

1 Elray Nixon (Spencer Family)

INTERVIEW WITH: Elray Nixon
INTERVIEWER: Marsha Holland
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MH: Today is February 18 and I'm in Escalante, Utah. And I'm with Elray Nixon and I'd like to thank you for inviting me over to do this.

EN: You're welcome.

MH: You live in a very beautiful home, first of all. We'll talk about that in a minute. But can I have you introduce yourself and tell me the date you were born and where please.

EN: I was born the 5th of February, 1931, here in Escalante in a log cabin about two blocks from here. It no longer exists, but, it was on a cold February day as you might suspect. And they couldn't find the midwife. My dad ran all over town trying to find her. Finally, they did. And I was born there.

MH: And who was the midwife? Did they tell you?

EN: I know who it is, but I can't think of it.

MH: Was it Heaps, one of the Heaps?

EN: Yes. Susan Heaps.

MH: Susan Heaps. Ok.

EN: I'm pretty sure that's it.

[Type text]

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MH: Yes. So the thirties, not so much for you but probably your family, it was a tough time to be born.

EN: Tough time.

MH: What were your first memories? Do you have memories from Escalante because you were here, you were probably about five.

EN: Yes.

MH: Tell me what you remember.

EN: [Laughter] Well, I remember, and I guess this is five years or younger. I remember my first friend was Lloyd Munson. We used to... His dad owned the grocery store and he stored ice in his barn with sawdust. And we used to go over in the summer and sit on that ice to cool us down.

MH: That's a good memory.

EN: [Laughter] There was an old man that always walked by. This is our daughter, Jennifer.

MH: Jennifer, it's nice to meet you. I'm Marsha Holland.

JN: Hi, Marsha. It's nice to meet you.

EN: Anyway, . He used to come by and I remember that we were all scared of him because he used to say, "If you don't watch out I'm gonna cut off your ears." [Laughter].

MH: [Gasp] Did you ever find out who it was?

EN: No. I never found out who it was. But that's what he'd say every time he'd pass.

MH: What a mean person.

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EN: Yes [Laughter].

MH: Gosh. That's more like a nightmare for a five year old.

EN: And remember, my grandfather, John Spencer and Caroline. They were my grandparents. He had a chicken and he cut off its head. And this was back by the granary. And I was standing there watching. And when he put the chicken on the ground, the chicken ran with its head off at me. And I ran and the chicken chased me for about forty feet before I realized that all I had to do was turn one way or the other and it would go right on by.

MH: [Laughter] Cause he couldn't really see you.

EN: I remember that experience. And then I remember getting an infection in my knee. And it went up my leg. There was a blue line up my leg into my groin area right here. And the doctor came in and he had to lance up here and lance my knee. I remember being on the couch for a few days and not being able to do anything from that.

MH: Right. An injury?

EN: I loved my grandparents. They were really fine people.

MH: Yes. So let's talk about your grandparents. First of all, let's start with your parents. What were your parent's names?

EN: Earl Nixon and Jane Ellen Spencer.

MH: Ok. And Spencer is an Escalante name.

EN: Yes.

MH: And did they marry here in Escalante?

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EN: No.

MH: How did they meet?

EN: Well, dad lived in Idaho at the time, in Iona, Idaho. And he had gotten off on his mission to Iowa and Wisconsin and that area. And mother had gone on a mission up in Oregon. And so when mother came back, one of her companions lived where dad lives.

MH: In Idaho?

EN: And so she introduced Dad to Ellen, they called her Ellen. And that's the way they met.

MH: Right. So both were return missionaries.

EN: Yes.

MH: And they met in Idaho. Right.

EN: Mother went up to Idaho to see her friend and, at the time, Dad was there.

MH: Right. Oh, great.

EN: So ...

MH: And obviously they ended up coming here because you were born here.

EN: Yes. They came here lived here in the log cabin for awhile. And then they built, do you know where Burl Shurtz lives?

MH: No.

EN: Where he used to live.

MH: Yes. I don't.

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EN: It's the house right up across from Claron Griffin.

MH: Oh. Ok.

EN: That brick home, my dad and my grandfather built that.

MH: Ok.

EN: And, we lived in that house. And then I remember there, and this is all I remember of my mother in Escalante, was that we had a garden. And, for some reason, I liked cabbage. And so I would go in the garden and peel of leaves of cabbage and eat it. And my mother, I remember her smiling at me whenever I would do that.

MH: Nice.

EN: I also remember getting one of the diseases. I don't know whether it was chicken pocks or measles or something like that where I had to stay in a dark room for quite a long time.

MH: Right. Childhood disease.

EN: Yes. And that's all I remember about the old house, or about that brick house. Then Dad got a call from his dad in Idaho. And this, of course, was during the depression. And he was losing his farm. And he wanted Dad to come up and try to help him save it. The government was gonna take it from him. So, we moved. At the time we moved, my mother, came down with cancer, cancer of the colon. And so while she was in Iona, Idaho, I remember my mother just being sick. And I remember her groaning quite a lot. She was in her own room and I could hear her. And, as a result, I never really got to know my mother. She died when I was eight. So ...

MH: Right. So, she had colon cancer. Do you think she was impacted by the nuclear testing?

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EN: I don't think that was going on at that time. I'm not sure though.

MH: Oh, right. Cause it was probably a little bit... yes, thirties.

EN: This would be in the thirties.

MH: Yes.

EN: Anyway, my grandfather lost his farm. And so eventually my dad remarried and we moved to Milwaukee.

MH: That's a long way away.

EN: Then, I used to come out from Milwaukee each summer when I was in high school. I wanted to come out and be with my grandparents. So... we, all of us kids, we moved to Milwaukee and it wasn't easy because our step-mother was not used to kids. She hadn't had any kids. And we just kind of didn't fit together.

MH: Right.

EN: But, I used to come out and be with my grandparents. And I have some really good memories of Escalante from them.

MH: Yes. So let's talk about your grandparents. That's a good segue; tell me your Spencer grandparents names.

EN: Yes. John Spencer, his dad was, Joseph H. Spencer, but there was not actually an H. in his name. But, Joseph Spencer lived in England. And, I can't recall. Maybe I'll think of it.

MH: Yes. Is it time period that you are trying to remember?

EN: No, the city that he lived in.

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MH: Oh, the city. Ok.

EN: But, anyway his dad was also called Joseph Spencer. And, I can't go back any further. But, anyway, Joseph Spencer, while he was in England, when he was about thirteen or fourteen, he worked in the mines. And whenever he'd get paid, he would have to give the money to his dad. And so one time he decided that he wanted to buy an accordion. So he bought it with his money and his dad got mad at him and kicked him out of the house. So he went to live with his half brother who was Henry Heaps. And the Heaps were here in Escalante, also.

MH: Ok. So were the Heaps already here?

EN: No. They were in England.

MH: Interesting.

EN: While he was with the Heaps, he joined the Church because Henry Heaps had found the Church. So, anyway, for some reason, Joseph changed his name to Heaps [Laughter]. And he was Joseph Heaps for a period of time. And there was quite a controversy here in town as to whether he was a Heaps or whether he was a Spencer. But, Thelma Cottam got some documents from England and he definitely was a Spencer. So, he was Joseph Spencer. But, anyway, he married while he was in England and they decided to come to America to be with the Saints. And just before, a couple of days before they were to get on the ship, he had a dream. And he says in the dream it said something terrible was going to happen but he should go to America anyway. And, of all things, it turned out that his wife decided not to go with him. And, so Joseph went anyway because of dream [Laughter]. Which is very interesting, I think.

MH: Very interesting [Laughter].

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EN: And so, when he went to get on the ship, the Mormon Church had a little office there where their members would go to get on the ship. And there was an orphan girl there that needed a ticket. So Joseph gave her a ticket. And they both boarded the ship and came across. It was the... well; I'll have to my history to find out the name of the ship.

MH: Remember the name, yes.

EN: But I could, I could get that for you. , so they came across. Joseph landed in New York. Joseph and the orphan girl, they decided to split. So she went on to Nauvoo and the area and she got on one of the wagon trains and started to cross the plains. Joseph was working in New York to get some money. And then he went through Albany and over to the Great Lakes and down through the Great Lakes to the Chicago River and down to Mississippi and to Nauvoo. And Joseph got on a wagon train at Cheyenne, Nebraska, which was one of the departing points for the Saints. Anyway, an interesting thing happened because when the orphan girl was crossing the plains, she died. I'm not sure how, probably of a disease or something. But the night that she died, according to Joseph Spencer, she appeared to him and didn't say anything, but she appeared to him and later he connected it that it was the time that she died.

MH: Wow.

EN: So, that was interesting.

MH: Well, he had visions. That is very interesting.

EN: Anyway, he got on this, wagon train and went to Utah.

MH: But he's a single man.

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EN: Yes. He was a single man then. And while he was up around the Salt Lake area he... well, what happened was that eventually he was called to go down and settle Toquerville. And so he stayed there for a few years and then he went to Panaca, Nevada.

MH: Ok. So let me just stop you here. He has some skills. What were his skills, do you know...?

EN: Just working in the mine [Laugh].

MH: Ok. So he's a miner.

EN: Yes. He was a miner. But to my knowledge he never used that skill here. He was a rancher, farmer.

MH: But a hard worker.

EN: But a hard worker, a good worker. He moved to Panaca and that's where he met Jane Ellen **Hasvam** and they married. And then from there they moved to Panguitch. They stayed in Panguitch a few years. And then Joseph was one of the groups that wanted to find a different place because Panguitch, you know, is a pasture area but you couldn't grow any crops. You couldn't grow good gardens.

MH: Right. No gardens.

EN: So, they... he was with them and they came over here and found Escalante. So they decided to move over here.

MH: Right. And so do we have an idea of years then when he moved?

EN: He moved to Panguitch in about 1872, Panaca before that, then to Escalante in 1876.

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MH: Right. So a couple towns were just sort of starting up then like Cannonville was going, I think then. But I think that is about the right time frame.

EN: Panaca was a mining town at that time. They were mining mostly silver. And, the Saints had all filed claims on mines in the area. But, when they started getting a little bigger, they sent a judge out from back east. And, when they struck silver, the judge declared that all of the Mormon claims were non-valid. And so he gave claims to other people that were coming in for the big mines, whatever. And so Church member, plus they were having Indian troubles, decided to move and they moved to Panguitch.

MH: Yes. That's interesting. So Joseph is really one of the first families that came here. Is that correct?

EN: He was among the first families.

MH: And you also mentioned the Schows; what's the relationship there?

EN: The Schows were from Denmark, from Aalborg, Denmark. And they were converted to the Church and they decided that they wanted to come to America. And I should say that its extremely difficult to find out anything about my ancestors in Denmark because of the way named people and all of the problems that are associated with that. Anyway, they came across on a ship. I should change that a little bit. Annie Schow and her girlfriend were able to leave first to come to the New World. And then her family came later. But Annie and the girlfriend, Annie was poor and so she lived down in the lower part of the ship.

MH: The lower decks?

EN: And her girlfriend was more affluent. She lived up above and they couldn't really contact each other as they went through. Let me...

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MH: You want to stop. We'll take a break.