

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #20 - Side B

Subject: Wilford (Willie) and Goldie Racine

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: May 19, 1972

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

Release Form: No

PAULINE BRAYMEN: This is Pauline Braymen; I interviewed Wilford and Goldie Racine at Burns, Oregon, on May 19th, 1972. The tape recorder didn't work properly, and so I didn't get any of it on tape.

(The following is a summary of the conversations held during the interview.)

The Racine's operated the movie theaters in Burns from 1931 until 1972. "Forty years in show business," Goldie says.

Goldie's parents, Mr. and Mrs. Combs, built the Ideal Theater in 1926, in competition with Julian Byrd who operated the Liberty Theater at that time. In 1931, after Goldie and Willie were married, the Combs turned the Ideal over to them and went to the Oregon Coast where they opened and operated other theaters.

It was the middle of the depression years when Racine's went into business, and it was a rough go to make a living in any business at this time. Prices of admission for movies were 25 cents for regular admission; two for 35 cents on Pal Night; and matinees were 10 cents.

During World War II some 5,000 soldiers were brought in to do maneuvers between Bend and Burns. There were many soldiers in Burns during this time and the movie business thrived. The Racine's had a bank night program at this time, until Oregon laws were changed to outlaw this type of activity.

They built the Desert Theater in 1949, opening on Christmas Day. The Sunset Drive-In was built and opened in 1953, after some problems with wind blowing the movie screen over. They continued to operate the Ideal for a while, but the building was sold later to Dwight Hinshaw who moved the Burns Times-Herald into the building.

"We've worked hard, and the town of Burns has been good to us. We've always had the respect of the town and we have appreciated this," Goldie says.

Goldie and Willie are both proud of the fact that they have been able to give many young people the first job they ever had. Parents were willing for their girls to work for the Racine's because they knew that they ran a clean, well-disciplined business. They have had three generations work for them in some cases. For example, Gordon Ferris worked for them, then his daughter Carolyn, and now her daughter in later years.

One interesting thing the Racine's told about the Ideal Theater building is that when the C & B Building was built next door, they owned five feet of land between the theater and the property where the new building was to be built. In selling the five feet of property to the owners of the new building, they insisted on a restrictive clause in the deed that stated that any building built there could have no windows or openings on the Ideal Theater side.

"I got the idea one time when I was upstairs in the Arrowhead Hotel and looked out the window to see all the trash that had been thrown out onto the roof of the lower building next door. I thought right then that if I ever had control over such a situation, I would not allow any windows or openings."

When the C & B Building burned in 1972, this feature kept the Burns Times-Herald Building (the former Ideal Theater) from burning. The building was in grave danger during the fire, but with openings in the C & B Building, it would almost certainly have caught fire too.

In addition to their theater business, the Racine's owned the Burns Times-Herald for a few

years after the death of Editor Douglas Mullarky.

Goldie came to Harney County in 1926 with her parents, when she was about 18 years old. She had graduated from Emmett, Idaho high school, and had one year of advanced training.

She taught school at Lawen for a while, staying with the Otley family for a time. Then she drove her father's Cadillac from Burns to school. She tells of covering her legs with a canvas, with a lighted lantern underneath to keep her warm. In the spring she drove as far as she could with the car, and then rode a horse across the flooded meadowland to the schoolhouse. The winters were much more severe then, she says. The snow was so deep at times that you could walk over the tops of fences.

Goldie didn't like Harney County at all when she first came. She says, "I was just disconsolate. I hated it. I cried and cried. There were no paved roads. We came across the desert from Idaho through the sagebrush, and Burns was just a cow town with no side-walks and muddy streets."

But the longer she stayed the better she liked it, and she says now she wouldn't live anywhere else.

She and Willie went together for five years before they were married. "We fought a lot. It was a stormy courtship. But after we were married, we've had the happiest marriage imaginable."

During the World War II, Willie spent 25 months in the service. During this time, Goldie ran the theater and started the display of soldier's pictures, which is now on exhibit at the Harney County Museum.

Mr. and Mrs. Louis Racine, Willie's grandparents, came to Burns in 1884 with their son Fred, who was about four years old. They were French and came from Boston, Massachusetts. They also had two daughters, Eugenia and Delores.

They operated the French Hotel in Burns, and it was called so because of Racine's nationality. Mrs. Racine was always called Madame Racine, and when they first came to Burns she didn't speak

English at all, but her husband Louis did.

When Peter French was killed there was no mortuary in Burns, and he was laid out at the French Hotel.

Willie's mother, Anna, came to Burns when she was about 8 years old. She had been kidnapped back east (she was from Canada) and brought overland by the family that had stolen her. For some reason when they got to Burns, the Racine's took the little girl and raised her. After they were grown, she and Fred Racine were married. And Willie was born at the home of his aunt at the Rembold homestead, where the Willa-Ray Dairy has been located in later years.

Fred Racine worked for Peter French at one time, and Willie says his father spoke highly of him. Racine's had a ranch north of town, about where the old gristmill was. And Willie rode five miles to school, which was held in an old barn in town. He remembers being so cold in the winter that he had to have help getting off of his horse when he arrived at school. He froze his ears and his heels during his school days. He went to high school in Burns and to Oregon State College.

As a boy Willie worked as a shoeshine boy for the local barber. In order to have the privilege of shining shoes, he was to keep the tank where the men showered and bathed when they came to town, full of water. This was a tank with a heating coil underneath. The men stood underneath and pulled a rope which let the water run down over them. On Saturday nights Willie remembers that he didn't have time to shine any shoes because it took a lot of pumping to keep the tank full of water for the men.

He charged 15 cents for a shoeshine, but said that most of the men tipped him, and he was usually paid a quarter for the job.

"And this was the days when all men wore high topped boots too."

Another job Willie had as a young man was working for the laundry that was located where Ray Week's home is now. It was built by Ted Patterson and later was run by Harold Nichols. This

was about 1920.

When Willie applied for the job he was asked if he could drive. "I couldn't," Willie says, "but I told them I could." I started out in the car and coasted down the hill. Met up with Stub West of Burns Garage, and he taught me how to drive right there. After that I was all right.

An old Chinaman named Ben also had a laundry at this time. He was getting old and it was hard for him to get around. So Willie picked up and delivered his laundry while he made his own rounds just to help him out. This was about the time they put in the sewer system in Burns, and the streets were all torn up and a muddy mess. When Willie got stuck in his Model-T truck, Earl Sitz, who was delivering groceries with a team and wagon for the grocery store, would come along and pull him out.

John Day and Canyon City had no laundry at this time and Willie went over once a week as far as Prairie City to pick up laundry. In the winter it was a pretty cold trip. He would drive as far as Silvies Valley, then stop and warm his feet under the hood of the car. Then he'd drive as far as Seneca and do the same. The road was narrow and winding, and with snow, and ice, and mud the trip was very hazardous.

"I learned one thing though. If it looked as if I might get stuck, I never tried to go around a mud hole in the middle of the road. I just plowed right through. The reason for this was that if you got stuck in the middle of the road, whoever came along had to help you get out before they could get past. If you tried to go around and got stuck off to one side, everyone that came along would just go right on by without stopping to help."

Willie spent a lot of time with Rufus Heck, the town photographer, when he was a youngster. Rufus was quite a character and had a short temper that he made no effort to control. One time Rufus took Willie fishing up on the Blitzen River. Rufus got a fish on and about that time Willie asked him a question. Rufus pulled out his gun and began to shoot wildly around. Willie said, "I was scared to

death and started to scramble up the bank to get out of the way." Rufus told me later, "Don't ever make any noise when I've got a fish on my line."

Rufus drove an Air Stream Chrysler, a revolutionary car in that time. If the road was narrow and steep, it didn't make any difference to Rufus. He simply drove where he wanted to go and sagebrush, rocks, and obstructions didn't slow him down a bit.

Rufus Heck had his photographer's shop where D. C. Jordan is located now.

Willie told of the only time he ever worked in the hay fields. He was still a kid and was working up the river as a mow-boy. Wages at this time were \$1.50 a day for men, and \$1 a day for kids. Well, it didn't take Willie too long to figure out that he was doing just as much work, putting in just as much hours as the men, and getting paid 50 cents less. He asked the boss about it. The boss said, "That's right, but that's just the way it is. Kids get paid less." So I just climbed down off my mowing machine and went to town. And that was the last time I ever worked on a ranch.

Note: About three weeks after this interview took place, Willie died of a heart attack while fishing on Steens Mountain. He had just hooked a big one.

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