

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #305 - Side A

Subject: Prim "Tebo" Ortego Stories

Place: Burns, Oregon

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Interviewer: Marcus Haines

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MARCUS HAINES: I'm Marcus Haines on this September the 4th, 1991, and I'm going to try to tell you a story about a fellow named Prim Ortego, better known as "Tebo", who was known for the big stories he told, and the things he could do. Some people said he was a Mexican, others said he was a pureblooded Spaniard. But anyway, he was a little dried up fellow, he didn't weigh much over a hundred pounds. But he certainly remembered his stories, and he had a great memory, there was no question about that, as we'll testify to here pretty shortly. But this story here, I'm going to tell you about the things he could do, and the stories he could tell.

But first, I will quote the qualifying statement that he gave when he testified as a witness in the trial between the state and the federal government over the ownership of Malheur Lake. This trial was held in Burns during the fall of 1931. Mr. Prim Ortego, he was called as a witness for the plaintiff to testify in substance as follows: "I am 68 years of age, and was born at Red Bluff, Tehama County, in California, and raised in Colusa County in California. I came to Harney Valley in 1873 with Pete French. I knew him before I came here. When I arrived here I went to work on the P Ranch that is up in the Blitzen River. I have worked there since the time up to now, and I'm

still working there. Generally, my work consisted of riding after stock. I was foreman at one time, for a short time. My work took me around Malheur and Harney Lakes a good deal from 1877, when I first saw the lakes, up to the recent years. I was down there almost every year. I have seen it in the spring, and I have seen it in the fall, and I've seen it in the winter."

Now I have heard the remark made that Tebo seemed to have the better recall of things happening around the lakes there than any other witness that testified in that trial. And they had a lot of them. So, this speaks of his recall, there is no question about that.

But anyway, Tebo was, it was 1873 when he came, so remember that. But Pete French came to the P Ranch in the Blitzen Valley in the spring of 1872. Now this is according to "Harney County and It's Rangelands", written by Brimlow, which is probably one of the better books that's ever been written on Harney County. And he said that he ended up with these cattle, 1200 head of them, in Surprise Valley, which is in Northern California, if that's the same one. And he started out here in June with those cattle, with twenty horses, and a cook, and supply wagons, and a half a dozen vaqueros and ranch hands. And he came in here and settled in the upper end of the Blitzen Valley, which is near the town of Frenchglen. And I know you folks are all acquainted with. And he had his headquarters at the P Ranch, which is east of Frenchglen there a couple of miles.

And then Tebo, when he came, why it seemed like he was kind of an honored student, you might say, of Pete French's. He let him run cattle. And as near as we know, he was the only one that ever did that. He had his own brand and run a few cattle. And I think he had a racehorse or two too. I don't know whether he ever won anything with him. But I think he, as I remember, he had a racehorse up around the P Ranch.

And then when they made the drive down to Winnemucca, that's where they marketed these cattle, well Tebo would go along and he'd sell his cattle. And then he'd get into poker games and

whatnot there, with those shysters there in Winnemucca, and they'd clean Tebo out pretty quick.

But somebody asked Tebo, said, "Well, did you win any money, Tebo?" And, "No," he said, "I lost it all." But he said, "I sure made them work for it."

But Tebo went with the sale of the French holdings. It occurred two times prior to the purchase of the property by the Fish and Wildlife Service, as it is known now, for the Wildlife Refuge in February 1935. And Tebo went with that sale too. And he was housed at the P Ranch with Arthur Page, a civil engineer for the government. Both Tebo and Arthur Page died with pneumonia in January of 1937. Arthur was 52, and Tebo was in his early 70's, probably '74 or '75.

We attended a picnic at the P Ranch on the Fourth of July in 1935, and Tebo entertained the crowd with card tricks and stunts, two of which I remember real well. He could hold a broom handle with both hands out in front of him and jump over it, and then he could jump back over again. If you want to try that sometime, but you want to get around some place where it is soft, because you're probably going to fall down.

And he could take a washbasin and put it on a broom handle and throw it up in the air. And he could give it a spin before it started, and when it came down, he'd catch it and keep spinning it and he'd walk all over the lawn throwing this thing up, basin up, and catching it with his, with this broom handle.

And then Tebo could rattle the bones. Did you ever hear such a thing as rattling bones? Well that used to be one of the methods of creating a little music. Somebody would sing and rattle the bones. We didn't have radios, and TV's, and phonographs and all that stuff. And Tebo would cut four bones about six inches long, as I remember, out of a dried cow rib bone. And then he would put these two bones in between his fingers on each hand, and he'd just rattle them and keep time with the music, or whatever. It sounded kind of like a drummer, you know. I used to play the

accordion at dances in the early 1930's at Frenchglen, and Tebo would play with me until he got tired, and then he'd go back to the P Ranch.

During the fall of 1929, another fellow and I went to the P Ranch and rode with the buckaroos and got cattle that belonged at the lake, and we stayed in the bunkhouse a few nights. Of course, the regular hands wouldn't pay any attention to him, but let a stranger show up, and Tebo really ... so, Don and I was the victim. So, I will try to repeat some of the stories that he told to me for those two or three nights that we were there.

First, we'll start with the one about Kiger Gorge. He said he was riding up there in the spring of the year, and rode up and he looked off into Kiger Gorge and he said there was a monstrous rock right near by. It was just already to fall into the canyon. So, he said he got a pry pole and he finally broke it loose and down the hill it went and up the other side, and rolled right back up from where Tebo had started it. So Tebo watched it for a while, but he had to leave, and he didn't get back up there until fall. So, he thought he would ride over and look off into Kiger Gorge again, and he said that rock was still rolling. But he said it was about the size of a basketball then. And I suppose if it had been a little later on it would have gotten down to a baseball. But anyway, it was a basketball at that time.

And while he was up there he run onto some fence builders, and they were building fence by driving posts, driving the posts rather than dig the postholes. And he said a fellow was standing up in the back of the wagon with a big mahogany maul, and he got a man on the thing there too, and the fellow was on the ground holding these posts. Well, he whammed away at the post there, and missed it and hit this fellow on top of the head with this big maul. And Tebo said down he went. And he said the blood just flew. He said it wasn't until a little bit he was up and they went on building their fence.

And then he had some good mosquito stories too. And he tells about one night there the mosquitoes were real bad. And so, he got a big cast iron kettle, that all the ranches had back in those days. It would hold twenty, thirty gallons of water I guess. And they used them to render lard, and to heat water in when they butchered hogs in the fall of the year, so they scalded them to get the hair off of them. So, he turned that upside down and got under it with a hammer to kill what mosquitoes went under there with him. So, he said that pretty soon the bills started coming through this cast iron kettle. So, he'd just reached up with his hammer and he'd clinch the bill. And he said by gosh, all of a sudden away went the kettle. He said I just clinched too many bills and the mosquitoes flew off with it.

And then he tells another one about; I guess this happened at the P Ranch too. He said there was a couple mosquitoes come in when he was in bed. One of them set on the head of the bed, the other one was on the foot of the bed. And one said to the other, he said, what will we do, eat him here or take him off down to the swamp? And oh yeah, well he answered, he said, we had better eat him here. We take him down to the swamp those big fellows will take him away from us.

And he told about the calf that was there at the P Ranch, a milk cow's calf. He said that was the fastest calf I ever saw. He said you know he could run around the haystack there and crap in his own face, he was running so fast.

And then he said that he had a fish there one time that he got out of the river, and taught him to follow him around like a dog. And he said he did, he followed him out to the barn, and he followed him here, and he followed there, just like a dog would do. He said he had a little foot log there across the river. He started to cross there one day with the fish behind him. He fell off and drowned before Tebo could get him out.

And then he tells about another fish there too, this was a pretty good one. It was so big

there in the river that he had to go down to Malheur Lake to turn around. But Tebo had never figured out at that time how he turned around to go down to Malheur Lake. But anyway, it was a good fish story.

And he tells about the water flooding the meadows there one spring, and the birds came in there by the thousands, and was around in this water. And he said it just turned off terribly cold, and it froze those birds right in the water. He said they never got away there, they just froze right there. He said they weren't dead, he said, they were just floundering around there trying to get out. But they were froze in there. So, he said we shod some horses and hooked up to the mowing machines, and raised the sickle bars up about six inches, and he said we just went out there and mowed their heads off. And that kept them from dying there from starvation.

Then he tells about a horse there, a palomino stud, he said a beautiful horse. He didn't know too much about him, other than he came down to the place there to get a drink of water at ten o'clock every morning. So, he decided he would catch him. And so, he made a rope, a rawhide rope, a riata, and he braided it out of cowhide and made it about a hundred feet long. And he slipped down there to the big boulder nearby where this horse came in, and he roped him. But he got away from Tebo, rope and all, and away he went. Tebo jumped on his horse and took after him, but he couldn't begin to keep up with him. But after so long a time he run onto a sheepherder. And he asked him, said did you see a horse come by here with a rope on? Yeah, he said, he went by here a while ago. He said I never saw a horse run so fast. He said that rope was just standing right straight out in the air behind him, wasn't touching the ground anywhere. And he said it was covered with horse flies, as near as I could tell. He said well what happened there? Well Tebo said, there was a lot of horse flies on him when I roped him all right, and they kept falling off, but they'd catch that rope coming along. So, they were still going on for the ride.

And then he said we had a rain there, the people were telling about all the hard rains that they had seen. But this is the hardest one that I ever saw there at the P Ranch. He said we had a fifteen-gallon barrel with a ... hole in the top of it, and it was just sticking up in the air, which was about an inch across, inch and a half. And he said it rained so hard there, that it filled that barrel up in no time. And then broke it, it just fell apart, and drained out. So that was a pretty good rainstorm all right.

And he said they were branding calves out in Catlow Valley one time. And he said they got up one morning to go to work and their caviada was gone. They didn't know what had happened, but they could see a big dust out in the valley there a ways. So, they went out to see what was going on. He said there they were, the caviada had gone out there, and they rodeoed these cattle. And they had the young horses holding a rodeo. And the old horses were working out the cows and the calves.

And he said that --- the last story I think that I can remember at the present time, I'll think of some more. But anyway, he said that he came down to Buena Vista one time. Now that was one of Pete French's headquarters, and it is at the present time, it's the headquarters or maintenance station for the Fish and Wildlife Service. It's right near the road going to Frenchglen, just a big white building there, and big high trees, and a house. You can see it real plain. And the story had it that in previous years there had been some treasures buried around there. People have tried to find them, but they hadn't had any luck.

And then I'll have to tell you this story too; I can remember it when I was just a kid. But that's been a couple of days ago too. And somebody picked up a nugget, a gold nugget right out near Frenchglen, Buena Vista there. And word got back into Burns, and here come half of Burns with picks and shovels, and they went out there and dug and scratched around, but they never found

anything else.

Well anyway, Tebo got his supper, and there was nobody there, he got his supper and went upstairs and went to bed. And he closed the door, and just about got to sleep when the door flew open. So, he got up and he closed it again and got back in bed. And it just flew open again nearly before he got in bed. So, there was a dresser nearby, so he slid this dresser over against this door and got back in bed. And away went the dresser, and the door was open again. So, he said well I'll fix this. So, he closed the door again and shoved his bed up against it. And just got in bed and away went his bed and the door was open again. And he said that he looked out there at the opening and he said there stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen in his life standing there in the nude, and she was beckoning to him. So, he said well I might just as well follow her along here and see what's going on. So, she took him out on the east side of the house and went to one of the big trees that you see there now, and pointed down, and made a motion for him to dig. So, he said he got down on his hands and knees and found a soft spot and was digging down there, and got down a foot or so, and he just got his hand in what felt like a fruit jar without a lid on top of it. And then Tebo would stop, he wouldn't say anymore. He noticed everybody was kind of on the edge of his chair listening to this, you know, a pretty good story. Well what happened then Tebo? Oh, he said, that's when I woke up. He said I had my hand in my mouth trying to pull my teeth out.

Well that's the end of the stories. I haven't been able to think of any more. I hope you enjoyed them as much as I have.

(END OF TAPE)

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