

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #14 Side A

Subject: Ed Koeneman

Place: Koeneman Ranch - Dog Mountain - Harney County

Date: May 9, 1973

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

ED KOENEMAN: Well, my folks came here in June 1907. Dad filed on this place as a homestead. They left Idaho because that land he had over there at Payette had gone to alkali, so he had to find some place where the land was cheap. He got to looking the country over and decided this was about the cheapest place he could settle. He didn't have much money. I was only three months old when we came, so it was several years before I can remember what was going on.

You mentioned this Experiment Station and the man that operated it was named Henny, but I don't know his first name. And there was another man named Breithaupt, he was connected with the College Experiment Station. And he made trips over to Union, they had a station there, and he and Mr. Henny were instrumental in getting this experiment station started up here in Sunset Valley.

They tried many things. They tried trees, and fruits and different kinds of grains, and the people in this community were quite interested in it, in the crops that were adapted to this country. But, like I say, I was pretty small.

My dad used to go over there and help them prune shrubbery and they had the first irrigation system there. It wasn't very good at that time, it was steam operated, that way they could irrigate the trees. I understand the rabbits were awful bad at that time and

all these seedlings and trees that were put out had to be protected. They wrapped paper, and wire, and sacks, and everything else around them to protect them in the wintertime. As far as the orchard was concerned it really wasn't a success, although they got a little bit of fruit that didn't freeze out. That's one of the handicaps of this country is the freezing and the frosts. So you're just lucky if you grow any fruit.

But I guess that was a good place to try an experiment station. That land there is quite alkali. Dad was very interested in it and he tried some special grains and seeds over here when they knew they wouldn't do so good over there in that alkali soil. He tried them here. I remember one time he tried some of what they call "mango" like huge rutabagas. Some of them got to be 15 to 16 inches long right out here in the sand without any irrigation. They did that for several years. But they had to be careful about the rabbits. The rabbits would move in and just cut them right off at the ground.

It had been operating a long time before I can recall. I think the first time I was over there I must have been six or seven years old, and I was born in 1907, so it must have been 1912 or '13. But I'm sure it was started several years before that because it took several years to get started. So that would have put it back about 1910 at least.

I think it was about the time of World War I that they pulled out. Of course the Hennys were getting pretty old by that time. In fact, Mrs. Henny died and she's buried right there in the corner lot of that little cemetery there. They donated that half an acre or something like that in the northwest corner of their homestead, and she was buried there.

PAULINE BRAYMEN: Then the Experiment Station was east of the Highway 205?

ED: Well, no. The entrance sort of faced towards Burns because they had that station up there. And then they sent a man in here by the name of Obil Shattack, and he took over the one up by Burns, and this one sort of ...

But some of the trees were still there even after 20, 30 years. Some of the old

apple trees were still there with a few apples on them. But I imagine the bugs got into them because they finally just died. I was out through there a while back and I can't even find the place where their house and homestead was.

He was a good blacksmith, Mr. Henny was. So that way he was quite an asset to this community, because anytime anything broke down it always went to Mr. Henny. He'd sharpen our plow shears and he was a real good blacksmith. I don't know if that was his specialty before he came in here to homestead or not.

PAULINE: Now as I understand it, there were really two communities. There was Dog Mountain community, and the Dog Mountain Schoolhouse, and Sunset Valley community and school.

ED: Well, there was another one west of here about three miles. In those days they had to have these school districts pretty close together because there wasn't any public transportation. The families had to be responsible for getting their kids to school. That was a pretty good-sized school district in Sunset. It was a little larger than this one (Dog Mountain). At one time we had 20 kids go to school over here and I know there was 30 or 35 over at Sunset.

PAULINE: Where was the Sunset School located?

ED: It was on the old county road about a mile and a half this side (west) of the present highway. Right down on the power line. (The road down the power line is the old county road.) The schoolhouse was about two miles north of the Weaver Springs Road.

My dad's name was Edward. My mother's name was Pauline. I have two brothers buried in that cemetery over in Sunset Valley. There were six children in the family. Alfred was the oldest and he died when he was a few weeks old, before they came here. Fred is the next oldest, he lives in Portland, then me. Then Walter, he died when he was seven of the whooping cough, then Mary. Then the youngest one, Otto, Oscar Otto we

called him, he died at two years with the flu. Walter and Otto are buried at Sunset cemetery. Mary's last name is McMinielly, and she lives in Portland.

PAULINE: Were there business establishments, stores and this type of buildings in Sunset Valley and Dog Mountain, or did everyone go to The Narrow?

ED: No, everyone traded down at The Narrows. It was a very popular place at that time. At one time they had a store, and post office, a blacksmith shop, and three saloons which were very important, and a hotel, and of course they had their own school there. It was a very good store; you could buy most anything from old Charlie Haines. He had almost everything a homesteader needed, pipe, wire, nails, and all kinds of hardware, dry goods and groceries. What was always nice was, if you had a surplus of eggs or butter --- Mother always used to make butter and sell it. He was always glad to get those kinds of things. At that time there was a lot of sheep men in the country, and of course they used a lot of eggs. Dad cured meat and smoked it, and took it to the store. Any way to make a dollar. These people had a lot of go. A lot of them stuck it out. Some of them were probably better off to leave this, but times were pretty good then.

There was a family on almost every 160 acres here then. You wouldn't think so now --- sagebrush taken over again --- but at one time all this land was farmed.

Ted and Lawrence Jones' father worked on the oil well. He was a good carpenter. He also built the schoolhouse over here on the corner. And of course everyone else helped out. Dad and the Newell boys hauled the lumber from Burns, and other building material.

PAULINE: Well what about the oil well?

ED: The oil well was started here in about 1913 or 1914, and they worked on and off, mostly off, but they drilled on it for about 30 years. Finally they gave up on it. It was a stock company. People around here were quite interested in it, to get down and see what

was there, they went down 3800 feet, and that's where they finished up. Backus and Hahn, they did the last work on it, and finished it up. There wasn't any money to pay them so they filed an attachment on the equipment, and got a court order and sold it. And a man came in here from Prineville and pulled all the casing out of it, and that was the end of that dream for Harney County. The first oil well.

It was called the Eastern Oregon Oil and Gas Company. The president of the company lived in Portland, his name was Neese, and they hired a man by the name of Turner. He was the pusher on the job. He was a great big fat man, and about all he done was to keep everybody else busy. And a man by the name of Cates was the driller, and he was a good driller. When they got down about 2500 feet or so, they had a big meeting and decided maybe they'd better hire a really good expert to come in and finish up. They thought they were getting down to the oil structure and they didn't know whether Cates was qualified to handle the job. So they let him go and hired this expert. I think he was here ten days, and possibly two weeks, and all he did for them was to loose the tools in the hold. And then he disappeared. Later it was rumored that he wasn't working for Eastern Oregon Oil and Gas Company, that was just a minor check he got from them. His major check came from a major oil company who wasn't interested in having a well drilled here.

PAULINE: I've heard something to the effect that actually there was indications that they had struck oil, or they would strike oil, and the major oil company didn't want it discovered so they sabotaged the hole.

ED: Well when they changed drillers there, I've seen this myself, that they had oil, indications come up in the baler, you know, and run down the creek there where they dumped the tailings. Whether that was put in for a primer to get more stock sold, or whether it was actually coming out of the ground, was never determined because no one

run any tests on it to see if it was crude or manufactured oil put in there to stimulate the interest.

PAULINE: This was known to happen?

ED: Yes, in other places. Of course they drilled another oil well down here, down towards the lake, the Howell Well. Mrs. Howell was promoting it, but they didn't go so deep. I don't think they went over about 1800 feet. But it's a flowing artesian well, a small one, it flows water out there now. It's bad water, a lot of alkali, soda. Stock will drink it, but they're not happy with it. Swan Lake, they called that.

PAULINE: Is that what was called the Catterson place, or near there?

ED: I think so.

PAULINE: Amy Catterson told me that they struck a well down there that had natural gas. That if you struck a match the water would burn or flash. She implied that well actually burned for a couple of years.

ED: Well there's a little artesian well over here in what we call the West Bench of the Red S Field, between here and Lawen. It's just a small casing, but it's also a flowing well. You hold a match over it and it will flash, but it isn't enough to keep burning.

I've talked to geologists about this type of gas, and they say it's not really natural deep gas. It's more or less swamp gas caused by old tules, vegetation trapped there centuries ago. And if you tapped that area, why gas is still there, but not in volume to be used for commercial purposes. It wouldn't be natural deep structured gas. That's what they claim.

I've drilled for natural gas and we've always found it at a much greater depth. You've got to go down thousands and thousands of feet in order to get natural gas in this Northwest country.

PAULINE: I understand, as far as water supply, that in some areas out in here, in Sunset

Valley, and over here between Dog Mountain and the lake, it's really difficult to get a good well.

ED: Yes, to get good tasting water. Getting into that old lake fill, that's when you're going to be getting into old alkali and other minerals, and it isn't good tasting water. Now you take in this area, as long as you stay over here close to the mountain, you're going to get good tasting water. Our problem here is getting very much water.

PAULINE: You don't get much flow?

ED: And over in the Weaver Springs area there, they get very good wells, good pumping wells. But I've spent thousands of dollars on this place to get some irrigation wells, and the best well I have will only pump 100 gallons a minute, out of five wells I drilled. And some of them are absolutely dry and I got nothing. I have one at about 700 feet and it will pump about two gallons a minute. And a geologist came in here and checked the temperature in this deep well and he found that the water was quite hot; it was hotter than 35 degrees. He was interested in this thermal energy. And he tests wells all over the world, and he was kind of surprised that this was warm here.

PAULINE: Weaver Springs is back above Leathers and in there?

ED: Yes.

PAULINE: Who were some of the people who lived up in there?

ED: The man that homesteaded that, he came here shortly after that Homestead Act came in, I guess. His name was McKenzie; he had a place down here by The Narrows. It's in the bird reservation there now. But he had a right, so he came in here and saw those little springs there, so he just homesteaded it. He had quite an orchard and raised quite a garden up there. Off and on when there was something to do down at the ranch, he'd be down there, but he spent most of his time up here and he fenced it. At the time it was just a natural spring, it was never developed. And it just run all the time, you know, it

flowed about a three inch pipe full out of there all of the time. It's flowing maybe half that much now, may-be because it's filled up. Maybe it could be opened up. Jim and Polly Dunn own that place now. And that's very nice to have that flowing water there. Oh, he raised gooseberries, and pears, and apples, and he put in willows, and there's quite a little oasis, you might say, there for this country.

The schoolhouse was south of there about a mile and a half near Ross Finger's and Charlie Newell's place. That now belongs to Leathers. It was quite a gathering place for Saturday night dances, Weaver Springs or Sunset. They had a little larger schoolhouse than we had (Dog Mountain) so we generally went one place or the other. Especially in the wintertime, it was about the only kind of entertainment they had. Too far to go to town, just for the show.

PAULINE: Was it an every Saturday night affair, or once a month, or ---

ED: Oh no, probably a couple times a month, and holidays like the Fourth of July, or Christmas. We were always sure of a big time then. We always had a Christmas program, and then after the Christmas program they had dancing. Pile the kids up on the benches and let them sleep. Those affairs didn't have any time limit, a lot of times we'd still be dancing at daylight.

PAULINE: I know. I think along about midnight I wouldn't be able to take it any more.

ED: Well, maybe they had more energy than we do now.

PAULINE: Of course they didn't do it every night.

ED: No, they didn't do it every night, maybe once a month or so.

PAULINE: About 1918 people started to leave this area?

ED: We hit quite a drought area there, and then the armyworms came through this country and stripped everything. That was the payoff that killed most of the interest in homesteading. And people would just gather up what they could haul away and then just

leave the doors open. They just had to get someplace where they could survive.

A lot of this land really should never have been plowed up because it was so sandy, and after you took the vegetation off it started to blow. And put in a crop and it might get up pretty good and one of these sand storms would come along and just chop it off right to the ground. A few discouraging trips like that and they went someplace where the sand didn't blow so much.

PAULINE: There's quite large dunes over here now between Dog Mountain and the lake.

Has that developed since it was plowed up, or was there a condition like this before?

ED: Of course that was always a sandy area, but the dunes were never as big as they are now. After that was plowed up, the sand moved so fast the sagebrush couldn't even get started back. Those sand dunes have just been building up. I know down here south and east of here, place that used to be fenced, you can just barely see the top of the fence posts now. They're completely buried with sand. You can see that dune over there, right over the top of your car. Well when I was a kid that sand dune wasn't there at all, so that's all developed since then. West of that there isn't even any sagebrush, and sand just keeps moving to the east. I imagine another 40 years and it'll be a mile over this away.

Sunset Valley really had a lot of people living out there at that time. Stahls, Nashes, Tylers, Egglestons, Daryl Eggleston's father and his folks lived right next to the school there for a long time. Alex was his name, Daryl's father. And then there was Charlie Reed; he had a small herd of cattle. Of course that was a little later, I think. At that time we had free range and you just turned stock out, and if a farmer didn't like them on his place he just had to fence them out. But the grass was much better then, a fellow didn't need to range out too far. Now, like you take this Dog Mountain, hundreds of head ranged up there, even a lot of Company cattle in the spring. They'd turn them out up

there on Dog Mountain and nobody seemed to care. There was plenty of grass and there wasn't even very much sagebrush up there then. But gosh, the sagebrush sure has took over up there now.

I have 800 acres here that takes in almost all of this land you can see north here. There's some BLM land on Dog Mountain, but Mother and Dad homesteaded this, and after they proved up on this you were allowed another additional homestead, or desert claim, or something like that, so he filed on another 160 on top of that. It was separated from this by my mother's brother, Frank, who homesteaded just north of us. His place was in between. So Dad proved up on that. So eight or nine years ago I bought another 320 acres from Robinson that was originally my uncle's place. My uncle's name was Klitzke, my mother's brother. He didn't stay here too long.

Mother's folks came to Snohomish, Washington when she was 15 or 16 years old (from Kansas). And Dad's folks all lived in Missouri. And he and his brother were on their way to Alaska and they got as far as Snohomish, Washington and went broke there, and started in the woods there. And his brother got pneumonia, and they nursed him through that, and he didn't want no more of the west. And so he went back, and Dad stayed on in Snohomish there, and met my mother and they were married. And then they moved to Idaho, and from Idaho they moved here.

PAULINE: What do you think of water witching?

ED: Well, I don't know of a better way, if you don't have anything else to do, and you want to entertain yourself, and brag to your neighbors how smart you are, I don't know of any better way than water witching. I don't believe in it. But I know a lot of people do, and they get angry when I laugh at them for running around the prairie with a willow switch, or a peach switch, or a pole with a little bottle of water hanging on it, or a copper rod. They all swear, oh, there's water here and they walk ten feet and oh, there's water here. But I

should have got some of that water here because I've had people witch this place until you'd think it was dangerous to walk around in it. But my opinion of that is --- Well when I was in South America I met a ground water geologist from Washington, and he'd traveled all over the world on ground water programs, and his name was Baker. And I asked him the same question. I could see he was immediately disturbed because we were at the breakfast table and he laid his fork down and took a drink of coffee. He said, "Did you read my book on ground water?" And I said, "No." And he said, "Well I've got a copy of it in my suit-case and I'll give it to you." And he said, "I don't care if you read any part of it, but read the last paragraph." And that paragraph said the same thing I said a while ago, if you don't have anything else to do and want to entertain yourself, that's the way to do it. But don't expect results. So that's the feeling of a man that that was his whole life, and if he didn't believe in water witching, why should I? I didn't question his authority.

PAULINE: Well you've drilled wells all over the world, for instance where?

ED: I've drilled wells from Canada to Cape Horn. In almost all the countries, not all of them, but most of them, the United States, Panama, Paraguay, Peru. I was thinking here awhile back, I've drilled wells for forty years and that's a lot of holes. But I'm through now. Oh, I piddle around, but I figure there's others more able to do it than I am now. I've drilled for water, gas, and oil. I never hit any oil, but I've drilled gas wells.

The first man I worked for was a contractor from Walla Walla, and he drilled up in the city of Richland, Washington long before the government went in there with that atomic energy, and we drilled thirteen gas wells in that area. Gas in that particular area run all the way from 1200 to 2000 feet. And we did drill a prospect well to 5000 feet looking for oil, but after we got through that gas structure we never hit any oil. It was just more rock. Drilling down there 5000 feet and there's hard rock, why there's not much ...

PAULINE: Well about Harney County, is there anything particular unique about drilling for

water?

ED: I've talked to a lot of geologists all over the North and South America and they say that you'll never get oil in a lava area like this Burns and Bend area. That the oil, that when this upheaval took place, all the oil burned out. You'll never find a big producing well in a lava area. Sandstone and limestone formations, that's where you find the big ones. Like Venezuela, that's a very productive area. In fact, it has one of the largest producing oil fields in the world and you don't find any lava there at all. And I figure those geologists must know what they're talking about because that's their business to know. Big fields are never found in a lava area.

PAULINE: In other words, the heat from the lava ...

ED: Either moved it or destroyed the oil. There's a geologist that said it is possible to hit a pocket, even in a lava area that didn't burn out, but it would never be a big producing well. That's what we found in that gas field that we drilled up there in Washington. When we first started drilling there on the first well we had 35 pounds casing head pressure. And then we gave up when it dropped down to 3 pounds. When it dropped to 3 pounds, we figured that was the end. It didn't even pay to pump then. They had a ten-inch line run over to Sunnyside and Grandview, Washington, and the company, they came in and took up the line and said, "Well, that's all. We've got to get someplace we can get some production."

PAULINE: How did you get started drilling wells, was it when they were drilling oil wells up above here?

ED: Well partly, yeah. Every time Dad gave me a job to do and I'd --- if I could sneak off I'd go up there and see what they were doing. And the first man I worked for, this guy from Walla Walla, he came to Burns to drill some wells. And that was my first experience, on those wells in Burns. And then we drilled some wells for Hines Company and he

asked me if I wanted to follow that kind of work, and I said, "Yeah, it's better than pitching hay or working in the hay field." "Okay, you stay with me a couple or three years and I'll give you a job drilling," he said. So I went with him over into Washington. And he had at that time about thirty machines all over the northwest. He was operating into Seattle and clear up into Canada. And I was one of the few single men that he had around, that he could send around. And so he'd send me around as a troubleshooter for all the other machines, as quick as I learned anything about it. And that's how I drilled at Moscow, Idaho, LaGrande, Spokane. Oh, its been an interesting life.

Let's see, 1940 I went down to Panama in charge of the shore drilling and blasting for the channel changing for the third locks, and I was there about five years. And that's when I met Louise. We got married there, came home and raised a couple of kids, and then contracted around here and Portland.

And then in 1955 I got a chance to go to Chile for the government on one of these foreign aid programs. So I went down there and spent about six years in Chile.

Of course prior to that time I started out with the Taylor Grazing people working there on the desert, in 1935. And I think it was due to working for the government before that I got the Panama job. You had to take a civil service examination, but it was a good job. We made the channels, took out these channels, and they put in bigger locks. The present channels are only 110 feet wide and they didn't accommodate these big airplane carriers, so they wanted to put in wider locks so they'd be 150 feet wide. So we did the excavation and everything, and then they said, well the atom bomb came in and they said the big battleships and airplane carriers were out of date anyway, so that's where it sits. They never finished. We spent millions of dollars there and then never --- I had 50 well drilling machines there to drill blast holes to shoot the rocks out of these channels. We sure burnt up a lot of power, and spent a lot of money. Now it just sits there. Maybe it is

just as well. The Panamanians want the canal, and I think they are going to get it.

PAULINE: Well how did Louise happen to be in Panama?

ED: She went down to teach school. Her sister and husband were already down there and that's one reason she went down there. We were married in June 5, 1942. Yeah, it was a good life; I liked it down there. A lot of people say, well how can you stand it down there? But it's just getting used to it. And when you're younger ---

We're kinda getting away from Sunset Valley here. When you talk about the Panama Canal you think that's just a ditch across the country, you know. But it's one of the wonders of the world that was ever developed. Those old timers that put that in there really had a tough time fighting the disease and mosquitoes, the bad water and the climate, and everything. You wonder how they ever did it. Yes, it's an amazing piece of engineering. The French of course tried it and failed. In fact we dug out some of the old French Channel.

PAULINE: Where you excavated, is there water in it now?

ED: Yes, there's water in it now. You see the canal is 78 feet higher than either ocean which is the reason they have to lock ships up into the channel or lake area and then you get into the Culebra cut, that's on the Pacific side, then you have to lock back down to sea level. That's the area we were working in.

Well, let's get back to Sunset Valley and Harney County. People had one advantage in those days, you know, there wasn't the income tax and property tax. Oh, I know at one time the taxes on this property right here run \$7 a year for the whole place. And Dad sure got disturbed when it was raised \$3. He thought this country was sure going to hell when they started charging that much for taxes. Well he should have seen last year's taxes; he'd have reason to be disturbed. Well those days if a fellow made a dollar a day, well he took home a dollar in pay with nothing subtracted from it. Of course it

was long days, from daylight to dark. And a lot of these people worked out, they had to make it pay.

They had quite a project going when they were digging that ditch down there at Buena Vista. When they didn't have anything to do at their places, why they could take their teams down there and help build the ditch.

Then the Company over here, the Cattle Company at the Island Ranch, they could always use an extra hand to feed. We had one man just east of here, a neighbor, his name was Moxley. He did sheep shearing, and every spring he'd go down in the Southern Arizona area and start following the sheep shearing routes clear up into Montana. He'd probably be gone until June or July and then he'd come home and work on his place. Then when spring come, he'd take off again. But he said if it weren't for the sheep shearing he'd never made it, and I guess he was right.

PAULINE: What kind of crops did people try to put in mostly?

ED: We used to raise wheat here. It was never a sure thing, but one year, it was back about 1920, we had a failure. That was the year the armyworms came, we had about three acres left. They cut everything right off at the ground. That was the first year my dad ever had to buy hay.

We didn't want to sell his stock off because he would take so long to get back, so he bought hay and paid \$10 a ton for the tule hay down at The Narrows. I still think he'd been better off to sell the cattle, but it turned out all right. They didn't come through the winter in very good shape, but he didn't lose any. But it was a long haul, a ten-mile haul. But everyone had some stock here, raised pigs, and chickens, and had a milk cow, and raised a garden. I think it didn't take so much as it does now. You didn't expect all the conveniences, campers, and trailers, and fishing outfits ...

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