

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #112 - Sides A/C/E

Subject: Don Higgins

Place: 619 West "C" Street - Burns, Oregon

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Interviewer: Charlene Gates

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CHARLENE GATES: Wonder when you came to Harney County?

DON HIGGINS: In 1947.

CHARLENE: Were you a high school teacher?

DON: I was teaching shop at the high school at that time, which is now the junior high. And we looked for a place to buy, and there were only five houses available in Hines and Burns. And we looked at all five of them, and I didn't want to put my money in any of them, so we built a house here, the one we're living in now. So, I was building and teaching all at the same time, and the days were long, and the nights were short. But we got it finally put together and had an enjoyable year and a place to live.

I can remember we had our --- our daughter was born the last of September and we had no doors on the house yet, very few windows, and we borrowed a stove because our furnace wasn't here yet. And we put a chimney out the bedroom window and hung blankets up at the doorways and that's how we brought a new baby home from the hospital. And it wasn't until November that we got the furnace set and operating.

CHARLENE: Where did you come from? Where'd you move here from?

DON: From Portland. I started teaching in Prineville; then we moved to Forest Grove, and then to Portland. And I worked in the shipyard during the war. And then I was drafted out of the shipyard and went to Okinawa. And when I came back the shipyard was closed, and I had a difficult time

finding work in Portland because it was a shrinking economy there. Couldn't find a place to teach there because of the people on tenure there, and they had had such a boom during the shipyard days that they had lots of teachers there. And I didn't find a place to teach there, and this job came open in Burns, and I was tickled to death to get it.

CHARLENE: What did Burns look like? I know it's changed a lot. I was wondering what it was like when you first caught sight of it?

DON: Well, my first impression when I came over here to look the place over was windy and dusty. Dust blowing down Main Street (Broadway) and there was very little paving done on the streets except for the main street, and the street each side. And as the years went by, the various programs, the streets have been paved nearly all over town.

I remember a salesman at the high school one time, I was talking to him, and he was looking out the window at the street that goes alongside of the high school and he said, "Are they going to fix those potholes in that street out there?" And I said, "Well, they never have. I think they'll just dry up and be potholes." It was quite a while before they got the streets surfaced around the schools. I didn't think it'd ever happen, but it did.

I built close enough to walk to school, and then they moved the school clear out towards Hines and made it a long ways to walk, so I usually drove. But one of the reasons I built where I did was because it was right across the street from the grade school and about two and a half blocks from the high school. It made it very convenient for me.

CHARLENE: What was the high school like when you first started teaching in it?

DON: Well, there was --- I was hired as an industrial arts teacher, and the year before they had let the industrial arts teacher go at mid-year. And the janitor, Mr. Taylor, had tried to keep the classes going the rest of the year. And there were tools scattered all over the building, there was no place for the tools, and the shop in general was in a shambles, but it was a challenge. They had some good equipment there, and the principal we had at that time wanted me just to teach woodwork. And I convinced him that we should have a little drafting. So, he allowed me to teach six weeks of

drafting. And I put all of the students in drafting for six weeks so that it gave me some time to get the tools together, make tool panels, silhouette the tools that hung on the panels, and get the shop ready so that at the end of the six weeks drafting period, they could come into the shop and have something that was organized.

The school at that time was rather small, and we had lots of room. Well, as the years went on, the population grew, and grew, and grew and we outgrew the school and we kept adding on little things here and there. I would like to have a metal shop, so we arranged to get a Quonset hut and the carpentry class built the Quonset hut, put it together, and made a metal shop. And that Quonset hut, by the way, is still in use. It has been taken over behind the gym at Slater Grade School and is used for a storage shed over there.

But we did get the program enlarged from just woodwork to a full year of drafting, and eventually two years of drafting. We taught carpentry and cabinet construction; we had arts and crafts; we had --- in our metal shop we taught forging, sheet metal, arc welding, and gas welding. And we had to put up another large building there for auto mechanics and had diesel and auto mechanics in there for several years, and eventually it turned into the music room.

But the growth of the school was quite noticeable. If I remember right, we had eight teachers in the high school when I came here.

CHARLENE: Is that all?

DON: That's all. It was rather small. At faculty meeting, we didn't have trouble getting that many teachers together.

CHARLENE: Well, how many kids were in school, with only eight teachers?

DON: That's been a long time ago to remember. I'd have to get an annual out to make sure, but it seems like there was about 125 students, something like that. Then we grew to 600 and more.

CHARLENE: Oh, they did? I didn't know they had 600 kids here.

DON: Well, that's at the peak, I think, of our enrollment, which was out at the other school. And we had, oh, 300 or more in the school that wasn't built for that many when we moved.

CHARLENE: Now when I left in '63 it was, oh, probably a little over 300. I didn't realize it had ever grown to 600. Now it's about down to 300 or something.

DON: Yes, it's shrunk considerably.

CHARLENE: Well, let's see. I wonder what there was to do in Burns when you first came. That was before TV got really popular and so forth. What did people do to entertain themselves?

DON: Well, I remember the reception that we had my first year here was held in the City Hall, which was up over the library at that time, and they put on a very good program, which included skits and singing, and I remember the Sawyer boys had a quartet that was just really good. And they gave the history of the town and the school, and so it was sort of an indoctrination into Burns.

And, well, one Saturday afternoon I was walking down the street and there was a fellow approaching me that was ragged a little, and had an old slouch hat on, and a jug, and a rifle. And he staggered up in front of me and he said, "Say, you're a stranger here, aren't you?" And I said, "Yes, I'm the new shop teacher here." "Well, have a drink on me," he says. I looked at that told dirty jug and I said, "Oh, no thanks, no thanks, I don't care for any." "Oh, you gotta have a drink," he says. "Well, I really don't care for any. I've gotta be on my way." "Oh, now look here, stranger, you'd better have that drink." And he pulled that old jug down and he shoved it at me, and I didn't even take a hold of it, and he pulled that rifle down and he said, "Now you better take a drink," and I could tell in his condition that I'd better make some move here. So, I took that jug and I just took a sip of that and it was the awful lest whiskey I ever tasted. It was terrible. And I made an awful face. He looked at me and he said, "It is awful, ain't it? Now, now you hold the gun on me, and I'll have a drink." (Laughter)

Oh, we had lots of fun entertaining ourselves, you know. And we used to have Robert Burns Days, and the whole community would prepare for this Robert Burns Days and have a big program, just all kinds of entertainment and preparation for the occasion. And then the school functions would be entertaining, and school plays and so forth were well attended because this was our entertainment. And oh, in the wintertime we would get together and have sleigh parties, and

church groups would have their parties, and the organizations, the lodges, and service organizations were very active, and people attended because this was our kind of entertainment.

And then we eventually got a radio station here, which was, my, it was really something. We had communication through the radio station. And they were talking about television, and they said, well, it had to --- it couldn't reach over 200 miles in a straight line. And I thought, well, Burns is out; we'll never have television. But it wasn't long before people had great long antennas up, and we would meet at people's houses and we would look at a screen full of snow and say, "Oh, I think there's an image there! I think I see something! Don't you see that?" And then it improved, and we finally got the cable system, and we have one of the best TV programming situations around here because of the Idaho and Oregon stations that we get.

So, it has improved in some ways, and in some ways we don't get together as much as we used to. But I can remember Halloween parties, and Christmas parties where we really got together and had our own entertainment. I have recited poems for a long time, and you find less and less people who recite poetry anymore. And that was an accepted form of entertainment for a long time. And I still like it.

CHARLENE: Well, when did you get started in reciting poetry? In learning all these?

DON: Well, my mother taught me the one about the guy that swallowed the lizard when I was just in grade school. And then in high school --- well, later grade school and high school I was in Boy Scouts, and around the campfires at night, we had a camp leader that would recite poetry. And some of my favorites were Robert Service's "Cremation of Sam McGee," and "The Shooting of Dan McGrew," and so I wanted to learn those. And I didn't get serious about learning these until I was in college, and I was taking a course in speech. And we had to learn all sorts of things and recite them, prose and poetry both, and prepare speeches. And I thought at that time, if I'm going to have to memorize these things, if I have a choice, I'm going to memorize something that is humorous. There's enough sadness in the world, and if I can just lighten it a little bit with some humorous poetry, I'm going to do that. And so, as I learned things that had to be for class, I would learn

something that I wanted to learn, if I had a choice. We didn't always have a choice. We had required things we had to learn. But that's where I learned the bulk of these poems, and then as the time has passed, I've added to those.

I remember when I was in Christian Endeavor Camp up at Wallowa Lake one summer, and we had a program period during that time, and one of the ministers recited, "When Paw Tried to Wean the Spotted Calf". Well, this minister had a peg leg, and he put on such a show that I thought that was the funniest poem I ever heard. I just laid on the ground and laughed. It was so funny the way he did that. Well, I looked for that poem for years, and years, and one time here in Burns, I was mentioning this poem to someone, and they said, "Well, I've got a copy of that." And that's how I got the copy of, "When Paw Tried to Wean the Spotted Calf". And then I set about learning that one. So, I enjoy it. I found that this is entertaining and a great joy to me.

CHARLENE: I wonder, could you do one now?

DON: Oh sure. One of Robert Service's lesser known is, "The Ballad of Old Blasphemous Bill".

"I took a contract to bury the body of old blasphemous Bill MacKie,

Whenever, however or whatever the manner of death he die -

Whether he die in the light o' day or under the peaked-faced moon;

In cabin, dance hall, camp or dive, muck lucks or patent shoon;

By velvet tundra or virgin peak, by glacier, drift or draw;

In muskeg hollow or canyon gloom, by avalanche, fang or claw;

By battle, murder or sudden wealth, by pestilence, hooch or lead -

I swore on the Book I would follow and look till I found my tomb less dead.

For Bill was a dainty kind of cuss, and his mind was mighty sot

On a dinky patch with flowers and grass in a civilized bone-yard lot.

And where he died and how he died, it didn't matter a damn

So long as he had a grave with frills and tombstone "epigram".

So, I promised him, and he paid the price in good cheechako coin

(The same I blew in that very night down in the Tenderloin).

Then I painted a three-foot slab of pine: "Here lies poor Bill MacKie,"

And I hung it up on my cabin wall and I waited for Bill to die.

Well, the years passed away, and at last one day came a squaw with a story strange,

Of a long-deserted line of traps 'way back of the Bighorn range.

Of a little hut by the great divide, and a white man stiff and still,

Laying there by his lonesome self, and I figured it must be Bill.

So, I thought of the contract I'd made with him, and I took down from the shelf

The swell black box with the silver plate that he'd picked out for himself;

And I stuffed it full of grub and "hooch," and I slung it on the sleigh;

Then I harnessed up my team of dogs and was off at the dawn of day.

You know what it's like in the Yukon wild when it's sixty-nine below;

And the ice-worms wiggle their purple heads through the crust of the pale blue snow;

And the pine-trees crack like little guns in the silence of the wood,

And the icicles hang down like tusks under the parka's hood;

And the stovepipe smoke breaks sudden off, and the sky is weirdly lit,

And the careless feel of a bit of steel burns like a red-hot spit;

And the mercury is a frozen ball, and the frost-fiend stalks to kill -

Well, it was just like that the day when I set out to look for Bill.

...

North by compass, North I pressed; river and peak and plain

Passed like a dream I slept to lose and I waked to dream again.

River and plain and mighty peak - and who could stand unawed?

As their summits blazed, he could stand undazed at the foot of the throne of God.

North, aye, North, through a land accurst, shunned by the scouring brutes,

And all I heard was my own harsh word and the whine of the malamutes,

Till at last I came to a cabin squat, built in the side of the hill,
I burst in the door, and there on the floor, frozen to death, lay Bill.
Ice, white ice, like a winding-sheet, sheathing each smoke-grimed wall;
Ice on the chimney, ice on the bed, ice gleaming over all;
Glittering ice on the dead man's chest, sparkling ice in his hair,
Ice on his fingers, ice in his heart, ice in his glassy stare;
Hard as a log and trussed like a frog, with his arms and legs outspread.
I looked at the coffin I'd brought for him, and I looked at the gruesome dead,
At last I spoke: "Bill liked his joke; but still, goldarn his eyes,
A feller had ought to consider his mates in how he goes and dies."
Have you ever been in a little hut in the shadow of the Pole,
With a little coffin just six by three and a grief you can't control?
Have you ever sat by a frozen corpse that looked at you with a grin,
And seemed to say: "You could try all day, but you'll never jam me in?"
Well, I'm not a man of the quitting kind, but I never felt so blue
As I did sitting there looking at that stiff and figuring what I'd do.
Well, then I rose and I kicked off some of the husky dogs that were nosing around about,
And I built up a roaring fire in the stove, and I started to thaw Bill out.
Well, I thawed and I thawed for thirteen days, but it didn't seem no good;
His arms and legs stuck out like pegs, as if they was made of wood.
Till at last I said: "It ain't no use - he's just froze too hard to thaw;
He's obstinate, and he wouldn't lie straight, so I guess I'll have to saw."
So, I sawed off poor Bill's arms and legs, and I laid him snug and straight
In the little black box he picked his self, with the dinky silver plate;
And I came nigh near to shedding a tear as I nailed him safely down;
Then I stowed him away in my Yukon sleigh, and I started back to town.

So, I buried him as the contract was in a narrow grave and deep,
And there he's waiting the Great Clean-up, when the Judgment sluice-heads sweep;
And I smoke my pipe and I meditate in the light of the Midnight Sun,
And I sometimes wonder if they saw, that awful thing I done.
And as I sit and the parson talks, expounding of the Law,
I often think of poor old Bill - and how hard he was to saw."

CHARLENE: (Laughter) I've never heard of that one before. I know a few of Robert Service's, but I never heard of that one!

DON: Well, another one that I have never learned yet, but I may someday, is "The Ballad of the Ice-Worm Cocktail". And it's lengthy and it's really funny. I get a kick out of that. When I was on Okinawa my sister sent me a *Complete Works of Robert Service*. So, I read a lot of them.

CHARLENE: Now, you do a lot of these around for things like, well, Masons and Eastern Star and so forth, like that, which everybody enjoys. I also haven't heard too many people who can do this kind of thing anymore, who are interested in it. I think maybe one of the reasons that they don't seem to teach kids in school to memorize anything. You think that's true? That has something to do with it?

DON: That has something to do with it, yes. When I was teaching drafting, I had my students memorize sentences that are important in drafting. And of course, a lot of them objected; they didn't like to memorize, but here just lately a former student of mine of many years ago said, "Do you know what I remember in your class? I remember that sentence we had to memorize." And he recited it to me. He still remembered that. Well, this is the way you get things to really stick, is to memorize them. Now the law of forgetting takes effect, if you don't use them, you forget them. But if you say them over and refresh your memory once in a while, they stick with you. And you get more meaning out of them because you think about them.

And in lodge work, of all the various lodges, a certain amount of memory work helps you to

really get the essence of the material in that lodge if you memorize the work. And then it stays with you. But I've enjoyed reciting these. We went to Europe this last spring, a busload of 41, and I recited several of these poems while we were in transit on the bus for entertainment. And this is fun.

CHARLENE: Can you estimate about how many poems and things of this kind that you can recite?

DON: Oh, I could give ten of them today, I suppose.

CHARLENE: I bet you know more.

DON: I'd have to refresh a little on some of them, but oh, I know at least fifteen that I could give.

CHARLENE: Since you have this trained memory, do you think it helps you --- think it helps keep the mind active, to keep memorizing that kind of thing?

DON: Oh yes, because every once in a while, in a spot where you never have faltered before, a word will leave you, and my goodness, you're just frantic for a word, you know, and it has never left you before. So, you have to keep your mind going. You have to keep saying it over, and then if you set out to learn something new, then you have to concentrate. And we get so lazy, we don't like to concentrate if we don't have to, you know, and so this is a matter of self-discipline, a matter of making yourself do something that you ought to do, and yet you don't want to put the effort out to do it. And it does take effort, and it does take time. I have found that I can memorize a little bit faster if I stand in front of a mirror and say it out loud, so that I hear myself say it, and you watch yourself say it. And then it helps to get that imprinted in your mind a little faster. But I don't know of any fast way of doing it, just over and over and over. There are no pills to take so you can memorize; there is no short cut that I know of. You just have to say it over and over until you have it, and you can recite it back. For some people it takes much less time than others. Some people have a terrible time memorizing. Other people can say it over three or four times, and they have it. For me, it takes a long time. I have to work at it.

CHARLENE: I found that Rainbow helped a lot when I went through the various offices.

DON: Yes. It's very good training. And if you take it seriously and memorize your parts as you go through, Rainbow means something. It holds a great amount of basic meaning if you can make

yourself do that. Some girls go through and never memorize anything.

CHARLENE: Oh, I know. The whole thing about not memorizing and not learning is showing up in --- practically everywhere that I go. It's in Rainbow, unfortunately, and when I taught Freshman English in college, they don't memorize anything.

DON: Well, we had to memorize the timetables through the twelves. In Canada, they have to memorize them through the fifteens. And in Europe they memorize them --- they still do. And I have found this helps considerably. And when I would ask in my drafting classes --- because we do use math in drafting --- how many know their timetables, and, well they knew a few of them. Very, very few knew them through the twelves, because they'd never had to. Maybe they had been required to at one time, but they didn't. And so, it's a handicap to them. They say, "Well, we've got a computer right here in my pocket! I don't need to know the timetables." Well, maybe so, but I still appreciate knowing, because I had to memorize. And I made myself memorize these things.

CHARLENE: One thing I was going to ask in connection with this: I can remember --- because I grew up in the '50's --- I can remember a period of change in Burns that seemed to kind of reflect the whole society. Seemed to me when I was growing up that the population of Burns was more stable. I mean when new people moved in it was really noticeable because they were so new, and we didn't have too many strangers moving in. And it seems that that's changed a lot. Is my impression true?

DON: Well, I have noticed this, too. I used to know nearly every-one around here, and now I go to a gathering of any kind and there's so many I don't know. I don't recognize them; I just don't know who they are. Well, I don't think Burns has grown all that much, there's just a little difference in attitude. We don't get together as a community as much as we used to. And the teachers would have get-togethers, all the teachers, not just in one building, but all the teachers would get together. So, we got to know all the teachers in the county, and then we had teacher's meetings in Central Oregon, so we got to know other teachers besides Burns. And for a long time, we had what we called the Schoolmasters' Club. It was just the men would go, and go over in Bend, Redmond,

Madras somewhere to a meeting and come home in the middle of the night. It was quite a trip, but we did it because we liked the association. We liked to know these people. And this isn't done as much as it used to be. So, the circle of people you know gets smaller, instead of enlarging. And it's mostly the attitude of the times, more than population, because right now Burns is down in population.

CHARLENE: Can you sort of pinpoint when this change started to take place? Because I kind of felt like there was something different going on when I was in high school in the early '60's. And when the town or the country as a whole has kind of started to change in attitude, and people started getting awfully mobile, I mean people move every three or four years now. I find myself forced into that position. I don't particularly like it. ...

DON: Well, it's gradual, it's hard to put any particular year on it, but this has been a trend, this mobility and moving from place to place, and not staying one place long enough to really get acquainted and not making the effort to get acquainted. Some would just as soon not. They don't particularly want to get involved in community activities, or church activities, or fraternal activities, they just want to be alone. They don't want to get involved. And some of them spend half a year here and a half a year in the south, so they don't want to get involved in anything. And when they don't get involved, they don't know many people. Don't get to know very many. So, mobility has really affected the community life, and it's hard to put a date on it, but it's gradual.

CHARLENE: What about television? Do you think, since you've seen it come into Burns, and as you were teaching at the high school, do you notice that that's had an effect on ---

DON: Oh, definitely. Definitely. Evening meetings --- it's difficult to get people to come out in the evening. And the fraternal organizations have noticed this particularly. It's hard to get people to come out at night and attend meetings. In the Masonic Lodge, I remember hearing some of the early minutes read about when the next meeting would be the full moon of the next month, because they came horseback and they would rather travel at night in the full moon than they would at the dark of the moon, so they set their lodge meetings by the moon, so they could travel in moonlight,

either horseback or buggy, or however they came in to lodge. But they would come from long distances to come to a lodge because this was their association with adults, this was their entertainment, this was their closeness to their selected friends. And so, they made a real effort to come to these meetings. Now with cars and good means of transportation, they don't come. The effort is not there. They'd rather stay home and watch their favorite programs than to make an effort to go out to a fraternal organization.

I think that's one reason why a lot of the service organizations meet at noon, during the noon hour, because they can get a good turnout at that time, rather than in the evenings. But television has certainly taken its toll in this field, all right. Yes, very noticeable.

CHARLENE: I think it's kind of a pity. Have you noticed any weather changes, like the heavy snow we got last winter? Was it like that when you came?

DON: No, the weather here hasn't --- except for the last three years being wetter and wetter and wetter --- it's been very nearly constant. We get some snow, and it stacks up for a while, and then it freezes and hangs on and hangs on and hangs on. But never a great abundance of snow at any one time except for this last wet season that we've been experiencing. They used to have an, oh, an occasional snow that was a little heavier than others, and they'd stack it up in the middle of the streets like they do, and they'd have a hard time getting over these stacks in the middle of the street until they were hauled off. But it's been rather constant. But going back to my early childhood, when I was 5, 6 years old in Elgin, I remember cold winters in Elgin and crusted snow, crusts heavy enough to hold up a team. And so, they would go right out across the fields and over the fences with their sleds in the wintertime, because the crusts and drifts were so solid that they could maneuver a team over them. I remember seeing this. And, well I remember one time our --- we had a potato cellar with two-foot walls, thickness, with sawdust in for insulation. And it froze our potatoes in there. Got down to 45 below and just stayed there for a while. So, we didn't have very much to eat that winter. We had frozen potatoes if you could eat them. And it wasn't much fun trying to get along on very little food, but we managed to get through. Long winter.

CHARLENE: Did you grow up on a farm?

DON: No, I always lived in town. I've been mistaken for a farmer sometimes, but I've always lived in town. I was born in Minam.

CHARLENE: Where's that?

DON: It's between Elgin and Wallowa. It's at the confluence of the Minam River and the Wallowa River. A little town that isn't there anymore. And from the looks of the picture, I have of the little shack I was born in, we were eligible for the Poverty Program and didn't know it. We thought we were all right; we didn't know anything about being poverty stricken. And then we moved from there to Elgin when I was so young, I can't remember it, but then we lived in Elgin until I was in the fourth grade.

And then we moved to LaGrande, where we had the first inside plumbing in our house. Taking a bath on Saturday night in a galvanized washtub was common when I was a kid; that's the only kind I had till I was in the fourth grade. So that poem strikes home, too.

CHARLENE: That must have been awfully cold to have to do that in the winter.

DON: Oh, it was. We put the tub right next to the wood stove, and that's where you had your bath. And my mother was a clean woman, and this had to be!

CHARLENE: Couldn't get out of it, huh?

DON: No way!

CHARLENE: I don't know if I could have taken those. Well, I guess if you --- that was all that was available ---

DON: That's the way it was.

...

CHARLENE: Oh, about this heavy snow. Did you ever remember this kind of heavy snow?

DON: No, not around here.

CHARLENE: I can remember more snow when I was a kid, and it was almost like this, but this seems to be ...

DON: We've had fairly heavy snows, but not like we had last winter. Like when I was a kid, we had two great, tall pine trees in our back yard, and my father put up a swing between them, a long rope swing, and we had so much fun out there. Well, here just a few years ago I was going to show my wife where that house was in Elgin. And we looked and looked and looked for that house, and I finally said, "Well, this has gotta be it because of those two little pine trees in the back yard." To me those pine trees were tall when I was a kid, but now they're not that tall. And I thought they'd be huge by this time, but they weren't. And we discovered the house, and they had remodeled it until I hardly knew it, and made streets and roads different there, and I had a hard time finding it, but we found it.

And in Elgin there's a rock wall, there's a big sheer wall of rock just north of town, and as I remembered that it was way out of town. But when I looked it over it's just a little ways out of town. So, your high snow might have been affected by your size.

CHARLENE: I suppose it was, because I can remember when I was about 5 or 6 years old, and it seemed awful high in the middle of the street and so forth. Well, I'm about at the end of the tape, but I'd kind of like to get some more poems and so forth from you some time. Can I come back and have you recite some more things?

DON: Sure.

TAPE 2 - SIDE C

CHARLENE: ... the Spotted Calf. If you want to start with that.

DON: I think I could do that all right. It means quite a bit to me, 'cause I've been there.

"You see, you can talk about your circuses and movin' pictures, too,

And coon-camp meetings, and Halloween and shivarees,

But you can take my word, the hottest show that ever fetched a laugh

Was once when Paw he tried to wean the spotted calf.

Now the calf milked them on the left-hand side and Paw milked them on the right.

And every blessed milking time that calf and Paw would fight.
He'd butt his head and switch his tail and dig right in like glory.
Paw said he had an awful time to hold his territory.
And then the calf would mess up the cow so, sometimes Paw'd make him march.
He said he'd rather stick his hand down in a crock of starch.
He said sometimes he wished that calf was in a hotter region.
He said if he didn't wean that thing he was going to have to give up his religion.
So, he went and got a milk-pan and put some more milk in,
And me, I clumb up on the fence to watch the fun begin.
He saw me and he says, "That's right, my son, you watch your Paw
And you'll be a first-class farmer when you grow up to be a man."
Well, then he marched into the calf-pen where the spotted calf was at.
He says, "Come on, Mr. Spotty, here's the cope to make you fat."
He stuck his hand down in it and he placed his fingers so.
Why, he thought that calf was going to come and take it in his mouth, you know.
And then he'd go to pullin' and then he'd sock his nose down in,
And then he says again, "Come on, Mr. Spotty, here's your cope,
Come take your medicine." Well, that calf just smelled Paw's fingers,
And then he broke and run. Yes sir, that was the smartest calf purt-near ever saw.
It knowed as well as anything that Pa's fingers wasn't its Ma.
And then Pa's fingers stickin' up so instead a tother way,
And Paw didn't have no bell on, nor horns, nor even hay.
Well, then Pa took to chasin' the calf around and around the pen.
He'd stop and stick his fingers up, then he'd break and run again.
I could see his jaws a-grinding and his neck a-getting red,
And I knowed some fun was a coming by the kind of words he said.

Then he went and he set the milk-pan down where he thought it safe from harm,
And he says; "Now we'll see who's a-runnin' this here farm."
And he spit on his hands and he rolled his sleeves clean up to his neck.
"Now, ya little rascal, we'll see who's a-runin' things, by heck."
And he grabbed old Mr. Spotty by the left ear and the tail,
And the fun was on for little Willy a-roostin' on the rail.
It was the beautifulest scrap that there ever was.
He split Pa's shirt clean up the back and busted his galluses.
Then Paw bent the calf plumb double and yelled, "You spotted brute!"
"I'll make you bite your pesky tail off clean up to your snoot!"
Well, the calf let out a beller and he darted right between Paw's old bowlegs.
Oh, you'd ought to hear him holler and get down on his knees and beg.
Then Pa let out a holler and he grabbed up old Spotty's tail,
And he went chargin' around the calf pit like a scooter under sail.
And I stood up and hollered, old Carlo started in,
And the geese and guineas and hens all set up an awful din.
And the pigs squealed and the colts and calves went chargin' cross the lot,
And the gobbler and the turkey hen joined in the turkey trot.
And the crows and magpies, why, you'd a thought for sure t
hat Noah's Ark had scraped the bottom and he opened up the door.
Well, the calf kinda humped his back and threw Pa clean as silk.
And kicked him in the stomach and set him in the milk.
Well, Pa looked and caught me laughin', and I hadn't done no harm.
He says, "What are you laughing for!" Well, I says, "I'm learning how to farm."
Gee, he was mad! He started in again; then he said, "Oh, shucks and fiddlesticks!"
And that was all he said. So, he limped away leaving the enemy holding down the field.

But Paw got even with that calf: He sold him for veal."

CHARLENE: Do you know who wrote that poem?

DON: I don't know. I first heard that when I was at Christian Endeavor Camp up at Wallowa Lake, and there was a minister there that was one of our advisors, and he had a peg leg. And he said this poem and he stomped around on that peg leg, and I thought it was the funniest thing I ever heard. And I tried for many years to find that poem. And here in Burns one time I mentioned that I sure would like to find that poem, and somebody says, "Well, I've got a copy of it." So, I got a copy. And I don't know who the author was, but I was sure glad to find that.

CHARLENE: Well, it's a funny poem, but I don't know anything about weaning. Is that pretty true?

DON: Oh, that's the way they do it. That's one way they do it, anyway. They've got better methods now; they have special buckets with a nipple on them that they feed the leppies with, or they wean the calves with, but that was common practice when I was a kid.

CHARLENE: Sometimes it was that difficult?

DON: Oh, yes. Calves are ornery; they're unpredictable, especially if they get a little big, too hard to handle.

CHARLENE: And they have to do it in one day?

DON: Oh, usually you work at it quite a while to get them, so they'll drink. They don't like to drink. They think they should have their mother.

CHARLENE: No wonder he sold him for veal. Do they just give them cow's milk in a pail?

DON: Yes.

CHARLENE: I've never seen that done. I suppose anybody who's ever been associated with farming or ranching would really appreciate that.

DON: Oh yeah, there's a lot of people around Harney County that knows about weaning calves.

CHARLENE: There was one other thing I had thought of that I thought you could probably tell me,

and that is, oh, about what the Masons did back a few years ago when they were really, when there were a lot more of them and the lodges were more active. And I wondered if you could say something about Malheur Cave ... how that got started.

DON: Well, it started, I think, about 1937. It was a long time ago. And they used to cook right out at the mouth of the cave, and everything was done right there. They'd sleep in the cave. But the cave became quite notable, and the Masons heard about it and invitations went out to Grand Lodge. So, they started coming from all over and just really having a good time there.

My first year to go out to the cave was in '48. And there were four busloads from Portland that year. We had close to 400 there, which is the largest crowd we've ever had. And one of the Portland lodges put on the second section of the degree in full uniform and it was very impressive. And we used to serve steaks out there for Saturday evening, and then the crowd got so large that we couldn't afford to feed them steaks, and we didn't used to charge them enough to hardly pay for the meal. We've had to raise our price for the meals. But even now we feed them Friday evening, Saturday morning, Saturday noon, and Saturday night. And there's a few stay for breakfast Sunday for \$15, so it's still very reasonable as far as food is concerned.

And out there at the cave we have air-conditioned rooms by the acre, out there. See, they bring their tents and sleep in the air; that's air-conditioned. With running water --- you run for the water.

CHARLENE: Oh, I see.

DON: We have pasteurized water out there, too. Yeah, it runs through pasture after pasture after pasture.

CHARLENE: No facilities at all.

DON: We have a well there that's pretty good water. We have it tested, and I'm not sure how it'll test out this year. Because of the high water, I'm not sure whether our well is contaminated or not, but we've had good water out there for many years.

And as far as what the Masons used to do, we had better attendance --- we do the same thing

now as we used to: We encourage candidates and help them through their degree work and their memory work, and it's a fine get-together. Men enjoy getting together and having fun together. And the ancient part of Masonry, it's been in existence for many, many, many, many years, hundreds of years, and so the antiquity of it is interesting. And there's so much study you can do if you have a notion to, in the history of Masonry and in the ongoing projects and problems that Masons have, and the good that they do, the Shriners' Hospital, the help that we have, for monetary help and physical help that we give to the members and widows. And it's a fine organization socially and mentally, and I just can't say enough about how I enjoy Masonry. I started to say we do about the same things now as we did then, except it's more difficult to get people to come out in the evening. Some join the lodge and go through the degrees and get their standing, and never show up again. And others find it very interesting and never miss a meeting. And so, it's the same that you can say with any other organization.

CHARLENE: Now this, at Malheur they do this, it's an initiation, isn't it? (In Malheur Cave)

DON: Yes, we put on the third and final degree in the Blue Lodge there. There are three degrees, and this is the most pictorial of the three degrees. We always put on a third degree at the Malheur Cave. One year we did not put on a third degree, but the Demolay put on their degree at the Malheur Cave. And many, many times visiting lodges have put on the work at the Malheur Cave, which is entirely up to the Master. If he wants another lodge to do it, why, that's fine. If he would like to do it --- when I was Master, I wanted to do the work because the men of Burns do the ritual work as good as anyone I know, and we can take a back seat to no one as far as putting on the ritual work. I hope that it will continue. We need to do some work on the bleachers down there. All this water dripping and the dry rot, we have to make sure that they're strong enough to hold up the many hundreds of men that get there. So, we were talking yesterday about plans for rebuilding sections of those bleachers. We'd like to put them on a cement pier to get them up out of the wet. We'd have to take a mixer down there and our light plant and have a work crew down there to set forms and pour the concrete. Then, if we get that done, it would make it so much more easy to fabricate and haul

down there the bleachers to set on them. So, it's something to think about, if we can get enough work crew together, we can probably do something like that.

CHARLENE: Do the Burns Masons own the cave?

DON: Yes. Yes, we own 50 acres, which includes the cave. And the owners of the land right next to us have sought our permission to fence the land, which is all right with us. We've had no fences out there, and we've had an agreement with the rancher that owns the land around the cave, that if we could use that little valley where our cook shack is and we feed the people down there, if we could use that once a year, he could use our 50 acres for grazing his cattle. And that's been in standing through about four different ownerships out there. But the present owner out there would like to fence the property, and so --- it's fine with us. We agreed that it'd be all right.

CHARLENE: Years ago, I know I remember that during the initiation --- it's always in August, is it?

DON: Yes.

CHARLENE: I remember that they had the families out for picnics, because I remember going out there for that, and then they must have quit that.

DON: We used to always go out there on workdays, when we wanted to get everything ready for the cave meeting. On workdays, we had family picnics out there, and I've attended some of those. And the men would go out and work, and the ladies would --- and the kids would enjoy the picnic idea. But the last years we've just gone out there and worked, we haven't made a picnic out of it. It would be nice if they could do that again, I think. We really had interesting times out there. And for some families, that's the only time they get to go out there.

CHARLENE: I haven't been out there since I was a little girl. Well, I thought I remembered that the families went out there during the initiation, but it must have been one of those workdays.

DON: It was probably one of those workdays, because the families are not encouraged to go to the Masonic meeting.

CHARLENE: Have the Masons always owned Malheur Cave area?

DON: No, we purchased that --- I don't remember when. It was probably about 1948, or somewhere along in there. We purchased that land.

CHARLENE: I'm surprised it wasn't designated a kind of monument or ...

DON: Yes, the state would probably like to set that aside as a monument or something, you know. And it's open to the public all the rest of the year; we don't close it or anything, we just put a notice in the paper that it's closed to the public while we're having our meeting. But we've experienced a great deal of vandalism down there. They've torn up our cook shack, just mutilated it, shot great holes in it with shotguns and rifles. And burned our altar --- we had an altar down there, they've burned it up, and they've torn up planks off of our bleachers and burned them. And one time we lined all the bleachers with some planks that we got. Someone went down with a truck and stole all of the planks, every one of them. And someone stole our roll of wire that we run down in the cave that we use to light the cave. And that was while we were there working. We'd hauled it out there and was getting ready to string the wire into the cave and somebody came along and stole the whole roll of wire. We had to come to town and get some more wire.

CHARLENE: It's such an isolated place; there is nothing out there.

DON: Every year people go out and dig in the entrance to that cave. They just dig great holes in there and push the rocks around and leave it, of course; they don't put it back where they found it. So, we have to go down there and make sure there's a path down that we can use, and push the rocks out of the way. So, we're plagued with vandalism there.

CHARLENE: Are they digging for relics?

DON: Yes. Yes, for artifacts.

CHARLENE: There was an Indian war there, wasn't there?

DON: Well, the Bannocks came over and the Paiutes holed up in the cave. And they were able to survive in the cave until the Bannocks gave up and went back into Idaho, as the legend goes. We print this legend on the aprons in the meeting every year so that they can know this history of that. 'Course, the way the Indians tell it, the coyote came and told them that the Bannocks were coming.

So, it's a good legend.

CHARLENE: Yeah, that's real interesting. ...

DON: You ought to get one of those aprons. There is a pile of them up at the lodge.

CHARLENE: Oh, is that all right, can I look at them?

DON: Sure, take one of them. We always print lots of them, so you can have one.

CHARLENE: Initiation is this weekend?

DON: This coming weekend.

CHARLENE: Are you expecting a big crowd?

DON: Well, we've been getting around 200 every year. And they surprise you, where they come from. The last several years, we've had a great number that come from California, in the Berkeley area. And some of them fly in, some of them come by bus, some of them drive, most of them drive in. Oh, from Idaho we usually have quite a few. There's a group that always comes from Washington. And all over the State of Oregon they come into it. We have had them there from Hawaii and China and other places that were far off. And every year we have someone that comes from --- when they register you can tell where their home lodge is, and they're from way off someplace.

For many, many years I have served rattlesnake cocktails at the Saturday evening meal out there. I usually fix around a hundred cocktails. And usually, they're all taken. I won't say they're all eaten, but they're all taken! (Laughter)

CHARLENE: What are they?

DON: Most of them eat them. Well, they're made of --- like any cocktail, some chopped lettuce, and rattlesnake meat, and a little cocktail sauce on it.

CHARLENE: You kill the rattlesnakes yourself?

DON: It's been some years since I found any to kill, but I have lots of friends that know I need rattlesnakes, so I usually get rattlesnakes enough, and I cook them up, cook them in the pressure cooker, then take the meat off the bones and mince it up because it comes off in long strips. Their

muscles are long and thin, you see. So, it doesn't look too much like snake, I mince it up in small pieces. And it doesn't taste too bad. A lot of people really like it. Like one fellow said, it tastes kinda like the neck of a chicken, but if he had a chicken that tasted like that, he wouldn't eat it!

(Laughter)

CHARLENE: Do you tell them before or after?

DON: Oh yes! We holler it, we shout it out, "Come get your rattlesnake cocktail!" There's no doubt about it!

CHARLENE: I've heard that for years that you served rattlesnake cocktails. ...

DON: The work crew usually goes out on Friday and then we get the thing set up and ready to go on Saturday. Our first part of our meeting is Saturday afternoon. So, we have to get out there and get things ready.

CHARLENE: How many snakes do you figure you need for that?

DON: Well, if they're any good size at all, three will feed quite a few men. But if they're small ones, it takes about thirteen. Quite often we get just small ones. I like the big ones because they're easier to cook and take the meat off of; you get a lot more meat off of one big one than you do a whole bunch of little ones. So, I like the bigger snakes, and of course the snakes we have around here are all Pacific rattlers or timber rattlers. We don't have any diamondbacks. And so, they don't get very big. Now if we were in the land where they have diamond backs, they get big and there's lots of meat on them. The meat is white and it's quite mild; there's not any strong taste to it. One year I was curing some meat, so I cured up some rattlesnakes and smoked them and took them out and they made a real hit. They picked the skeleton clean of that smoked rattlesnake.

CHARLENE: That's got to be quite a legend around. A lot of people must come for that ...

DON: Yeah, they call me "Rattlesnake Higgins" out there.

CHARLENE: The cave initiation must be really well known.

DON: Yes, it's well known. We usually have around twenty of the official state family there (the grand officers). And that is good --- anytime you can get the state officers to attend something, you

know it's worthwhile.

CHARLENE: Oh, they don't have to? ...

DON: Oh, no, this is strictly voluntary. So, we're very happy to have the Grand Master and his officers, and other grand officers also from other states. We usually have some of those. They're given a respected place on the program.

CHARLENE: It's the Burns lodge that does the degree work?

DON: Yes. It's in two sections. They always do the first section, and then sometimes a visiting lodge will do the second section. And this year we're going to do both sections.

CHARLENE: Is the candidate from here?

DON: Yes, the candidates from here.

CHARLENE: Is it always from Burns?

DON: It doesn't have to be, but we have always tried very hard to have a candidate ready for the cave meeting. I remember the year that Bob Smith was a candidate out at the cave.

...

CHARLENE: It's a really fascinating place out there because it's flat and then all of a sudden you just drop down and there's this huge hole in the ground.

DON: Yeah, just a huge cavern there. Makes a beautiful place for a lodge hall. The acoustics are just marvelous in there.

CHARLENE: Isn't there a river --- a stream that goes down the middle ---

DON: Not a stream, no. In the wet season it drains down into there, and then it forms a lake in the back part of that cave.

CHARLENE: They've got a rowboat, don't they?

DON: Yes. You can go quite a ways in a boat back there.

CHARLENE: I vaguely remember when I was little going in that rowboat. It looked like the bottom --- you could just reach out and touch it, but ---

DON: The water is extremely clear and clean in there and so it deceives you. The bottom looks

like it's right close when it's quite deep there.

CHARLENE: How deep is it down there?

DON: Oh, I don't know how deep it gets. It couldn't get very deep because that's a lava tube, and a tube doesn't get much larger than what you can see there. So, the water wouldn't be any deeper than that. But it finally does fill up the cave. The cave slopes downhill, you see, because it was formed by lava that cooled on the outside, and the center's still hot and it keeps on moving and leaves a tube. So, it has to be downhill for it to move out, to leave the tube. And there are lots of lava tubes in lava areas. And over by Bend there are some lava tubes. I've been in one over there.

CHARLENE: Does anybody else have a cave similar to this?

DON: Not that I know of.

CHARLENE: I have a Masonic friend in Nevada, and since I grew up around this, I thought all the lodges must have a little cave that they do this in, but they do theirs somewhere on one of the mountains for their outdoor initiation. ... That was always fascinating to me. I also wondered if you remembered anything about the 3-P Ball.

DON: Oh, yes indeed.

CHARLENE: Was that a Masonic connection somehow?

DON: Yes, the 3-P organization came to Burns from California someplace. And it is a fun organization for Masons, and it's a very rigorous initiation, and lots of fun at the expense of the candidate. But it tells the story of the King Solomon's Temple and the destruction of the Temple, and the rebuilding of the Temple, taken right from the Bible. And this humorous degree is based around this time in history. And it's just strictly a fun organization.

Before television, we had an annual ball. It was one of the big things of the year. And we had a huge list of invitations. We invited everyone we could think of, and had a nice dance, and about 11 o'clock they would have the grand march and introduction of officers, and then just had a good evening of dancing and refreshments. And as time went on, we got fewer and fewer coming to dance, and a harder time getting a good orchestra. I remember one year we thought we'd do

something good and get an orchestra out of Portland, which cost us more than it should have. Well, when they came it was just a group that they had put together through the hiring hall --- musicians never played before, but they just --- And when midnight come, they were through. Well, usually these balls went to 2 o'clock or so, you know, so when they started putting things away at midnight, oh, there was a furor. And from then on, we had a hard time getting good music. So, it kinda went downhill, and we held it in smaller places, and finally it just died the death of nobody coming, very few coming. And when the expense of the orchestra was more than you took in, why something had to be done.

CHARLENE: It was a lot of fun to watch when I was a little girl.

DON: Oh yes, that was one of the big things of the year, the 3-P Ball.

CHARLENE: I remember after they had the grand march, they used to sing the Star Spangled Banner.

DON: Yes. And this was always held as close to February the 22nd as we could get it.

CHARLENE: Oh, why is that?

DON: Because of the --- Washington's Birthday.

CHARLENE: Oh, I forgot, of course.

DON: See, Washington was a Master Mason also. So, we always held this in February and tried to get it as close to the 22nd as we could. And the pins and ribbons we gave as they came in to show they'd purchased their ticket were little red, white, and blue ribbons.

CHARLENE: That was really exciting. They had a whole gallery of spectators.

DON: Oh yes. Lots of people came to just watch.

CHARLENE: Can I ask what the P's stand for, or is that secret?

DON: Well, that would divulge some secrets, so we can always make up something for the three P's, you know.

CHARLENE: I'll bet you did too.

DON: Purpose and pulchritude and all those crazy things, you know. But I suppose there's very

few that know what the three P's stand for.

CHARLENE: ... Was it the Knights of the 3-P?

DON: Yes, the Knights of the 3-P.

CHARLENE: Well, that was really interesting. I'm sorry to see that go.

DON: Yes, I was too. One of the last meetings that we had was in John Day. We went up there to Canyon City and put this 3-P degree on up there for them.

CHARLENE: Do they have a chapter up there?

DON: No. This is the only one that I know of, and it doesn't do anything any more.

CHARLENE: And I remember the Shriners used to march in the Fair Parade.

DON: Oh yes, in their fezzes. The Shriners are still very active here in Burns, and their biggest activity, of course, is at Fair time when they sell tickets and have their drawing. And then they buy beef and sheep and whatnot at the auction, 4-H auction, for the crippled children's hospital, Shriners' Hospital. And it's a money raising effort to support that.

For many, many years we furnished the beef for the crippled children's hospital. And they have a caravan that starts over in Eastern Oregon. Sometimes it starts at Joseph up by Wallowa Lake, and proceeds to Portland, and people join the caravan all the way down to Portland. And by the time it gets to the hospital it's quite a caravan. Banners and everything. And they have a crew waiting there. They bring in the Demolay and younger fellows to help unload the pickups and trucks, and people that arrive there. And they bring all kinds of food into the Shriners' Hospital.

CHARLENE: That's wonderful. I remember seeing them from the Fair Parades and I thought that was really fun.

DON: Well, from the outward appearance quite often the Shriners, people get the idea that they just are having hilarity and mischief and drinking and so forth. But behind that is some mighty fine work that the Shriners do.

CHARLENE: ...

DON: Ray Weeks was instrumental in getting a boy from Harney County and his mother sent to a

Burn Hospital. I think this was in New Orleans, a Shriner Burn Center, because they couldn't afford to have it done and so the Shriners took care of it.

CHARLENE: ... Can you think of anything else? That's the main thing I wanted to ask you about.

DON: Oh, not that I know of.

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TAPE 3 - SIDE E

A collection of poems recited by Don Higgins, narrated by Vachel Higgins.

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