

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #103 - Side A

Subject: Jean Harrit

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: September 26, 1976

Interviewers: Royal G. Jackson & Jennifer A. Lee

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ROYAL JACKSON: Okay, Mr. Harrit, H A R R I T, Jean is your first name?

JEAN HARRIT: Yeah, right.

ROYAL: Jean, what province in Spain do you come from?

JEAN: I came from France.

ROYAL: So you're from one of the French provinces of the Basques?

JEAN: Yes, LaPulle. There was seven provinces, but France has three, and Spain has four.

ROYAL: What year did you come to the United States?

JEAN: 1939.

ROYAL: Why did you come here?

JEAN: Why did I come? Well like everybody else, you know, I got brother here in Burns.

ROYAL: You had a brother in Burns?

JEAN: Right.

ROYAL: What was he doing?

JEAN: Herding sheep.

ROYAL: What were you doing in France in 1939?

JEAN: We was farming there --- little farm.

JENNIFER LEE: With your parents?

JEAN: Yes.

ROYAL: Your father was a farmer too?

JEAN: You bet.

ROYAL: Is that near the Pyrenees?

JEAN: Yes, right in the low Pyrenees Mountains.

ROYAL: Wasn't that land very different from Burns?

JEAN: Oh yes, sure. Small.

ROYAL: How did you come over, by boat?

JEAN: I come by boat into New York. From New York, I took a train and came to Burns.

ROYAL: Did you know any English when you got to New York?

JEAN: No sir.

ROYAL: Not a word?

JEAN: No. But I wasn't afraid to go any place; I spent two years before I came here in Paris. I was in Paris two years in the French Army.

ROYAL: How did you like the French Army?

JEAN: Well, we didn't know no better. You got to stay there that's all.

JENNIFER: When were you born?

JEAN: In 1914.

JENNIFER: So you were a mature man when you came?

JEAN: Oh yeah, sure. I was 24.

JENNIFER: What did your family think before you came here? Did they think it was a

good thing for you to do?

JEAN: Oh, I guess. In the old days, everybody does their own things, and a small family does not have much in common with the big families.

ROYAL: Did you have a large family?

JEAN: You bet, we was 12.

ROYAL: Twelve children, or 10 children and 2 parents?

JEAN: No, 12 children, 6 boys and 6 girls.

ROYAL: Did the rest of your brothers and sisters stay in France, or did any come to the United States?

JEAN: No, only two brothers, we came here. The two oldest brothers. The rest of them stay over there. They make a living too.

ROYAL: What did you think when you came to New York and saw it for the first time?

JEAN: Oh boy, I don't know.

ROYAL: It was big?

JEAN: Big, you bet. Took me four and a half days from New York to Burns by train.

ROYAL: How did you know how to catch the train if you did not speak English or anything, did someone help you?

JEAN: Well, they put me on the train, you know.

ROYAL: Who put you on the train?

JEAN: Valentine Aquirre.

ROYAL: He helped many Basques?

JEAN: Oh boy, you bet. Yeah, he put me on train.

ROYAL: And so you came in four days directly to Burns?

JEAN: Four and a half days, something like that.

ROYAL: What did you think when you got to Burns, when you saw it for the first time?

JEAN: Well my brother he was herding sheep. My bother he come to the depot to meet me.

JENNIFER: Where was the depot, in Burns?

JEAN: In Burns, the train depot there.

ROYAL: What did you think of Burns?

JEAN: Well, I don't know what to say. It was nice over there. Quite a few Bascos they come to meet me because my brother was tied up here. They come over here. It was nice. I didn't see very much.

ROYAL: You didn't see very much, but that made you feel good when all the Bascos came?

JEAN: Oh yeah. Sure, you bet.

ROYAL: Did you herd sheep right away with your brother?

JEAN: Well, we stayed right here. I got here September; one month maybe we stay in town here. Then I herd sheep.

ROYAL: Where did you start herding sheep?

JEAN: In Crane.

ROYAL: Do you know Stink Water Pass?

JEAN: Stink Water Pass, yeah. That's where I herd sheep.

ROYAL: How long did you stay there?

JEAN: Just so long. It was the Crane Land Sheep Company.

JENNIFER: You didn't know how to herd sheep before this?

JEAN: Oh no, I was scared. I was going to loose them all. That was my trouble.

ROYAL: Did they put you out there by yourself?

JEAN: No, I got a camp tender.

ROYAL: He only came once in a while, didn't he?

JEAN: No, we stayed together. He stayed with me all the time.

ROYAL: How long were you there that time?

JEAN: Well, I was there five years, I think. Then they sold out.

ROYAL: Did you come to town very much in those five years?

JEAN: Once or twice, that's all.

ROYAL: Wasn't that very lonely for you?

JEAN: Oh, you bet.

ROYAL: Didn't you miss friends and girlfriends?

JEAN: Oh sure. That time I was glad to be here, because it was the Second World War. I barely got out by a couple of months.

ROYAL: Did you know that was about to happen? The war?

JEAN: Oh, you bet.

JENNIFER: Is that one of the reasons why you came over here?

JEAN: Yeah, to get out.

ROYAL: What about your parents and your brothers and sisters? Were they in the war?

JEAN: Yeah, I got two brothers that were in the war. One brother he was in Germany. He took prisoner, you know.

JENNIFER: I guess you weren't homesick to go back ever?

JEAN: No, no, never, and finally I got used to here, so I made my home here.

ROYAL: What did you do after you worked for five years? Was that until about 1945, somewhere in there?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: What did you do then?

JEAN: I bought my own sheep too.

ROYAL: You saved up a lot of money by herding sheep?

JEAN: Oh yeah.

ROYAL: How many sheep did you buy?

JEAN: About 2,000 sheep.

JENNIFER: What did you do while you were up in the mountains? Did you read, or do you play an instrument?

JEAN: You got no time. You got up ...

JENNIFER: I thought in about the late '30's and early '40's sheep were leaving this area. Sheep were being pushed out because of laws and there weren't other sheepherders coming in?

JEAN: I was telling you about how I spent my time in the sheep camp so you ask me. I didn't have much school myself, but I can read, and sometime I get dictionary and learn English. Most of my spare time, I spent hunting coyotes.

ROYAL: With a rifle?

JEAN: You bet.

ROYAL: What kind?

JEAN: I have a 30-30. Them days there were a lot of coyotes. Most of the time I was hunting coyotes.

ROYAL: Did you do that because the coyotes bother the sheep?

JEAN: The coyotes bother the sheep. Late in the fall, I set up a few traps. I trap them. If I can shoot them, I make a few dollars.

ROYAL: How did you keep your sheep from getting into the traps?

JEAN: Well you put the traps away from the sheep and you watch.

JENNIFER: Were the coyotes your biggest problem?

JEAN: Oh, yeah, you bet. I seen as many as 15-16 coyotes by the sheep.

ROYAL: Did you lose very many sheep to the coyotes?

JEAN: Biggest lost I have one time, was 7 head.

ROYAL: What did you do with the coyote pelts? Could you sell those?

JEAN: Yes, I sell them.

ROYAL: How much could you get for those?

JEAN: Oh, one time it was pretty good, around \$12.

ROYAL: Where did you sell them, in Burns?

JEAN: In Burns.

ROYAL: What do people use them for? Who bought them?

JEAN: I don't know what they used them for, maybe fur. I don't know.

ROYAL: So how did you spend your days besides taking care of sheep and hunting coyotes? Is that all you did?

JEAN: Yeah, that's all.

ROYAL: Did you read at all?

JEAN: Not much. You do all your own cooking.

JENNIFER: You had a dog for company?

JEAN: Yeah, you bet. Two dogs.

ROYAL: And the camp tender lived there?

JEAN: Not always.

JENNIFER: So a shepherd when he is up in the mountains, he just looks over the sheep and makes sure they don't scatter?

JEAN: Well they follow the others. You have to be behind the sheep all the time. You can lose a bunch easy. Like we lived in the desert, miserable days. Like in the wintertime, cold and snow. When you get up in the morning, you take a little lunch and take your band of sheep and you watch. At night you bring them back to the camp.

JENNIFER: What did you live in?

JEAN: We live in tent.

ROYAL: Did you move the tent very often, from place to place?

JEAN: Well, depending on the feed.

JENNIFER: What kind of things did you eat?

JEAN: We eat good, I'll tell you that. We eat mutton.

JENNIFER: Dried fruits and stuff like that?

JEAN: Well, we had dried fruit. It used to be there was dried prunes, you know. Dried apples used to be a long time ago.

ROYAL: How much did they pay you for staying up there with the sheep?

JEAN: Well, when I first started with the Crane Land Sheep Company, I got \$2 a day. I got \$60 a month.

ROYAL: And \$720 a year?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: Plus your food?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: You saved all of that probably?

JEAN: Well, you gotta buy your clothes, shoes.

ROYAL: By the time you quit at the end of five years, how much were you making a year?

JEAN: I think I made about \$4,000.

ROYAL: You saved that much?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: That is when you bought your own sheep?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: That was about 1945?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: And you had your own sheep for how long?

JEAN: For three years. I didn't keep them long. You gotta have a ranch to run them. I didn't have nothing.

JENNIFER: So you herded those sheep for three more years?

JEAN: No, I got different outfit.

JENNIFER: So somebody else herded your sheep?

JEAN: Yeah.

JENNIFER: So what did you do in the meantime?

JEAN: You got a lot to do when you own sheep.

ROYAL: So after that did you sell your sheep, or what did you do?

JEAN: I sell the sheep.

ROYAL: Did you get a lot of money from that?

JEAN: Yeah, I got good money. Prices were going up. I made a mistake like anyone else. After you look back you see them. At that time it was good money. I sold the sheep and maybe go back to the old country.

ROYAL: That's what you thought you'd do?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: What did you do?

JEAN: Nothing, I stayed here.

ROYAL: So what kind of job did you get?

JEAN: Well then I started to work in the mill.

ROYAL: Hines Lumber Mill? What year was that?

JEAN: 1948, maybe.

ROYAL: How long did you work with Hines?

JEAN: Five months.

ROYAL: You didn't like the job?

JEAN: No, I didn't like the job. You know, you get used to the outside, the open. That noise ...

ROYAL: So what did you do then?

JEAN: I went back to herd sheep.

ROYAL: For how long?

JEAN: Oh, for a long time.

JENNIFER: There were still sheep in the country then?

JEAN: Yeah, 1945, '48. Sheep went out about I say 1955, '56.

JENNIFER: Can you explain why the sheep left?

JEAN: Well the reason is that they couldn't get no herders anymore.

JENNIFER: There were still Basques around though?

JEAN: Yeah, but they don't want to go out.

ROYAL: The younger ones coming over didn't want to go out?

JEAN: They don't want to go out. Now they all together different. They don't want to stay out alone. That's a lonesome life, you know. And another thing, this Taylor Grazing, you got to have lots of things for the sheep. There used to be about 200,000 sheep in Harney County.

JENNIFER: You remember that?

JEAN: No, by the time I came, maybe it was maybe 100,000, I don't know. Maybe not quite.

ROYAL: By 1955, they were all gone?

JEAN: Yeah. '55, '58, like that.

ROYAL: What did you do then after you quit herding sheep?

JEAN: I went to California.

ROYAL: What year was that?

JEAN: It was 1950.

ROYAL: What did you do there?

JEAN: I stayed in Bakersfield. A lot of sheep there at that time.

ROYAL: Did you have friends there? Is that why you went there?

JEAN: Yeah. I had friends there. I went to visit with him and one guy, one sheep man he want me to go work with him, lambing, you know, and that's why I went to work with him. I didn't like it. It's too hot around Fresno there, 100-110 degrees, too hot.

ROYAL: So you didn't stay very long?

JEAN: No, so I came back to Burns.

ROYAL: Then what did you do?

JEAN: I stayed around here then I started work in sawmill again for the last ten years I worked.

ROYAL: You started working again in Hines?

JEAN: Yeah, right.

ROYAL: So you're still working there?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: What kind of job do you have there?

JEAN: Saw filer.

ROYAL: You like that job?

JEAN: Oh yeah.

ROYAL: How is life here in Burns with your Basque friends? Are there a lot of people here that you can associate with?

JEAN: Oh, yeah.

ROYAL: You speak Basque most of the time?

JEAN: Oh yeah, you bet. We get together, and that is all we talk. That is our language.

JENNIFER: Is French Basque any different from Spanish Basque?

JEAN: Not really.

ROYAL: Are there any other French Basques in Burns?

JEAN: Yeah couple of them here. I think one went back to the old country.

ROYAL: Have you ever been back to France?

JEAN: Once.

ROYAL: When was that?

JEAN: 1962.

JENNIFER: How was it?

JEAN: Oh, big change.

ROYAL: Did it make you want to stay there?

JEAN: Yeah, my sisters want me to stay there.

ROYAL: But did you want to?

JEAN: No.

ROYAL: How was it different?

JEAN: All together different from the time I come in '62.

ROYAL: You haven't been back since?

JEAN: No.

ROYAL: Are you planning a trip to go back?

JEAN: Yeah, when I retire.

ROYAL: When will that be?

JEAN: Maybe next year.

ROYAL: You think you are going to stay there and live?

JEAN: No, I don't think so.

JENNIFER: You like Burns, huh?

JEAN: Oh, yeah.

ROYAL: Do you ever go to the Basque parties and things they have?

JEAN: Yeah, this summer they had one.

ROYAL: Did you go this summer?

JEAN: Yeah.

... (Confidential information deleted by interviewer.)

ROYAL: You never did marry?

JEAN: Nope.

ROYAL: Are you sorry?

JEAN: You bet I'm sorry.

ROYAL: You wish you had?

JEAN: Yeah, when I was young.

ROYAL: Why didn't you marry?

JEAN: Well, these United States girls, they wear high heel boots, you know, high heel shoes, and I didn't like that.

ROYAL: It was hard to meet girls when you were up in the hills?

JEAN: Yeah. Right.

ROYAL: There were no Basque girls?

JEAN: No. There were a few, but not many.

ROYAL: How long have you lived here with the Urizars?

JEAN: Since I have been in Burns in 1939.

ROYAL: Why did you come live with the Urizars? Did you know them before?

JEAN: No. I met them at the Star over there.

ROYAL: You started living at the Star Hotel?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: Are there more Basques in Burns now than when you moved here?

JEAN: Oh yeah, twice more, maybe more.

ROYAL: How about the young people, do they seem like it was when you were young?

JEAN: No, big change now.

ROYAL: In what ways did they change?

JEAN: Well I don't know why they change, but when we came here, we never think about staying in town. We went to the hills and stay there. Now they don't want to go out, and even if they got to go, they stay maybe one year. That's all.

ROYAL: They don't like the lonely life?

JEAN: No, no, they don't like it.

ROYAL: How about the young Basques that are born in America now. The young people that speak English real well. Do they speak Basque as well as the older people?

JEAN: Some of them, they do.

ROYAL: Are they keeping the tradition do you think?

JEAN: Yeah, some of them, but not all of them.

ROYAL: Do you think that's good or bad? Do you think they will if they continue to marry Americans and have friends that are Americans?

JEAN: I don't know, I don't think so. Hard to tell.

ROYAL: Did you ever feel any discrimination against you, any bad feeling because you were a Basque? Did the Americans ever treat you badly?

JEAN: No, they were good to me.

JENNIFER: Do you know how to do the dance La Jota, the major dance?

JEAN: Oh yeah, I used to know.

JENNIFER: Are French Basques any different from the Spanish Basques? Are there any differences that you can see?

JEAN: No.

JENNIFER: In customs or ---

JEAN: No, no different. When the French Basques and the Spanish Basques, like here, you know. You talk to people from Burns, and you talk to people from New York, they have difference in the accent.

ROYAL: It's the same with French Basques and Spanish Basques?

JEAN: Right, just a little different in the accent.

ROYAL: The same language and the same culture?

JEAN: Right.

ROYAL: You consider yourself first a Basque and second a Frenchman?

JEAN: Right.

ROYAL: Is that how it is in France too?

JEAN: Yeah.

ROYAL: Were there any laws in France against speaking Basque like there were in Spain?

JEAN: No, no not in my time.

ROYAL: So it was easier for the Basques in France?

JEAN: Yes.

ROYAL: Than it was under Franco?

JEAN: Under Franco, yeah. Franco took that away, you know.

ROYAL: Did you ever visit the Spanish provinces of the Basques?

JEAN: Oh yeah, sure. One-half mile, and we were on the Spanish side.

ROYAL: I guess that is enough for now.

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