

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #17 Sides A & B

Subject: Katie Wheeler

Place: Hines, Oregon

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Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

**(The following is a summary of the conversation on the tape.)

Katie Jones Wheeler is the daughter of Hugh and Lettie Jones who came to Lakeview from Kansas and then to Harney County in 1912 and 1913. There were seven children in the family: Denver, deceased; Theodore of Ashland; Katie of Hines; Alonso (Stub) of Fort Klamath; Carl of Princeton; and Harlan of Ontario.

KATIE WHEELER: I was born in Kansas and we came from there in a covered wagon when I was just little. I don't remember it at all. We came to Twin Falls and then we went to Lakeview. I was three years old. I started my first year of school in Lakeview and that was the year that my dad came to Catlow Valley.

It was 1912 and he put up a tent and built a one-room cabin, and cleared a piece of ground. My mother and we kids stayed in Lakeview until Dad came in 1913 to get us. I went to school about two months in Lakeview until the snow got so deep I couldn't go. Then in the spring Dad came and got us and we moved to Catlow. Our home adjoined the Rock Creek Ranch that Taft Miller owns now.

They called the community Ragtown because everyone lived in tents until they could build their houses, and I think there was a homestead on every 160 acres. They built two schools, a grade school and a high school. Then there was the Pioneer School

House.

We had to go five miles to go to school. We usually went horseback until the weather got bad, and then we went in a buggy. Dad built a bobsled. Those days, we used to have hard winters, lots of snow.

I can remember we had a rough winter that first winter in Harney County. Winters were just more severe in those days. Lots of times we couldn't go to school. The snow would get so deep and then drift, and we had to cross Rock Creek.

We usually went horseback until the weather got bad and then we went in a buggy. Rock Creek would be high and froze over, and then in the early spring it would begin to break up. We used to drive a big old gray mare to school, her name was Doll. By this time my older brothers had finished school, and I was doing the driving for my two younger brothers. I can remember many a morning climbing out, tippy-toeing across the ice a couple of times to see if it was safe to cross with the horse and buggy. Sometimes I didn't make it and fell through.

I remember one time I did. Mrs. Bradeen was the teacher (Bill Bradeen's mother). What I'd do was pull the lines out and throw them across. Then I'd go across the ice and pull on the line and old Doll would come across. If we fell through, the water would be deep; it would run into the buggy. Anyhow, this time I fell in and I was nearly froze by the time we got to school.

Mrs. Bradeen was real tall, slim woman and wore her dresses clear down. I remember wearing her clothes that day. The kids all --- well I don't think any of them studied all that day for laughing at me.

Bill Bradeen's uncle taught too, he was one of our teachers. There were a lot of people there when we lived in Catlow.

My two brothers, older than I, went to high school at the Pioneer School too. And

then we left there when I was fifteen and I went the first two years of high school at Voltage. And that's all I ever had. Dad wouldn't let me come to Burns; he thought it was too wild. So two years was all I got.

There would be lots of times we couldn't go to school because it would drift so bad. Horses would just lunge through it, you know. And today people will look at you like you are crazy when you tell them.

Mother had a great big rock and it just fit in her old Majestic range. She put that in the oven at night and built a fire the first thing in the morning. By the time we were ready to go to school that old rock would just be hotter than hot. And she'd wrap it in sacks and put it in the buggy for us kids to keep our feet warm on the way to school. We had five miles to go, and I can remember the little ones starting to cry. We had this old mare --- oh Dad loved his horses more than he did his kids --- and she had to have hay and grain. We had to take a sack of grain to school for a nosebag of grain every day. And you had to hold her all the time or she wanted to run. And when the little ones would start to whimper, I'd shake the lines and holler, and boy old Doll would run. If Dad knew today he'd turn over in his grave. She'd just be lathered by the time we'd get to school. Of course when we got home from school we'd get a brush and brush her all down. But she loved to run.

We all had copper-toed boots. I had boots just like the boys, with copper toes and buckles on the top. We got one pair when school started in the fall, and by the time school was out in the spring and the snow went off, we went bare footed until school started again.

Mother would cut burlap sacks in strips and wrap our feet over our boots and then put the hot rock in the buggy. But oh, it was so cold and the kids from the other way had the job of doing the janitor work and building the fire at the schoolhouse. But they were

always late. I can remember getting to school and running up front to the stove. The little kids would be bawling and I'd get a fire started.

The last time we went down to Catlow we wandered around on old roads and through the sagebrush until I found where the old school was. And I found the top off one of the old stoves. It was one of those that was chrome-like. There's a few pieces of the old desks lying around out there.

One of the schoolhouses is at Blitzen. There was this old fellow that lived there that bought the schoolhouse and moved it to Blitzen. He was going to make a nightclub out of it. He was an old fellow.

Kids today just don't know what roughing it is. But Mother would always put the rock in the buggy and hitch up the buggy or the sled, whichever we went in, and bring it up to the gate and away we'd go.

You know, they were fighting here awhile back, afraid that they were going to exterminate all the coyotes. Well, the homesteaders then made a living trapping rabbits and coyotes. There was a five-cent bounty on rabbits, and a \$5 bounty on coyotes. We kids had a snare line on one side of the road that we run going to school. We'd get the ears off the rabbits (this is the proof needed for collecting the bounty) and then on the way home we'd check it again. And Mother and Daddy run a trap line.

All the homesteaders were doing this, and that still didn't kill the coyotes off. This was in about 1917. I think we had maybe seven different rabid coyotes come to our house. We'd find them in the manger and we lost one of our dogs. Dad built a high, big high fence around the yard so they couldn't get into the house.

The first year we lived in Catlow Dad dug a deep well, and he rocked it down. I remember he put a wagon wheel on ropes and covered it with canvas. He'd ride that down into the well and bring the dirt up in buckets. And he rocked it up. We drew our

water out of the well with a horse and a ten-gallon keg. Then later we put a pump in so we could pump water for our stock.

There was no way of watering a garden, but Mother always used to put green onions and radishes along the trough where we could dip the water out and water them, and around the pump where the water would run down when we pumped into the trough.

My dad and the older brothers used to hay, and the boys worked in the sheep camp with the lambing in the spring. Mother and us little kids would pump water every night. We kids would chase the cows away --- they'd come in and drink half a barrel. Every night we'd pump water in two barrels and two half barrels. I used to think those old cows would just pride themselves on how much they could drink. They would come in along the middle of the afternoon and stand there and drink and drink and drink.

And every night us kids would take turns pumping. We'd each one pump so many strokes. The littlest ones couldn't handle it alone and it took two of them to work the handle. But we would count the strokes. And then Mother would take over and pump about twice as much as us kids did.

Daddy built this one room cabin when he first came up to Catlow and then he built on. I remember he built a frame and put a tent over it, and he put coats of linseed oil and paint until it was just like a board. And my older brothers slept in that. It was just as the end of the house, it was walled up so far and had a stove in it and it was just like another room.

We used to go to Beckley and Blitzen for supplies, and then in the fall he'd go down to Surprise Valley, California with a four horse team and he'd get apples and potatoes and carrots, a whole load. And he used to bring --- well, they were like half kegs --- one each of strawberry and apple jelly. There was nothing out at Catlow to can. And he'd bring a five-gallon can of honey.

Dad built a cellar; it was dug down with steps and rocked up. And he had bins in that cellar, and Mother would put the carrots in sand.

He'd go to Blitzen and buy a barrel of flour, macaroni, and beans, and a slab of bacon, and that was about it. Slab or two of bacon.

I can't remember Mother making much roast, it was steak or stew, and we usually had a couple of pigs to butcher in the fall. We used to make lard, we rendered lard and pork, and I remember curing it. I remember just freezing it and hanging it up. We always rendered our own lard, and Mother would make butter in the summer when the cows were fresh and giving lots of milk. We couldn't eat much cream because we had to keep it for butter. And she would work that butter, and work it, and work it, and then she'd put it in those big crocks and put brine on it (salted water). And then put a plate over the top of it with a rock on top to hold it down.

And eggs, when the chickens were laying good she'd put eggs down in water glass. It is kind of like Jell-O and it's clear. She'd put the eggs in those crocks in the water glass and they'd keep.

The butter would keep all winter, or until it run out. Mother used to wash her butter so well, she made the best butter. She used to make it in rolls like that, and take her paddle and make marks across the top. I could always tell Mother's butter, because of the marks.

We always had lots of milk and cottage cheese. Mother made cottage cheese every day. I think my mother made the best light bread of anybody I ever knew. She used the whey off the cottage cheese.

To make cottage cheese you put the sour milk on the stove and get it hot and it separates. And then she'd drain that whey off and put the curds in a bag and hang it on the clothesline and let it drip. And she'd use the whey for light bread. It was so light and

not porous and dark. If she didn't have whey she used potato water.

You just didn't go to the store for this and that and the other.

The Rock Creek water surplus came down across our place. Dad built a dam and we had a pretty good reservoir there. But they've changed the channel now and it doesn't go across the homestead at all.

We had a rye patch and a wheat patch. And once in awhile on a good year with the reservoir we could irrigate the wheat patch. For several years there we had good years. We had rain and lots of snow, and good crops, and then gradually it got dryer and dryer each year and less snow, just like a drought. People just couldn't raise their grain. But we always had rye and wheat, at least enough for our stock in the winter. But it gradually got warmer each winter --- well it's still getting warmer. We don't have near the winters that we used to have.

Finally Dad gave it up. The years got worse and worse and worse. First one would move away, and then another. We went to Voltage then and Dad worked on ranches. Eventually he and Mother separated after we kids were all grown and married. We were in Catlow there eight years. Gradually homesteaders left one at a time, gave up, gave out.

There just isn't anything there anymore. We were there this summer or early spring, and it's hard to find where our old homestead was. The road has changed and gone across Trout Creek. We camped right by it, where the old house used to sit. Here a few years ago the ground cracked open out there. There was a big fissure that went right through our house, and right through our well. You see it was rocked, and here set our well. It's caved in now. But when we went out after it first happened you could throw a rock in, and never hear it hit.

We were in Catlow through the flu epidemic in 1918. Nobody would come near

you, and the snow was deep on the level. Mother was alone with us, my oldest brother was at Home Creek working and nursing. There were several men died at those ranches. And my dad was at Roaring Springs.

It was February and all of us kids had the flu. Mom didn't know from one minute to the next whether any of us were going to live. My brothers were hemorrhaging, and the only person that ever came near us was old Razz Lewis. He made the rounds to everybody's place every few days on horseback. He never got the flu. But he'd come in and kid with us, and try to cheer us up.

The only medicine Mother had was the old home remedies, mustard plasters, and onion poultices, and castor oil. Every one of us lived, but we never went back to school that year.

Mother had 21 head of stock to feed that winter, and all five of us kids sick. She was expecting any or all of us to die. Bob Johnson lived at Squaw Creek Ranch. Mama would ride up to the fence and holler, and he'd holler back, but he wouldn't come any closer. Of course people died all around us. But every one of us came out of it. It took a long time to get over it, but heavens there was no doctors out there. They sent calomel in, but Mother couldn't get away to go get calomel. I think some of those old home remedies worked, but they really didn't know what to do for it.

Mother never got it. I've always thought that the good Lord must have been watching over us, because Mother never got it. Razz Lewis finally got through to Roaring Springs and told Dad, and he started out in a buggy to come home. It was cold; it was nothing to be 30 below zero at nights then. Anyhow, Dad started home and got lost and frosted his feet. I remember Mother saying many times his feet were all swollen, and he was so cranky that she said he was worse than all of us that had been sick with the flu.

And then it was in the fall, I guess, that Dad got the flu and he got an abscess on

the brain. I remember my brother went to Frenchglen horseback to get Dr. Buerki. He could come as far as Rock Creek in the car, and we took Dad in a buggy to meet him. He was in the hospital in Burns up here for a long time. But he didn't get it from Mother, she never did get it.

My oldest brother was feeding cattle and doctoring at Home Creek, and I think there was three died there, but he never got it.

We used to have dances at the schoolhouse. When Dewey and Nick Robinson were going to play for the dance, that was really something. They played the violin and the piano, and Nick played drums too.

My brothers used to play for dances, and they'd never had a lesson. They played the accordion, a banjo, and a violin, and guitar. They'd go to the schoolhouse and play all night and they'd change around. And they'd never had a lesson in their life. And me, I could play Home Sweet Home on anything, and that's the only thing I could ever play. But they would play all night for them to dance. My dad used to call for square dances, he was a good caller.

The people that they speak of in the Peter French books, old John Borax, and Tebo, I knew all of them. After I grew up and married (Bill Harris) we lived on the Buena Vista Ranch and I cooked for the feeders in the winter there, and then we moved to Three Mile and Home Creek. We leased that during the depression and we lived there when Bud and Buster were little.

All those old timers, Mart Brenton, John Witzel and all those that were mentioned in that book all lived out in that country beside us when we lived there.

There was Chino Burdugo, he was part Mexican and part Negro, and he came here with Pete French. He married the sister of Jim McCulloch. They named Burdugo Post Office after him. The Burdugo Post Office was not much farther than a couple of

blocks from the Pioneer School House. Part of it is still standing. Burdugo was never the postmaster; they just named the post office after him.

Tebo was Mexican; he was tall and real thin and dark. One thing I can always remember about Tebo was, when we'd have these Fourth of July celebrations we used to have them at Home Creek. They were always pitching horseshoes and strong-arming, and Tebo could reach up with one hand and chin himself. And he could keep it up as long as he wanted. He'd just keep it up and there wouldn't be a young person around who could out do him. Tebo always wore a cap, and he was skinny.

There used to be lots of sheep on the Steens Mountain and we kids used to go up a horseback to Kueny's and Graves' and get bumper lambs. We always raised a bunch of bumper lambs.

There was Billy Carroll, who fell in the well; it was on the east side, up from Roaring Springs. There were two old bachelors, the Koontz brothers, and it was one of them that was in the well with him. Well, as you go up P Hill, the old shack where Mel Kundert lived when they were newlyweds is still standing and it was just down the line from that, that Billy Carroll fell in the well. And this Koontz, I think it was Bob, he clumb up the side of the well, held his feet against the side and dug with his fingers until he didn't have any fingernails left at all. And he got almost to the top and he fell back on top of Billy. And of course Billy lost both of his legs, they froze. This was at Christmas time. And finally somebody came up with a wagon close enough that he could hear them, and found them, and got them out. Bob said he chewed tobacco and spit tobacco juice in Billy's mouth to keep him alive. They were in there for several days.

There was a Catlow, Oregon Post Office. Well at one time there was a Burdugo Post Office, a Blitzen Post Office and I can't think of the other one. It was run by a fellow named Kelly.

There's a lady, her name is May DeBouis and she lives at Silver Lake I think, and she had a piece in a magazine about Ragtown. (The article is on file with the library.) May lived in Catlow when they all lived in tents. This was a year or two before we got there. I remember I went to her wedding when I was just a little girl, and everybody was crying, and I was scared to death. She used to be May Byer. The sign on the post office was Pioneer, but everybody always called it Ragtown.

Now Manuel Clark, he was one of the fellows that was there when Pete French was killed. His daughter-in-law is a sister to Alice Johnston up here at the Vogue. I remember the first job I had away from home was when I was living at Voltage, and I helped cook on the ranch at the Sod House for Manuel Clark.

Gee, I look back now and think it hasn't been too many years since John Witzel, Mart Brenton, Manuel Clark, all those fellows fought in the Indian War.

This May DeBouis I was telling about, her brother-in-law was Doc Tulloch. He had started out to study to be a doctor before he came to Catlow, and he was the only doctor around. I remember he operated on a little boy with a paring knife on the kitchen table and took his appendix out.

And there was this girl who lived alone with her brother and dad, and this fellow went over there one time and raped her. So her dad gave her a gun and told her if he came back to shoot him. Well, he came back and she shot him in the belly. He made his way to a neighbor's house and they laid him out on the sofa. The mother told her little boy to stay with him and keep him from going to sleep by slapping him on the face. The blood was running down through the springs of the sofa. It was quite a ways to any place, but she run down the road until she met a buckaroo, and he went and got Doc Tulloch. Doc Tulloch operated on him, and the fellow lived to be an old man. Old Doc Tulloch saved a lot of people's lives.

When I first came to Catlow a car was almost unheard of. I saw my first car in Lakeview. I can always remember that as plain because my mother always said, "Don't you ever get in with a stranger." And when my brother and I started home from school one day, this salesman came along in an orange colored car, I can see it now. And he stopped and said, "Where do you kids live?" And we told him, and he said, "Get in, I'll take you home." Why we'd of got in that car if he'd have took us to Timbuktu, it was the most wonderful thing. We just thought that was the most wonderful thing in the world. Mother said, "What would you guys have done if he'd have just kept on going?" I don't think we would have cared.

But there were very few in Catlow. Butler had one, he run the mail route. And I remember when my oldest brother finally bought an old Model-T Ford. There's part of it setting out there yet. Dad built a big long shed and we had a spring wagon and a buggy, and a wagon and mowing machine, and stuff, and a chicken house on the end. It burned. All those pieces of machinery that burned, and that old Model-T (it's been over 50 years ago) is still sitting there. It was the first car we had, it didn't even have a top on it, it had one of those curtains. Oh boy, it was great. He used to take us to dances in it.

I've got a quilt that is over 150 years old. I can remember when I was tiny Mother used that for a spread on Sunday. The pattern is called the heart and leaf.

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