

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #168 - Side A

Subject: Merlin LaChapelle

Place: Harney County Historical Society Luncheon - Burns, Oregon

Date: January 1980

Interviewer:

ARLIE OSTER: Merlin, either as part of his hobby, or his job has cited the old mill sites in the forest up here, and is going to tell us about it. Please, Merlin, it's yours.

MERLIN LaCHAPELLE: ... my job, or part of my job on the Burns Ranger District down here is what they call Cultural Resource Technician. The main job I think is to inventory and ... all cultural resources, both historical and archeological sites, on here for our timber sales. It has just been in recent years that we have really started into this, and got laws that --- Well the laws have been in effect since ...

But to start out with, to just give you an idea, this is a map of the Paiute Indian Reservation, which at one time went up the Malheur River, then across the Strawberry Mountains, back across to the Silvies River, and down the Silvies. Then it goes across down here below --- just below Crane. So it took in quite a lot of land.

The Reservation was taken away from the Paiutes in 1879, is when they were moved off of it. Mainly, because they moved off it themselves. Because of the Bannock War, some of them joined the Bannocks, and some of them moved off because of it, because the war going on and they didn't want to get involved. When they came back, they couldn't get back on the Reservation land.

Well --- the first business started in this country, the trappers, the wool seekers, then cattlemen. Most of the cabins were down below, were --- and a lot of them along the

edges were made out of logs, or a lot of the sod houses, or rock houses were built first. As more people poured into the area here they brought a lot of technology with them, and all of a sudden some of the mills started showing up.

First one to show up was the Robie Mill, that was in 1865. Now some of the information I get is conflicting as to where these are. For myself, I've been to some of these on the ground out here, and they're not what is said to be. The Robie Mill shows it up in here. And that's not --- it's down here between the Rattle-snake Creek and is on the --- would be on the east fork of Coffee Pot Creek. Below --- about two miles below the old McKinney Mill. It's --- a lot of you know where it is now. This mill was brought in by A. H. Robie in 1865, brought in from Idaho, and set it up in there. All those were Harney ... was made there, and also for the "P" Ranch Headquarters.

In 1877, Robie sold the mill to Dr. Glenn, along with supposedly 200,000 board feet of lumber, plus the land up there. Which is kind of strange, since this is all Reservation land at that time, in 1877. So, I don't know how he sold it, but he did.

After that, in 1877, there was a mill set up by Dore, up on Canyon Creek, which is off the Burns District, right up in here. And that's just in --- oh, let's see ... and comes back up in. You can still see a lot of the old sites there too, at the Dore Mill. And he operated that in --- for --- mostly for lumber and for timbers for the mining towns of Canyon City and John Day. That's mainly what that one was set up for up there. At least for all the lumber up there.

Later Dore came back himself, and in 1877, Dore --- Sayer and Dore set up a mill located on the Silvies River at Burns. And that was all right up in here, just outside of town out here, right on the river. This mill supplied logs that floated down the river by means of splash dams, they brought them down the Silvies River, come out of the timber country up here. Splash dams, well they're, you know what they are, they built dams

across the river back up the water, then got their logs in those big ponds and then blew the dams out. That floated the logs on down the river.

The fall of 1900 this mill burnt down, and in 1901, he bought the Horton Mill, from ... and moved it into town. And it was moved into --- I don't really know where he moved it into, he just moved it into town. I believe that is where it was, right there. And then he went defunct a few years after that. No record that anybody can find is to --- where Dore, Sayer, or Robie had ever bought any timber or any land at all. They just operated off this Indian Reservation at that time.

In 1880, E. H. King moved in from California, from Red Bluff, California, and built a mill south of King Mountain, which is right next to where Telephone Springs is. I don't know if anybody knows where Telephone Springs is, but just below King Mountain. The road goes right across through it now. And then obviously he did the same thing as Robie and the rest of them at that time. Still operating on Indian land without buying any timber.

In 1887, Charles McKinney come to Harney County, and he built a mill just above the old Robie Mill, about two miles above the Robie Mill. And on this map that I've got, it does not show the McKinney Mill, but it was right here where they have the Robie Mill.

And Mr. Welcome told me an interesting story about McKinney Mill, it's where the people of Harney Valley were sent at --- the spring of the year when dysentery was very bad in the county, they sent them up in some of these areas like that. And McKinney was one of those areas that they sent them to. Get them out of town!

He was in partnership with a man named Sparrow, and this lasted in 1898, and McKinney bought out Sparrow, because I guess Sparrow ran for office --- judicial office here in Harney County, and he bought him out. McKinney transferred his property and his mill to his son-in-law Elmer Perrington.

Perrington moved his mill on over to the west and it was just below Parker Springs,

above Idle City. And some of the remains are still there. A lot of the old sawdust and stuff like that, that's about the only thing there. Perrington later moved his mill on over to Prather Creek. It's on over a little further east, or west, over in here.

This location is now called Dickenson Mill, he sold out to Dickenson. And --- he later moved it on up to Trout Creek, which shows it here. It operated for quite a few years. There is lots of stuff left there at the old Dickenson Mill, at Trout Creek, down by Temple's home down there. The old farm there in front of Temple's cabin is the old millpond, from the Dickenson Mill. I did have some photos of the Dickenson Mill, but I forgot to bring those. And it ran until 1945, and then they sold out to Christenson. Most of the logs that were going to Temples, or to Dickenson, was moved to Christensen's here in Burns. And it was dismantled in 1950, and moved to Bend.

Meanwhile, a guy named King, in 1902, sold a lot of this land up around King Mountain, a lot of it was turned over to ... Perrington. And also a lot of it was turned over to Pacific Livestock Company. They bought a lot of that land up there for grazing.

In 1901, J. L. Lowe arrived from Tennessee, immediately employed by King. And at a later date he was the owner and operator of the steam mill that was moved to the head of Cow Creek, which is right along in here, just a little further north and further east of the King Mountain point. If you have ever gone from the old Call Meadows guard station back over the top, you know where the old Lowe Mill site is; there is a big meadow there.

In 1905, the Blue Mountain Forest Reserve was created. In 1908, the Malheur Forest was established. Much of the timber at this mill, now known as the Lowe Mill, cut, was purchased from the government. At that time, the price per board foot was a \$1.50 a thousand. It's sold for quite a bit more than that now, another \$500 a thousand. Lumber from this mill was hauled all the way to Denio, and clear to Ontario. We had no way of

getting it out besides wagon, clear down to Denio, and over to Ontario. Towards the end of existence, the major --- the majority of the output consisted of fir and pine, and timbers was used in construction of the Oregon Railroad, Navigation Railroad, which went from Burns to Seneca, through 1925, and '26. I believe it operated for quite a long time at the old mill site also.

Some time between 1890, and 1894, the Ott Mill was set up. The first Ott Mill, this one right here, this was set up on the Malheur River, about where the ford is. Anybody knows where the Malheur ford is, if anybody is up there fishing. It was soon moved a few miles south, it was a little farther down the middle fork, down here. Most of these mills were moved pretty often, anyhow. And this might have quit operating entirely in about 1943.

Some of the old splash dams, if you go up to the old ford, going across the river up here, just below the ford there is still one of those --- still pretty well in existence, you can still --- there is a big pond behind it in fact. You can pretty well tell where all the splash dams was.

WOMAN: Is that the area just below the ford, there is kinda a picnic area, and a place ---

MERLIN: Just below the picnic area you can see where the logs were across, and some of them are still there. Much of the lumber from the Ott Mill is ones that made Drewsey; the lumber went into Drewsey on that, from most of the ranches around that area.

In 1907, the Moffet Mill was set up, which is right here, also on the forest. Can't really find too much about that mill either. A lot of these you can't find county records for, they don't have a lot of these mills, the ownership of them.

In 1945, "Frosty", Gerald Frost, I think most everybody knows, set up a mill at Kraft Springs, which is right up here, the old Frost Mill, the Kraft Springs Mill. A lot of that --- there is a lot of lumber still stacked there at that one. He cut about 400,000 board feet,

then combined with Everett Twinman. They started the mill over there above Van, where the old Van Post Office used to be in Cawlfild. And that's right up here at Cawlfild Ranch, down here, and the mill is up on top and it's called the old Frost Mill site. There is a big sign there, mostly used by hunters and stuff like that now. And he ran that until in the '50's, early '50's, he finally closed that up.

Then a guy named Bulke, in --- set up a mill at Soda Springs, which used to be an old stage stop on the Harney-John Day route, which sits here. If anybody knows Steve Miller, it's right there in that area, right there by his house there --- Steve Miller. They sold out to Hammock Brothers, in 1949. And they went defunct in '52, because of the high cost of government timber. In --- number of these mills --- all over exist, I can tell you ---

There is another one that I have found --- I cannot find any record at all at Idle City. Just about two draws ... of Idle City, there is an old mill site in there. And from the cans and bottles found in there, I would imagine it was in the early '20's, that that was going. And I just imagine it was partly to do with Idle City, build timber for them and for their mines and stuff there. About all they put out there, wasn't really a lot done there.

MAN: Wasn't a very big one.

MERLIN: Another semi-portable mill was installed by Williams Brothers near Rock Springs, which is right up north of town here, if anybody knows where the microwave station is, it's just north of there just a little ways. Then it was sold to a guy named Larson. It was moved over on to Devine Canyon. You can't find any of that left anymore either. I think the road pretty well wiped that one out. There is one place there where you can find some old car axles and stuff like that, is still in there, right along side the highway.

And this was sold to a Mr. Weil, whose family still lives in the area. He is one of the bosses up in Seneca, the John Day area. In fact, I think he did move to John Day. His grandson works for the forest service down here. They moved it up to Bridge Creek,

which is just out of Silvies Valley, just out of Silvies Store. And they cut a lot of, mostly all pines and stuff for the railroad, what they cut up there, to go on through.

And then a guy named John Biggs up in Seneca bought it, and moved it up to his ranch, just out of Seneca. And that one still --- you can still see where that site was. He just cut for local ranchers up there, is about all he did.

In the meantime, there was a lot of development in the big industry, and a guy by the name of Barnes, E. W. Barnes from Portland, received an idea of how much timber was really involved over here, and how much potential there was. And he went to the City of Burns, the people, and got them up in arms, and they --- He went back to Washington and got a guy --- a logger, or a lumberman I should say, to come out and look at this land. And in the meantime, he got the federal government to cruise all the timber that was involved into the drainage of the Silvies Valley area, the Harney Valley.

And so the people of Burns, and this Barnes, they got together and got a lot of help, a lot of signatures of the people of Harney and that helped, and they got the forest service to put up a timber sale. This timber sale covered most of the east side of what we now know as the Burns Ranger District, and clear up into the Bear Valley District. That was in the Bear Valley, Logan Valley area.

There was a timber sale put up for around 770,000 board feet at that time, which was in 1923, when he put it up. He advertised this for sale at \$2 per thousand. And a man by the name of Fred Henry, or is it Herrick, yes, was the successful bidder. And part of his contract, when he brought it in, or bought the contract was to bring the railroad from Crane into Burns. He had to do that, and also build the railroad from Burns to Seneca. And he didn't get it done. He put out quite a bit of money, but never got any-thing done.

So forest service, he faulted his contract, and made a contract with Edward Hines

in 1928, June 1st, 1928. He signed a contract with Edward Hines Lumber Company. Edward Hines spent supposedly \$7,000,000 more ... that Edward Hines Mill built, and the railroad in.

In 1930, January 1930, Secretary of Agriculture Arthur Hyde pushed the button to get Edward Hines Mill going. It was done in Washington, D. C. It must have been a long button.

Shortly after World War II, Jack Bogle built a small mill here in Burns, and it was known as the Pine Cone Lumber Company. So I think Wally might know, I don't know, there was the Wolverton Mill and the Pine Cone Mill. One of them was down there by Culp's Ranch, and I think that was the Wolverton Mill, was it not Wally?

WALLY WELCOME: Wolverton Mill was right across the track on Egan Street, off to the right.

MERLIN: Okay.

WALLY: Pine Cone Mill was down southeast of Burns towards the county yards.

MERLIN: Yeah, that's the one by the Culp Ranch then. Okay. I couldn't really find out which one was which. One of those mills that was set up --- the Wolverton Mill at one time was the Sayer and Dore Mill, was set up on Al Welcome's land, which is out here at -- Mr. Cato now owns I believe.

WALLY: That's where Sarah had that ...

MERLIN: Yeah, yeah. Is on Welcome property. Wolverton Mill had a 12 million a year capacity, is really nothing compared to anymore like the Edward Hines Mill cuts about 125 million a year, or a little more.

Just to give you a rundown on some of the volume that was cut off our area, the Robie Mill when it first started out in 1865, did cut 2 million board feet of this pine. It was little better than ten years, it was running. Which 2 million board feet now is not very

much. The Dore Mill, the first one ... cut a half a million. One of the biggest ones was the Ott Mill, including the Moffet Mill; these two together cut 12 million. And up to 1950 Edward Hines had only cut 18 million. I thought that was kind of interesting.

And I tried to get some information on any of the nowadays payroll out here at the mill, but it's quite ... I do have some pictures there in the back there of the Sayer-Dore Mill, Sayer-Horton Mill, and you folks can take a look at those, if you want to, anytime. And I'm just trying to get a lot of this stuff together, and there are some people I'm just finding out that's got a lot of information on a lot of these mills.

This Ralph Dickenson is one of them, which I'm going to have to get a hold of him. But there was a lot of operation on here, and a lot of small mills that moved all over. And I guess that's about it, Arlie.

WOMAN: That's very good.

WOMAN: Thank you. (Applause)

MAN: ...

MERLIN: Well a lot of these figures I do have, they do have records on those. But a lot of these other mills, they did have some figures of output. But they didn't have any regulations, you know, in the county court or anyplace else, as to buying the timber. They got the output on them, but not on the purchase of the timber.

WOMAN: ...

ARLIE: Merlin thank you very much for the program. I know you touched on some areas that ... I didn't know anything about that area here. ...

MERLIN: There is a lot to it.

ARLIE: ... Thank you again. (Applause)

MAN: And they later homesteaded ... Poison Creek, where there is a road that kind of goes up around the hill, I forget what they call that stream right up there. And I worked

there for two months. And I also, we built 20 miles of fence from Crane ... almost to Lawen. Of course that took in both sides of the track. I built 4 miles up Poison Creek, on the mouth of Poison Creek up to where they cross the railroad track.

ARLIE: You better get all this down.

MERLIN: Yes. I was saying there was a lot of these real portable mills, I mean they were truly portable. They would just pick them up and move them to the next patch, and they were really hard to figure out what they were --- where they were.

MAN: That's what this was.

MERLIN: But Herrick was paid about half a million dollars for what he had done, from Edward Hines.

MAN: I guess he went ... finance it any more, and so he had to sell out in order to get ---

MERLIN: The things I've read about him, was that he was kind of a hard-headed person, and he was telling people that the ranchers would not haul cattle over his railroad either. And that's what it was supposed to be, a common carrier, from Seneca down. It was supposed to be a common carrier.

MAN: I never met the man, but I did call ... Foley was his lawyer I think here, attorney anyway, and this --- I think ... married the Foley girl. Was the ... the engineer on that, building that railroad track up there.

ARLIE: Mary, again we are honored that you came today, and we are real honored that you have been a part of our organization all these years, and we do thank you for all of it, and we want to see you back. That's all.

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