



Feeding Dust Bowl Children, Maryann Ashe, 1935

by Gilbert Gia,
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(Adapted from the *California Odyssey Oral History Program* interview,
California State College, Bakersfield, 1986)

Maryann Ashe: **When was I born? Oh, my word! that's telling secrets. I'll tell you what I used to tell people when I was younger, and it touched me. I said, "To you, I'm just as old as you think I am, and to me, I'm as old as I feel!" I was born in 1889. I'm eighty-seven years old.**¹

Where did you start school?

My oldest brother and sister started at Old River, but I went all the way through at Panama School. The school district was established in 1875, and that was two years before my father came to Panama. He

¹ Maryann Ashe was born to E. M. and R. S. Ashe on Jan 18, 1889. She was raised on the family's 320-acre Kern County ranch on sec 34, T30N, R27W, which they had settled in 1880. Maryann Ashe retired in June 1951 after 30 years in teaching. She was a member of the Kern County Retired Teachers Association. She was known as "Auntie Mayo" by her nieces and nephews. Maryann Ashe died Jan 15, 1988 and her ashes were interred in the Ashe family plot at Woody Cemetery (Kern County). She was survived by a brother, James Samuel Ashe and a sister, Anne Ashe Loudon.

came in 1877. His sister, Margaret, was a teacher. The original school house was down on what is now Taft Highway, next to that canal, the Farmer's Canal. My aunt, my father's sister, Margaret, taught in Panama, but she taught in the old school house down by the canal. I remember hearing her tell a story about a terrific dust storm. We used to have awful storms. I remember them. She took children on each side of her, held onto a child and that child held onto the next, and they formed a continuous line and braved this wind so that nobody would get blown away and lost.

They sold the old school house to the Bidarts. It was moved down Wible Road, about two miles I think, and the last I heard of it it burned. They built the new school house right in the corner. That one was eventually taken down. And then they had the one in 1938. I remember when that school house was built.

The next [*Panama School*] was the two-story building right there at the intersection of Stine and Taft Highway. That's where I started school [*about 1895*] and where I finished school. We had a pump on the outside, and we all pumped the water and drank out of the same cup. The Chic Sale for the boys was in the west corner, and the girls' was over in the east corner.² We had a six-inch board fence all around the school. The

2 Charles Sale (1885-1936) was an American actor and vaudevillian. "In 1929, inspired by a carpenter ...

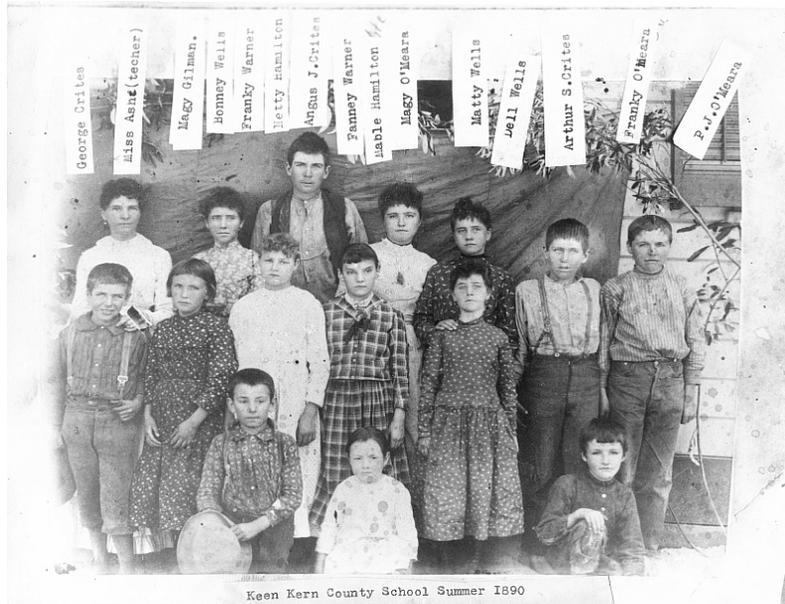
horses were always tethered across the road under the cottonwood trees. And then we had a stile with a flight of steps up on one side. There must have been about six steps. And then a platform on top and then six steps down the other side.



On The Stile (Winslow Homer, abt 1878)

That led to a walk up to the school house. It was two-story, and the four upper grades were upstairs, and the four primary grades were downstairs. I started with two teachers, and I had a Miss Galloway for the first two years, and for the next two years my cousin, Laura Lewis, was my teacher. I say that everything I learned at that time I learned from those two women because I was brought up on farms. We learned to read and write and spell and speak correctly.

Sale wrote *The Specialist*, a play about an outhouse builder." Sale enlisted the aid of two newspapermen to adapt it to book form. Sale spent the several months after its publication responding to fan mail. (Wikipedia)



Keen School, 1890. Miss Ashe, the teacher at left, was an aunt of Maryanne Ashe. Image courtesy Sidney Allen, Huntsville, Alabama

And I remember the old State language book. We learned about the Deity then, that everything to do with the Deity began with a capital letter. And that's a far cry now. We were taught the history of our country, and we got a good foundation. I went through the eight grades there, and I was the only one in the eighth grade when I graduated.



Kern County class about 1905. Courtesy Kern County Library

Did you go on to the high school in Bakersfield?

Yes. I was the first one to graduate from academic high school and go on to higher education.³ I went to San Jose and became a teacher. Since then, of course, education became compulsory, and many young people have gone through high school, almost everybody. And many of them have gone on through the university and taken up other branches of education, but I was the first one that did that.⁴

³ According to Kern County school historian Jerry Kirkland, a Minnie Ashe graduated from Bakersfield High School in 1907. The *Bakersfield Californian* obituary said she graduated in 1905. Maryann Ashe attended San Jose Normal School in California and received her teaching credential on Dec 16, 1910. Her obituary stated she started teaching at a one-room school in Jan 1911. According to Kirkland, a Mary Ashe taught at Quinn School in 1911. In 1976 Maryann Ashe was interviewed for the Earl Warren Oral History Project, *Earl Warren's Bakersfield*, University of California, Bancroft Library/Berkeley, Regional Oral History Office. Warren graduated from KC High in 1908.

⁴ Kirkland noted to the author that Maryann Ashe was principal/teacher at Stine School in 1932.



Biology class from 1905. (Mills College)

I was in the Hawaiian Islands when the cotton industry came into Kern County.⁵ That was 1918-1920. When I returned from the Islands, they were growing cotton here. And that, of course, brought in the cotton pickers and the people interested in cotton. When the Dust Bowl people came there was cotton growing down on the Kern Lake bottom. That was when the Panama Migratory school was started. In 1935 I went down there to teach, and I taught there for seven years.

There were two of us teachers. Others had been there before, and as I said I don't know just when it was established. Eva Strickland was there when I went. She was the principal. Her father was Japanese and her mother Hawaiian. She was brought to Bakersfield by Anna Maude Anderson, who was Art Supervisor of the County Superintendent's Office.

⁵ According to the obit she taught at Maui in 1919. Her interview implies she taught there until 1920.

Maude had spent seven years on the island of Maui and became acquainted in Lahaina with Eva, who came from a large family.

Maude recognized her ability and brought her to the states, and Eva went through this high school and worked her own way through UCLA. Then she became the teacher out there in the Panama Migratory⁶, a most worthy woman, and a most excellent teacher. I taught with her for seven years. It was a tremendous experience to be with her, as well as to be teaching the children.

That was during the Dust Bowl migration, right?

It was. Here we had this influx of Dust Bowl people, and nobody was prepared for them. Yet they had to be taken care of. So that's how we fell heir to 147 children the first year, and no money with which to get extra teachers. After that, of course, the bill had to be changed. When Mrs. Eva Tenabe Strickland, who I said was the principal, had over 40 pupils in her class we had to get an extra teacher.

The first year I was there it was a double session. Eva and I had 147 children between us. I had 71 in the first three grades, and she had 76 in the five upper grades. She began at 8:00 AM and taught the minimum day. I began at 20 minutes of one and taught as long as I

⁶ Panama Migratory School was south of Bakersfield. According to school historian Jerry Kirkland a Kern County map dated 1942 shows the school at the intersection of today's Stine and Herring roads.

could see. We had no lights, no lanterns, no candles, nothing. We had one spigot out in the yard – that was our drinking fountain. And I think, if I remember rightly, there were two Chic Sales. This old building in which we taught had been a bunkhouse for the Kern County Land Company and was originally 50-feet long.

When so many children came to the school the board of trustees added 20-feet to the school, so then this building was 70-feet long. The blackboards were half-inch boards, a foot wide, nailed to the wall and painted black. They were blackboards all right! There was one little closet and old seats they'd raked up from hither, thither, and yon. We did the best we could under the circumstances.

I had 33 in the first grade that year. I developed one excellent reader, a little Indian girl. I had her sister later. They were bright children. I had only half a term there, so when I left at the end of the first semester, this Indian family also left, but they were back the next fall. I was delighted to see them. When I heard Naomi read, I said, "Why, Naomi you don't read any better than you did when you left me." She said, "I know it." I asked, "What was the matter?" She said, "I didn't like the teacher."

Did you return the following year?

Yes, I did. When I was at the Migratory School the second half-year we had tents. Long Beach had suffered an earthquake [*March 10, 1933*], and while they were rebuilding their schools they taught in tents. After they'd gotten their reconstruction accomplished, Panama District bought the tents and moved them up here. We had two or three or four tents, and I taught in one of them.

Did the children get lunch?

One tent they equipped as a lunch room, and they equipped it beautifully. They fixed up another tent for the custodian -- the husband of the Indian family I mentioned before. He was our custodian by that time, and his wife had become our cook. We teachers did the cooking from December on until the end of the year because the school had no money to hire anyone, and that was at a time when the legislature had passed a bill that no school could exceed its previous year's expenditures by more than five per cent.

How did you and Mrs. Strickland get along with the families?

The children told me in September that there was a family over in one of the camps that had children that were school age. I told them to tell the mother that she had to send them to school or I'd report her to the attendance officer. The next morning I received a note from her saying if I wanted her youngin's in school, I'd have to get them some clothes to

wear - some misspelled words in it, but that is neither here nor there.

So that evening I went into my guild at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, and that evening I presented a letter to the rector, who happened to be at the meeting. He read my request for things, and then he told the guild, "If you will have all of your contributions for me here Friday morning, I'll take them out to Mary's."

I had a twenty-foot porch on the south side of my house, and that Friday evening when I got home it was laden with boxes. Of course the next day, maybe the next two days, I spent going through these boxes. Some of them I just consigned to the fire right then and there. Some people had a wonderful job cleaning out trash, which included dirty stockings that were runners from toes to top, things of that sort. But there was a lot of good-wearing clothes in it.

We had a Negro couple living on our ranch at that time, and she, the black woman, and my mother, washed and ironed all those clothes, everything. Many of them had to be repaired. I invited the ladies' aid of the Congregational Church at Panama to have a sewing bee at my house and bring their portable sewing machines. They repaired the clothes.

I was getting ready for the clothing sale, a used-clothing sale. I had no conception of how the idea would be received, whether [the parents] would be insulted or whether they'd be grateful, or just what would happen. But, anyway, at school I kept talking up some little articles of clothing I had, and building up my sales talk, and I told the children that on a certain Saturday we were going to have the sale.

Well, I was also in the dairy business at that time, and my milker had more curiosity than any cat that ever lived, so he went down with me the morning of the sale, and we stretched a cord across the school house and put out all the used clothing. The women usually picked cotton until twelve o'clock. But the smart women came in at eleven, and they had the pick of everything I had to sell.

The most expensive article I sold was a little child's coat for twenty-five cents. I am sure it must have cost anywhere from \$15 to \$20. It was a beautiful piece of merchandise. The men's shirts sold for three cents apiece; socks, two pairs for a nickel, and a little two-piece dress sold for twenty cents. That day I sold \$22.70 worth of clothing. I put it in a fruit jar and took it home and put it on my dresser. And there it sat waiting to be used.

How did the lunch set up work?

We always had a good kitchen set up. We were cooking for about 60 children with the help of the older girls and boys. The district built us two long tables with benches, like picnic-style tables you know. They equipped our kitchen with a gas range and hot and cold water. They bought regular restaurant dishes, plates, cups and saucers. I don't think we had any knives. We only had forks and spoons, so we could never have any meat that you had to cut. And we had Wearever cooking utensils. They were super.

In December when we opened up our school lunchroom Mrs. Eva Strickland came to me and said, "I haven't enough to buy a bill of goods, and I'm sure you haven't either." So I said, "Why not take my clothing money. It's been sitting in that jar ever since I put it on my dresser." So I took it to her, and that set us up in business.

The second year, Mrs. Strickland and the older boys --maybe the girls helped-- developed a garden, and we grew our own fresh vegetables. The first Christmas after we set-up in the cooking business, the Soroptimists, of whom Mrs. Anderson was a member - and influenced by Eva Strickland - gave us \$35 to help feed the children. We also charged a nickel a meal. Mrs. Strickland told me, "If I can, I want to

save that money to buy fresh fruit in the summertime and put it up."

We kept a very strict account. She took the first week, planned the meals and bought the food, and she and the girls prepared it. The next week was my turn, so she turned over the account book with the money to me, and I did the same thing. For my own benefit, I kept a list of all our menus, every meal, every day, and I referred back to it so we wouldn't duplicate too often. Well, we never duplicated anything oftener than once every three weeks, except for beans, and we did beans because the children wanted them--pink beans. When the school garden came in, you see, we had our fresh vegetables. We did the cooking the rest of that year in that way.

I understand you also got food for the school.

In the summertime, that first summer after we established our lunch business, my mother and I, and I think two Mexican women who lived with their husbands in the labor camp all summer, came over and helped us peel the fruit. We put up the fruit for our school's next winter lunches. Then a man came in from McFarland with raspberries, and we put up raspberries. We went out to Di Giorgio and got apricots and plums, and I think we put up grapes, too. Some of the growers had them and gave them to us because they knew what we were doing with them.



Panama Migratory School. Principal Eva Strickland, right. Photo courtesy Kern County Library

Then as time went on, Mrs. Eva Strickland being part Japanese and because the war had come on, she had to go to Poston. The children had one more week of school before Christmas, and I was left in charge.

That summer it was up to me to get the fruit. Well, I went out to McFarland and brought in fourteen hundred pounds of peaches at one time. I sold some of them to other people who wanted them, but not one person in Panama would help me with my canning, and we had helped them every single summer when they put up their fruit.

I got up at four o'clock the next morning and got my jars sterilized.

It was open kettle. The fruit was cling, and I got them all pitted. I had everything ready, my sugar and my syrups. My mother got up and had her breakfast about seven-thirty, and at eight we began to peel. We peeled until she went to bed about eight. She was well into her eighties. I worked on until about eleven and got everything cleaned up for the next day.

I got up at four o'clock the next morning and kept at it. My mother and I put up seven hundred pounds of those peaches in two days for the Panama Migratory School. I took the jars down to the school and stored them in the kitchen cupboards. Of course we couldn't can anymore after that year because of sugar rationing.

Who was Betty Lou?

She was the sister of that little Indian girl I told you who didn't like her teacher, and this Betty Lou was in the third grade the year we raised rats as a nutrition project. She was just as bright as she could be, a natural newspaper woman, and she wrote a beautiful story about our keeping and raising those rats. She was in the midst of everything, but she knew when to maintain a discreet silence. I loved her dearly.

One weekend I took her up to spend the weekend with the little girl who lived on my place. That little youngster's father worked for me, but

her mother had been called back to Oklahoma on account of the illness of her own father, and I knew the child was very, very homesick for her mother; so I brought Betty Lou to spend the weekend. They wanted to ride the old horse, but he wasn't a saddle horse, so we had to lead him up and down the road. They had a wonderful time, but, my word, I was dead tired!

Betty Lou's mother and father were the worst kind of parents. The little girl could have had a better life, and it has been my one regret that I didn't ask them to let me have her to educate because I think they would have given her to me. It wouldn't have been a millionaire's life with me, but it would have been a good, wholesome one. I think she was married at fifteen. I don't know what's become of her.

What was the reason for the rats and the nutrition project?

Well, those youngsters in that class were just pitiful. They were so poor. They were undernourished, and their parents knew nothing about nutrition. They ate sod meat, 'maters, 'taters, and black coffee and bread. The sod meat was side meat, which is that part that's made into bacon. A lot of people called it "sow belly." The 'maters were tomatoes. Now, that was the sum substance of their diet.

I had children sit in school and gnaw the lapel of their shirt collars,

just gnaw the whole morning. Others with great, deep circles under their eyes and turned as white as a sheet. They just could hardly do anything through the hunger. So I began to teach nutrition. We had to teach them to eat.



I was at a Pumpkin Center store, and the man came in with his Nucoa posters, beautiful posters, so I said, "May I have some of those?" The next morning I plastered the walls of my room with them, and I began to teach nutrition to those undernourished children. I remember one picture was of a child sitting on the globe, and he was holding a glass of bottled milk. I said, "You see what milk is? That youngster is on top of the world with a bottle of milk." Well, they knew the globe represented the world, and they could see what milk had done.

We made a health book based on nutrition. I taught them about vitamins and what vegetables contained vitamins, the sources of the

various vitamins. I said, "If you eat the right kind of foods, your eyes will sparkle like diamonds, your cheeks will be as rosy as apples, with ruby lips, and you'll just be wonderful."

I had one little youngster who proved my words to a "T." She came to me dreary-eyed. Her hair was like rope ends, it was so coarse. Well, she and her brother were twins, and they began to eat there at school. As I said, we had to teach them to eat, but they did eat, and after a while her hair began to grow, and it was the finest hair you could ever imagine, and it shone like silk. Her eyes lightened up, she got color in her cheeks and in her lips. The food did beautiful work.

Then Roosevelt began giving us vegetables and fruit. The only vegetable I remember getting was just one, wilted bunch of turnips. So we told them to hold their vegetables, we didn't need them because we had our own garden. Then they began giving us grapefruit, and I think we got a few boxes of apples, too. Not every day, but the grapefruit we got particularly. At 8:30, we'd bring the children in and cut grapefruit in half, and they'd sit around the table and eat grapefruit. And if they wanted more, we'd have grapefruit for lunch, and if they asked for grapefruit for a dessert, we'd have it. The children were welcome to eat, and we fed those children.

Then the nurse, I think it was the nurse, asked me if I'd take two white rats to have as a health project. We put the two of them in a divided box, and we chopped up paper with the paper cutter for their nests. One of them we fed brown bread and milk and vegetables and all the wholesome foods. The other one we gave white bread, soda pop, candy and all the unwholesome foods. The one to which we gave the good foods, grew three or four times in size to what the other one was. His eyes sparkled, his fur was beautiful. He was gentle. He would run up the arms of the children like that. And the other one was just a wild rat. The eyes were red, the hair was coarse, and it didn't grow. It was really pitiful to see him. Well, the children could see what had happened.

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