

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #159 - Side A

Subject: Henry Slater - On Schools

Place: Harney County Historical Society Luncheon - Burns, Oregon

Date: May 1978

Interviewer:

MARCUS HAINES: Stand about halfway down Hank, is about the best. I was going to get a P.A. system but it was locked up in the building, I couldn't get it.

HENRY SLATER: I'm a little bit flustered being introduced by a Democrat. (Laughter) It makes me feel like the fellow who lost his job as an elevator operator because he couldn't remember the route. Now, history can either be interesting or boring. Now some of this will be very interesting to you, and some of this is going to be boring. And if any time you want to get up and leave, just get up and leave. I hope that what I've got to tell you will be favorable to all those listening to me. And some people are mentioned here in this article who are here today. And also I just want to take one moment, there's been quite a bit of malarkey about our local hospital. Now as you know ---

BILL CRAMER: You're taking sides, Hank, when you say that.

HENRY: I don't care. I'm going to take this side. I was in the Corvallis Hospital, and then I came home and I got into this hospital. And I want to tell everybody here and everybody in this county that I didn't receive any better treatment that a person could ask for than I received here in this hospital. (Applause) Not only the personnel in the hospital, but the medical officers, the doctors in this county. 'Course I'm a little biased about one of them because he happens to be my bridge partner. But I think we've got a very excellent medical staff in this county, and our hospital doesn't have to take a back seat for anything.

Now I think a definition of history, the first thing it must be written down, and of course it must have happened. Now all this information I've got here was written down, and I had presumed it happened, because I wasn't around when some of this took place. The area now embraced geographically in Harney County was included in Grant County until February 1889, when the south half of Grant County was made a separate county, with a county seat established temporarily at Harney City. The first meeting, that's school meeting of the Silvies River District, was held February 10, 1875. N. F. McLeod was called active chairman, William Jennings chosen as the secretary. A committee was appointed to draw up the boundaries for the school district.

The members of the boundary committee were Peter Bohn, James Sheppard, and P. M. Curry. Now I've heard the name of P. M. Curry many times since I've been here.

The report of said committee read as follows: Running from a point at Wright's Point northeast to Camp Harney, thence to the north boundary of P. M. Curry's ranch on the Silvies River, then south to Sagehen Spring, then southeast to Wright's Point. N. F. McLeod, and P. M. Curry and Peter Bohn were elected as directors, and Thomas Whiting was elected clerk. This was called the Silvies River District, and was in the Grant County system.

Sarah Latham was the first teacher. She received \$100 for three months, and this money came from subscriptions. School was held only in the fall and spring. The first schoolhouse was made of logs and was located at the site of a spring, which can be clearly seen from the highway between Burns and Hines, in the field east of the Roe Davis airport. This settlement was known as Egan. However, the school was called the Silvies River School. Now this school was moved to Burns, in the immediate vicinity of Burns to a site called Miller's Cove.

How many here know where Miller's Cove was? Three of you. Well, I'll tell you, it's

where the football field is. And the schoolhouse had moved there in 1880. Now this was real interesting to me. A house was purchased from Thomas Whiting for a \$175. Now, even if it was an outhouse, you couldn't build it for that today.

It was moved onto the new site. And George McGowan was the clerk for the new district.

It was called School District #13, and was organized in 1883. The teacher was paid \$160 for three months.

Now here are some of the pupils who attended that first school that was organized and set up here in Burns in 1880: Mart Brenton; Lizzie, Frank, George, and "Skip" Whiting. Now the only ones I know that I've heard since I've been here was "Skip" Whiting. Sally, Rod and Erma Howser. Are they related to Darrell?

CROWD: Yes.

HENRY: Laura and Louie Stancliff; Charles Bedell; Don and Ida Simpkins; Frank Baker; Charles Johnson; Archie, Jessie, and Jim McGowan. The first county superintendent of Harney County was L. B. Baker. He was paid an annual salary of \$300. The school located at Miller's Cove was moved to South Main Street in Burns, in 1885. It probably was located near the present Copeland Lumber Yard. It was a two-room building. Charles Newell, who was elected the county school superintendent, at the first county election held in 1890.

In 1895, Harney County had 805 pupils. Now that's quite a few for that time. Twenty-eight teachers. In 1912 a new building was completed and located on the present site of the Burns Grade School. Warren Sutton was the first principal of the new school. He started in 1912, and stayed until 1935. In 1940, Robert Harriman, who was paid \$200 per month, was the principal. The teachers were Irene Reed, Kathleen McLane, Everett Sandberg, Greta Hossman, Wanda West, Agnes Stallard, Marie Whitney, Ruth Shaw, and Ruth Garcia. And one, two, three, four, five, and Lela McGee, five of those teachers

taught for me. And two or three of them, I would rate them as strong in education as any teacher that ever worked for me. I'm talking about Ruth Shaw. Lela McGee at the time she taught for me was quite an old lady, as you'll see further in this history, and Agnes Stallard. They were solid people; they were dedicated to their work. They didn't ask for extra money because they were doing playground duty, or hall duty. When I got hit with that the first time, a teacher lost a job with me because the first thing she asked me was how much extra money do I get for playground and hall duty. I said you got your extra money but not from me. Move on!

Now from this point on, so as to not make it too monotonous, I'll just name the district and the date of organization. The #2 District was at Harney City; #3 at Poison Creek; #4 at Crane was organized in 1901; Pine Creek in 1901; Otis Creek in 1901; Diamond in 1901; Buchanan and #9 known as The Narrows were organized in 1903; #10 at Silver Creek; #11 at Trout Creek organized in 1903; #12 at Princeton; and #13 at Drewsey; and #14 at Sunset Valley were organized in 1906; Otley in 1902; Venator in 1902; Frenchglen in 1927; Graves in 1901; Lawen in 1907; Redpoint in 1902; the Downs School in the Catlow Valley in 1908; Wolf Creek in 1891; Silvies River Valley-Trout Creek School in 1890; Suntex in 1901; Foley in 1902; Happy Valley in #27, and #28 Double O in 1894.

In 1929 the schoolhouse was moved into Hines. The new school was built in Hines, and it cost \$38,000. The builder was C. E. Silbaugh, and that name I've heard a number of times since I've been here. R. H. Anderson was the first principal of the new school in 1932.

Warm Springs, sometimes called the Cheney District, in 1898, and the Sod House in 1908, and by the way we have a woman here today who taught in that Sod House School for 7 or 8 years, Edna Haines. I think it was later than 1898. (Laughter) Blitzen

District in 1888; Districts 8, 20, and 46 consolidated with 48 on June 1919; Wagontire in 1916; Saddle Butte in 1913; and located in the community of Albritton. Now I couldn't find on the map this Albritton. Does anybody know where that is?

CROWD: Yes.

MARCUS: Between Burns and Lawen and Crane, Hank, between Lawen and Crane.

HENRY: Oh, the Beckley District in 1913; the Ross District in 1913; and the Waverly near Windy Point in 1918; and the Embree School located approximately 6 miles southeast of Burns. The McGee District organized in 1892, and Lela McGee taught the school in 1892 at 16 years of age. She also taught for me in 1944. Thus ends the saga of elementary education in Harney County.

Now, since I've been here I'm not going to mention any names, but it's not only in Harney County but almost every school district in the United States at sometime or another there has been a serious crime as a result of a school fight. And I was told since I've been here, that there was some shooting done over a schoolhouse district in this area close to Burns.

Now, I'm going into the secondary part of this history. The first Harney County high school was organized in the fall of 1904. In 1903 Professor Finn, principal of the Burns Grade School, taught the 9th grade to pupils who wished to further their education. Now, one of these I was very well acquainted with, and the other one I didn't know. Maybe I did but I didn't recognize the name. Neil Smith, Sr. I knew. He was one of those who took lessons from Professor Finn and Merle Dalton Miller. It said she lives in Prairie City now, I don't know.

A building was constructed by M. E. Rigby on the present site of the Episcopal Church. The high school board procured this building in 1904, and the first high school in Harney County was organized. Now the first graduates, from this high school in May

1906, were Merle Dalton and Neil Smith, Sr. Now, but listen to the subjects that were offered. No "Mickey Mouse" courses then. No fly tying or weaving baskets. Now that was many, many years ago, in fact 72 years ago. Now then these are the courses: Algebra; English; Latin; Civil Government; Social Problems; Economics; Caesar; Botany; Rhetoric and Composition; Physics; and Bookkeeping. Now if you take a look at the curriculums that are being offered to some of these pupils today, and compare with that, it isn't any wonder that the best they can do in college is walk in the front door, and walk out the back door. They don't know what's going on.

The high school was continued in this building until 1912, when it moved to the old school building vacated by the Burns Elementary School, District #1. The local high school was organized under the name of the Harney County High School. The name was changed to Burns Union High School, District #2, after the Crane Union High School was organized in 1921.

In 1928 a new high school was built in Burns at a cost, now get this, a brick building at a cost of \$80,000. That building of the Burns Grade School, \$251,000. I don't know what the high school cost, the new high school out there. The contractor was C. E. Silbaugh. The same building houses the present Junior High School of Burns School District #1. Merle Bennett was the principal in the new building in 1928.

The Crane School District was organized in 1920, with school being held in "Old Lawen". Is that where Lawen is now?

WALLY WELCOME: No, south.

HENRY: The site of the first town of Lawen it says. There were 9 pupils. The modern pupil dormitory school was established in 1922. Harney County is as large as Maryland, and because of this some pupils to get to the Crane High School from their ranch homes, had to travel some 120 miles one way. So it wasn't just around the corner from home.

Obviously a daily trip was out of the question. The taxpayers found that it was cheaper to provide room and board for the students than to arrange the transportation.

Now another man here, and I'm sorry to say he was a Democrat, but he and I were very good friends, and I think he helped a great deal in the educational program, but he was really responsible for the educational program in Crane. I'm talking about Nelson Higgs.

The first Crane High School built on the present site was built in 1924. That building burned, and it doesn't seem that long ago, January 1967. It was replaced with the present building at a cost of \$893,000. The Crane High School serves an area of some 7,233 square miles.

I recall that after the Crane High School burned that there was agitation to try and bring the Crane pupils into Burns. This movement met with a resistance by the majority of taxpayers in the Crane District. In my humble opinion, if the parents and other patrons of the district decided it was better to pay taxes and erect a new building than to try and move said pupils into the Burns High School, then I feel that it most certainly was the sole prerogative of said taxpayers of that district. Crane graduates, in many instances, have more than held their own educationally after graduation, and that most certainly is the bottom line of any educational program whether it be in a one-room sod schoolhouse, or a castle of brick, glass, and stone.

And now in closing I leave you with this summary: In the early period teachers salaries ranged from \$33 to \$65 per month, and the school terms were usually of three months duration. In 1940 there were 26 active districts, including the two Union High School Districts. Twenty-one districts had been consolidated with other districts; eleven had been suspended. Burns School District #1 was established in 1875, 103 years ago, and is still in operation. Now when I came here we consolidated with Rye Grass, Poison

Creek, Foley, Trout Creek, districts were annexed to the Burns Grade School.

In my opinion I think that the schools in the Harney County, for the most part, are as good as there are in the State of Oregon. I only hope that we spend an awful lot of time, now this is my personal observation you don't have to agree with me if you want to or not, it doesn't make any difference to me. Anybody throwing rocks at me isn't going to hurt me anymore. But I think we're paying too much time and attention to the underprivileged child and forgetting the privileged one in our educational program. Because take two people, one a real good student and one under-average in school and put them to digging ditches. Who's going to be digging the ditch? Not the good one, he's going to be standing outside that ditch telling them you've got to put a little more pressure on that shovel, and so forth. In other words what I'm trying to tell you is that good student is the one who's going to be taking care of us, and our governments in the future. That underprivileged child, they may need some attention that's true. But look at all the special classes we've got for underprivileged children. And right now, I doubt very much, I stand corrected on this, but I've been out there now for two or three years and I can't think of any class out there they set aside distinctly to help the privileged child, the good student. Now I say this because when they leave this school and go down into the Valley, they have to compete against boys and girls who were in those kinds of classes. And it makes it real rough in college to do that. Now that's just a little fire and brimstone from my side of it.

And while I'm here then, I have only one sorrow that Gen and I, and my family didn't decide to come to Harney County many years before we did. Because every day that I've been here has been a most pleasant one for me. And the attitude of the patrons in this district, and the people who I worked with, have made this work very, very interesting for me. And I think that the product that came out of my schools was in pretty

good shape.

I like this little story. I wish I had written down some of the things that the teachers did, and the children did while I was teaching, because it'd make interesting --- but I've got two little things I'm going to give you and then I'm going to turn you loose. Ivancie, who was commissioner in Portland, came into my building with two little Indian boys, into my office one day after school. He said, "Mr. Slater, you've got to do something with these little boys. One of them threw a rock and hit me in the head." So there were three Indian boys, so I said, "Which one of you did that?" And the one standing where I am said, "He did that, he throw the stone." So that one he looked at the one on his side, and he said, "I didn't throw the stone, he throw the stone." Well of course, that one's at the bottom of the line, he hadn't any place to go. So I tried to get it out of Mr. Ivancie if he was sure which one did it. No, he wasn't, all he knew was he got the stone.

Then one of my teachers, disciplining a pupil, put the pupil in her closet, her clothes closet. And while he was in there he ate her lunch. (Laughter)

Now, God willing, I plan to go back out to the high school next year and teach speed-reading again. I'd like to get one more year in, and then I will have 50 years of schoolwork. That's the only reason I want to go back to that, one more year.

And with all the information that pupils have to have in this day and age, they can't get it reading 250 words a minute, no way. So that's why I feel that it's almost necessary, that if they're going on to college, that if they can't read at least 400 words a minute with 70% comprehension, they're not even going to come close to getting the information that would be given out that they must have.

So, without further ado, and then thanks to each and every one of you for the many pleasant years you've given me and my family. Thank you very much.

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