

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #12 Side B

Subject: Ruth Cowing

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: April 7, 1972

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

PAULINE BRAYMEN: I'm interviewing Ruth Cowing at her home in Burns, on April 7th, 1972. Well what I'd like to know is did your parents come to Harney County, or ---

RUTH COWING: Uh huh.

PAULINE: When did they come?

RUTH: Well let's see, I don't know if I know exactly the year. I was just a little kid. Oh, they come in '80 --- let's see, I was about four years old, I think. They must have come about '88 I guess.

PAULINE: 1888.

RUTH: I think. I don't know now, I don't know if that's exactly right or not.

PAULINE: You were about four years old.

RUTH: Yes.

PAULINE: In '92?

RUTH: 1892.

PAULINE: Uh huh. Well then made it come in about '96, or '98.

RUTH: Well '98, well that would be four years. I wasn't very old, I know, four or five anyway. I wasn't old enough for school, I know that.

PAULINE: Where did they come from?

RUTH: Grants Pass.

PAULINE: They came from Grants Pass.

RUTH: Uh huh.

PAULINE: And what was their names?

RUTH: Jennings.

PAULINE: What was your dad's name?

RUTH: Henry, Henry Jennings, and Julia Jennings was mother's name.

PAULINE: Were there other children in the family?

RUTH: Yeah, I had a sister and a brother.

PAULINE: Were they older or younger?

RUTH: My sister was older, and my brother was younger.

PAULINE: Had they lived at Grants Pass a long time?

RUTH: My folks?

PAULINE: Uh huh.

RUTH: Yes, they lived, I don't know how long, but they lived there quite a while, maybe they was born there, I don't know.

PAULINE: I thought, you know, that maybe they had come from some-place else.

RUTH: No, that's where --- the only place I know of that they lived, until they come over here.

PAULINE: Do you know how they happened, why they came, how did they happen to ---

RUTH: Well no, I don't. I'm sure I don't know how they happened to come over here.

PAULINE: Did they come in a wagon?

RUTH: Yes, with a team, a team of mules. I can remember a little bit about the trip, but

not very much.

PAULINE: I imagine it took several days.

RUTH: Yeah, I guess it did. They come with a team all right.

PAULINE: Where did they settle then when they got to Harney County?

RUTH: Well at first they worked on some of the ranches around. We stayed at Lakeview; I think they come to Lakeview and was there a year before we come on over to Burns. Then we come to Burns, and then we worked at the --- well it's where Pollock's live now. It used to be the Juniper Ranch, they worked there about a year, and then they came on over here. Papa took up a homestead, well it was on Soldier Creek, between Burns and Harney, you know, up in the hills there.

PAULINE: Well you must have gone to school at Harney then.

RUTH: Yeah I went to school at Harney.

PAULINE: What was it like then? Was there quite a little town there then?

RUTH: Yeah, there was quite a --- there was a store. It seems funny to look at it now and remember how it was then. There was a nice big schoolhouse there.

PAULINE: Do you know about how many kids went to school with you?

RUTH: Oh no, gee I wouldn't remember. There was quite a little bunch though. There was two rooms, too many kids --- well I think; oh I went there more than one year. I went, I think one year or two there was two rooms. At first I think there was just one room of kids. There was quite a little schoolhouse, because you know, there was quite a few people lived right there in Harney.

PAULINE: Was there soldiers still stationed there at the Fort at this time?

RUTH: No, huh uh.

PAULINE: Did they still call it Fort Harney, or was it just called Harney?

RUTH: Well yeah, I've heard them call it Fort Harney, and then called it Harney. No, there wasn't anything there.

PAULINE: Do you remember anything about when the rabbits were really bad in Harney County?

RUTH: Yes, I do, we went on rabbit hunts. We just killed piles of them out there along the road, you know. Well, it was around, on the sand hills is where it was, where they drove rabbits. We lived out there one winter, after I was married, with Clyde's mother and went on rabbit drives. My goodness, I never saw so many dead rabbits in my life, gracious. Yeah, they were bad.

PAULINE: What kind of crops did your dad raise when he first came here? Did he have cattle, or did he try to ---

RUTH: He had a few cows; we had milk cows, mostly milk cows. And he raised hay up there on the --- it was just a canyon, you know, they didn't have much land there. And then they lived there, and I was married then, while I lived there. And after I was married they bought the Bill Morrison place below us there. ... Then they lived there until they, I don't know just what year they bought that place. Then they sold it and moved to Burns, they was getting too old to run that.

PAULINE: Did your dad serve on the school board, or hold any public office or ---

RUTH: No, no, he never did.

PAULINE: What about dances out there, did they ---

RUTH: Oh yeah, we used to have dances in the neighborhood there, we'd all go to different houses and have dances, you know. There was quite a lot of people lived up in

there then, in the hills, you know.

PAULINE: What did you do for music?

RUTH: Well the Hibbards, you know, they used to, they all played, and they did most of the playing. Ralph Hibbard, and Dewayne, and Earl.

PAULINE: Did most people have a piano, or an organ, or did they just use a violin and ---

RUTH: Yeah, they mostly had violins and guitars, you know. Hibbards had an organ. And the rest of them didn't.

PAULINE: Were you living out there at the time that they, I'm not sure of my date here, I should look that up, but I didn't think about it until just now. But were you living out here at the time that they decided to move the county seat to Burns, or had that already happened?

RUTH: That happened before, I think before we got there, I think. Maybe about that time, I don't know, I just --- I'm afraid I don't remember.

PAULINE: Did your dad go out and freight anything like food supplies and this ---

RUTH: Yeah, they used to go to Ontario in the fall and get supplies, or over --- sometimes they went to John Day with a team.

PAULINE: Well what kind of things did you have to eat then?

RUTH: Oh, we always raised a big garden, garden stuff, all kinds of garden, planted a big garden. We milked cows and sold butter to the Perrington Mill up there. We'd pack it up there a horseback.

PAULINE: Now tell me about this mill, what did you say the name of it was?

RUTH: Perrington.

PAULINE: Perrington.

RUTH: Perrington, yeah. Oh what was the other fellow, that was --- I believe it was Perrington's father.

PAULINE: But I hadn't heard this name before, is the reason I was asking about it. Well that wasn't the Dickenson?

RUTH: No.

PAULINE: This wasn't the same place?

RUTH: No, Perrington, it was on Poison Creek.

PAULINE: It was a sawmill?

RUTH: Uh huh. It was on up above our place.

PAULINE: On Soldier?

RUTH: ...

PAULINE: Did they have quite a few people working up there?

RUTH: Yeah, yeah they had quite a few men working up there. There was quite a lot of lumber up in there. ...

PAULINE: Well we can sure go checking on that. Dickenson's Mill is ...

RUTH: No, wasn't Dickenson's ...

PAULINE: I hadn't run across it.

RUTH: This was Perrington ... They had one daughter just about my age. She's been dead several years. She married that --- I can't think of nothing --- But he's dead too. ...

PAULINE: What did you do for dresses, did you buy material from the ---

RUTH: No. Yeah, we made them. Yeah, I never had a boughten dress till --- Lord knows when.

PAULINE: What kind of material could you get then?

RUTH: Oh, we could get calico and gingham. ...

PAULINE: Well I've often wondered, of course the same thing today, you have a big bolt of material in the store, and everyone has the --- did this happen often, where a lot of the lady's dresses would be pretty much just alike?

RUTH: Oh yeah, have a dress on, see somebody else with a dress on like it. It didn't seem to bother anybody though.

PAULINE: Did you ever teach school, or ---

RUTH: No. No, I stayed home and helped my dad milk the cows until I was married.

PAULINE: What year were you married?

RUTH: 1910.

PAULINE: 1910. Okay, that was to Clyde. I believe I have his history from the Pioneer Day article here a couple weeks ago. (See attached copy of Cowing history in Pioneer Day article.)

RUTH: Yes.

PAULINE: Did you live up by Five Mile Dam ...

RUTH: No, we lived, when we were first married we had a homestead up about 15 miles from Burns. We were there seven summers.

PAULINE: Then did you come in then during the wintertime?

RUTH: Yeah, we'd bring the cattle down in the valley to winter them. We had cattle and horses. We'd come down in the summertime and put up hay, and then we'd bring the cattle down. We didn't winter up there. ...

PAULINE: It was up in the forest there?

RUTH: Well it wasn't in the timber, no, there was timber on past, we wasn't in the timber.

PAULINE: The cattle though ---

RUTH: Oh, yeah, we run the cattle in the forest. Yeah, same as we do now. And then we bought the place on the river up here from Henry ... We bought that in; I think the fall of '17.

PAULINE: Was the Five Mile Dam in then? Had they put the Five Mile Dam in?

RUTH: Oh yeah, the dam was in then, Five Mile Dam. ... That dam went out a couple of times though, ... The last time it ... they put it in with concrete, you know,...

PAULINE: Did you ever have a problem with being flooded out up there?

RUTH: Yeah, we have been flooded out. And I had to move out a few times. It almost got in the house once. It was all around the house ... So we moved out for, oh about three times I guess we moved down from there. The water was high. Once when it was high we was out three weeks.

PAULINE: Did your children go to school at the schoolhouse that was up there, or was their school at Burns?

RUTH: Yeah, yeah, no they went to grade school there until they got ready for high school. Then we went, come to Burns. No, they all four went up there ...

PAULINE: About how many kids did they have at one time?

RUTH: I don't know how many, there must have been 12, 15 ... maybe there were more than that. I've got a picture of a bunch of them. ... quite a few of them lived up there, you know.

PAULINE: Oh, I was going to ask you if you remember the first time you ever rode in a car, or saw a ... automobile, what you thought about it.

RUTH: Well Clyde's mother bought a car while we was living up there on the homestead.

She must have bought that about '13 or '14. Henry was born in '16, and I know she had it then. ... We called it the big Apperson car. That was about the first rides I ever had in a car, I guess. I don't think I did before that.

PAULINE: Did you like it?

RUTH: Oh, yeah.

PAULINE: Yeah, it was pretty nice.

RUTH: Then we got, later on we bought a car. I don't know ...

PAULINE: I imagine in the spring that road up that way got pretty muddy and was pretty bad.

RUTH: Yeah, they used to gravel it. It is pretty good now, they've got so much gravel on it, it stands up pretty good. Of course they've got it paved out here by the house ...

PAULINE: That sure helped.

RUTH: Yeah, yeah, that was rough and everything. We got that --- yeah that helped Henry a lot. Most of his roads, you know ---

PAULINE: Yeah, he can --- Now, let's see your children were Henry and ---

RUTH: Audrey (Bennett).

PAULINE: Audrey.

RUTH: Dorothy.

PAULINE: And ...

RUTH: ... and his wife. Dorothy, Dorothy Starbuck.

PAULINE: Yeah, I was thinking of Veva.

RUTH: Veva Dolan, Veva Dolan. Yeah, and I got 11 grandchildren, and 5 great-grandchildren.

PAULINE: Yeah, one is just not too old either.

RUTH: No.

PAULINE: ... little one.

RUTH: And Carol and Joan she's got one that won't be a year old until October. Carol and ... Sharon, she's got one that --- she's only 3; she's 3 the 13th of this month.

PAULINE: Did you ever work on the election board for voting?

RUTH: Let's see did I, yeah I have a little, but not very much. I generally stayed home and got dinner for them. ... they'd all come over on there to dinner.

PAULINE: Where did they have the election, at the schoolhouse?

RUTH: At the schoolhouse, uh huh. I worked a few times, but not very many. I was school clerk; I think I was the clerk one year. But I didn't like that kind of work. Teresa Baker, she was clerk for years and years up there. But I didn't have time, on the ranch and raise a big garden and milk cows.

PAULINE: Well Teresa told me one time about the neighbors all coming up to her house for dances, and dancing.

RUTH: Yeah.

PAULINE: Moving her stove right out into the yard.

RUTH: Yeah, and they used to dance at our place too. We had a big kitchen and they'd move the stove out and the table and everything and, they don't do that any more. ... parties. Used to have fine parties. Yeah, I liked Teresa Baker; she was an awful good neighbor.

PAULINE: I didn't get to know her until just these last few years. But I surely think she is a wonderful person too.

RUTH: When Dolly and ... Smith lived there ...

PAULINE: Did you ever have any problems with rattlesnakes coming down near the house?

RUTH: Yes, we killed several of them around the house. One got under the house, and I stood there and watched until he come out and I went out and killed him. A great big one. The kids was out, they happened to be there that day, and the grandkids was little and they were playing in the yard and yelled there is a rattle-snake. At that time he went under the back porch. I got them all in the house and told them to be quiet now. And so we stood there and we watched and pretty soon that darned thing crawled out. I went around the house the other way to get between him and the porch, you know, ... and killed him.

PAULINE: I don't know whether I could ever kill one or not. See I run when I see one.

RUTH: If I see them, I'm not afraid to kill them. I stepped on one, one time.

PAULINE: That's an experience.

RUTH: By the front gate. Well I knew he didn't bite me, but ... was just a little kid, and I jumped and yelled, and jumped back. She heard him rattle and she thought he bit me. She began to cry.

PAULINE: Yeah.

RUTH: I don't know why it didn't. Oh I didn't step with my full weight on it I guess, but when I stepped, you know, I knew it was something soft, you know. The thing just began to, rattled right then and started to crawl off. ...

PAULINE: Well this is what I've always heard; they'll try to get away.

RUTH: Yes, yeah they will.

PAULINE: They'll run if they can. If they think they're threatened, why they ---

RUTH: I hate the darn things. But oh I don't know, as long as we have lived there I expect we have killed 15 or 16, or something around the house, you know. They're around close there at the house. They're bad up that river, you know. We've killed them out on the road up there.

PAULINE: Yeah, I know that they are.

RUTH: And out in the field when they're haying, I think they ...

PAULINE: Did you pick chokecherries, and elderberries for jam and jelly?

RUTH: Yeah, just some. But we never cared much for the chokecherries, and I never picked very many of them. I have picked elderberries, and wild currents. Those black ones, I like them black ones.

PAULINE: Oh, they make good jelly. I got ... last summer. In fact I've got juice in the freezer that I didn't get made up.

RUTH: I cook it and can it. I got some in the cellar now.

PAULINE: But next year, I'm just going to hunt black ones. I'm not going to bother with the others.

RUTH: That's the way with me; I just go around and hunt the black ones, because I like them so much better than I do the others. I liked the black ones awful well. Oh I had berry bushes up there too ... Strawberries never done very good, but I had raspberries. Raspberries did beautiful, raspberry patch up there. We had a few fruit trees; we had a peach tree and two apple trees. They don't always have fruit on them though every year, you know. Some years they're just loaded.

PAULINE: I didn't think a peach tree would ever make fruit here.

RUTH: Well they didn't get very big, but they were good. I canned a lot of them. Well, the frost gets them. ... I had a big old yellow transparent tree up there with a bunch of apples on it. They are a fall apple and when they are ripe, they're ripe, and they spoil pretty fast. Raspberries and currents ---

Well I used to work out in the hay field a lot. I always helped on the mowing machine, and I always drove the Jim team. They never tried to get anybody to do the Jim driver but me.

PAULINE: Well I think driving the Jim wagon could be a pretty nice job.

RUTH: Yeah.

PAULINE: Or was there more work to it than it sounded?

RUTH: Well yeah, you had to be on your toes, you know. You had to trip, you know, when they showed up with the fork. You had the tripper, and you could pull off the stack awful easy, you know. I drove four horses. ...

PAULINE: What kind of a wagon did you use?

RUTH: Just one of these old four wheeled ---

PAULINE: Just the old four wheel?

RUTH: Yeah, the wagon, you know. The worst thing that ever happened in the hay field, why we was coming in for supper and we was out here on this Foley place. We had that for 3 years ... I was coming in and had a bridge to cross and there wasn't no railing on it. We had an old milk cow there that she was just ready to calve, and ... was going to milk her. A nice big roan cow. And when I started to cross --- I had the cutter bar, you know you've seen mowing machine, and they had the cutter bar up. And of course it goes up like this, you know. That end there was up about this high. And I started to cross that

bridge, and darned if that old cow didn't start to cross this other way to meet me. And of course there wasn't no railing on the bridge, and she kinda crowded over toward that, and the corner of that cutter bar hit her right in the shoulder and just split her side wide open and pulled out her entrails. I looked back, and my gosh I was ... And she run out there and laid down. And Clyde was already at the house, I think, and I told him and so he went out there. She'd run out there a little way, and the calf was a laying there, and she went on a little further under a bush and laid down. Her entrails were just --- Oh my gosh, what a mess. And I was a bawling, and Clyde said, "Oh shut up bawling." I said it was one of the family ... I felt. PAULINE: Yes, I can imagine.

RUTH: And that calf, that heifer calf --- And I told him, I said, "Well if that was a steer, bull calf we'd call him Max." And so Clyde said, "Well I guess we can call it Maxine." So we gave it to Judy, she was just a little thing then. And that calf grew to be a nice big cow. And then Clyde ... They come up and butchered the cow; they give a hundred dollars for the meat.

PAULINE: Well it wasn't all lost then.

RUTH: No, but oh my ---

PAULINE: Oh, that was terrible.

RUTH: I never had anything --- ... A person just doesn't realize how sharp that cutter bar point is. That just caught her right back of the shoulder and just split her whole side.

PAULINE: Did you ever go to Bend or Ontario much when the roads were bad?

RUTH: No, we never had a car. You know, until after we got our car, then after we got the car, why we never took any long trips. Well the first time I was ever to Portland, well we was on the road the day Audrey was 16 years old. And we ... to Portland. Clyde had

relatives in Portland. And that was our first vacation trip. ... Not a great deal, because we always had a bunch of old milk cows and we had to stay home and milk, you know. No, we stayed pretty close to home.

PAULINE: Would you change it if you could do it all over again? Would you still choose to be a rancher's wife out here in Harney County?

RUTH: Well I guess so, I suppose I would. Oh, I suppose a person would change all right, but then ---

PAULINE: Well most people that you talk to live out here, but will admit that there is better places to live maybe, but they just as soon not live there. They'd just as soon live right here.

RUTH: Well I think this is --- Oh well the climate of course is not as good as it is lots of places. There's drawbacks to all countries seems like, you know. I wouldn't want to live back there where they have those tornadoes.

PAULINE: No, that idea is rather frightening to me too. The wind may blow out here, but ---

RUTH: Yeah, that was a pretty bad one they had in ---

PAULINE: In Vancouver.

RUTH: In Vancouver.

PAULINE: Yeah, that was terrible. There was, I don't know whether you got the paper today or not, but in the Journal they had one page of pictures.

RUTH: Did they? Well I saw lots of pictures on the TV.

PAULINE: Oh, they just --- lumber and debris scattered every place.

RUTH: Yes, I sat there and watched that for a day, you know. And that night they had

another half hour of that show on it. It was awful. Well you know here 3, 4, 5 years ago when they had that bad storm in Portland too.

PAULINE: Yeah, that was Columbus Day.

RUTH: Yeah, but that didn't do ---

PAULINE: No, it didn't --- it did a lot of damage but it wasn't ... anybody got killed.

RUTH: No.

PAULINE: And it didn't take off roofs and things, you know, complete destruction.

RUTH: This just happened, I guess they didn't --- you know they didn't think there was. I guess maybe they --- the wind was blowing and they knew a storm was coming, but they didn't seem to realize that it was going to be ---

PAULINE: But it's not too common for us to have that kind of ... In fact I've never heard of there being a tornado on the west coast.

RUTH: Huh uh, I never either.

PAULINE: We were coming home from Bend, and they said tornado. I said, "Well we don't have tornados out ---" But that's what they're calling it.

RUTH: Yeah, they're calling it. Well I guess it could be, I don't know what else it would be, a storm like that.

PAULINE: Well can you think of anything else that, the way things used to be?

RUTH: Oh ...

PAULINE: Have things, as far as the cattle business is concerned, the way you do things, oh fifty years ago, and the way they do them now, has it really changed an awful lot?

RUTH: Oh changed some, yes. Yeah, quite a little ... Well I know, when you turned the cattle out, you never had to pay for them, you know.

PAULINE: You have to have a permit.

RUTH: A permit, and you have to pay for them. You can't turn nothing out without paying for them. So we didn't used to have to pay for them to turn them out. Yeah, we've had a high price and a low price. I can remember when my dad used to, when our milk cows calved, you know, why he could sell them calves for \$12, \$16, \$14, \$16 a head. ... And now they are way up to 40 cents a pound.

PAULINE: Yeah. Well they can go down again too, they can do that again.

RUTH: Yeah. Well gee, I hope not. The way prices is ---

PAULINE: Well this is the thing, if they go down too much ---

RUTH: Everybody will be broke.

PAULINE: Yeah.

RUTH: You know, the prices ... used to be.

PAULINE: Well I sure thank you for taking time to talk to me.

RUTH: Well, I don't know if ...

PAULINE: Well one thing you did is told me about this Perrington Mill, and I hadn't heard about it before.

RUTH: Yeah, you hadn't.

PAULINE: No.

RUTH: Well they had that up there for a long time. Of course it is not there now.

PAULINE: Yeah.

RUTH: But it was there for several years. I made many a trip up there with vegetables, and lots of butter.

PAULINE: Well I'll know to ask somebody else about it, you know, too.

RUTH: Oh yes.

PAULINE: Maybe I'll find somebody that ---

RUTH: Darned if I can't think --- his house was right down here. They lived ---

PAULINE: Would that be Blacks?

RUTH: No.

PAULINE: No.

RUTH: Well I haven't thought of it for a long time. ... I'm getting so darned forgetful ...

PAULINE: Yeah.

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