

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #469

Interviewee: Eileen O'Keeffe McVicker

Interviewer: Karen Nitz

Subject: Homesteading on the South End of Steens Mountain

Date: October 16, 2008

Place: Chester & Helen Felt Recording Room, Harney County Library, Burns, Oregon

KAREN NITZ: Okay, my name is Karen Nitz, and today is October 16th, 2008, and we are in the Chester & Helen Felt Oral History Recording Room at the Harney County Library in Burns, Oregon. And today we're talking with Eileen O'Keeffe McVicker and her husband Gene, and she is the author of, "Child of Steens Mountain". She co-authored the book with a friend of hers named Barbara Scot. And today Eileen is going to share some of her experiences about growing up on the homestead, on the southern end of Steens Mountain. And first of all just give me an idea of how the whole book idea came to be.

EILEEN O'KEEFFE McVICKER: Well I've been working on this book for over thirty years. Just little stories that I have written and put away thinking someday my children might enjoy reading them, maybe to grandchildren. And I have a little art shop on my, at our house and my friend Barbara was walking her dogs, and she saw me out in the yard and thought I was working out with the glass. So she said, "Are you out playing in your

shop?" I said, "Well no, I've been doing a little writing." And I had heard that she was a writer, but didn't really, it really didn't dawn on me what she had done. I hadn't read any of her books. So she said, "Well let me see your writing." No," I said, "We haven't enough of it done yet. So, I think that I had better get some more written." So she said, "Well let me see it anyway." And we went on like that for a while, and finally I said, "Well I think maybe I need a little help." And Barbara said, "Good, let me have your notebook." So she took my notebook. And we went from there, and we were e-mailing back and forth all during the day and night. So one night I thought of something in the night, I jumped up, got on the computer and I was writing it down, e-mailed it to her, and I got an e-mail right back again. And she says, "What are you doing up at 2 o'clock in the morning?" I said, "Well I'm answering your questions." So she was up at 2 o'clock in the morning too. So we did this back and forth for, oh, a good year and a half or better. And so finally we did a lot of just getting things kind of organized, and got it all together, and then we began to look for a publisher, and ended up with Oregon State University Press.

KAREN: Now how did the whole process of finding a publisher, how did that work?

EILEEN: Well due to the fact that Barbara had published three books before, she did a lot of legwork finding a publisher.

KAREN: Uh huh.

EILEEN: And she did find some publishers in New York that had printed some of her books, and they said they would love to print the book, but it would be about a year before they would be able to get to it. So we decided that that was too long, because we were kind of ready to get it done. And she contacted Big Bear Press and they said well

they wanted to do the book, and at the same time Oregon State University said that they wanted to do the book. So we mulled this over, and finally we decided to go with Big Bear, or with Oregon State because they were closer to us. So that was the way we finally got a publisher.

KAREN: Okay, can you tell me a little bit about your family and how they came to be on the south end of the Steens Mountain, where they came from, where your parents came from?

EILEEN: Well my mother was a teacher, she was just out of college, and then she was looking for a job. And she found a job down in Catlow Valley, teaching in a one-room grade school.

KAREN: Where did she grow up?

EILEEN: She grew up; she was born here in Lawen, Oregon, down on the lakebed.

KAREN: Uh huh.

EILEEN: And people used to live on a lake bed, because they wouldn't have the run-off, but the run-off wasn't enough, they would have water out on the ground, but there wouldn't be enough there to keep them from living there. And it didn't last that long, it would disappear. And she lived down there with her parents; she had four brothers and herself. And she was next to the youngest.

KAREN: What were her parent's names?

EILEEN: Her parents were Charles Benjamin Ausmus, and Lillian Ludella Ausmus. And they came from the Midwest and they came up in the 1800's. And my grandfather came first. He was coming with some of his relatives for the gold rush days. And he ended up down, just south of Lawen at the lake, and homesteaded there, and then brought

my grandmother and two little boys out. And then other children were born here in Oregon.

KAREN: Uh huh. Now what were your Mother's brother's and sister's names?

EILEEN: My oldest, her oldest brother's name was Ormand Ausmus, and then was Dick Ausmus, E.R. Ausmus they called him. And then it was Standley Ausmus. And then my mother was Izola Ausmus, and the younger brother was Henry Ausmus.

KAREN: And did they pretty much remain in the Harney County area most of their lives?

EILEEN: They all did, yes. Except for the last of 1958, why my parents moved to Silver Lake, Oregon.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: Bought a ranch over there. And my father came from Ireland in 1920, in March, at the age of 23. And his family owned a dairy and he was the oldest of eight children. And he went through Ellis Island when he came to the United States and got a train and went to Lakeview, and he was sponsored by a man by the name of Jimmy Singleton. And he was taken out to the sheep camp and he stayed in the sheep camp-herding sheep for six years. He took new lambs instead of pay. And when he got enough new lambs where he figured he could make a living, why he took off for Harney county and I have no idea how come he decided to come to Harney County, but he did. And he got a pastureland at a ranch over in Catlow Valley for the winter. And he had his tent set up there, and his sheep.

And my mother's first teaching job happened to be there. And she stayed with the family that owned the little ranch where dad had leased the pasture. Then she had to

walk across the pasture and crawl through the barbwire fence across the road into the sand dunes where the little one-room school was. And of course two young people, and nobody else around much, and he got to going over to the school and making faces, and creating a little bit of havoc with the children. And they eventually got married in January 29th, 1927. And she stayed there with the school, and he stayed there with the sheep until the spring, and the grass was good out on the hills and they gradually migrated down to the Trout Creek Ranch, south of Fields. And they lived there and leased a place for a couple of years. And by this time I was about a year and a half old or so, and they needed summer range and they had more sheep than they could, the ranch there would support. So they moved up and homesteaded, and they homesteaded up on the south slope of the Steens about five miles north of Fields. And they put the house in a place where they had a beautiful view of Pueblo Mountain. And when the air is just right the Pueblo Mountain was a gorgeous blue. And they figured that, there was a spring above the house, and this was included in the homestead property. So Dad figured that he would have gravity flow of water to the house. However, we had a lot of earthquakes down there, and some years that little spring would have water year round and other years it wouldn't, it would dry up. And every time we'd have an earthquake the water would change.

KAREN: Huh.

EILEEN: And so that idea didn't work out.

KAREN: Now did you ever have any big earthquakes that you remember? Did you feel them?

EILEEN: We had some that shook the dishes in the cupboards. But the main part that we remembered the most was the springs that would pop on the road. And the creek beds that were dry, every time there was an earthquake we'd jump up and run out to the --- where there was some little old creek beds, and they were usually always dry. And they would be running water.

KAREN: Really. Wow.

EILEEN: And there would be water come up in the middle of the road. And it would be kind of a mess there, and we would have to try to go around it, which there wasn't very much room to go around it on either direction. But, it didn't last long. Next time we had another little earthquake it would be all-dry again.

KAREN: Huh.

EILEEN: So it was a change right underneath there some place which would do that. And so anyway I was down there the other day and there is water in the creek that usually was dry. And so the earthquakes, they just come periodically, and they never did do any damage other than just took the water.

KAREN: Huh, that's interesting.

EILEEN: Yeah it was very interesting. So ---

KAREN: Can you tell me a little bit about your brothers and sisters, and what their names are?

EILEEN: Well my brother, I'm the oldest, and my brother is three years younger than I. And we grew up and went to high school here in Burns, and off to college. And my brother ended up being an engineer for the NASA Space Center in Houston, Texas. And he retired from them.

KAREN: Oh wow.

EILEEN: And he still lives there. And he has four children, and three grandchildren. And my sister lives in Oregon City and she is a retired beautician.

KAREN: Now when your father came over originally, did he have other family members that came with him too? Or did he come by himself, or what prompted him to come to the United States, do you know?

EILEEN: His parents owned a dairy, and my dad being the oldest child, he had to help milk the cows. And he never liked to milk cows. And that just wasn't one of his priorities. And the properties over there, that country is so crowded, and the, everybody that has any ground whatsoever, is just a small little place, very small, like maybe two or three lots that we have here. A few have maybe a little bigger. And they're all, like, instead of fences they have so many rocks there they make rock fences.

KAREN: Uh huh, I've seen those, yeah.

EILEEN: And he wanted something more than that. And he went to Scotland, and he worked in the shipyards to get enough money for his passage to the United States.

KAREN: Did he originally intend to work with the sheep when he came over here, or is that just something he fell into once he got here?

EILEEN: I'm not really sure of that, but I think that they did have quite a few sheep in the, over in Ireland. And I think that was one of the things that he probably thought that he would like to do.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: And he was sponsored there.

GENE McVicker: They had to be sponsored. He had sponsors.

KAREN: Yeah.

EILEEN: And this man, Jimmy Singleton, in Lakeview had sponsored several of the Irish at a time. And they came in on the train; he came through Ellis Island, and went straight on the train to Lakeview.

KAREN: Did any of his other family ever eventually come over to the United States?

EILEEN: They did later. He had two brothers that went to, came to Oregon and they migrated back up to Alaska. And they did fur trapping and gold mining in Alaska. And he had another brother that came over and was here in Oregon for a while, and he went to the San Francisco area and married and lived.

KAREN: And do you know his name?

EILEEN: Kohn.

KAREN: Okay. And I don't think we mentioned your father's name. What's his full name?

EILEEN: His name was Benjamin Joseph O'Keeffe.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: And his two brothers that were in Alaska were Dennis and Jack.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: And then his brother Tim came over later, and he came to Oregon and then he went back to Chicago and became a fireman. He was the fire chief back there, and he was there for 35 years when he retired from the fire ---

KAREN: Wow.

GENE: Before that he was a professional boxer.

KAREN: Really! How long did that last?



GENE: Until somebody hit him ...

EILEEN: Well he won, they had a boxing match here in Burns, and he won the boxing match with the first round.

KAREN: Really,

EILEEN: And my dad was a lightweight boxer. And I don't know if he boxed here in Oregon or not, but he boxed as a young man in Ireland.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: And he had a younger sister, and a younger brother, and a, two younger brothers. He had his brother Jerry that never left Ireland, married and had children there, and lived there until he died. And he had a sister Teresa and she lived there, and married and had children, and never left Ireland. And then he had a younger brother Ben, he was never married, he was a bachelor and he lived there in Ireland. And he sold sewing machines. And he went to a house one day, and he knocked on the door and a little girl answered. She says, "My mother is not home." And he said, "Well go ask your mother when she will be home." He was selling sewing machines.

So that was his family. His father and mother were still alive after I was in about the seventh grade, his mother died. And then about 1960 --- in the late '60's, 1960's, and my grandfather died. And I never got to meet either one of them.

KAREN: So they stayed in Ireland.

EILEEN: Yes, they stayed.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: I did go over to Ireland, and got to meet the younger brother and sister, there was the only two left when I went over there. But I have lots of cousins. So it was a very enjoyable trip.

KAREN: Well tell me a little bit about your homestead area, and where you actually lived, and maybe who some of your neighbors might have been at that time.

EILEEN: Our homestead, the folks built it themselves up on the hill. And at that time some of his brothers were there, and they were working for dad, and I'm not sure if dad sponsored them or not. I have a, kind of a hunch that probably he did. But they helped him for a year or two anyway with the sheep. And they helped build this house. And it wasn't a very big house; it was about 24 foot square. But it seemed big to us. Of course us kids were outdoors all the time. We didn't spend much time in the house; just to eat and sleep was about it. We were always out on the hills and climbing around.

But my grandmother lived with us part time, and usually she lived with us, come in the spring and stay in the summers. And she raised a garden up on the mountain where another spring was. And Dad dug that out with a, what they called a Fresno team, and Fresno --- and a Fresno is a, it's like a big scoop, and a horse pulls it. And he dug this spring out and made a reservoir. And my grandmother would put a hose in there with a screen wrapped around it, the end of it, to keep it from getting plugged up. And then it would be gravity flow up over the dam and down to the garden. And then she would make little ditches and run the water where she wanted it then.

KAREN: What kinds of things did she grow?

EILEEN: She grew everything. It was a protected area. And she grew everything. We had strawberries and raspberry patch. And she always had a little flower garden where

the berries were. And we had another, bigger patch on the end of the garden, which was potatoes. And then there was all kinds of melons and squash. And we had cantaloupe and watermelon.

KAREN: Oh wow.

EILEEN: And corn and peas and beans, anything that you could grow. Carrots, parsnips and ---

KAREN: But did you do a lot of canning then for the wintertime, or did you pretty much eat everything fresh?

EILEEN: Well some of the root crops can stay in the ground all winter, and you just go dig them, as you needed them. And then my mother and my grandmother canned, I was too young to do it. I was busy all right; they had plenty of chores for me to do. But they did do canning, and my dad built a cellar, and kept, had shelves in there, and kept stuff in there. And we had chickens, and we had a milk cow. And my grandmother would make butter and put it in a crock, a big round crock. We called them sourdough crocks because that's what we usually used them for is sourdough. And they'd fill those crocks full of a patty of butter, and then put a bunch of salt on top of it, and just add the patties and the salt until they had it full. And they did the same thing with the eggs. They put them in the crocks and they had a brine that they put in there on the eggs. And the eggs would fill up in there and the brine would get cold and yucky and ---

KAREN: What did they make that out of, do you know, the brine?

EILEEN: I'm not sure; it had a lot of salt in it I know. And I'm not sure what else they had in it. In fact, it might have been just, kind of salt and water that congealed; I don't

know what it was. But I know it was an awful slimy, cold mass to reach in and get the eggs and bring them out.

KAREN: And that was your job when you were a little girl?

EILEEN: That was my job, and I didn't like it. But the first cellar that they built, they dug a hole in the ground, down about, oh probably 18 inches, where the doorway was. And the hill sloped a little, so it went kind of back into the hill. And so it was all dirt, except for the roof. And down below our place, about a quarter of a mile where the artesian spring was, where we got our water, packed it to the house. But it run into a reservoir there and then the reservoir run into a creek on down the canyon. And it was lined with willows. And the willows were pretty thick, they grew pretty good, and Dad would go down there and cut willows and make them into bundles and tie a rope around them and put them on his back to pack them back up. And he used those willows to put on the roof, for the cellar roof, and gunnysacks and then dirt and that was the way he made the roof. And during the depression, you had to haul stuff from Burns down there, and the road was like a cow trail, so it was so expensive to get anything there. So that was the way he made the cellar to begin with.

And I have the story in my book about Jerry Murphy and the snake coming out between his legs. So I knew there were snakes that would get in there, and they would get in there to hibernate more or less. And so we always had a big long, usually it was a broomstick that we kept by the door, and I would take that broomstick and open the door and shove it in, and listen, and then I'd take that stick and pound it up around the door, and pound it all around. And if I didn't hear anything why then I would go in, I could get what I wanted.

KAREN: Did you ever have any close encounters with rattlesnakes? Was it closer than you would have liked?

EILEEN: I did. I --- we used to run barefoot all the time and I was down there the other day, and I looked, and I said I don't remember all of these thistles and stickers and stuff everywhere. And they were so thick our dog couldn't walk on it. But of course sheep eat those things when they are young and tender, they are browse eaters. So, we run barefoot all summer, and our feet were pretty tough. I used to run, everywhere I went I ran. And I was running down the hill there from the garden, on down to the house one day, and it is kind of shale along through there. There was a path, and I stepped right in the middle of this rattlesnake who was crawling across the path, and I stepped right in his middle.

KAREN: Oh, yikes!

EILEEN: I saw him just as I stepped, but you know it rolled me, and I thought I was going to fall on top of him. Scared me to death. But I didn't, I kept running forward. And I took off, I never went back. And another time I --- a lot of little rocks, rim rocks, about so high. And I used to run on those, and us kids liked to run and jump, see how far we could jump after we jumped off of one of those things. And the sheep, was chasing the sheep downhill, and this rattlesnake was all coiled right there. The sheep had alerted him, you know. And they will bite at the sheep, but unless they get them on the nose or on the leg why they can't get through the wool.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: And so he was coiled, and I see he was coiled with his head up, he was about this high up, and I looked down and I jumped off of this rim rock, and here he was, right

where I was going to step. And I think I stepped on him as he struck, because I never hit the ground, I just propelled over, on top of a head of brush.

KAREN: Oh, my gosh.

EILEEN: And I don't think I could have done that if he hadn't of struck, and it was like a spring, you know. But yes, we've have had encounters with them at times when we didn't appreciate it at all. But that's what you do when you live in that part of the country.

KAREN: Yeah, it's just a daily fact of life, I imagine.

EILEEN: Well it is, you carry a stick with you everywhere you go. And as you walk, you go like this with the stick, kind of like a blind person. Because if you hear a rattle why then you know you had better watch out, you know.

KAREN: Right.

EILEEN: But that was, we all carried sticks all the time. Usually they were cut off broomsticks, from old brooms, and they made good sticks.

KAREN: Yeah, I remember reading in some of the old newspapers here about big rabies outbreaks, and the coyotes in the county at different times. Did you ever have encounter with those?

EILEEN: We did. We had several encounters with the rabid coyotes. And now one story I had in my book was --- my dad went after water down to the lower reservoir, where the artesian spring was, and he was coming back with a couple buckets of water, carrying them. And he was a long time coming. And Mom was fixing a meal, I can't remember exactly which meal, but we waited and waited and Dad didn't come. And so finally she said well you kids better go look for Dad. And my brother and I had been feeding bumper lambs. And we came in, and Dad wasn't there yet. Pretty soon we

heard somebody yelling, and we looked and Dad was up on a hill, and that's not where the house was, you know, he was up above, way up above here, and he was yelling, "Get the gun, tell Mamma to get the gun." And so we ran in the house and we looked behind Dad and there was this coyote following him. And when they are rabid, they're just kind of like the, their muscles are not all there, they just kind of, they just wobble. And this coyote was just a little ways behind him, and it was just staring at him, following him. And so we ran in the house, we got Mom, she got the gun, and she ran out. And so for her --- anything that moves fast or a sudden move that is different why they will take after it. And so Mom was wondering how she was going to get to Dad with the gun, and Mom was a real good shot, but she was afraid to shoot, because she thought what if she missed, you know. And so anyway --- and Dad set the water buckets real gently, and that old coyote just kind of raised up, he really got excited. And Dad picked up a rock and threw it at him, and it kind of bounced off of him and rolled down the hill and he turned around and ran after the rock. Mom ran with the gun to Dad and he shot him and killed him.

KAREN: Wow.

EILEEN: When they are rabid they have a black tongue. And so of course after we ate we went back out and buried the coyote because we didn't want any germs from him, getting around anywhere --- we had to see the black tongue. Sure enough he had a black tongue. We had another one came one time, it came to the back door, and the folks saw him, and so they shot him. And that was the only two. I always wondered, when I was out on those mountains all by myself, if there was two rabid coyotes, where did they get that disease, and was there anymore there, you know, someplace. And what would I do if

one was, come for me. But it didn't happen. And I used to get kind of worried at times, but still I enjoyed being out by myself. So I would be out lots of times out by myself with the sheep.

KAREN: Did you have a dog with you too?

EILEEN: Always, yes always. My brother was with me part of the time, my sister was too little, she was seldom out with us.

But anyway we just lived out there in the wild.

KAREN: Now did your family do a lot of hunting for game and fishing for meat, or did you primarily just eat sheep? Or how did you supplement your food with meat?

EILEEN: Well bacon and ham was one type of meat that we were able to keep without any refrigeration.

KAREN: Because you had no electricity then?

EILEEN: No, no, no electricity at all in that area. And in later years people began to get refrigerators that were run on coal oil. And then they went to propane. But we didn't have any of those luxuries. My dad didn't like to kill anything. Everything was a pet.

And he didn't like to kill the deer. So we would have sheep, he would kill a, wether, when the weather got cold. And when the weather got cold we had, because we had wooolsacks, and the wooolsacks were about 8 feet long. And when they --- they would always, when he got some wooolsacks he would always save out one or two new ones that were clean. And then we bought flour and sugar in sacks, buy a 100 pounds. And Mom would always keep; wash up some of those sacks and keep them clean, to put the meat in. And then we would put them inside the wooolsacks. And Dad would hang them from a pole. And if he didn't have a pole handy, and he had hay, why he would take the meat in



the sacks and bury them in the haystacks during the daytime and that would keep them cool enough. But we couldn't ave any fresh meat in the warm weather.

KAREN: Yeah.

EILEEN: And some people ate rabbits, but they had --- the government introduced a disease called tularemia, in the rabbits, which killed the rabbits. Because there were so many rabbits they had rabbit drives.

KAREN: Now did you guys ever have problems with the rabbits up around where you lived?

EILEEN: They didn't bother us, because we didn't have anything that they could bother, other than the garden, and they did get into the garden. But for some of the people that had, raised grain, primarily over in this area, why they had rabbit drives, because they would get into the grain. But tularemia was a very bad disease and a lot of people died from it, because a lot of people were starving in that time. And so the rabbits were plentiful, and they ate it. And that disease was terrible. The rabbits would become very infected until they died. So it was kind of a bad disease, because the rabbits died, kind of a traumatic death from it.

KAREN: Were there antelope, or big horn sheep, or anything like that around where you lived?

EILEEN: Not, no big horn sheep that I know of. And we were down on the lower slopes of the Steens. And we did have deer occasionally. And a time or two when things were pretty bad, why Dad would shoot a deer. But, and he wouldn't shoot a deer; he wouldn't even kill the chickens. Mom would kill the chicken, and we'd have chicken. But that was the only fresh meat we would have.

KAREN: Did you fish at all? Was there any place to fish?

EILEEN: There wasn't any place to fish.

KAREN: No place.

EILEEN: But when we were up on the summer range, up on top of the Steens sometimes Dad would go fish. But we didn't really have much time to do things like that.

KAREN: Well tell me about how they ran their sheep operation. You started with them; you kept them around the home place in the wintertime?

EILEEN: We kept them around the place in the wintertime. And our house was up on the hill, so the snow got really deep up there in the winter, somewhere. We used to have ten foot snow drifts in some of the canyons sometimes.

KAREN: Wow.

EILEEN: And so my folks kept a saddle horse so that they could get down to Fields to get the mail and get some groceries. And in those days you could carry your groceries back in a gunnysack on the saddle horn. You know people didn't have anything more than, usually lintels and dried beans, and dried fruit.

KAREN: How often would you make the trip down to Fields do you think?

EILEEN: They used to go about once a week and get the mail.

KAREN: How often would they come to Burns?

EILEEN: About twice a year they would come to Burns, and they would get like sugar, flour, coffee and the staples that you would use. And then usually about once, twice a year, Tiller's Market used to be up on Main Street, it was a grocery store, and they had a flat bed truck. And they used to come down, make a trip down and bring a lot of groceries down. And if the folks needed things, why they knew about when Tiller's

would be making their trip, and they would send a letter in and say what they needed, a list of what they needed. And they would come down, stop at our place and drop off the stuff that the folks needed, and go on to some of the other places, take down stuff to the Fields Store.

KAREN: I didn't know that. That's kind of neat.

EILEEN: So it was, it was kind of neat. It was just one of the things that they did in those days. If you didn't have it, why you usually did without it, or tried to do something else, you know. So ---

KAREN: So in the summertime then you would take the sheep up into the mountains?

EILEEN: We took the sheep up on top of the Steens for the summer. And my grandmother would stay up there at the home place, the homestead. And she would take care of the garden. And it was 25 miles from our place up to where our homestead on the top of Steens was. And we had a cabin that Dad built up there. And we stayed up there during the summer. And they would go once a week down to --- Mom or Dad took turns, and they would go down to the homestead, check on Grandma, and get groceries and the mail, and come back, ride back up on horses then.

And then when we went up, when there was just my brother and I, why we went in the alforjas on the horse. And they'd lead the horse. And then when the baby arrived, why they packed her part time, and then part time they put her in the alforja, and I had to ride behind.

KAREN: Now explain what an alforja is, what is that?

EILEEN: An alforja is like a big sack with straps. It is made out of heavy canvas, and it has leather straps around it and loops on it. And the packsaddle is like an X on top, and the loops hang over on either side of the X, with the two bags that hang down.

KAREN: So it's kind of like saddlebags, sort of.

EILEEN: Yeah, they probably call them saddlebags now days.

KAREN: But they were more just sacks?

EILEEN: Yeah, they were like bags. Only they are probably a good 18" wide when they are opened up. And probably, what did you say, about two feet high?

KAREN: Uh huh.

EILEEN: And they had a leather bottom in them, to make them sturdy. And the canvas was a very heavy, heavy canvas. And I should have a packsaddle and some alforjas in the museum over here.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: I took, and put in there when my, after my folks were gone. And that's the way they carried their groceries, and us kids. And then finally my dad made a wagon and we used to carry stuff up there in the wagon with a team, to the mountain.

KAREN: So your mother went with you in the summertime then too, with the sheep?

EILEEN: Yes. Yeah, Mom and Dad and us kids all went to the top of the Steens and spent the summer in the cabin up there.

KAREN: Did your dad ever have to hire anybody to help with the sheep too, or did you pretty much just do it as a family?

EILEEN: Well it just depended. Off and on he would hire help. And then after the lambs were shipped, why that cut down on the band of sheep quite a bit.

KAREN: Uh huh.

EILEEN: And so we didn't need as much help. It was more or less just family. And then while the lambs were growing, why we had a pretty good size bunch of sheep and a lot of times he would need help. And he would need help during shearing and during marking.

KAREN: Did a bunch of people get together and do that? Kind of together for each other, they would go around and do everybody's sheep?

EILEEN: They did. The neighbors all helped neighbors, and it wasn't like it is today. I mean today everybody works from eight to five, or nine to four, or whatever. In those days you didn't pay each other. You just exchanged work. And if you had a team, or needed extra help, why you would borrow their horses, and they would borrow our horses. And you took care of each other's animals like they were your own. And Dad used to loan his team out a lot in the wintertime when we didn't need them. Then he took them back in the spring when he needed them. He had a, the county road grader, he was the county road grader for, down through Long Hollow which was to the north of our place and down to Fields. And the road grader we kept at our house all the time. And it was manually operated, and Dad did the blade work. He had a neighbor that drove our teams. It was driven by four-horse teams. And Dad's team was a great big old horse that was part Clydesdale. And then he had this big black mule which I have a picture of in my book. And that mule was an exceptionally big mule. And he was used for whatever they needed a mule for. You could ride him or you could pack him or you could, he would work as a team.

KAREN: Uh huh.

EILEEN: And the big old horse was the same way. But the big old horse liked to run away. And that old horse, when he'd get tired why he'd just squeal and he'd bounce in the air and he'd get the other horses excited and then they'd all run. And the man that drove them for the grader was a black man that had a ranch down in the Trout Creek area.

KAREN: Do you remember his name?

EILEEN: His name was Oscar Anderson. And he was a delightful man. He used to come and help my folks a lot. And he would drive. And so I remember one time as a kid why Dad would scream at us kids, "Get out of the way, get out of the way". And they were coming in for the night to unhook the horses when this old brown horse decided that he wanted to run. His name was Buster. And he took off, and this driver couldn't stop him, he was jerking back on the reins for all his worth. But all four horses were running at full speed.

KAREN: Oh no.

EILEEN: So he could turn them. So he turned them up the side of the mountain by our house, which was quite steep. And of course then Dad dropped the blade and that stopped them. So, but the old mule, he didn't, he wasn't one that would take off to run. But at 5 o'clock at night he would lay down, you couldn't get him up ...

KAREN: That was the end of his day, huh.

EILEEN: That was the end of his day. And it didn't make any difference where you were, so Dad always had to have the time so he could be close to the gate to come home at 5 o'clock because that mule would lay down. And how in the world he ever knew it was 5 o'clock, but at 5 o'clock on the dot he laid down.

KAREN: Huh, that's something.

EILEEN: Oh, he was quite a mule. But a gentle old fellow, he was a nice old fellow.

KAREN: Do you remember some of the names of some of the neighbors that you had around that area?

EILEEN: Well, the neighbors weren't close to us. In the summertime we had a man by the name of Lee Morris who had summer pasture back at the mouth of Long Hollow, which was probably ten miles back to the north of us. And he used to stop by, everybody stopped to visit when they'd go by, because everybody knew everybody. And Lee Morris lived down in Trout Creek. And we had the McDade's that lived up to the west of Fields. And we had the Doans that run the store there at Fields for a while. And the Thornburgs run the store at Fields. And Margie and Andrew Shull run the store at Andrews. And then there was Lucille and Sonny Hollis, and they had the little rock house down there, that us kids helped pack the rocks for him to build.

KAREN: Was that down at Fields?

EILEEN: Yes, and it is still there. And there is people living in it now.

KAREN: How neat.

EILEEN: So other than that we had neighbors, the nearest neighbors were in Denio, in Denio and Andrews. There was, I had them written down here, there was the McClain's and Cooney's, and Nellie Sherman lived in a little house back behind the store at Fields. And then the Kranes and the Cooney's lived up at Andrews area. And Mrs. Cooney, Mr. and Mrs. Cooney run sheep and cattle both. And Mr. Cooney died, he was an old Irishman. And when he died Mrs. Cooney run the ranch for a while, but she wasn't able to run sheep and cattle both by herself. So she sold out the sheep. And she run the cattle for several years. And then there was a fellow up on top of Steens Mountain next to my

folks' place, and his name was Riley Huff. And his place joined my folks' place. And eventually he bought my folks' place. And then he became sick and left the country. And so Mary Cooney turned her ranch in Andrews over to the Shriner's Children's Hospital in Portland, and she bought the, Riley Huff's place. And she lived up there for a number of years. And someone the other day was telling me that she had bought another little place up there someplace where she lived. And she got to living up there during the wintertime.

KAREN: Wow.

EILEEN: She was being snowed in, but she stayed there all the time by herself until --- finally she wasn't very well, and she was getting up in years. And some of the neighbors said well you've got to leave here, you can't stay here. We can't let you live up here any longer. So she moved down to Winnemucca, and she lived in a home down there until she passed away. And the Hollis's, Sonny lived down there for a good many years after Lucille left. She had family; she came from Salt Lake City. And she went back there after a good many years, and left Sonny. And he lived there by himself until; I guess somebody moved him to Burns, to a home where he passed away. And the McDades lived up the canyon. And when Mr. McDade died why Mrs. McDade lived there with their son.

KAREN: Now was he the McDade that was the freighter, that drove the mule team? Do you know, do you remember any of that?

EILEEN: He run sheep, and I don't know whether he was involved in that. He was gone shortly after I was born, so I don't know too much about Mr. McDade. But Jimmy McDade, his son, I knew really well, grew up with him. He was about ten years older



than I. But my folks used to visit with the McDades a lot, so I grew up with Jimmy. And Jimmy is now over, living, I don't know whether he is in a home or an apartment, but he is living over in Idaho somewhere. And I think Weiser, but I'm not sure. And the Thornburg's moved away and lived in Portland area. And I'm not sure of the history of them now. But I imagine that --- they were my folks' age, that they are probably gone by now. But they did have a daughter, and they had two little boys. And I think probably they are still living. And the Shulls, Andrew and Margie Shull --- Margie passed away here just a few years ago. She lived in Burns. And Andrew had died quite some time before that. And they do have a couple of boys. And one of them run one of the, was it the Shell Station down here, one of them had.

GENE: Seem to me like it was, yeah.

KAREN: Huh.

EILEEN: And I'm not sure where those two boys are. And the McLain's lived there, and finally moved to, down around Diamond someplace I think. And I think they are all gone except for --- well there are two younger boys, about my sister's age I think. They were just little boys. And the ---

KAREN: Were they ranchers?

EILEEN: Yeah. They were ranchers and raised sheep and cattle, over on the east side of the Steens. And there is one boy that lives here in town; I think he's my brother's age.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: His name is Ronald. I don't know, I think they call him Ron. And that just about takes care of all of the neighbors that we had at the time when I lived there.

KAREN: Tell me a little bit about your school days. Where did you go to school? And who were your teachers, if you can remember, and some of your classmates.

EILEEN: Well first grade --- well there wasn't any school in Fields. And so my mom home schooled me, because she was a teacher. So she home schooled me during that time. And then I went to school, I started to school and I went to second grade. I should have been in third grade. I missed one year of school because it was too hard to get me to school. And Mom had the two other children, and she had a lot of chores with the sheep.

KAREN: How far away were you from the school?

EILEEN: Five miles.

KAREN: Okay. That was a little ways.

EILEEN: Well it isn't far now. But we just had a cow trail for a road.

KAREN: Did you have a car at that time?

EILEEN: We had a car, yeah. When Mom and Dad got married, why Dad bought a 1926 Whippet car. They only made a few of those, very few. And he said that he pushed that car farther than he ever drove it.

KAREN: (Laughter) So the roads weren't in too good a shape at that time?

EILEEN: And the roads weren't in to good a shape. And then we had several different cars after that. And the bedrock --- every time there was a storm, or after the winters, why the bedrock would be higher because the ground would wash away from it. The roads would gradually start going around with the bedrocks. So the roads became pretty crooked, and not good at all. But the cars were higher, the wheels were bigger, and there was more clearance. And like I was saying in parts of my books, my mom could take a car where nobody else would take a horse. She was a good driver. And we would hit

bedrock lots and lots of times. We always carried extra oil, because when she would hit the bedrock underneath and mash in the oil pan why she had to jack up the car and take the oil pan off. She would pound it out and put it back on again and fill it up with oil and away we would go. And we had a lot of flat tires. And there wasn't money in those days to buy tires. I can remember when there was a new tire, it looked so funny, it looked so thin and skinny on the car because everybody --- we weren't the only ones, everybody took, when you had an old tire that was worn out you cut the inside rim of the tire off, and then you could work that tire, that old tire over top of another tire, so they called it a boot. And there was, all of the cars had those on, and they were big and floppy you know.

KAREN: Uh huh.

EILEEN: Lots of times we had to dig the rocks out between where the boot was and the other tire. And so when you saw a car coming why, you know, it looked really funny if you saw a new car that only had the one original tire on each wheel. But Mom took us to school in the mornings, and we had chores to do before we went to school every morning. And the chores we had to do weren't usually like the chores kids have to do today. We had to get up and milk the nanny goat and feed the bummer lambs before we could go. And the teacher did this; she made sure that us kids had clean hands when we come to school. She had stars, and she had big stars and little stars and colored stars. And she had charts on the wall, and every morning first thing when we got to school why we had to have our hands checked and see if they were clean, if our fingernails clean. And we got different stars for --- did we have our teeth brushed, and was our hair combed, so we had this chart and we got stars for different things.

KAREN: Who was your teacher at that time, do you remember?

EILEEN: We had Mrs. Hollis for our teacher at that time. And she was Sonny Hollis's wife. And she was a real sweet lady. And she did things in a very precise manner. And when she came to school in the mornings she had to walk across the dirt and the mud, but when she got to school she was wearing heels and nylons, and beautiful clothes. And she was a blonde lady, and her hair was just, every hair was in place, and she had on her makeup. And she was professional for the day. And I had a lot of different classmates. I guess they were classmates, due to the fact that we had all eight grades in one room. And they were --- different grades, we had different children and different years we had different children. And I have a list here; I tried to make a list of the different ones that was in my grades over the years.

KAREN: About how many kids were in the school when you went there, total?

EILEEN: It depended. One year there was my brother and I and Larry Doan who was the young boy from the store, they're the ones that had the store. And then Patty Doan, his older sister, she lived in Nevada with her grandmother for a while, and she came up during the last couple of years. And then Annie Wenzel was a girl from Burns. And her parents were killed in an automobile accident, and there were several children in the family so the other families took the children. They couldn't all take all of them, but they each took one or two of the children. This one aunt and uncle of hers was Burt and Denisie Wenzel, and they worked up on the McDade Ranch for a while, and they took Annie, and Annie was my age. And she went to school there for 7th grade and 8th grade. And then there was a boy, Jack Carson, his father was a buckaroo, and his mother had died, and his father was trying to raise him. And he was in school there off and on. And

then there was another boy, Billy Wynn and his mother had died, and his father was a buckaroo and he lived with an aunt and uncle down in Trout Creek. And they boarded him up at the McDade Ranch. And he went to school there off and on too. He wasn't there every year. And then we had a family that moved into the hotel for a while, and there was Charles Noble and Hugh Noble that went to school there. Charles Noble was my age, and Hugh was a little older. And then there was two children, and I can't remember their last names, but they were Aroha, which we called Sissy, and she is married now and lives out here in Drewsey. And then Manuel was her brother. And I think he lives out in the Drewsey area too. But his mother married a man by the name of Swede Sizemore. Swede Sizemore helped raise the children. And then there was a family from down in the Trout Creek area, and they were there one year and they had two boys, Del and Allen Sherbourn. And Allen Sherbourn was in my grade, and Del was a year older. And then there was a family came in and there was a mining crew came, and they had the mine up on the hill above the Pedrow place, which they called the mobile mine. And the two girls were Peggy and Judy and they were there from the summer until about Christmas. And then they closed the mine and they moved to the San Francisco area.

KAREN: And what did they mine there?

EILEEN: Cinnabar and mercury. What do they put in their thermometers?

KAREN: Oh, mercury, yeah.

EILEEN: Yeah, yeah,

GENE: That's the ---

KAREN: That's the rock that it is in, right?

EILEEN: Yeah, yeah. My mind leaves me sometimes. And then my 8th grade year we had a new teacher that came. She came from the Portland area, and she had taught for the Hills Miller Academy for Boys, it was for wayward boys in Portland. And when she came, she had a daughter that was my age and her name was --- the teacher's name was Margaret, and the girl's name was Teddy, that was her nickname for herself. And so we became very close friends, and still are today. And she has also written a book, which she is waiting to get okayed for publishing. And she wrote it about the Fields, the year at Fields. It was kind of an extra-ordinary year for all of us, because there was about 13 children there that year and that was the biggest school we had ever had. And so we could play games and things, which we hadn't been able to do before because there weren't enough children. And that year we had some new children too. We had Donna Basehum, Jean Hardburn, Rex Rose and then we had Roberta Roberts, and her brother and I can't remember his name. And that was kind of a, that was really an exceptional year. We had a big graduation class that year, it was Andrews and Fields and Denio, and each year we took turns hosting the year-end ---

KAREN: Uh huh, the graduation.

EILEEN: Graduation. And we had athletic program, with high jumping and broad jumping and running for 50 yards and a 100 yards. Everybody participated and they got ribbons for who was first and second and ---- Then the teacher was really good. When she first came she had, somebody had told her that she was coming to a bunch of kids that were really rowdy and unmanageable. And whoever spread the rumor, I have no idea. So the first day she got there she had to rest up. She was just worn out from the trip and coming from Portland to Burns and trying to get a ride from Burns to Fields and so

forth. Her daughter did come over and introduce herself. We thought, oh the daughter is really nice; I think we'll have a lot of fun with her. And the next morning, why the teacher came. In the meantime we didn't have a teacher because they didn't get there until late, I think it was in October when they got there. And so Denisie Wenzel had been a teacher in her earlier years, and my mother, and so they took turns kind of keeping us kids in school and doing their best to teach us. And so Mrs. Kell came and they stayed at the hotel. They lived there. And at that time why the Roses were there running the hotel. And Mrs. Kell came in that morning, which kids got to school, and we were anxious to meet the new teacher. And she got up at the head of the room at her desk. She said now, she says I am Mrs. Kell; I am going to be your teacher. We will not have any foolishness in this schoolroom whatsoever, and we are going to keep our noses in the book, and we're not going to look up unless I speak your name. And you will study, and you will have tests at the end of each chapter. And she went on, and we're going to salute the flag, and we are going to say the pledge of allegiance. And she got --- you could have heard a pin drop in there. And my brother was very tender hearted. He was always a real --- he got his feelings hurt really easy. And I looked over at him and the tears was rolling down his face, and I had my head down here. You know we read that book, but we never knew a word we read. We were sitting there turning the pages and supposedly reading, and we didn't know a thing we read we were so scared. So at the end of the day why we went home, I said, "Mom this teacher is terrible." I said, "We don't like her at all. She is not a nice lady. And I don't know what we are going to do, but I think you ought to go talk to her." So Mom was getting kind of upset. She said, "All right, I'll go talk to her." So that evening after we got home there and told her that, why Mom went over and she

introduced herself, talked to the teacher for a while. And the teacher said, "You know," she said, "I just feel terrible," she said, "I was told that I was coming to a very unruly situation here." And she said, "You know," she said, "I think I had all these kids crying." And she said, "I just feel terrible." And so Mom said, "Well her kids was pretty upset." So anyway Mom came home and she said, "Well you know I think when we get to know this teacher better things will be okay." She said, "I don't think it is going to be bad at all." Boy I said, "I don't think it's going to be good." And so we didn't know whether to get friendly with the teacher's daughter or not, because if her mother was so bad why maybe her daughter wasn't too good either, you know.

KAREN: Yeah.

EILEEN: But it all worked out and she became a wonderful teacher, and we all loved her and we had a great year that year, and it was one of the most memorable years of my life. And it's one that --- two of the ladies now, her daughter Teddy and the daughter of the family that did the mining, Judy. And we e-mail back and forth weekly to this day.

KAREN: How neat. Now how long was your school year back then? Did it go from September through June like it does now, or did you --- not go in the winter when the ---

EILEEN: Our school year was short. The weather was so bad during the wintertime, that we just had a couple of days off for Thanksgiving, and a couple of days at Christmas. And we usually always got out around the first of May. And there was another reason for getting out the first of May, because that was when the stock people would be taking their cows and sheep out to the range, and they needed the children and the wives to help, and they didn't have time to run the kids back and forth to school.



KAREN: Uh huh. So the school year was based on what the family needed done at home.

EILEEN: Right. And we just didn't take off any holidays. We didn't have a spring vacation or anything like that, we just went right straight through. And they got the days in that we needed for the school year, and were able to get out early.

KAREN: Uh huh.

EILEEN: And that pleased us too, because when it is so cold in the winter, it used to get down to 30 and 40 below zero, and when you've got so much snow and blizzards and cold, there just isn't anything to do outside anyway. But the chores we had to do.

KAREN: Yeah, right, and the day is a lot shorter.

EILEEN: Uh huh, the days are shorter. So it was just better to stay home and do the things in the house that we needed to do. And do our studying, and get out early in the spring, which was usually --- really looked forward to.

KAREN: I bet. I bet it was pretty there.

EILEEN: It was nice. The wild flowers would be coming out and starting, you know. And the smell of the ground, maybe a lot of people don't think about that. But out there in the mountains when the snow is gone, the sun shining on the ground it has a smell of its own, it's just kind of an earthy smell, you know, fresh earthy smell. And I always liked that. And find the first buttercups of the season, and the little birds bills and things, --- probably have other names. But we had our own names for a lot of flowers. We didn't have any flower books, and Mom knew the names of some of the flowers, and a lot of the flowers we just named ourselves. So I call them by the names we used to call them. And people say, "Oh no, that's not the name of those." But I know what they are.

KAREN: What kinds of things did you guys do for fun when you weren't doing chores, and you weren't in school? Did you have much free time?

EILEEN: We didn't have a whole lot of free time. If we didn't have anything to do Mom found things for us to do. But we did climb the mountains a lot. And I didn't have anybody there to play with, no playmates. So we climbed the mountains, and hunted pretty rocks, and played in the little shale patches. And had pretend animals, and pretend sheep with the different colored rocks, and bigger rocks for our horses. And when you don't have toys why you do the best you can. The next best thing is playing with the rocks and the flowers and the weeds. And we did have down at the reservoir below our house, where the artesian spring was, there was a little creek run from the spring down into the reservoir, and we called them wild --- they were kind of a snapdragon. They have a name, and I can't remember the name. We called them wild snapdragons. And they were yellow, and they would grow up there about 3 or 4 inches high, and they would bloom with yellow flowers. And to the side of our house, just a little bit to the west of our house, northwest, there was a, what they called an adobe patch. And it was kind of a brown patch of dirt, and when it got wet, you didn't dare walk in it because it would just stick to your feet and you'd just --- as kids we'd walk in it to see how high we could get. It would stick to your feet.

KAREN: Kind of like clay?

EILEEN: It was a type of clay. And the Indians used this adobe, and they would fire it, make dishes and things out of it. But us kids, we played with it, and we made dishes and stuff. But we didn't fire ours; we laid them out in the sun and let them dry. And we'd take these wild snapdragons and when we'd make a little dish why we would pull that

little snapdragon out and kind of lay it flat in the bottom of our little dish, and we had flowers in our dishes.

KAREN: How neat.

EILEEN: And so we did that. That was part of the things that we did for fun. And we had sleds in the wintertime, and we had some old skis that we played up on the side of the hill with. And we had a little wagon, the little buck, Honeybunch, that I have written in my book. He would butt us down the hill in our wagon or the sled, whichever.

KAREN: He sounded like a character.

EILEEN: He was a real character. And when you only have one running around the yard there, why he became kind of a pest at times. But he was always making, doing something that entertained us kids. Like he jumped through the schoolhouse window. I saw him coming, so I jumped out of my desk and jerked the window up and stood aside just in the nick of time. He came through that window, and the floors in the buildings at that time were wood, and they were poor --- everybody kept their old oil, when they changed oil in their cars, and that went to oil the floors in the school.

KAREN: Did that smell bad?

EILEEN: Oh yeah, it smelled bad. But, I mean that is the way it was. After awhile we kind of got used to it. And after you walk on it enough, enough dust got in to it that it kind of tromped down. We had oil all over our shoes and socks all the time from it. But it was a way to keep the dust down in the school they thought. And so that's why they did it. But when he jumped through the window, why it was slick and he slid clear across the room.

KAREN: Oh, my gosh.

EILEEN: Bumped in to the wall on the opposite side. And then he got his berries, got his feet back under him. And then he licked his tongue in and out all the time. He'd lick his tongue in and out, and he looked all around at everybody. He saw the teacher up there behind her desk, so he made tracks right up the aisle right for her, licking his tongue in and out, and just before he got to the desk why then he started backing up. We thought, well when he backed up, he was going to butt somebody. And the teacher, she was yelling get that thing out of here. And us kids were laughing so hard, all the kids thought this was funny, was a big joke. So anyway, he hit the desk and she was standing in the chair and scooted her back against the wall, and she jumped out of the chair and on top of the desk, and he backed up and he was coming for her again. She jumped off of the desk and into the sandbox. We had a sandbox that was probably about the size of this, about 2 feet by 4 feet or so, and had little sides up on it, full of sand. And we were studying about the American Indians. And the teacher had sent and got these big books of cutouts. And we had cut all this Indian village out.

KAREN: Kind of like paper dolls sort of?

EILEEN: Yeah. And we had colored them all, the whole school was involved. Well you had eight grades, which we didn't have everybody. Sometimes there was only one person in a grade, but we had eight grades there. And so the whole school was involved in it.

KAREN: You kind of all studied the same things.

EILEEN: More or less.

KAREN: Right.

EILEEN: We did do what we had to do for our grade.

KAREN: Right.

EILEEN: But everybody was involved when it came to a lot of our studying because you're in such close quarters that when you studied with the teacher and answered questions and so forth why the rest of them heard too.

KAREN: So the younger kids would kind of pick up on what the older kids were doing.

EILEEN: Right. And we had done an awful lot of work on this Indian village in this sandbox. Colored all of the different things, and the Indians in all of their different feathers on their costumes and everything. And the teacher ran and jumped in the middle of this, and messed up our Indian village.

KAREN: Oh no.

EILEEN: Here come the buck, he was backed up again. He saw her in the sandbox and he was going to get her again. She is screaming and screaming and screaming. And finally she yelled at me and she said, "Eileen will you get this thing out of here right now?" So I got up and went and got the old buck and escorted him out the door. And so then he butted the door outside. So I had to take him home and tie him up. That was the only way to get rid of him. But he came to school quite often and create a problem, and we'd have to take him home again.

KAREN: So he followed you to school?

EILEEN: Yeah, he followed us to school. We stayed down at Fields in the wintertime because the snow was too deep to get back and forth.

KAREN: Okay.

EILEEN: So we lived out behind the school. And he wouldn't stay with the rest of the sheep; he'd come over to school.

KAREN: He was more of a pet.

EILEEN: Yeah, he was more of a pet. And one time one of the boys went to the outhouse, he didn't come back. And he was out there for a long time, and finally the teacher sent my brother out. She said, "You better go out." It was Billy Wynn. She said, "You better go out and see what happened to Billy." So my brother went out, and Billy was in the outhouse holding the door shut. And the buck got tired butting it, so he laid down against it. The door opened out so he couldn't get out.

KAREN: Oh no.

EILEEN: So my brother had to get the buck and he had to take it home and tie it up. So the folks tied him up a lot of the time, but every now and then why he'd be loose and here he'd come to school. So he was quite a pest.

KAREN: Huh. That's neat. Well Eileen, we've been here awhile, I think it's probably time to take a little bit of a break. But thank you for sharing your experiences about growing up in the Fields area, and the homestead era. And maybe you'll come back and join us again and talk a little bit more about maybe your high school days.

EILEEN: That would be fun.

KAREN: I know that you folks moved up closer to Burns at that time.

EILEEN: Yes, that would be fun.

KAREN: Well thank you.

EILEEN: And thank you.

(The End)

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