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HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #133 - Side A

Subject: Tommy Jenkins

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: February 3, 1972

Interviewer: James Baker

JAMES BAKER: You mentioned the date in which your father came over. Maybe you could give me that date.

TOMMY JENKINS: He came to the United States in 1883 and landed in New York, and from there he went to Pennsylvania to work in the mines there, in order to get finances enough to get on to the West Coast where he wanted to go. He ended up in Portland, and from there he just worked at odd jobs, ranches and farms mostly, and sometimes orchards and whatever he could get.

JAMES: What was he picking up wages for?

TOMMY: In Portland there he worked at anything that he could get. Just at odd jobs in order to make it through the winter, and get enough money to live on, and a little money to get a little farther on down the line. He had his goal set to get into the interior where he could find a good sheep country. And he worked his way up through the Willamette Valley, and then across to Klamath Falls. And there he spent one winter in Klamath Falls just working on ranches and whatever work he could get, ... the winter of 1884 and '85. ... He joined the survey crew in Klamath Falls in the spring of '85, I guess it was, and stayed with them until late fall when they reached Silver Creek, and that's where the survey party stopped for the winter. And he left the survey party there and took a job herding sheep.

Later on he took sheep on shares. Then he got his brother to come out from

Wales and join him, and by that time he had enough accumulated there that they had a band of sheep of their own. And they done all the work, outside of lambing time and shearing, by themselves, and the lambing ...

They ran out in the Silver Creek country there, and in fact they bought a little ranch out there, which is known as the Sage Hen Ranch.

JAMES: Well that name kept on. There is a few things known as the Sage Hen now. (Laughter)

TOMMY: Then, they weren't satisfied after the road grant went through, which took out every odd numbered section, 4 miles on one side of the road, and 7 miles I think on the other side. And that didn't please them, as far as running sheep was concerned. So my dad made a trip over to the Steens Mountain to look for a better location, and spent some time over there looking around, and found a little place to buy over there. This was in about '95 or '96. So that country suited him a lot better, so he bought a homestead, a 160-acre homestead there for a kind of base. And came back over here, and they decided they'd just move on over there with the sheep.

JAMES: There were a lot of sheep on the Steens at one time, I guess?

TOMMY: Later on there was. They ran sheep there as partners for, until about 1906 or '07.

JAMES: Well that would be about the time that the homesteaders came in? Seems like to me, around 1906 or '07, isn't that when the ... farmers started in?

TOMMY: That's when they --- the reason I think ... especially on the mountain out there, the survey wasn't completed until somewhere along about that time. My dad brought my uncle out then, and then he started to build up his own outfit.

JAMES: Yeah. Did he marry a girl from Wales, or a girl from this part of the country?

TOMMY: He went back to Wales in '98. My mother and dad were married in Wales and

came out here in '99.

JAMES: Do you remember him ever saying something along the lines of why sheep raising was better than cattle raising, or better than farming, or better than any other kind of life? Was there something particularly rewarding about sheep raising for him? Style of life or something?

TOMMY: I think it was more the style of life than anything else, because after he --- his father was in the sheep business in Wales, and he had worked with sheep there, and he liked to work with them.

JAMES: It was curious to me, because there was so much cattle ranching out here, and so much conflict between sheep and cattle, maybe he could find more money in the cattle than the sheep?

TOMMY: Well in those days I think it was probably the opposite. I think there was more money in the sheep than there was in cattle.

JAMES: Is that right. Well where would the difference come from? I really don't understand that.

TOMMY: The way they figured it, you had your wool crop, you had two crops to sell, you had your lamb crop and your wool crop. They wouldn't sell any lambs like they sell now. They'd run them until they were maybe three or four years old.

JAMES: What was the biggest problem that a sheepherder would run into at that point, in this period of time that you are talking about, maybe before the turn of the century? What would really wipe him out?

TOMMY: The elements.

JAMES: Yeah, the winters itself.

TOMMY: The winters. Because they had to depend on, they didn't put up hay, and they just had to hope that there was enough grass and browse and stuff enough for the sheep

to eat. That's one reason that that was a good country out there, because it was close to what we called the Owyhee Desert. It's a low country and the snow didn't lay, and there was lots of feed. But even sometimes you could go out there on the desert and have a band of sheep there in real good condition, and come one of those snowstorms and it would wipe the whole thing out.

JAMES: There would be nothing like that in Wales?

TOMMY: Oh, no.

JAMES: Probably the Welsh showed a lot to the Americans about how to raise sheep.

TOMMY: Well I think probably they did. It is pretty true of a lot of Scotland and Ireland, they're great sheep countries too, and that's the reason that a lot of the Irish and Scotch people came out here, and other places where they ran sheep.

JAMES: That's something that a lot of people don't know, is about the number of Irish and Scotch out here.

TOMMY: Then later on why then the Basque people started coming and they done the same thing. They would get started and then they'd send back and get some ... In fact right now, practically all the people who work with sheep in this country or the Idaho country are Basque people. They can get the younger Basque people from the old country to come out, and they are natural sheep people.

JAMES: Well I see that stack of pictures, are there any sheep-herding pictures in that stack?

TOMMY: Yeah.

JAMES: Let's take a look at them. Those are brown, how come? They're not black and white, they're brown.

TOMMY: Don't know whether it's age, but nearly all the pictures in those days, these are old ones.

JAMES: Isn't that something. They really are.

TOMMY: ... (Points out people in pictures.) In this one they are putting sheep through a dipping vat, there.

JAMES: What kind of dipping would they put them into, to protect them from what?

TOMMY: From scab.

JAMES: Scab? That's a disease? I really don't know anything about sheep.

TOMMY: You never hear of it anymore because they have so many pesticides now.

JAMES: That must have been a pretty bad problem at that time.

TOMMY: Oh yeah it was. Here's the end of the dipping vat, dug in the ground. We'd fill that with water and with a, what they used then was a nicotine solution.

JAMES: Nicotine, is that right? Is there a date on that? In Cold Springs, dipping sheep. Is that 1890, somewhere in the 1890's?

TOMMY: Well, I was less than a year old then and I was born in 1904.

JAMES: Okay, so it's at least after --- it's before the First World War anyway. Okay. Hey, you know, that's on a cardboard back.

TOMMY: Nearly all these old pictures are. Now here's the old shearing corrals. There's the wool sacks and here's the wagon that's loaded up ready to go to the railroad, which at that time was down at Huntington, Oregon. You know where that's at?

JAMES: Well I know where Huntington is, yeah. Is this about the same time as this other picture?

TOMMY: Yeah. Well this could have been just a little later, but not too much. These freight wagons, they'd load four sacks length-ways in the wagon, and six stacked above crossways, ten sacks of wool on the wagon. And the sacks would average somewhere around 400 pounds.

JAMES: Each sack. And that would be in burlap probably. How much would that 400

pounds bring?

TOMMY: At that time, I doubt if they'd get over 10 or 15 cents for it. They loaded those sacks with the derrick. A pulley up there, horse with harness. ... Here's a freight team all loaded up and ready to go.

JAMES: How many? You got one, two, three, four, four, what do you call that, four ---

TOMMY: It would be an 8-horse team.

JAMES: Eight-horse team.

TOMMY: Yeah, and 2 wagons. And they got more on this one, you see, it's double stacked. ... (Discussion of pictures.) And my dad had about 14 sacks on this wagon, 400 pounds at 10 or 15 cents per pound. It would go to Ontario. They would have three wagons, the little light wagon back behind with the grain for the horses and the camp outfit. Some had two wagons and they piled cook stuff on top.

JAMES: How fast could a fellow shear a sheep in order to get that big filled? Could he do it in a hour?

TOMMY: Oh, gosh no.

JAMES: No. Take him three hours or so? From breakfast to lunch?

TOMMY: The average fleece would be around, I imagine around 10 pounds.

JAMES: Per sheep, so 400 pounds is a lot.

TOMMY: You wouldn't shear 40 sheep in an hour.

JAMES: You couldn't do that, that's for sure. And that would be pretty fast with the hands.

TOMMY: Here's a picture, this is the first machine plant in this county.

JAMES: In the whole United States?

TOMMY: In this county. You can see the shaft there; it's covered with canvas.

JAMES: How did you drive it, with waterpower?

TOMMY: No, with gasoline engine.

JAMES: Gasoline engine, I see. And that would drive these power driven clippers?

TOMMY: Before that they had those old hand blades. ... Those old boys that used those things, they kept them so sharp that you'd just close it about once the length of the sheep. ... (Shearing technique discussion.) For a long time the blade men were faster shearers than the machine man was.

JAMES: Was there ever a contest?

TOMMY: Oh, you darn right. In this county, and the Australians and New Zealanders where they run lots of sheep, they had their world champions and everything like that, you know.

JAMES: Looking at the picture of the shed and gasoline engine is in the shed.

TOMMY: He was on this end of it, and there would be pens on both sides, about 5 feet wide and about 6 feet deep, and they just put the sheep in the back end and the guy was out in front of it and the machine hangers are up overhead, for the machinery for the clipper. This is a 20-man plant, 20 shearers, all shearing at the same time. They'd put out two bands a day if they had a good day. JAMES: Oh, in other words, more people than just one ...

TOMMY: They belonged to my dad. The shearing outfit belonged to my dad, southeast of here about a mile was the main stock trail that went to the top of the Steens Mountain. Thousands of sheep went by there, and they'd come up the trail and come in and shear and then go on up the trails.

JAMES: I see. When would they shear, what part of the year?

TOMMY: That would depend on the weather too. When they could get up on the mountain, and if there was heavy snow year, why they'd have to stay down till later because they couldn't get across the creeks up there, and snow and everything like that.

But ordinarily they started some time in June. The weather was the deciding factor there. This plant here, some years they'd shear way up into July, there would be over a 100,000 head of sheep sheared.

JAMES: Who had the biggest herds in this area at the time that you're thinking about generally?

TOMMY: There was several pretty good-sized outfits. I believe the Eastern Oregon Livestock Company; they went into the sheep business in a big way about the time that there were the most sheep in the country here. They probably were the biggest, and then there was several that run from say 4,000 to 10,000.

JAMES: Is that a large herd, 4,000 to 10,000?

TOMMY: Oh, yes. You get up to 10,000 head, 10 bands. Usually it would be 8 bands, it would be 6 bands of ewes and lambs, and 1 band of yearlings. Of course your yearling band would be about 2,000 or better in a band for the summer, and about 1,000 ewes with their lambs would be a band for ... There, that picture is looking at the far end of the shearing corral, and there was the cook house.

JAMES: How many people would be fed by that cookhouse, do you think, 20?

TOMMY: Well there would be way more than that. There would be 20 shearers, and there would be probably about 5 or 6 penning the sheep, and working them in the sheds. And then there would be about 3 younger fellows ordinarily typing wool, and 1 wool sacker.

JAMES: There is a lot more than 20.

TOMMY: And then the people who had the sheep in there to have them sheared would board there too, would usually be 3 or 4 with them. And then there was always freight teams there either loading or waiting to load.

JAMES: Yeah, and they would be using that facility. What about the little fish in this

sheep business? Could they make a living at sheeping, or was it just the big guys who made the money?

TOMMY: No, no, the little fellows they done real good. Because they could do most of their work themselves, and it was all free range, until the Taylor Grazing Act came in. After the homesteads were taken up on the mountain, then you'd have to rent those homesteads.

JAMES: Well that would be an extra cost, but probably the cost was pretty low.

TOMMY: Oh yes. It didn't cost much to rent the summer range. A lot of people made real good by two of them going in together, one of them herding the sheep, and the other one tending the camp, and that way they weren't out anything more, just living expenses, groceries.

JAMES: Just the living expenses that you would have anyway, probably. What did people gas about when they would get together? What did they talk about?

TOMMY: Just things that had happened around the country. That's about all they had to talk about. We had quite a few country people and they would get mail, and that would give them some things to talk about.

JAMES: Did you have any conflict with the cattle people?

TOMMY: No, not any range wars or anything like that.

JAMES: Not like you see on TV?

TOMMY: No. The PLS Company used to run an awful lot of cattle there and they would turn out a lot of cattle and they'd just go every place. Of course, that wouldn't make the sheep man very happy.

JAMES: No, that would cut down the area in which you could move, that's for sure. Well that's that trough, to dip in. And the guy there has a stick that he prods the cattle, or the sheep along.

TOMMY: This stick, this end here he'd stick over their neck and shove their head under, and if he saw one that got too much of a dose, and was going under, why then he could hook him and bring him up.

JAMES: ... That's quite an instrument, a long thing like that with a cross bar at the end. What else have you got in that stack there? ...

TOMMY: Here's a picture of sheep just coming out of the shearing corral. ... Here is the branding chute along here.

JAMES: They brand them on the back spine like that?

TOMMY: Yeah.

JAMES: Not on the ears, or not on the neck, but on the back.

TOMMY: Middle of the back, so you can see them coming through the chute. If you mixed with your neighbor, the two of ... Our brand was a circle with a dot right in the middle of it.

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