

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #447 – Side A/B

Subject: Ida Cross

Place: Cross home, Burns, Oregon

Date: June 28, 1979

Interviewer: Gloria Lenz

(Ida Cross and Gloria Lenz, June 28, 1979. Cross residence, 407 East Jefferson, Burns, Oregon. (Horner Museum #979132-A)

GLORIA LENZ: ... where your parents came from?

IDA CROSS: Yes. My dad came from down near Eugene, Oregon, and my mother came from Walla Walla, Washington.

GLORIA: And were you born in Eugene?

IDA: Here.

GLORIA: Here in Burns.

IDA: Yes, near Burns at my grandparent's place, Mr. and Mrs. Harvey Dickson.

GLORIA: I see. What year was that?

IDA: 1893.

GLORIA: 1893.

IDA: I'm 85 years old, last October.

GLORIA: I see. You look like a very spry --- Okay. Do you remember moving to Burns, or did you live out in the country all of that time?

IDA: Well I lived in the country until we were married. Then after we were married in June 1923, we moved up, we spent the first winter at his folk's place at Trout Creek, Oregon. Then we moved down here, and then is when we got the job to working on the railroad. We worked for the man by the name of Frank Brown. He was a rugged old fella, I'll tell you he was. He had, I think his contract was about seven miles, and they had to use horses and scrapers and plows and things. We worked there, we went to work about the middle of September I think it was, and worked until about the middle of December when it got so cold that it was freezing the ground, and then they couldn't plow the ground anymore, so we had to quit.

GLORIA: This is in 1923?

IDA: 1924.

GLORIA: '24.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: And they used horses primarily for this?

IDA: Oh yes. Yes, they didn't have any other, they didn't have any other way of building the grades you know, and we plowed with the horses.

GLORIA: So a lot of it was also physical labor by human beings?

IDA: Oh yes, yes.

GLORIA: I see.

IDA: Yes, it took a man to drive the team, and hold the scraper, a man to drive the team and hold the plow. Then they had to take the scrapers up and make a levee, you know.

GLORIA: Oh.

IDA: Put the railroad; make a bed for the track for the railroad.

GLORIA: So you and your husband, how did you find out about this job with the railroad?

IDA: I don't just remember. I think --- I just don't remember just --- he was talking with somebody. We were living here in town at the time, and somebody said, asked him if he wanted a job on the railroad. He said, well yes he needed to have the work. He says, "Can your wife cook?" "Yes," he said, "she can cook." "Well how about her, would she want to take the job?" Well he thought so. So we went up there, and I worked for \$2.00 a day.

GLORIA: \$2.00 a day.

IDA: And he worked for \$3.00 a day. He hauled hay for the horses. And we started out with about 15 men to cook for. Ended up with 22. Goodness, that was a lot of men for me to cook for. But being raised on a ranch, well we had to do a lot of cooking for hired help, you know. I seemed to be able to make the light bread, and made 48 biscuits, sourdough biscuits every morning for breakfast.

GLORIA: So you must have had to get up very early in the morning to do all that.

IDA: Yes. Well the first place we went, it was just kind of an old shed, but this man he didn't have all the little dishes that goes with it, for which I was glad, because I had little pans for serving dishes, so I didn't have all those little extra dishes to wash.

GLORIA: Uh huh.

IDA: So then I set the table the night before, and got everything ready so I could be up by 5 o'clock in the morning to get started.

GLORIA: Now what kind of a building was this where you had your kitchen? Was it a temporary building that they would move?

IDA: Oh no, it was kind of an old ranch shed. A shed they had I think, oh maybe one side of it people lived in, and the other side, well maybe was oh just kind of a storehouse or something. That was up in Bear Valley.

GLORIA: Is that where you were the entire time you were working?

IDA: No, then he let all the men go but 7, and we moved up to a little house right across from where, in Seneca. We was there, we was there two weeks. Then is when we moved back down to Burns.

GLORIA: I see.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Okay. Did you find it difficult being the only woman in a railroad ---

IDA: No I didn't. No. The neighbor ladies would come and visit me, maybe some in the afternoon. And I even had time to do a little fancy work on the side.

GLORIA: Oh, you did.

IDA: Well I tried to cook enough in the morning, you know, so I could have most of it for, ready for their supper, you know.

GLORIA: Uh huh.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Did you have electricity?

IDA: Oh no. No we ---

GLORIA: Well did you do your shopping daily then?

IDA: Pardon.

GLORIA: How did you get the food prepared and keep it from spoiling?

IDA: On an old wood stove, range, you know, wood range. And I had to wash the towels every morning and get them dried and get them back. I think he had 12, but a lot of men, you know, washing and drying on that many towels. I didn't want them to get too dirty either, because they are harder to clean.

GLORIA: Well how did you clean the towels?

IDA: On the washboard and tub with the washboard.

GLORIA: You had to heat the water to ---

IDA: I certainly did. Yeah. Had to heat the water for everything. And the lights was gaslights.

GLORIA: Who did the shopping for the food?

IDA: He had a straw boss, what they called him, and he would come and get the list of things that I needed and come either to Burns or go to John Day and get it.

GLORIA: Did he do the shopping every day?

IDA: No, no, maybe every, about every 3 or 4 days.

GLORIA: Uh huh.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: What kind of meals did you prepare, other than the biscuits?

IDA: Oh just potatoes, meat and I had to bake light bread. And --- we always had prunes, dried prunes it seemed like. And oh, just an ordinary every day workman's meal I guess you'd call it.

GLORIA: Well how many days a week did your work?

IDA: Oh, every day.

GLORIA: You didn't have Saturday or Sunday off?

IDA: No, no.

GLORIA: Not like today then.

IDA: No. Well maybe Sunday. Sunday maybe we wouldn't have so many around, but I had to cook, you know. When you're cooking for men there is some of them that will leave, and some of them who don't, and you just have to cook then.

GLORIA: You had to have the coffee pot ready.

IDA: Pardon.

GLORIA: You had to have the coffee pot ready at all times?

IDA: Yeah. Well no, we didn't. They wasn't drinking coffee like they do now. They would just maybe drink it at their meals. They didn't have time, you know, for coffee breaks those days. They didn't know what a coffee break was.

GLORIA: Oh.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Could you describe a typical day, starting from the time you got up in the morning, what did you do, and what time did you get up?

IDA: Well first I, when you first got up we had to get breakfast. Then when breakfast was over I had to wash the dishes. Then I had to prepare things for dinner, you know, like making pies or light bread, or peeling potatoes, getting vegetables ready. Then when they come in for, well they call it lunch, we called it dinner. Well then I had the dishes to wash, get things ready for the evening meal. Then after supper why I had to still wash dishes, and you had to do it with two hands beneath the water. You had a big old kettle, with heated water in that, you know.

GLORIA: Uh huh.

IDA: Then by the time I got to bed maybe it was around 8 o'clock. And your getting up though when you're working long hours, I'll tell, get up by 5 o'clock in the morning.

GLORIA: I see. Okay, let's --- was there someone there at the camp who supervised your work?

IDA: No.

GLORIA: You were independent.

IDA: Oh no, I did it all myself.

GLORIA: Did you have anyone working with you?

IDA: No, no. Maybe my husband, if he had time in the morning, he might help me a little getting the breakfast ready, like frying the meat and things like that, you know. No, I didn't have any help. When he had time to help me, he was the only one, yeah.

GLORIA: Could you tell me something about the area where you worked, your kitchen and where the men ate? Was it all one big room, or what was it like?

IDA: Oh it was more, just like a meadow. They were just kind of going through meadows where they --- well I think that's what it was; was they had to go through people's meadows to get these, get the railroad up to Seneca. Yeah. Of course there was some timber too.

GLORIA: And they were cutting down the timber as they went along?

IDA: If it was in the way of where they were building the track, they had to cut it down. But most of it was just open country, where he had his.

GLORIA: Can you remember how many miles, or how many quarter-miles they would go a day with their construction?

IDA: Oh, no I can't. Not more than a quarter if it --- anyway that isn't very much, but where they have to do it all with teams why --- manual labor --- it might be a quarter of a mile, it wasn't too much. Because we went there in September, and he didn't have any, he had to finish up his contract the next spring. I don't know, I think he got some man to cook then, because we were going to be on another job.

GLORIA: Oh, I see. Could you tell me what the kitchen looked like where you worked? Was it a big room, or ---

IDA: Yes, it was a shed. Oh goodness, it was longer than my house here, just these two rooms. And it was just, oh it was just a shed by a well was all it was. Yeah.

GLORIA: Did you have running water?

IDA: No. Had to pump it.

GLORIA: Was the pump inside?

IDA: No, it was outside.

GLORIA: So you had to carry the water.

IDA: I had to carry the water in.

GLORIA: And you had to do the dishes and all of that all by yourself.

IDA: Yeah, I did. Well my husband might, he might be able to dry them in the evening for me, you know. But he was the only help I had, and sometimes he had to take care of, see that the horses was fed, and outdoor chores was done. Yeah.

GLORIA: What time did the men stop working at night?

IDA: At night, 6 o'clock.

GLORIA: Did they bring all of their animals and everything back?

IDA: Yeah, had to bring them into the corral to be fed. Then they got ready for supper. It was usually a little after seven by the time we'd get through with supper, you know. So all those dishes made it kind of late.

GLORIA: I suppose so. What kind of living arrangements did the men have? Were they in tents?

IDA: No, they had a barn where the horses was, and the men had their --- their bunks made out in this barn.

GLORIA: I see.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: And at night when they were finished with supper, what did the men do for entertainment?

IDA: They went out, and I don't know --- they went out and I think they went to bed, probably. Not much entertainment, maybe they visited probably out, they probably visited, you know.

GLORIA: They were tired from working all day.

IDA: You bet they were tired. Dirty. Didn't get many baths either that way, to bathe in a washtub, you know. Yeah.

GLORIA: Okay. On your days off, what did you do?

IDA: I stayed right there, they didn't have any days off.

GLORIA: No days off at all.

IDA: No, no. No, I tell you, people have it pretty easy nowadays. Have coffee breaks, and have days off, and running water. There out in the country --- everybody has electricity now, you know. They didn't those days.

GLORIA: Can you tell me how many weeks or months you worked out there without coming in to town?

IDA: Oh, I was up there from September until the middle of December before I come back to, before I was here in Burns again. So I --- I don't know just how many weeks. But it was about the middle of September, and about the middle of December when we came back down here. Yeah.

GLORIA: What kind of transportation did you use to get from the camp to Burns?

IDA: Oh, it was --- we had --- this old fellow, he had a car, a Ford, and he took us from Silvie's Valley, or Bear Valley up to Seneca in ... And then when we came home we had

to hire a, we had to hire a man that had a car to bring us home. Cost us \$20 a piece to get home.

GLORIA: That seems rather expensive.

IDA: Well it was too. It was so cold, I didn't know but what my feet was about froze by the time we got to my husband's mothers. Well, it was three of us sitting in the back of his car, and two of them up in the front, you know. They didn't have heaters in the cars those days. So I had my overshoes on, but, and I think some old blankets or something. But it was a long way --- they didn't make over about 15 or 20 miles an hour those days so took quite awhile to come. So pretty cold when we got back.

GLORIA: So you stopped work in December. Was that because of the cold?

IDA: Pardon.

GLORIA: You stopped work in December, was it?

IDA: No, we didn't stop, we just come right on from Seneca to Burns here. Yeah.

GLORIA: And then what happened when you got to Burns?

IDA: We went to my husband's mother, and we stayed there from that time on then until his father passed away. Then I went to cook for, up to Dee Dickerson at his mill. And was up there for better than a year.

GLORIA: So that was a different job.

IDA: That was --- then come down here in 1926, and that's when he built this house.

GLORIA: I see.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Did you have any children?

IDA: No, I didn't. No I didn't have any children.

GLORIA: Do you remember, you said you were paid \$2 a day?

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Your husband was paid \$3 a day.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Was that good money for those days?

IDA: Well I should say it was. We thought it was. Nowadays what would \$5 a day --- you don't get anywhere for \$5 a day now, do you?

GLORIA: No, not at all.

IDA: No. Well we thought it was pretty good.

GLORIA: Do you know of any other women who were doing the same type of work that you were doing?

IDA: No, I don't know.

GLORIA: So you were doing something that was rather unusual in those days, for a woman to go out and get a job.

IDA: Oh, they went out and worked in the hay fields, yeah. Cooked for the ranchers, where they had a lot of men to cook for when they were threshing grain, you know.

GLORIA: Can you remember anything, any experience that you had while you were working with the railroad that stands out in your mind?

IDA: No, I don't.

GLORIA: Any exciting experience?

IDA: No. Just everything seemed to be pretty calm, I guess.

GLORIA: Oh, that's good. What were some of the things you liked about your job?

IDA: Oh, I liked to, I really liked to cook it seems like. Liked to make light bread, pies and cakes and things like that.

GLORIA: You specialized in bread?

IDA: No, no. Just learned that when I was about that high.

GLORIA: Oh, I see.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Looking back at it now, if you had it to do over again, would you still work for the railroad?

IDA: I don't know how I done it then. I really don't.

GLORIA: There was a lot of work to be done, and ---

IDA: Yeah, but it didn't seem so hard to me. But I didn't realize I was so tired until he let seven men go one day. He didn't have any work for them, and I didn't realize I was so tired. And I got to thinking; it won't take so many potatoes. I won't have so many dishes to wash. I won't have so much of this or that to do. And I just had to force myself to get their dinner ready. I was just that tired, and I didn't realize it until these men were gone. I just kind of let down, you know.

GLORIA: It's amazing that you found time to do some of your fancy work.

IDA: Well in the afternoon, maybe a couple hours or so, setting by the old heater to keep warm and do a little fancy work.

GLORIA: Could you tell me what your living quarters were like when you lived at the camp? What kind of a room did you have where you stayed?

IDA: Where we stayed?

GLORIA: Yes.

IDA: Well we just slept on the other side of this old shed. It was nothing but just a common old machine shop. We just had a room, just off from where we had the kitchen. We just had a bed in there. It wasn't nothing fancy. Pretty cold to get up in the mornings, I know.

GLORIA: In the wintertime you mean.

IDA: Yeah, in the wintertime, yeah. No heat in there.

GLORIA: What kind of changes did the railroad make in Burns when it finally got here?

IDA: Well with the mill going in down here, it made quite a change with, because they employed so many people, you know. Yeah. But I don't know, people was just a cattle country, you know. People seemed to get along. But it did bring in a lot of people.

GLORIA: Did it cause a lot of excitement?

IDA: No, not particularly. Because it just kind of grew gradually, you know. Yeah.

GLORIA: At the railroad camp when you were there, did the families of the men ever come to visit them?

IDA: No, the only time, there was one man that he came to work for a while, and they lived in a tent, and he had his wife and two little children. They just lived about --- most of the men, well their wives were home, there was no place much for them to come to visit, you know. Yeah.

GLORIA: And were the men allowed to go out and visit their families?

IDA: Oh yes, maybe Saturday evening if they wanted to come home, you know.

GLORIA: How far was it from the camp to Burns, do you remember?

IDA: To Burns?

GLORIA: Yes.

IDA: Oh my goodness, about 40, 45 miles anyway. When they got to Seneca, I think it was 50.

GLORIA: So that was a long trip then?

IDA: Yes it was. Then most of them, they didn't have much transportation, you know. He transported them with his car, but the men didn't have much transportation. So they were there pretty much, just like we were. We didn't have any car either.

GLORIA: Do you remember anything about Jap Camp?

IDA: Oh, no not particularly. I never was right over to the Jap Camp. We was on north of that, you know.

GLORIA: How did the men get along being together for so many months? Were there any arguments?

IDA: If they did, I didn't hear about it.

GLORIA: So it was more or less a equal ---

IDA: Seemed like they got along pretty good. They might have had some fusses on the job, but I didn't know anything about it.

GLORIA: What kind of people were hired? Were they local people or ---

IDA: Yes, they were local people.

GLORIA: Mostly locals.

IDA: Mostly local, yeah.

GLORIA: Were there any special groups like the Basque or Indians?

IDA: No, no, no. No, they were all local people.

GLORIA: Mostly people you knew?

IDA: Pardon.

GLORIA: People you knew, your friends?

IDA: No I didn't, but I got acquainted with them. Some of them I knew, yes. Some of them I knew but ---

GLORIA: After you were finished on the railroad then did you keep contact with the people you met?

IDA: No, no I didn't.

GLORIA: Okay, I'd like to get a little information about you.

IDA: Oh.

GLORIA: Where did you go to school?

IDA: Went to school at Poison Creek School, out in the country. Oh it's about 6 miles out from Burns.

GLORIA: Do you remember how many years you went to school?

IDA: Well I went to school a long time, about 16, 17 years.

GLORIA: Oh, that sounds like a long time.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Did you ever consider going on to college?

IDA: Well no, because we just, my folks wasn't able to send us, you know. So we just got a grade school education. Yeah.

GLORIA: It was kind of a typical one-room country school?

IDA: Yeah, yeah that was it. Yeah.

GLORIA: Shall we take a rest for a moment?

IDA: Pardon?

GLORIA: Should we shut it off and rest?

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: All right.

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GLORIA: After you left the railroad, did you work again anywhere?

IDA: Yes, that's when we came down; we came down and stayed with Albert's mother until his father passed away. And then we went to work for Dee Dickerson at the mill. That was the last that I, we worked there better than a year, and after that I have been a housewife right here.

GLORIA: Well that's a lot of work too.

IDA: Yes, it is.

GLORIA: How about your husband, was he ---

IDA: He passed away; he passed away 13 years ago.

GLORIA: I see.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: And you have been alone ever since?

IDA: Ever since, year, yeah.

GLORIA: Do you have relatives in town?

IDA: Oh yes, I have got, I have one brother that had six girls, and three of them live here. One lives at LaGrande, and one at Canby, Oregon, and one up near Seattle. Then my sister lives at John Day, and she had two children. And then I got a brother that lives at LaGrande, he had three children. And I helped to take care of those children. They liked to stay with Aunt Ida pretty well.

GLORIA: While you were growing up, were you responsible for helping with your brothers and sisters?

IDA: No, I didn't have to. If they wanted to go somewhere, they brought them and left them here, you know, so --- If they had to see the doctor or anything, I took them, because ---

GLORIA: Well that was nice that you were there to help out.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: I bet they appreciated that.

IDA: Well, I think all my nieces and nephews think a lot of me.

GLORIA: I'm sure they do.

IDA: Yeah.

GLORIA: Have you stayed in Burns pretty much all of your life, or have you done any traveling?

IDA: Not a great deal. No I haven't done a great deal of traveling.

(End of Tape)

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