

Steins Mountains - Alvord Ranch ✓
Period 1912- 1922- South end of
Harney County, Oregon
Alvord Valley

6-17-83

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My Father and mother were homesteaders in the area of Alberson, Ore. at the foot of the Steins Mts. the Northern end of the Mt. chain. It was marginal land and suitable for dry farming at some seasons when there was little water in the Juniper Lake which was about one and a half miles north of the property -- there was a filing for water rights on the lake and some years the main diversion ditch carried considerable water. There was irrigation for about 80 acres. My father then went into the sheep and cattle business but mostly sheep. There was considerable range available - winter in the desert East and summer in the mts. above StoneHouse canyon which was just South of the homestead, and that creek flowed East in the valley.

I am developing this background with the purpose of showing the need for outside income. What haying - harvest we had did not take up much of my fathers - and neighbors time so it was then possible for him to take outside contracts for putting up or stacking hay on the neighboring ranches.

The primary contracts were for the Alvord ranch owners beginning about 1910 - season June 20 to Sept. 18th. In the meantime we had two bands - herds - of sheep about 1500 each which summered in Mosquito Pocket - Hole - in the Ground and head of Coyote Creek - on the mountain from our homestead. Alvord and Mosquito creek were about thirty miles South of our home base at Alverson. The owner at that time was a Mr. Frank Clerf who was from Calif. and he acquired the ranch and cattle from the heirs of John Devine who had originally owned the place. I have no further facts on the origins of the property development - other than there was a connection with the Miller & Lux company of Calif. Mr. Henry Miller of course the Cattle King as written in the well known book of that name.

This hay contracting was profitable for my father who was accompanied by his brother Luther Tudor during the first three or four years. It was only a hay stacking contract and did not include the mowing of the wild meadow grass. The

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Mowing was done by the Clerf ranch people with their own horses and equipment. The hay was then raked and bunched or shocked by their crew - which usually consisted of about twelve or fifteen mower teams (Mc Cormick or Deering), the old fashioned two horse rakes (trip) and two horse buck rakes or bunchers. The haying began about June 20th, shortly after the water in the meadows had dried - that is the mowing or cutting, then after drying in the shock about 10 days later came my fathers crew for stacking.

This harvesting of the wild meadow grass all over the West was accomplished in about the same manner. The severe winters made it necessary to feed the cattle for about two to three months, usually Dec. thru Feb.

My fathers crew consisting of about twelve men - wagons hay net - (Chain) cables pull-up wagon and about four hay bucks, or four horse bucks. Termed "Bucks" since they pushed the hay instead of lifting it off the ground to transport same to the stacking area or on the net. Then there was the camp - tents, provisions - and sleeping tents. Our first Camp was at Pike creek, then the Alvord Field near the main ranch buildings, then the Cottonwood Field, from which we stacked also the Swamp field and then on to Mosquito Creek. In the first three or four years the Mosquito Creek fields were owned by the Pac. Livestock Co. - Miller & Lux, and did not come under our contract. In the later years the Alvord was under management of the P.L.S and we combined it with the ^{mosquito creek} Alvord operations. The operation called for the services of about sixty horses, thirty teams. We changed horses at noon in most cases. The animals were fresh to the work and off the grass as feed thus hard work over four hours was not good for them. Then we had two or three hundred horses to draw from so it was a good idea to keep them all working on a light schedule - about half of them were new to the work, just broken, and they would soon forget their new life and give you trouble. In the manner as all ranch boys of the time I learned to ride early - and for the haying a good part of the time I was elected to "Rango" or fetch the herd from the night pasture, starting

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just after daylight. This getting up at that time was almost too much for me a young sleepy head and I managed to get out of the job most of the time. The horses, teams were caught in the stockade corral by the hands - harnessed and tied to their rigs before the men had breakfast. There was a rest period at ten A.M and three P.M. when refreshments were brought out from the cook house by one of my mothers assistants. Mother was the cook and provider most years - but there was a period of three years when she was away and Dad had others attending to that duty.

It must not be forgotten that at this time of the year then and perhaps now the Mosquitos and horse flies were a miserable condition to deal with. The flies in the daytime and the mosquitos in the evening. There were no repellants or sprays at that time and we burned cow chips in the evening and in the day used split wool sacks on the horses bodies and gunny sacks cut out over their heads. It was a job to keep them properly covered. The summer weather was most always warm.

The hay crop varied from year to year depending on the water from theSteins back of the ranches - the Mts. were very rugged and high, perhaps four or five thousand feet above the valley floor and collected a good snowfall in winter providing a good run off in the Spring but seldom much in the summer. I remember we usually had a combined maximum of about thirty five hundred tons of hay in all the corrals at the end of the seasons. The stacks ranged from forty to 100 tons each. Our contract payment received per ton ran from one dollar and fifty cents per ton in 1912 to two dollars and twenty five cents the last years 1921-22. It was a profitable enterprise and didn't take time away from the sheep business at the^t season of the year. One of the camps was in Mosquito Pocket above the Alvord about half way up the mountains - a fair flat area - meadows and much pasture on the hill sides. Dad owned forty acres there which he had acquired from a Leonard Goodman who was one of the settlers.

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Alvord Ranch is in a picturesque setting there next to the mighty mountains which rise abruptly within a quarter mile of the ranch buildings. The streams, Creeks, come as rushing white water over the gray and white granite stones so beautifully polished by the thousands of years of wear. As a small boy it fascinated me to see the different colored stones in the creek bed - especially at the Pike creek. Then there was always a profusion of Sunflowers, lupine, larkspur, butter cups and the tiny violets which grew in beds. Wild onions gave a strange flavor ^{to} the ~~the~~ cows milk but they apparently were very palatable to the animals. So much for the Flora but there is much more of it and I suppose it is even better this year with all the precipitation.

Consider the Fauna for a moment. There was a flock of Sandhill cranes which came to the Swamp meadows each year. A herd of Elk spent the Spring and summer - Fall on the lower meadows and hiding in the willow and buckbush jungles of the Mosquito and Cotton wood fields. Then the deer in the Fall and winter took haven in the same area. It was good hunting there. On sundays we would take the afternoon and go to swamps to catch Flopper Mallard ducks with garden rakes. The water always was about knee deep and there was no place for them to hide - and as you know mallards are almost grown before they have enough feathers to fly. Coyotes would follow the hay Bucks around in the mornings and when we moved some shocks catch the mice and not be fearful of us or the horses - mostly they were the young or first year pups. Come Sept. I would run a short trap line for them and sell their pelts for from six to ten dollars.

There is much more that could be told about the area and especially the people who came to inhabit it. The first immigrants were mainly from the South, Kentucky, Tennessee, then followed by europeans - Welch, Irish and mostly the Basques.