

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #128 - Side A

Subject: Buck Miller

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: January 29, 1972

Interviewer: James Baker

BUCK MILLER: ... he went into, I think, into the Dakotas in the Black Hills, in the mines first.

JAMES BAKER: What was his family doing in Glendale?

BUCK: Well I wouldn't know that. I don't know too much about my family, the older ones. They had a home there, I don't know what they done. I imagine they just worked. But he went right there, and when that Indian War broke out back there, he joined the army. After they got that settled there, he came to Klamath County with the soldiers. And he went through that until they got that batch of Indians cleaned out. And then from there he come here after he was out of the army.

JAMES: He must have been in his 20's when he came here, or was he younger than that?

BUCK: He must have been older than that because he, of course I don't know when they left home, just a kid I suppose. But that Indian War back there in the Dakotas and Klamath County both must have lasted three or four years.

JAMES: Yeah, that's right. Did he get into any trouble with the Indians out here?

BUCK: Not after he come here, I don't think. He was there in Klamath County when they had that uprising of the Indians here, I think.

JAMES: Do you remember him mentioning anything about that?

BUCK: Oh hell, I used to remember he'd tell stories when we was kids, and I was afraid to go to bed, tell them damn stories. We had to sleep upstairs, and I wouldn't go upstairs in the dark. He'd tell them Indian stories, but hell, I forgot them. I never paid no attention to them.

JAMES: Anything about being chased by the Indians?

BUCK: No, I don't remember too much about --- People would come there, you know, and get him started. It was interesting, but I don't remember it.

JAMES: Let's see now, he went to the Dakotas to hunt for gold and ended up in the army?

BUCK: He went to the Dakotas when they had a gold strike back there, the Black Hills. I remember him talking about that.

JAMES: Do you think he made any money out there?

BUCK: Well, I don't know.

JAMES: Did he make a grubstake to come out here and buy a ranch?

BUCK: No, he homesteaded, down at Harney Lake.

JAMES: Do you have any idea what year that was?

BUCK: No, I wouldn't know. It was before I was born.

JAMES: Do you know what he was looking for when he came to this part of the country?

BUCK: Well no, he was looking for a job, probably. Of course, he worked for Pete French awhile, and he worked for them Riddles up at Happy Valley for a long time. But when he first come, I think he worked for Pete French.

JAMES: Was he buckarooing?

BUCK: Yeah. Then after that he took a desert claim up there on the mountain, this side of the P Ranch a ways, and he started raising horses there, and that's what he done there for a long time, raised horses.

JAMES: Then he sold that?

BUCK: Yeah, I don't know what year he sold out.

JAMES: One of the things I've been interested in is why people stayed in this country after coming here.

MARY: Just couldn't get away.

JAMES: Couldn't get away. Nobody said that yet.

BUCK: Well, it was a new country, I think, and that's what most of those old timers were looking for, I guess, was a new country. And they once got in here; it's quite a ways out again. I guess probably a lot of them just come and stayed over night and went back, too.

JAMES: I'll bet they did. ... Was your dad working for the P Ranch when a fellow by the name of Tebo was there?

BUCK: Well no, I think he was there before Tebo come there.

JAMES: Even before.

BUCK: Yeah, I think so, even before. As near as I remember what they talk about, when Tebo come he was just a kid, a pretty small kid. I know he was a good many years younger than my dad was.

JAMES: I see. Did your dad ever mention the fellow who was buckaroo boss or superintendent of the P Ranch during that time?

BUCK: Well, old Mart Brenton was for one.

JAMES: Yeah, I guess that's right.

BUCK: And I don't know whether ... Fine was the buckaroo boss there at the time, that's Joe's father. And then old Chino, but I think my dad worked there before Chino, I don't know.

JAMES: I may have that wrong, somebody told me that Tebo was never buckaroo boss.

BUCK: Tebo, no. Tebo was never was there as I remember him.

JAMES: Yeah, that's what Judd told me. Well, what about Mart Brenton, do you remember, what did he look like, can you describe him?

BUCK: Well he was a pretty good-sized man; don't know that I could describe him. ... His picture is in that book, that Pete French book, "Harney County and Its Rangelands".

JAMES: Where did Mart Brenton come from?

BUCK: I don't know.

JAMES: I'm trying to track down some of the background.

BUCK: His daughter lives right over there.

JAMES: I'll have to go see her.

BUCK: He was past 60 years old then, and he used to tell me about times, he worked for Devine when he was here. And he was just a kid and he had this fellow, he sent to, come over here to Riddle Mountain to work with the French's outfit, and Mart Brenton, I think, was the buckaroo boss then.

(Now they are looking at pictures and pointing out Mart Brenton and Chino, and Tebo, and Mr. Miller's father, in Giles French's book.) JAMES: You were telling me about the fellow who worked for Devine.

BUCK: And he worked for ... before old Miller got this Island Ranch. And at that time Devine had that Agency Ranch, no I have that wrong, the fellow that had the Agency Ranch was named Mason, I think. And this fellow had come over here to ride with the P Ranch was working for this Mason. And when Miller bought Devine, why he went and bought that too. And he put it all together. But the, this old fellow he used to tell me about them old times, and I never paid no attention, you know. If a fellow had just a knowed and took a few notes, he'd have got a lot of interesting stories.

JAMES: John Devine sounds like rather an exceptional fellow out here, apparently quite

a character?

BUCK: Well I guess he was. He was quite a gambler in a way, I guess. He had racehorses and fighting chickens.

JAMES: He had fighting chickens? I'll be darned. Did they ever put special bands on their legs?

BUCK: I don't know; that was before my time. Now there at Whitehorse they had a horse on the cupola over there, but on the chicken house, they had a big rooster. I don't know whether it is still there or not, but he had a barn there at Whitehorse where he kept his racehorses, and where he had his fighting chickens, and everything like that.

JAMES: Well somebody told me that he got that cupola on the barn, a big white horse, cost him \$100,000 down in San Francisco.

BUCK: Oh, it's just made out of wood. I worked over there at the Whitehorse and we'd climb up in the damn cupola once in awhile. It's just carved out of wood in the shape of a horse and painted white, and when the wind blew it would turn around, you know. You hear all kinds of stories.

MARY: That sounds like Ilda May.

JAMES: How did you know?

BUCK: I worked over there for Juan Redon. He was the buckaroo boss. He was with the Company then, but he was there for John Devine. I don't know whether he come there with Devine, but anyway he worked for Devine. He run the buckaroo outfit for years, and I worked for him for a couple of years when I was just a kid.

JAMES: What was his name, Redon?

BUCK: Redon, Juan Redon. His picture ain't in there.

MARY: I know one person who has a picture of Juan Redon, and that's Stella McDade, Stella Calderwood. She told us when she was in Portland that time that she had a picture

of Juan Redon. Don't you remember? And she had a picture of his wife, too.

BUCK: I don't remember seeing it though, Mary. I've seen her. She was a big old Irish woman, went barefoot all the time.

JAMES: Did she cook?

BUCK: Oh yes.

JAMES: Where did she work?

BUCK: No, she didn't cook for --- they had a little ranch. When I was working for him, I went and helped him put up his hay, worked for about a week or 10 days putting up his hay, and then back to the buckaroos wagon again. But he was a real nice old fellow and he was kind of a dressy old fellow. When I worked for him he even wore a suit buckarooing.

JAMES: Oh, come on.

BUCK: Yes, a suit.

JAMES: Bet that would be hot.

BUCK: Well, in the summertime. And he wore white shirts all the time, you know.

JAMES: A real gentleman?

BUCK: Yeah. You take in the summertime when it was right hot, and you get to sweating, he'd take his handkerchief out and wipe the sweat off his hair and then poke it up in his hat and put his hat on. He smoked a pipe all the time, and every little while he'd have to spit and he'd lean away over on his horse --- He was a fine old fellow. And I guess at one time he was the best roper that they know of in this country, this old Mexican, Redon. I've seen him when we was branding calves, he'd rope for hours and never miss a shot. Now that's something that they don't all do, the best of them.

JAMES: I've heard that some of those Mexicans were the best ropers, they could ---

BUCK: They was; they was perfect. They took a pride in that, I think. And raised good

horses.

JAMES: That's the other thing I heard, that they had the best horses.

BUCK: They did. They rode the best bridle horses, all of them.

JAMES: Well did they get those horses from around here?

BUCK: They raised them themselves right here, at all these ranches, raised their own horses. At that time this was just strictly a stock country, horses and cattle. And then, of course, several years later the sheep moved in. But when I was a small kid, I never seen a sheep until I was a great big kid.

JAMES: I didn't know they came in later.

BUCK: I was a kid at home.

JAMES: The thing I heard about the sheep was that they came over from Idaho.

BUCK: Well the sheep that invaded this country mostly come from Lake County, and places like that. The Irish moved in here and they landed in that country down there, Lake County and Klamath County, and them places. And the Basques, they landed in Jordan Valley in Idaho.

MARY: They come from both directions.

JAMES: They come both directions, twice as many of them. Would they come in, in the spring?

BUCK: They would come in, in the winter, in the fall of the year and stayed all winter and lamb, and then they'd go back to the mountains. Some of them stayed right here ... Steens Mountain; never leave the county after they came in here, a lot of them.

JAMES: Used to eat that grass clear down, make it tough on the cattle?

BUCK: Oh, yes.

JAMES: Say, is it true about the smell of sheep for cattle?

BUCK: They'll run together. Oh yes, if there is any feed. They smell, that's for sure. ...

MARY: I imagine why they didn't put them together was because when they herd the sheep, they had dogs with them.

BUCK: But they'll run on the same range and do all right.

JAMES: Something that's been interesting to me is some of the horse races that used to run around here. I guess John Devine had some racehorses. I heard that Tebo's horse was real fast.

BUCK: He had a saddle horse; he was fast, all right. I remember he was a white horse, called him Barb Wire, he'd been cut on a wire, had a big scar on his shoulder. But they just run him around here in the relay races.

JAMES: I heard a story about that big white horse and that was that one time Tebo tied its mane onto a wagon to pull it out, mired in the wet, and it pulled the skin right off his back. And so Tebo grafted this sheepskin onto it.

BUCK: That's one of Tebo's stories. He used to tell another one, riding up there on the mountain out there by the Kiger, and he rolled a great big rock off the mountain there. And he says, "Well, I don't know how many tons, but it weighed tons." And he rolled it down into Kiger and it got up so much speed when it went down into the bottom, it went way up to the top on the other side. And then it come back and rolled back up the other side. And he said the last time he was back there, he says, it was about the size of a marble. That's the kind of stories he'd tell. No, he didn't expect anyone to believe him, just for fun. They'd get around telling stories and one would try to beat the other, but they never could beat Tebo.

JAMES: I heard one story where he was roping that horse and he let his riata out there and the horse just kept going, this was before he had tamed him, and he was going so fast that the whole 75 feet of that riata was straight out and there were some flies on the end of it that were resting.

BUCK: You hear all kind of stories.

JAMES: I haven't been able to get hold of too many of them.

BUCK: It's too bad all of them old fellows is gone, you know. Who else do we know, Mary, that's an old timer around here?

MARY: I don't know. How far back do you want to go?

BUCK: Well you can't go much further back than Judd, and I, and Joe, and Clarence Young. There's Ches Mace, we were born the same year, 1891. Judd is the oldest of the bunch that I know of around here. He was born the year before I was, 1890, I think.

JAMES: Judd told me last night that one time he saw Tebo sitting out on the steps of some building and there were flies around everywhere, mosquitoes, and flies, and everything. And they were snapping at, and biting everybody except for Tebo. And he was just sitting there, wasn't moving. And he said the reason that he wasn't getting bit was that he was just sitting there being quiet, everybody else was slapping away at them. Judd didn't have but that one story.

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BUCK: They had a lot of old horses, you know, good old horses, and then they had some young horses and they went out to get the horses and they had a bunch of cattle rounded up, these old horses. And all them good bridle horses, they was in there working the cattle, and the old stove-up horses out there holding the cattle out there, and the young horses they were ... over there, no riders at all. Yeah, that's one of Tebo's stories.

JAMES: I don't know if you've heard a fishing story I've heard. Apparently one time he was fishing in the Blitzen River and he caught a real big fish, and it was so large he had to back it 14 miles down to the Malheur Lake before he could turn it around and could bring it in.

BUCK: I've heard the same story; only the difference is it was so big he had to go to

Malheur Lake to turn around. I don't know. He couldn't turn around in the canal of the river, had to ---

JAMES: Yeah. That's the thing I'm most interested in, those old stories. Do you remember any stories about John Devine?

BUCK: No, I just hear them old timers talk, but I never knew the man. I was just a kid when he died. I was just a small kid when Pete French was killed. I remember mother reading the paper about it.

JAMES: Where did your mother's family come from?

BUCK: Well I don't know; they came from the East someplace. I've heard her tell stories about crossing the plains in a covered wagon. I don't know what state she come from.

JAMES: I heard a lot of people came from the Midwest out here, Iowa, Ohio.

BUCK: She came from some of those eastern states, and come clear across the states in a covered wagon when she was a small kid, I guess.

JAMES: What about Bill Hanley, did you know him?

BUCK: Well, yes. I don't know too much about him, only I just knew he lived here, and that's all. I don't think he was such a great man as they ---

JAMES: I haven't heard anything great that he did. So it's new to me. I don't know either side. He had a ranch, was it the South End?

BUCK: No, right out here, the Bell A. He bought the Double O years after that. The Double O at one time belonged to some fellows from California, their names was Hardin and Riley, two of them.

JAMES: Let me take a guess, did Hanley get in trouble with the homesteaders out here, or ---

BUCK: No, I don't know too much about him. He was just a Hanley man, that's all I can say. He was for Hanley.

JAMES: I bet you mean a lot by that I don't know. There's one thing that's been sticking in the back of my mind. Your father, you say, was in the army, and the Indians --- Klamath. Now I didn't get this straight, was he still in the army when he came up here, do you think?

BUCK: No, he was discharged. He came up here probably looking for a job. There's an old fellow lived up here at Harney that was with him, together in the army, but of course he's dead now.

JAMES: What was his name?

BUCK: Tom Vickers. He's in that picture. ... they were real nice kids, all of them.

JAMES: Well I'm always ready and willing to hear the other side. MARY: Well I don't mean the other side, but it always seemed funny to me that no one ever did, because ---

JAMES: They come down pretty hard on the Oliver people.

MARY: After all, you know, there must have been something wrong that, if he went out and killed him like that, and then they acquitted him. You know there must have been a lot of people behind Oliver, too, in order to do that. And they did, they never convicted him.

JAMES: Sounds like you know something about Ed Oliver. Maybe you could just describe him to me.

BUCK: No, I never seen the man, that I know of.

JAMES: Oh, I misunderstood ---

BUCK: I went to school with his kids. He had four kids and I went to school with them. They moved down there to Warm Springs, in the same neighborhood, and we all went to the same school for several years, there was four of them.

JAMES: Did you ever meet their mother, Mrs. Oliver?

BUCK: Oh yes, I remember her. She was a nice little woman. She was a crippled

woman. She re-married again. She married a fellow by the name of Petersen, and raised a family from him. But she was a real nice little woman.

JAMES: In that trial, from what I know, Oliver was brought to trial, but he was acquitted. And they say that it was rigged, he got free, and then had to leave the country because there was so much ---

MARY: I know; I heard somebody say he left with another woman.

BUCK: Well, that's a story, Mary, maybe he don't want that in his book.

MARY: ... I'm just telling what I heard.

JAMES: I stay pretty clear from stuff like that.

BUCK: No scandal in there.

MARY: ...

BUCK: There are three of those kids alive yet.

MARY: It seems funny to me that they haven't ever said anything or done anything. Because their father must have had a side. He must have had some reason.

BUCK: Well, the settlers had a side, and I heard my dad say several times that they never could have got a jury in Harney County to convict the man for killing French. He was just hated that much. That's as far as I know, just what I heard him say. I've heard these fellows say, all these old timers that worked for French, they all thought the world of him. He was a good man.

JAMES: I've heard Judd say that, and I've heard other people say that.

BUCK: He was good to his men; he'd do anything for them, and fight for them. But he wanted all the land that joined him, and he didn't care how he got it.

JAMES: Now I've never understood how he got that land when he put homesteaders on it.

BUCK: It wasn't all homesteaded, I don't think. I think a lot of that land was swamped,

through script and things like that. He couldn't homestead all that time all those places, because a lot of those old timers would have hung onto them. They'd have homesteaded long enough to proved up. They'd probably have stayed on, went into the business themselves. He did buy the homesteaders out where they did, where he could get them.

JAMES: Do you remember, I heard of a real superstitious fellow by the name of Tom Stevens.

BUCK: Well that's an old fellow used to be here, wasn't it?

JAMES: They say he was a gambler.

BUCK: Yes, old Tom Stevens. Big, tall, hump-backed old fellow. I remember him. Of course I don't know too much about him, but he's been dead a long time.

JAMES: I heard he got shot in the belt buckle once, knocked the wind out of him.

BUCK: Well I never heard that. My dad was shot in the belt buckle, might have been his story. The Indians were shooting at him, what he tells, and they had some breastworks set up, and he got up on his knees and was a shooting. And this bullet, he said, hit the ground about 30 to 40 feet out there and then hit him in the belly, right on the belt buckle.

JAMES: Must have taken all the impact out of it when it hit.

BUCK: It would have went clear through him if it hadn't hit the ground. But it hit the ground about 30, 40 feet ahead of him and then bounced, and hit him right on the belt buckle.

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