

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #152 - Side B

Subject: Grace Blair Smyth

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: February 3, 1972

Interviewer: James Baker

GRACE BLAIR SMYTH: My mother's maiden name was Louise Jensen. She was from Kansas, ... Kansas to be exact. And my father's name was Robert Henry Blair. She was a teacher in there, at Bunker. Pupils that she wrote to in later years was Drew Pearson. She corresponded with him later. And she taught in those days when you spent your time, boarded probably a month, I'm not sure, with one family, and then the next month on with another. She began teaching, I think, when she was only 16. Many of her pupils, I have pictures of her classrooms, were much larger than she was, great big strapping boys, and probably older too, in the 6th and 7th grades in those times.

And my father was a stonemason. Mother had ceased teaching, though, and was keeping books in the bank when she and father were married. His name was Robert Henry Blair. And they came to California, Visalia, California.

JAMES BAKER: Visalia?

GRACE: Uh huh.

JAMES: ... I've never heard of that town.

GRACE: Well it's about 40 miles south of Fresno.

JAMES: I see.

GRACE: Well, they were married and lived on a dairy farm someplace close to ... some small town there; I've forgotten the name of it. But my father's family, his brothers and

sisters, they were a large family, and mother had come to Visalia a year or two before that. So then my parents came out there. And my older brother was born in Kansas. Then in Visalia my next brother was older than I; and I and my sister were born at Visalia.

They operated a dairy farm there for 12 years, and that's quite a chore if you know what a dairy farm is. You milk cows twice a day, way into the night. They didn't have milking machines then, you know. And it would be quite often maybe 2 o'clock when my father got home. And after about 12 years of that I think he was about fed up with it. In fact, he hated cows so; after he came to Oregon he never would allow a cow on the place, which is funny to most Harney Countians who run beef cattle, but not dairy cattle. They don't know what you have to put up with.

Well he had a sister who was a nurse, and her husband had come up here to the lower end of Catlow Valley and taken up a homestead. And they wrote telling my folks what a wonderful country this was, how all the people were coming in here getting all this free land homesteading. And this was the land of milk and honey apparently. JAMES: I think I saw some of it out there a while ago. Mud and water though now.

GRACE: Well, it was quite dry in Catlow Valley. They were never able to raise anything down there. This was about the time that the famous Rag Town sprang up down in Catlow Valley, over there near Blitzen.

JAMES: I've never heard of it.

GRACE: You haven't? Well, you'll have to get in touch with some of the settlers from that area. I have a brother-in-law at Andrews who could probably tell you a great deal about that, because he knows all about that area, and it is quite interesting. There was oh, four or five little towns over there. This one they called Rag Town because they were all tents. Everybody who came there, they just came from way back East, and every place, to get

this homestead land. Where they were going to get all this land for just living on it and raising, they thought they could raise everything, of course.

Well my folks then sold their cattle and we came into Harney County. Our first winter was spent on what was the Spangleburg Ranch; it belongs to the Company, the Allied Company now, their farthest one south. They have several ranches on down, they have Roaring Springs, and Home Creek, and 3-Mile, and 12-Mile and Spangleburg, and Skull Creek. We spent the first winter there; we lived in a regular adobe cabin. A lot of people say there were never any real sod cabins in this area, but there were, because we spent our first winter there. It had a thatch roof on it, no floor. And with the addition of two or three tents we built around there, we spent the first winter there.

And then when my father decided to, he had looked around, scouting for what he thought was the best land to take up, was in Long Hollow. It's sort of a long canyon that goes from Catlow Valley over across the Steens Mountain and takes you down into the other side where the Fields and Alvord Desert are. And in the central part of this there is a wide opening, it's long, it opens out to quite an area, and in there he took up a homestead, filed on a homestead, 360 acres. And the following spring we moved up there.

And father, being a stonemason, built our home out of a sort of a sandstone rock that he was able to get out of the mountains back of us. And he built it himself. Our first roof on it was also a thatch roof, I think. I don't know just how they made it, with willows and dirt and ... with a team of horses and came to Burns and bought lumber and put a floor in it, and a partition. It was just two rooms.

He dug the well himself and we planted a garden. We did raise a few vegetables, that were practically all. It was a difficult job, we found, very difficult grubbing the sagebrush off of this land. It was probably the most fertile land. It wasn't like some of that

dry in the southern part of Catlow Valley where you couldn't possibly have raised anything.

And we spent a --- there wasn't even a school there when we came, my first year. I came when I was 9. The first year then we had no schooling from then on. But the next, after we'd moved up onto this homestead in Long Hollow, my mother, of course, being a teacher, was very interested and insisted that we have a school. There was another family with children, who also had four children, they were the Wise family, and lived sort of on the hillside of this same area, and right connecting to my father's homestead.

And they established a school district and built a schoolhouse. The first year though, we had school in this family's living room, right in their home. And the teacher was a man; I think his name was Isaac Thomas. And then the following year they set up a school, and we had school there for a couple of years. And then we had one of those severe winters. Our teacher, his wife was pregnant, he came to Burns when her baby was born, and she lost her mind. And he didn't come back to teach. So there in about February we were without school again, after about two years of schooling.

The snow was so deep that particular year; we were hardly able to get across the mountain to Fields to get our mail. We had to use, although there were a few cars then, we had to use wagons, buck wagons and horses, to get over there once every two or three weeks to get our mail.

And about at this time the man who had the store and hotel there needed someone to run the hotel for him. And there being a school 5 miles from Fields, my mother took the family and we went over there and she began operating this hotel. And we went to school at what was then called the Dome School District, and it was 5 miles. And sometimes we went with the horse and buggy and sometimes we walked. But at least we were going to school again. I think we went to school there, let's see, a year. We

finished that year and went into, I think it was probably; we had one full year of schooling there. And then the next year World War I started, and our teacher at that time was a young man who was drafted about six weeks after school started, or two months, and there we were again without a teacher. Schooling has always been a problem. So probably after about two months of no school, they prevailed upon my father's eldest sister, who was a teacher. She was also a retired minister's wife, living in Oakland, California, to come up and finish the term out. So we got through the year some way, we finished that year. And the following year, then it was impossible to have school there, because I don't know --- just hard to get teachers or the pupils had dwindled so we didn't have enough to hold school.

Anyway my folks went to California, back to Oakland, and I went to school there in my eighth grade. And then we came back in the springtime, in the summer, and from then on they lived at Andrews.

They purchased a ranch down at Andrews that had been an old homestead up against the mouth of the Wild Horse Canyon. And I came to school to Burns that year, and went to school one year in Burns. That sort of tells how my folks got into --- I have an article here, I don't know you may have read it.

JAMES: Now this wasn't the homestead?

GRACE: No, they left the homestead. In fact we never lived there after it became ---

JAMES: What place did he buy that had the orchard on it?

GRACE: It was called the old Stone Place. It's right up at the foot of Wild Horse Canyon.

JAMES: The reason I'm interested in following that up is that there were so few good orchards around that I was interested in it when you mentioned it.

GRACE: Uh huh. It had this orchard there. My father was more or less an orchardist, and he did add to it, and he pruned it, and kept it up in his time. Planted more, and

transplanted, and grafted. But the orchard was there, and there was a nice alfalfa field, and a nice garden plot. And that was the reason that they bought it. It had this house that was built of logs that had been so well constructed that it had been moved three times. This Mr. Stone who had the place had had a homestead down lower in the valley somewhere. And they tell me that some way they had a --- then someone more or less, I don't know what the word was, what they called it, kick you off of your homestead, so you went some place else. And this house had been moved three times.

JAMES: Was that someone with the government, or a big operator who wanted to move you out in order to get more himself?

GRACE: No, it wasn't either the government. Anyway he had been moved three times, and the house had been moved three times. But it was so well built and the doors were all marked when it was moved; they just fitted right in. And this house, it was pretty well run down, I mean the floor was all broken up, and caved in. When I went home from my first year of high school here, they had just purchased the place and they were trying to build it up. And I can remember them tearing up the boards on this old floor, to put in a new floor.

Then after this first year of high school here in Burns, I went back and all my high school years was in Oakland and Berkeley. I graduated from Berkeley High. After I graduated, then the following Christmas, I and my husband were married here in Burns.

JAMES: Do you feel any strong attachment to this land out here?

GRACE: Yes, you do. During the years of the '30's, after the depression and we'd lost everything, and you didn't know where --- If anybody has lived through that, and raised a family in those years, they know what it was like. We decided to go back to California, thinking that my husband could get some kind of work. And the children would have better schooling opportunities, and we went back and tried it for a year and a half. And then

that's when Harry Bridges pulled one of his strikes, and my husband was working for the East Bay Water Company, he had a very good job as foreman out there on that. But after several months with no work, we came back to Harney County and it looked pretty good. Even though the years were still pretty skimpy for several years. In fact raising a family of six children they're always skimpy, there was never quite enough money.

JAMES: Is it the mountains that bring you back?

GRACE: It was my husband's home, he was born in Andrews, and Harney County brought him back. No, I don't particularly like mountains myself, they don't appeal to me. I like forests. And I don't care for deserts like most people do. But I think there is a certain amount of beauty to deserts, there is something --- every time I used to go over the mountain and look down on that Alvord Desert, that vast expanse of nothing, just flat almost like a glass table top, I used to wonder about the beauty of it. It was really awesome. Actually I like forests and trees. I was born in Visalia, amongst the orange groves and roses and all this. It was very hard, very hard on my mother those first few years. In fact often I found her in tears. I think she didn't know where our next meal was coming from.

JAMES: Did your husband feel a strong attachment to the land?

GRACE: Oh yes, he was an outdoor man; he loved Harney County. He loved it here, and he would never have been happy any place else. It was, we just felt that it was to the children's advantage. And he'd lost his cattle and there was nothing to do. We didn't know how --- well it was the depression, like everybody else was going through, and we thought things would be better there.

JAMES: Did he ever indicate something like a spiritual attachment to this land?

GRACE: No, he never did, but I think he felt that. I really think he did, he loved the outdoors. When he was younger he didn't care about fishing and hunting. If you are

raised with that, it was just natural to you, you know, you don't think anything about it. Like these people now who come out here for miles, and miles, and spend so much money going hunting and fishing. But if you just have that all around you, you don't think anything of it. So you never take time out to go fishing or hunting. If you happen to be along a stream and you want some fish for dinner, you throw in your hook and line and catch a few, and --- And if you need a deer for meat, you would go out and kill a deer.

JAMES: You had some other birds down in that part of the county, before the Refuge of course, you could hunt geese.

GRACE: Yes, there were some, not a great deal. Actually I don't think many of the people down there ever bothered to hunt for birds. My father did, because when we lived in Southern California, he used his one vacation a year from the dairy, would be a trip up, he had a boat and they would go up to some lake and they would hunt for ducks and geese and that was his outing. And he used to go down when we had the ranch at Andrews and shoot ducks and geese at old Borax Lake, you've probably heard of that Borax Lake down ---

JAMES: Did they mine borax out of that?

GRACE: Yes, that's where they original 20 Mule Team Borax came from.

JAMES: I didn't know that. Is there anything else that, that's interesting about that? What was the company ---

GRACE: Oh, very much so. A lot of the history of that area is about that. I'm trying to think if I have something that tells all about it, pictures and things. I think it was the book that Rankin Crow, yes, Rankin Crow's book. I don't happen to have one right here. I bought one and gave it to my grandson for his birthday, because his picture was in it. And it tells in there about the history of that. I think originally most of the employees there were Chinese.



JAMES: Were there Chinese in other parts of this county?

GRACE: Not that I know of. There were a few restaurants here and in Crane later on, but real early --- now this was before I came into Harney County. The borax had discontinued being mined when we came, and there was just this Borax Lake, this hot lake over there.

JAMES: I wonder who would know about the Chinese and Borax Lake? Anybody that comes to mind?

GRACE: Oh yes, a lot of people. I have a sister-in-law, Mrs. Stella Calderwood.

JAMES: Is she in Burns?

GRACE: No, she lives down there by Fields. She has a ranch down there. I'm trying to think, I must have something around here with all of it. If I had known ---

JAMES: Well it's interesting, and that's why I was interested in knowing ...

GRACE: The history of that quite frequently appears in the Oregonian. Not very long ago there was quite an article about the borax works, and pictures, and these old abandoned cabins, the sod houses that they had lived in. It belongs to my sister-in-law now.

JAMES: Calderwood?

GRACE: Calderwood, C A L D E R W O O D. They would haul the wool out to Winnemucca, and then they would come back with a load of groceries.

JAMES: He would team between Winnemucca and Fields?

GRACE: They hauled out the borax earlier, now it was hauling the wool to the railroads, and bringing the groceries back, and staple goods for the stores.

JAMES: Did Tommy Jenkins live down in that area?

GRACE: No, he lived on this side, Diamond Valley.

JAMES: Who were the sheep men who were down there?

GRACE: Oh, there were a great many of them. One of them, I think that my father worked for when he was on the homestead in Long Hollow was Ramirez, and he was the

father of the Ramirez who was a contractor here in town now. He had sheep. My father would help him just during the lambing season. It was quite an experience to us children, we had never seen anything like this, you know, coming from Southern California.

JAMES: You mean the sheep?

GRACE: The sheep, yeah. Running out on the range, and all these little baby lambs. And how the shepherders would cook their meals out in the open, you know.

JAMES: Oh, was that in a pot underground?

GRACE: The bread they baked that way, and quite often I think they also cooked their main meal that way. But they had a little stove, it would be real thin sheet iron, you know, just real thin, and it would get real hot real quick. And they had these in the tents, and they'd cook. In the bad weather they'd cook inside, and if it was nice they would cook outside. And then Santos Irrigarion (sp.?) was a sheep man.

JAMES: That sounds like a Basque name.

GRACE: Most of them are, so is Ramirez. Most of them are Bascos. My sister-in-law, the one who is now Mrs. Calderwood, her husband was a sheep man, but his name was McDade.

JAMES: Oh yeah.

GRACE: Jim McDade. And there were also some Irishmen who had sheep. But the majority of them, I think, were Basque. Johnny Madarega, I think he's in the nursing home up here; he had sheep down there. My husband worked for him when we came back from California after we had our year and a half down there trying to look for better opportunities.

JAMES: What kind of work did your husband do with them?

GRACE: It was laying pipelines, water lines.

JAMES: No, I was thinking of this Eastern Oregon country, working for the shepherders,

what kind of work?

GRACE: Oh, just herding sheep. He, sometimes he'd tend camp which would mean cooking and moving as they moved the sheep from one area to another. And then he would often be just a herder, stay out when they were lambing at nights, sleep out in the storm.

JAMES: Did you stay in town during this time?

GRACE: Yes. Shortly after my husband and I were married, he took a homestead up on Steens Mountain. And we took up, not the full 640 acres, which you were allowed. Then after the children were born, and we hadn't proved up on it, we found out that you, it would be impossible, to be honest, you know, you have to live so many months out of the year up there for three years in order to prove up on these homesteads. And with the children that was impossible to do. And so we found out we could take an additional acreage, and I think we took 80, right back of the little town of Andrews, a little village or whatever you call it, and be right near the school. And I could live there the full year round and our children could be in school, so we lived there. And we had a little house right there, and that's where I lived.

After my first son was born though, the following year I became very ill with tuberculosis, and we moved away. In fact, I was considered a hopeless case. We were out of the country for about two years before we came back. And then when we had, that was when we found going back on the mountain and trying to raise a family and getting them to school, just wouldn't work. We had gotten an extension of time in proving up on the homestead, and by filing on this 80 acres, which we still had right back down at Andrews, this little cabin, three room house which was built. I lived there and sent the children to school at Andrews. And my husband would, he had cattle.

For a while he ran sheep, he had a partnership with a sheep man in California

when I was down there at the Colfax Tuberculosis Colony for a year and a half, he worked for this man. And then he took my husband in as partners in sheep up here around Andrews and the Steens Mountain area. And he had sheep for two and a half years or more there. And most of the time he'd be out with the sheep, we seldom saw each other.

It was a rather hectic family life.

JAMES: Let me jump a little bit. What were some of the, what was the accounts that you heard from the Smyth family of the '78 massacre?

GRACE: Well that they were living on the, the family of Smyth's; they were quite a large family. There was the elderly, there was the father, his name was George Comegys Smyth, and his son John Smyth. And John's brothers Press, and Darius, and George, and the John, were all living with their families in the Diamond Valley when the word came that the Indians were coming. They moved their families to Fort Harney. And about all I know is that the Indians set fire to this cabin, surrounded them and burned my father-in-law's father and grandfather in those cabins. And his wife and the children were at Fort Harney. The children were my father-in-law, George A. Smyth, and his younger brother, John T., and the sister, Margaret, or Maggie as they called her, Maggie Donegan, who was the first white child born in Harney County. And they were at Fort Harney when this happened. And their mother, who was a cripple, stayed on at Fort Harney and took in laundry, as I understand it, to support her family. And my father-in-law and his brother were rather left to shift for themselves when she later on married one of the soldiers, and moved to Portland and started another family. Now as I understand it, my father-in-law at about the age of 10 was on his own, out working as a buckaroo. He rather raised himself and also helped raise his younger brother, John T. who was quite a bit younger. And they went on, when they became older, he and his brother went on to the other side of the mountain instead of back to the Diamond area.

He married my mother-in-law, who was a widow with six children, and they started the stores and post office, well I think there was already a post office at Andrews. But they started the stores and built a hotel, and operated them there at both Andrews, and bought the one at Fields. In fact, they owned the one at Fields when my mother was running a hotel there. Though they didn't live down there or manage it, it was run by a one-legged, peg leg man, from Montana, who had had his leg blown off in a mining accident. That's the story, as I know it, about the Smyth's.

JAMES: Why did the men go back to the ranch while the other people were up in the Fort during this time?

GRACE: Well they took their families there. I guess they went back presumably to protect their ranches and their stock, I would imagine. They took the children and women to the Fort for safety, as the men did in those days, you tried to protect your family. It was a beautiful valley down there and you just didn't want to give it up.

JAMES: Yeah.

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