

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #136 - Side B & #137 - Side A

Subject: Violet Brown

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: March 11, 1972

Interviewer: James Baker

JAMES BAKER: This is Mrs. Violet Brown. I'd like to talk about the old dances for sure.

VIOLET BROWN: Well I can tell you one that's kind of funny. This fellow he worked for us, and he thought he'd take his girl to the dance, it was 12 miles to the dance hall and they didn't have two saddle horses. So they got a big old workhorse, you couldn't put a saddle on him, and they rode double. This girl behind him hanging on, and they got to this dance and just as they got to the dance and stepped in, you know they had what they called a floor manager. Well a couple had ragged, you've heard of the dance, the rag? It's an old time dance, you know, it wasn't very mild, it would be very modest, but then the ragging wasn't a very decent dance. So just as he got into the door, the floor manager stopped the dance. And he and his girl got on their big old workhorse and rode back.  
(Laughter)

JAMES: You mean they had to close that dance?

VIOLET: He closed it, see he was the last word, what he said --- they caught this couple ragging as they called it. And then another that always amused me, they had a dance out here at Harney years ago, and before they had these dances they'd have big oyster feeds, if you can imagine, oysters. So they all got there to the dance and they were eating oysters in their soup. And this one woman upset the plate in her lap, and of course she was humiliated and she cried, and the women took her into the room and tried to

smooth her, and get her to quit crying. But she cried all night, so there was no dance. And it broke up the dance. It's so funny to me because now if anybody spilled oyster soup, they'd wipe it off and say, "What the heck."

And then we used to go the dance in Diamond years ago, and we had a Scotch herder that worked for us. And then music was kind of difficult to get, and this Scotch herder could only play one tune, "Nearer My God to Thee." But he could play it waltz time, and he could play it fast, and he could play it tango if you wanted it. So all night long we danced to "Nearer My God to Thee," in the different, almost like the Titanic.

And then there was another fellow that, he could play the accordion a little bit, he knew several tunes, but he liked "Golden Slippers". He said if you found one tune in your life you liked, why worry about any others. So he played "Golden Slippers" all night.

They used to have dances up above a shop and they had a darned old rickety stairs that was almost like a ladder. And they'd go up there, and of course dance all night. One rancher would come with his wife and he would get drunk, and then he would want to leave. They'd get in a fight, and she'd cry and he'd threaten to leave, and she'd follow him to the top of these stairs. And then just as he'd say, "Well I'm going," and he'd start down the stairs, but he'd always manage to reach out and grab her and down they both went. And every time they'd have a dance, they'd say, "Well, did so and so ---" "Yeah, they went down the stairs. They hit the top and down they went." And I can't understand why it didn't kill them. It was a cement floor on the bottom. But he always managed to grab her before he left. They are kind of funny dances to think of them. And I suppose I know a lot more, but it's kind of hard to remember all the --- I just remember the ones that were kind of funny, I guess.

JAMES: Those dances must have been a lot of fun.

VIOLET: Yes, they were a lot of fun. And of course, they started in early and danced all

night, unless the floor manager stopped the dance, which he could always do.

JAMES: How did you like living in the Steens area down there?

VIOLET: Well, of course I loved it. We lived there, we had sheep, and we lived there in the summertime. We'd be on the ranch in the wintertime, and then it was just strictly summer. We'd have a main camp, and the camp tender would work out from there, and the herders. And at one time there were lots of sheep on Steens Mountain. There was one place that you could stand up on the top and about 4 o'clock when the sheep would leave the bed ground to feed, you could see 35 dusts from the different bands. And now there isn't one band on Steens Mountain.

And of course, we had lots of Basque. They came through with their sheep, and some of them lived here, had sheep. Some, you know, eat the trails; as they'd come up, fatten their lambs, work to the Steens, and then work back down. They were nice neighbors and they are a very colorful race. They say that the Steens Mountain is very much like the Spanish Pyrenees. I've noticed, I've watched, when they had, "For Whom the Bells Toll"; it is very similar, kind of a desert mountain with lots of rocks. Of course I think they maybe had more caves than we do. They have lots of caves. They seem to like the Steens.

JAMES: Did you grow up on the Steens?

VIOLET: No, I didn't. My husband though, he was born at a place they called Cord. It was just like you go to Folly Farm, you know, out from there. His folks lived there. And then his father run his sheep on the Steens, and of course, he'd been raised there as a boy, and a child, and spent his lifetime there.

JAMES: But you came from outside the area?

VIOLET: Yes, uh huh, I did. It was all new to me.

JAMES: How did you find it at first?

VIOLET: Well I didn't know much about it at first. I'd never been on a ranch. But you learn, it's a nice life. And the schoolhouse there in Diamond, Glen's mother went there. They came in the days, her folks settled in the days of Peter French. In the ... cabin, that's on the west side of the Steens Mountain. She went to the schoolhouse, and Glen, my husband, went there. And my daughter went there, and my grandson went there. It's kind of interesting to think that a fellow would go to this little country school. And, of course, his mother must have gone in the '80's, must have been. I think they came here in 1884.

JAMES: Did they come from the Midwest?

VIOLET: They came from Missouri. So many people came from Missouri. The people in Indiana must have been satisfied. I've only known of one person from Indiana, lots of people from Missouri, or maybe it was --- I don't know, I wonder why. Do you know why? Don't you find that when you are questioning these pioneers that so many of them are from Missouri? Have you ever questioned any one from Indiana?

JAMES: No.

VIOLET: Honest, I knew this one rancher was from Indiana, and he was talking about Indiana. I used to like to listen to him, because he was the only one I ever knew and I've never known any-body since. We had quite a few from Kentucky came in, pretty rugged individuals, and Missouri, Nebraska. Lots of people came in from Nebraska.

JAMES: Who were some of your neighbors in the west part of the Steens?

VIOLET: Well we always had the Company, you know, the Company Ranch. They ran their cattle and sheep up there.

JAMES: Oh, I didn't know they had any sheep.

VIOLET: They run sheep, yes. When Joe Fine was manager there, they run in there. And the Jenkins' didn't run with us. They were over on the other side. And there were

small outfits. Well, you know, kind of little, the Basques. Joe Euchanis and P. T. Barr, and Joe Lauserica, they run in there.

JAMES: Did they bring over their wives after they had settled?

VIOLET: Well those I mentioned were single, except Joe Euchanis and he married a Basque girl in this country. But most of them that came here were single. I don't know, they married women in this country. Now John Ebar, he married a woman, she came from Spain of course, but he married her here. I don't know many of the herders that, or the sheep men that married in Spain. Of course, I imagine the older ones did. Maybe they went back and got a wife. Have you ever interviewed any of the Basque people?

JAMES: That's a really lonely life, isn't it, that herding sheep?

VIOLET: Well, yes it is. They read a lot as a rule. I think it would be a very lonely life for someone who didn't read, and we have had herders that couldn't read. But most of them, you never see a herder; he'd usually have a book or a magazine stuck in his coat pocket. And they always want the mail and they want to read. The Basque, they were good neighbors, they brought some of their cooking secrets, I think, with them. They were good cooks, they were clean. And before he'd start to make his bed, he'd roll up his sleeves and scrub his hands, and take out his pocketknife and clean his fingernails. They made famous, the Basques in this country, what they call, "the big bread". Have you heard of it? Well they call it "big bread" and then they call it "jackass bread". And for this simple reason, this herder would leave the main camp and he'd take his burro and he'd pack his bed, enough supplies for a week. And then he would leave and then he'd take his sheep, and wherever he'd be on fresh feed all the time, he wouldn't camp in the same place. Well they would have to make bread for this herder, and you'd hear one Basque say to another, "How many does he take?" "Oh, he takes 2 tens and one twelve." "Oh, my man he takes 3 tens and a twelve." Well, it would mean the size of the Dutch oven,

they come in tens and twelve's, and that's the size of the bread. They bake it in this Dutch oven. Well they take it and they make kind of a raised dough like a sourdough, and he digs a hole in the ground and he builds a fire in this hole and he gets a good bed of coals, and then he works his bread. As I say, he's very clean about it, and then he puts it in this Dutch oven and lets it raise a little bit, and then he puts it in, he takes some of these coals out, and puts his bread in there, and then puts the coals on top of the Dutch oven. And the Dutch oven has a rim on it like that see, for these coals, and then he covers it all up with dirt. And that's the way he bakes what he calls his "big bread". And then when it comes out of there it just has a real thick brown crust on it, and it is just really delicious.

And you go to his camp, and he offers you, they've always had wine, always lots of wine, and he offers you a glass of wine. And he takes his "big bread" like this and he holds it up against his greasy shirt and takes a knife, and cuts you off a slice. That's the way they cut it, hold it against, this way, just like they do in the old country.

JAMES: They make a stew in that pot too, I bet.

VIOLET: Oh, yes. Say, the camp tender is in the main camp, or the herder is in the main camp. We used to do it too; we used to make "big bread". He'll take whatever he has, his meat and he'll put it in there and his vegetables, just like the bread, and bury it. Then when he comes back in the evening, why his meal's cooked.

JAMES: How can he get his carrots and his --- all to cook up right?

VIOLET: Well, they will. They won't burn either, if you don't let any air to it. If you're careful to close out all the air, you know. They cooked their beans that way; it is really a wonderful way to cook.

JAMES: A lot of Irish became sheepherders too.

VIOLET: Yeah the Irish, but he wasn't the cook that the Basque was, and he wasn't as clean as the Basque. The Basque, as I said, he was very colorful. He was pretty smart,

you know. It always tickled me; one Basco says to another, one said to another herder, "How big is your check?" He says, "Oh, it's about 5 inches long, and about 3 inches wide." That's the way they would always come up with something like that, you know.

JAMES: Real good sense of humor.

VIOLET: Real good sense of humor. He didn't intend to tell him how big his check was, either.

JAMES: Pretty closed-mouth about that.

VIOLET: Pretty close-mouthed, and that was his way of answering him. And they'd always would come up with answers like that, you know. And then we had a Greek outfit on the mountain. The Greek run in there for several years, and they ran on our range. They are a different outfit altogether, the Greek. And they had one herder that was a ballet dancer. I couldn't get over that. I can see him now, he would ... and he'd just ride a horse, just flow past with his hat turned up in front, you know. He didn't speak any English so, of course, we didn't get to know him very well. But he said he was a ballet dancer.

And, you know, a lot of the herders were well educated. We had one, they called him Johnny Grow, he was an Englishman, and we had several Welshmen and Scotsmen. And Johnny Grow he was one of the greatest readers. Talk about your --- up on his English and his history of England, and he could just answer any question that you'd ask him, you know. He was just right up on everything. Of course, they would herd and then they would get off on this big drunk and spend every cent they had in a week, and come back broke. Johnny Grown wasn't that kind.

The Scotch, of course, they saved their money a little better. Of course the Basque he saved his money, and usually you'd be working for him after so many years.

JAMES: It wouldn't take too long.

VIOLET: No, it wouldn't take too long. (Laughter) They had quite a few Welshmen, Tommy Jenkins was Welsh, you know. They brought in several Welshmen, these pioneers that came in, and they'd bring in distant relatives, or cousins, or something. We had some Welsh boys that were with us for years. One Welsh boy was with Glen's father and worked until he retired. They were good.

JAMES: Whatever happened to most of these fellows after they got to the end of the time when they were worth ---

VIOLET: Well it seems to me like most of them died of heart attacks, I don't know.

JAMES: Heart attacks?

VIOLET: Well, I don't know. I know several did, this one Welsh boy that worked for us for many years, he had a heart attack and died. And Johnny Grow had a heart attack. Then Glen had a heart attack. There's been several, several of the Basques too. I don't know, maybe it's the sheep dust, you know. My husband had a heart attack and he died. I've wondered sometimes working with the sheep in the corrals, as must dust as there is a corralling a bunch of sheep, and working with them in the corrals and all. Sometimes, you know, you just couldn't see a thing the dust would be so thick. But maybe that's just my idea, I don't know. There's something about --- Glen's brother died of a heart attack.

Of course, the mountain is high and --- between 7,000 and 9,000 feet. One Basque, Pete Garay he died of a heart attack, and he told us, he said, there was a coyote working in his sheep, and his dogs took in after it, and the dogs would catch the coyote and hold it. And he'd run, he was up there on top, and he was up pretty high, he must have been up 8,500 or something like that. He wasn't clear to the top, but he was pretty high when he ... And he would just almost get there, and then the coyote would bite the dogs, and they'd let loose and run, and then the dogs would run again and he'd run. And he told Glen, he said, "You know, there is just something happened, I just felt like I burst



my heart or something." And he was never well after that. Maybe running in that high altitude and the over exertion, or something. And then some went back to Spain. Joe Lauserica went back to Spain and lived in luxury, of course. He kept his money, I think, here so Franco couldn't get his fingers on it. He had, ... I don't know, maybe several hundred thousand, or I don't know. And then the banker he would send, and the banker would send him what he wanted, say \$2,000 or \$3,000. If he had taken the whole thing over there, why Franco would have taken it. And he just sat over there and drank wine, and of course, he was like a king, you know, among his class of people. That's what Joe did.

There were others stayed here and raised families. Then after the next generation came along, the young boys in that generation didn't follow the sheep, like Felix Urizar, Julio's father. He'd always run sheep, but the boys didn't follow in their father's footsteps, seems like. They have a ranch, and have a few head of cattle out here. But they didn't run sheep like their father did.

JAMES: Did you take your wool out to Ontario, or Winnemucca?

VIOLET: No, we took it out to Portland. We'd shear kind of around the foot of the Steens Mountain, and then trucks would bring it into Burns here, and then they'd go out by truck to Portland, and put it on the docks there. Because, I know, we'd pay every kind of a tax on it, we'd pay school taxes, and everything else on this wool after we'd get it down there on the docks.

JAMES: It wasn't enough to fight the altitude and the ---

VIOLET: No, it wasn't enough to fight the high altitude and coyotes, and the banker, and the prices. All the sheep man has everything to fight, you know. Everybody seems like is against you. But it is kind of a nice life, I think, the sheep business is, I like sheep. I could always help with the sheep; I could never do anything with cattle. He always run a few

cattle. I could always help raise the little lambs and ---

JAMES: I've heard it said that sheep and cattle don't like to graze on the same land.

VIOLET: Oh no, that's just the biggest rumor ... And I'll tell you differently. But ... the same. But that's kind of been handed down by the cattle and the sheep wars. Of course the cowman, he hates the sheep, but a sheep man always runs a few cattle to eat the coarse hay off the top of his stack, the hay that's spoiled that he doesn't want to feed to his ewes that are going to have lambs. And he'll always run a bunch of cattle along with them. ... A sheep is more particular about their water than a cow, a cow will drink out of an old muddy mud hole ... and the sheep why they're very particular about their water, they'll drink only clean water.

JAMES: I've never heard such a good selling job on sheep before, I'm convinced now.

VIOLET: Oh, haven't you?

JAMES: No.

VIOLET: Oh, well.

JAMES: I'm quite convinced now.

VIOLET: Well you should be convinced. I'm telling you the truth. Anyone will tell you that. The sheep are so particular about their water, they are like a deer. And we always had troughs where we could keep their water clean.

JAMES: Did you have wells in that part of the country?

VIOLET: No, just springs, but they had to have troughs for the sheep, you know, they liked the clean water. They'll drink out of a creek, you know, if it's running, but they won't drink if it's just contaminated, like muddied up.

JAMES: Do you feel any particular attachment to this part of the country, the desert land of Harney County?

VIOLET: Well maybe I do, because my daughter lives here.

JAMES: What about the scenery?

VIOLET: Well, of course, I like to see. I left here after my husband died, I lived for 12 years in Idaho, Weiser, Idaho, and then I used to go up into the mountains there. And I always had a feeling; I kept climbing to the top, to see. Climb to the top to see. And when you get to the top, all you see is sky, because there is more trees, you know, it's timber. No, I like the desert much better than the timber, because I'm not used to it. I think it's pretty, you know, beautiful to see the trees and I love the trees and all, but as far as being out in them, I really prefer the desert.

JAMES: And the Steens too?

VIOLET: Yes, I like the Steens. I was there for 30 years, I should. We fished, you know, go fishing. Hunting in the fall.

JAMES: Antelope?

VIOLET: No, we just always hunted deer. We had antelope, but I don't know whether it would be good to eat or not. I can't eat deer any more. We didn't have elk on the mountain, just deer and antelope.

JAMES: I wonder if I could ...

VIOLET: We'd check the flowers. And, you know, it's kind of unusual, the flowers from the Pacific and the north and the south and the plains, it seems that they all kind of --- around the Steens Mountain. Different flowers, alpine flowers, we do have alpine flowers on the mountain. And that was always interesting. Of course, we had lots of birds. I always like the birds; we had the western mockingbird nests on the mountain. It's a funny thing about that western mockingbird, an ornithologist said, this was years ago, he would get there in about 10 years. They were in Montana and they would be to the Steens in about 10 years, and they finally arrived. They nest in there in the springtime and, of course, they have a beautiful song. They kind of mimic the different noises of the birds

and the frogs. And, of course, there was good fishing on the mountain. Have you ever been on the mountain? You'll have to go now and see the canyons and the --- do you teach?

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VIOLET: And then in the wintertime they had a bad big storm. So they all came and stayed with us, we were living in Crane then. Sent Mary Anna to school. And I had a house, I had two bedrooms, and I had two bedrooms down in the basement, and I had a couch you could make down, and everybody stayed, you know, and then everybody got started playing cards. I got breakfast for them, and they ate breakfast and then they played cards all day. That's just the way you'd do. You'd have to wait until the storm was over. Yeah, stayed all night and then play cards all the next day. I got them all bedded down some way. That's what would happen sometimes, there would be a bad storm and you'd have a heck of a time getting home.

JAMES: I've heard the weather was really bad there.

VIOLET: I don't know what, whether the weather is milder, or whether we had better heating systems. Don't you think sometimes that's it? Well, you know, we didn't have central heating or any-thing, you know, we didn't have heating like we have now. We just had a stove, you know, and kept it a going.

And the cars, of course, they didn't have heaters in them. But I think the snow was a little deeper. But I think you noticed the cold weather more than you do now.

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