

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #122 - Side A

Subject: Cecil Bennett

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: January 21, 1972

Interviewer: James Baker

Release Form: No

CECIL BENNETT: About 1915, after my folks had moved up to Silvies Valley, that was William Bennett and Ida Belle Bennett, my mother and father. At that particular time, why the stock industry in this country was not too good, cattle was low, feed was very scarce. The reason for this feed being scarce was that the range had been over-grazed, badly over-grazed, by the Pacific Livestock Company, commonly known in this country as the PLS Company, or Miller and Lux. They would turn their cattle loose early in the spring just as the grass had started to come up, in great droves of cattle. They would start scattering them from Harney Valley through Silvies, and Bear Valley, and up into Logan Valley, and all over them hills. And they had in the neighborhood of between 15,000 and 20,000 head of cattle. This amount of stock on that range, along with the sheep that were in the country --- there was some large sheep men, like the Oliver Brothers from John Day, and Officer Brothers from Dayville, and other big sheep men, had the country so badly over-grazed that an awful lot of the country that you drive through now was virtually a dust bowl. From north of here up through this grazing country, up through the northern part of Harney County, and the southern part of Grant County was the country that I rode in. In those days we called it buckarooing. In the fall of the year when these big cattlemen would come to gather their cattle, why the little fellows would turn out and ride with them, and this was done mostly in self defense, because if you didn't get out and ride with them, why they didn't pay any attention to your cattle and you'd land up --- you'd find out you'd end up with about half your cattle down here in Harney

Valley. Then if you didn't get down here and look after your interests pretty quick, why they'd be a big stock drive starting south.

And this said, PLS Company had a ranch where they could pasture their cattle on their own land from here clear to the Mexican border. They was that big. But they were very good to the average little cowman. We could go into their camp when they moved up to the Silvies Valley, or Bear Valley, or Logan Valley or any of them places, we could send a representative into their camp, and several of them, they would feed them, and if we run short of saddle horses they'd furnish us horses to ride, and we was always treated very nice by these big companies. This went on for quite some time that way, but I'll drop back just a little bit.

The first District Ranger in the Malheur National Forest was S. R. Bennett, my oldest brother, who has passed away. He was District Ranger in Silvies Valley and the Malheur Forest in 1908.

JAMES BAKER: That's about the time the Refuge was set up.

CECIL: At that time there was a program started to protect this range, but it was quite a little while before they were able to put this thing together. Like any governmental project, it's slow about being processed, and put together where it's working as it should work. Where we had dust bowls in those days, you can drive up through that same range now and you would probably be able to mow hay in a lot of it. Maybe not a big crop of hay, but some of those little meadows you could mow a pretty good crop of hay. So, they've went a long, long ways, I mean they've done a good job.

JAMES: That must be the water planning that they've done?

CECIL: It's the water, they've crosscut this country with fences, so called drift fences we call them, that's been put in, so they can control the herds in different areas. Now that went on and on to where they've treated this sagebrush land and sowed grass on it, crested wheat and meadow foxtail, until they have created a deal whereby, they can raise three times as many stock as they did back there in the olden days. And they can make them produce twice as much as them old cattle did,

because they're well fed, they're taken care of.

In 1917, why I got married here in Burns, Oregon. In 1918, we worked a year and a half for the Malheur National Forest; I was District Ranger, first on Canyon Creek and then on Crow Flat, up here 20 miles north of Burns.

JAMES: What were you doing mostly up there?

JAMES: Oh, we was fire prevention, telephone line building, and road construction. I built the first telephone line that connected the Crow Flat Ranger Station with the Ochoco Forest from Crow Flat to the Ben Campbell place, that was known as the Ben Campbell place, it's the Bob Smith place now on Emigrant Creek.

An old fellow by the name of Buck Hankins who is retired from the Forest Service, I hired, and Buck worked with me on this project that winter of 1918, and spring of 1919. And Buck stayed with the Forest Service all of his life until his retirement came up, and then he retired from the Forest Service, and he still lives over at John Day, Oregon. And I see a few of those old poles still standing that we put up.

And after that I worked around Burns just as a common laborer for a while, and then I moved to the south end of the county to what is known as Catlow Valley and took over as a ranch foreman at Three Mile for Swift and Company, under Judd Wise, who is presently alive and living here in Burns. Judd was the Ranch Superintendent for the Swift Company at the P Ranch at that time. That was in about 1921.

At that time why we put up quite a lot of hay with teams and all of it was done by hand, and with horses. We didn't have any power machinery of any kind.

JAMES: Did they put up hay then any differently than now?

CECIL: Well, we put up hay different then, in this way, that we would have six or eight mowers in the field, where maybe now you'd have two, because you'd mow as much hay with one big tractor as we would mow with six horse mowers. Now, I'm making a kind of a guess at that. Some of these young fellows out here that know more about it than I do would say that old Cecil didn't know

what he was talking about.

JAMES: Of course, they didn't know anything about the teams, either.

CECIL: But some of the old timers that we had in those days was old Raz Lewis, who lived down there in Catlow Valley, and he was one of the finest horsemen, with wild horses or mules, that I ever run up against, that I ever seen in my life. He could handle a wild horse better than any man I ever seen in my life. He would walk right in a barn where there was a bunch of hot, wild horses and mules tied up, and walk right in between two wild outlaw horses and slap one on each flank and make them get over and walk right on in between them, and they wouldn't never kick him. I don't know how he got by with it, but he did.

JAMES: He must have led a charmed life.

CECIL: I hired old Raz Lewis the first fall that I put up hay, to not do anything in the world but ride around through the field and watch this machinery and see that it kept a running, and to rope any team that started to make a break for a runaway. And they were surprised at how cheap I put the hay up for them; they didn't think it could be done. And we put the hay up for, cut it and stacked it and fenced the stack yards for less than \$2 a ton.

JAMES: How did you do it so cheaply?

CECIL: Well in the first place, labor was cheap. I'll elaborate just a little bit on how we accomplished it so cheap. Labor was cheap. We didn't have any high-priced fuel to buy or anything. Horses was cheap, they wasn't worth nothing. We had lots of horses. The only expense we was out, was the men, and feeding the men, and you could hire a good man for \$1.50 or \$2 a day. The cost of machinery was not very expensive, and it didn't cost too much to put a ton of hay up. We'd cut this hay and rake it with a rake, we had about 12-foot rakes that raked it up, what we called windrows. And then they'd go in there with hay bucks and buck it up into buck loads. And we had what they called the old sweeper buck. But they would buck this up in big buck loads, and there would be approximately 300 pounds of hay, give or take a little bit, maybe 400 pounds. And then when they went to bucking it into the stack, why they'd buck generally about three of these

loads together. By that time the hay had settled, and it got solider and, these big sweep bucks would pick it up and they'd bring it in, and they'd buck it right onto a net. And this net that I speak of consisted of three chains laying on the ground, one end of them attached to a fir pole, or a steel pipe, different ones used it different. Some of them used the steel pipe, and some of them used the fir pole. I preferred a steel pipe, myself.

And it had three bottom chains and this pipe would lay in a little trench, and these bottom chains would be about 18 to 20 feet long, and they would go up and the three of them would come together up at the front end and be hooked into a steel cable. And after you backed off of this net, why you'd have what we called a crotch chain a laying in this net, and you'd pull that out, the net setter would pull that out, and it went over the top of this hay, and hook it into this steel cable. And when he hooked her in there, why he'd holler, "Take her away." And the guy at the other end of the stack with four horses and a wagon was hooked onto this cable, would start out and he'd pull this load of hay up onto the stack. And the stacker, up on the stack, would place this cable where he wanted this load of hay. He'd generally pull one buck load of hay on one side of the stack, and the next buck load of hay on the other side of the stack, and about the third buck load of hay right in the middle between these two first ones, and kind of squeeze them out. And a right good hay stacker could handle pretty near any amount of hay that you wanted to shove up to him.

JAMES: I bet that was something.

CECIL: And he didn't handle but very little of it with a fork, you didn't see him forking hardly any hay. He'd just jump on top of her and holler, "More hay." Those old-time stackers, they knew just what they was a doing all the time.

Anyway, we enjoyed ourselves there in Catlow Valley, and eventually wound up the last year we were there on Home Creek as Ranch Superintendent of Catlow Valley. And we got into a little bit more money, and there was a lot of fine people down there. Hank Osborn at Roaring Springs was a fine man. Hank is gone now. And old Clyde McKelvey up on Skull Creek was another fine person. He's gone, of course, to his rest. And this old Raz Lewis that I speak of was a

fine man; he's gone. I seen his daughter, Mrs. Claude Brown, a few days ago, she came through Burns.

JAMES: She live in Burns?

CECIL: She did live in Burns for a good many years, her, and Mr. Brown, and she moved to Burns a good many years ago with her first husband, Frank Henry, who worked for the Bureau of Land Management until he passed away. And then after that, why Claude had lost his wife, why her and Claude Brown got married. They lived here until Claude died, and Mrs. Brown now lives in, you know where she lives?

MRS. BENNETT: Richland, near Baker.

CECIL: After we left Catlow Valley then, when the Company sold out, why we moved back up to Burns in about the spring, I think, of '23. Some of these dates are a little vague, and I may mix up on them a little bit.

We then started in looking for a garage, and so the first thing we heard of in the way of a garage was a repair shop in Prairie City for sale. So, I went over there, and I made a deal with the old gentleman that owned this building and service station for this shop. I can't recall his name.

JAMES: Do you remember how much you paid for it?

CECIL: I paid him \$500 for this repair shop and tools, and I was to get a year's rent free, and then after that I was to pay him a little rent. But it didn't pan out, there wasn't very many automobiles in the country, and we had a lot of snow that winter, and it got pretty tough. Well, we didn't have too much money in the bank, we had a little money in the bank, but I told Mrs. Bennett, I says, "Well, I'm not a going to sit here until every dollar we got is gone, I'm going to strike out and see if I can get a job."

JAMES: Let me ask you one question about the garage, what kind of farm machinery were they using at the time when you had your shop?

CECIL: Well, most of the farm machinery was still horses and, very little tractor work, yet then.

JAMES: So, you wouldn't be able to repair farm machinery at this time?

CECIL: Very little.

JAMES: Only the automobiles and maybe the trucks?

CECIL: Yes, that was all, automobiles and trucks. By the first of the year, that must have been about '24, wasn't it Mama?

MRS. BENNETT: ... started to school there yet. He was seven though.

CECIL: That would be about '25. In the spring of '25, why probably in January why we see that we were eating in on our little nest egg of money we had, so I told Mrs. Bennett, I says, "Well, I'm gonna leave you and the kids here, and I'm going to go down the river and see if I can find a job some place, possibly lambing. I says if I get down in that lower country why they lamb pretty early down in there." So, I struck out and kept a looking down the river as I went, and when I got down to Spray why I struck a job of lambing for the Stewart Livestock Company, and I worked there with them until about the 1st of April in there someplace. I don't know what time of year it was. And at that time why Mr. Stewart offered me a job of running these sheep for the Company, but I didn't want it. So, I appreciated the, they was awfully fine people to work for, I appreciated it very much, but I went back to Prairie City and packed up my family and we moved back to Burns. That summer, why I sold Raleigh Products.

JAMES: Raleigh Products?

CECIL: Yeah.

JAMES: That's before my time.

CECIL: That is something like Watkins Products, you know, liniments and medicines, extracts and spices, and stuff like that. And I was always kind of amused about that because I came back into town here and an old schoolmate of mine was selling Chevrolet automobiles down there where Copeland Lumber Yard is now. And I was walking around one of these new Chevrolets, and this old schoolmate of mine, name is Earl Hagey, lives in Portland now. And Earl told me afterwards, he says, "I didn't suppose that you had enough money to even make a down payment on a Chevrolet, let alone buy one." He said, "I felt kind of sorry for you because you were selling the

Raleigh Products." He said, "I just wondered how you were making a living out of it for your family." And finally, Earl walked out, he was sitting back in the office, and spoke to me, and I says, "What's the price of this car, Earl." And Earl gave me a price on it, and I says, "What will you give me for that Ford out there?" And so, they went out and they looked at this little Ford I had, and I don't remember the particulars of it, but they wanted \$400 or \$500 difference between the two cars. So, I said, "Well, I think I'll take it." And he wanted to know what kind of a contract I wanted on it. And I said, "I don't want no contract, I'll just pay you for it." Earl was very much surprised to think that a fellow could make that kind of money out of selling that junk that I was selling.

Well later that fall, I bought what was then known as the Maggie and Jiggs Service Station up on the corner used car lot up where Ben Jacques has his Chevrolet used car lot now. And again, I started back in, trying to get back into the automotive business. And that fall, or the next spring, why I --- I think it was that fall I took on the Overland Agency of automobiles. Shortly after I took the Overland Agency, why they quit making the Overland and went to making the Whippet, and I sold the Whippets until 1927 or 1928. At that time, my brother four years older than me, come up and went in partners with me, E. B. Bennett. And we got the Chevrolet Agency.

And then in about 1930, why, or I think about 1930 why Chevrolet made us quit buying Whippets, so we had to quit buying Whippets and go to Chevrolet. And I stayed there in the Chevrolet business, I bought my brother Ellis out in '34, and I stayed there in the Chevrolet business until 1955, when I sold out to Bud Grover.

And during that span of years, I think it was almost 30 years, why I owned the Union Oil bulk plant, the One Stop Service Station, and what was known at one time as the 3-Flags Service Station. Afterwards it was known as the Johnson Pontiac Service Station, where Roy Johnson was, there where the Safeway store parking lot is now. And the Union Oil Service Station at Hines had since been converted into a Texaco Service Station.

And then I bought the old brick building there that the Bennett Motel is in, and we talked it over between ourselves, me and Mrs. Bennett, and we decided to convert that and build it into a

hotel or a motel. Which we did in that time, along about 1951.

JAMES: I wanted to know about your selling Chevy's in the 1930's, were people buying cars then out here?

CECIL: Well in 1930, we'll say about 1930, about when Chevrolet come out with a 6-cylinder car in 1929, they asked me here about selling cars in 1930. Well, I have an idea that in 1930, if I had my records available, it would probably show that I sold about 15 or 18 new cars that year. That's what kind of runs in my mind that my first year with Chevrolet, my first full year with Chevrolet, was about 12 or 15 cars, that would have been '29. And then I hung about the same, and then we went into that depression, and it got pretty slow, and it got pretty bad. And then about 1934, business started on the up-trend, and it gradually started getting better from then on, it seemed like.

JAMES: What were the things in this area that helped you sell cars, gave more money to people?

CECIL: Well, the things in this particular area that helped me sell more cars than I formerly had was the Hines Lumber Mill down here, when the Hines Lumber Mill come in.

In about 1929 Fred Herrick Lumber Company come here, and I think about 1930 when Hines Lumber Company bought Fred Herrick out, and I think it was 1930 that Hines first started selling. I think when they finished this mill down here and started ... in 1930. Well, in the meantime, I had negotiated with all these contractors and tie cutters, and I was quite well acquainted with all these Swedes that was cutting ties, and I was selling them Whippets like hotcakes. And then afterwards, Chevrolets. And then I had Pontiac, too. I got Pontiac and Buick before I got Chevrolet.

And I traveled all over the county, and clear down into the South End of the county, and clear down into Nevada selling cars, and I didn't draw any punches on hours, hours didn't make any difference. I worked all day and then drove all night. We didn't never count the hours in those times. Oh, that gives you kind of a rough run down. If I'd had more time, and after I come back, if you want me to, I might put something together that would be a little bit more authentic, and maybe a little bit more interesting.

JAMES: That sounds good.

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