building was finished.

Q: And that's when the County took over the payment because the County pays for the utilities and pays for Virginia and my salaries, and now Rusty's, but it just sort of happened. Various people went to the Commissioners and said "Hey, could you pay for the lights" or whatever.

Mary: Lloyd Pierson, I think, was the mainstay for the Museum Board and for organizing it.

Q: Maybe so, even when the women tried to get the Sears prize for community contribution or something. What do you see as Moab's problems now? Cloudrock? The tailings or anything like that?

John: Well, true, maybe eventually the tailings will be moved. I think possibly as much because of the political influence and the concern of the people who arrived after the uranium boom. Until they came in and decided it needed to be moved there wasn't much concern about it. We just took it for granted. But now, people downstream are concerned. We went to several meetings about the concern of the contamination going downstream and I asked them several times if they'd checked the water down at Potash and then at Grand Canyon and so forth and they told me that they hadn't but it was a cumulative thing and so the tailings pile had to be taken out. Of course the people in California were made aware of the apparent problem and so the political activity created enough interest that they decided to move the tails. But I'll never see them get moved. I'm satisfied about that.

Q: At the rate they're moving?

John: That's right. I was just reading that they have to have another additional study.

Q: I seem to see your picture in the paper or on television every now and then attending some meeting or another.

John: Well, I've about finished going to meetings, I think. Because I'm out of phase I think with Moab now. I used to be somewhat active in civic matters. I enjoyed it. I was pleased and honored when, in '79, I was named Citizen of the Year. I served as Chairman of the County

Planning Commission for about 25 years and on various boards and committees – the Rodeo committee, the Airport Board, and County Economic Development.

Mary: Well, I think that his biggest problem with going to public meetings is that he can't hear what's going on.

Q: But that doesn't keep you from square dancing? Do you square dance every week?

John: Once a week.

Mary: Last night though we square danced and we were in a square and this woman kept talking all the time and finally Jack got really upset because the square kept breaking down because if just one person can't hear the calls it upsets the whole square and when one person is out of sync you might say and he wasn't the only person out of sync I think I was having problems too and all of a sudden Jack said "Would you please be quiet so I can hear the caller and can hear what he's calling." And believe me everyone came to attention.

Q: He could hear her alright.

John: We enjoy that dancing. We don't go traveling around like we used to. The club goes to different towns where there are different clubs quite often but we don't do that much anymore.

Mary: It's enough to go every Thursday night in Moab to square dance.

John: We don't have very many social activities, do we? We're kind of active in the Catholic church, you know.

Q: Do you go to any Ladies meetings?

Mary: I go to the Ladies American Auxiliary Auxilliary meetings.

John: But we don't do much else.

Q: You still do things with the kids that live in town? Seems like you babysit grandkids?

Mary: Yes, we do some baby sitting.

John: It's kind of nice to have so many kids close by because we see 'em all pretty regularly.

Mary: The ones who live here.

John: Yeah, the ones who live here. The kids who live out of town, we just see them one or two times a year.

Q: They all came to your 50th anniversary?

John: Yeah, they all came here and we had a good time at the Old City Park. One of my kids who lives on the East Coast is temporarily on the West Coast and she's going to come through here on the 4th of July and on short notice she wants to have another family reunion but I don't think it's going to get put together in time.

Mary: No and that's over the 4th of July and, like a lot of people, some of our kids have made plans for a year for the 4th of July weekend and Tim's wife's family is having a family reunion down south of Monticello and they've planned it for a year and his wife just said "Well we're going to be there for the whole weekend. We're not going to go for just one day." And you have to plan a reunion, especially when some of them are so far away. But our daughter lives on

Long Island now and she used to live in Oregon. She's a school teacher and so they're making a trip back to Oregon to sell some real estate that they still own in Oregon. Then she's going to be coming back through here on her way to Long Island and it'll be nice to visit with her. The kids who live here will be here and some of the others will come anyway.

Q: Sort of a mini-reunion.

Mary: Yes.

John: You asked about Moab and Grand County. It must be thriving because I hear we must have 7 - 8 - 9,000 people in the County now, so that's a lot more than there were during the Boom and I guess most of them are working so it must have a lot of promise. I'd kind of like to see a couple of additional businesses or industries to the tourist business, so that we could have a variety for employment so that more of the young people could stay here to work. They can't all work in tourism. But as far as the development goes, it's inevitable. You either go ahead or you back up and die so I think that most of the people are supportive of development and are doing pretty well in the County. Things are more regulated and organized now. We used to have a meeting or get-together nearly every Friday night to rehash the week's work, to socialize, to have a couple of drinks and relax. Many elected and appointed members of all levels of government used to come and briefly visit as well as other local friends. I'm sure that would be frowned on now.

Q: Do you have any thoughts about the running of local governments now compared to many years ago. They now have a manager for the County and also one for the City that they didn't use to have.

John: Well, it used to be when they had a three-person Commission I thought at that time that it would have been well for them to have an administrator to do all the paper rattling for them.

A lot of any government requires paperwork. I'm not supportive now of having seven councilmen plus an administrator and maybe an assistant. I don't know what the status of their staff is. Mostly I was impressed with both the City and the County governments before because I went to over 500 County Commission and City Council meetings over all the times I worked there and I was very favorably impressed with the Council people and the Commisioners both, because in those days it wasn't a paid position. I mean, they did get some money but it wasn't very much. But the people who sought those jobs were really conscientious about helping Grand County and Moab City, I think.

Q: Well, there's a lot of administration for somebody to take care of .

John: Once a town gets to a certain size you just have a whole lot of bureaucracy. Well, I think I've told you about everything I know.

Q: What about you Mary, do we know everything about you?

Mary: I think pretty well, yes. My years were spent mostly with childcare and family. I really enjoy living where I live especially out here in Spanish Valley.

Q: Well you have a nice place.

Mary: We have lots of privacy here and, after you raise eleven children, privacy gets to be quite a priority for you. When there are always a lot of children around you don't have very much privacy and their friends increase the numbers. I prize my privacy but I like people too, don't misunderstand me, but I do enjoy my privacy here.

