

AV-ORAL HISTORY #457

Interviewee: John Scharff

Interviewers: Matt Simek and Colin Lamb

Date: March 1992

Place: Frenchglen, Oregon

Subject: Peter French

(There is frequent passing of trucks and cars on the road in front of John Scharff, which makes hearing or understanding of the conversations difficult to understand, and impossible at times.)

MATT SIMEK: Okay, is this going to pick up ... automatic volume?

COLIN LAMB: Yeah.

MATT: Okay, alright. We were talking about Pete French, and what's your earliest recollection of Pete French?

JOHN SCHARFF: Well of course I didn't know him at all, other than by hearsay, and talking to the, three of the fellows that were with him when he was killed, at different times. So there is probably a lot about Peter French that I don't know. I think that you get the most authentic of word from Pete French in the Giles French book that he --- he spent a lot of time in California and other places that --- and here on the Refuge, and interviewing people that were left. Most of them a second generation. And I think he has

done about the best job. I know there was a story or two that I had heard, and when he traced them out why he wouldn't use them because he said they just weren't quite as authentic as he was looking for.

MATT: Uh huh. When you talked to the three guys who were with Pete French when he was killed, what story did they tell?

JOHN: Well they told about the actual shooting of French ---

COLIN LAMB: Just a minute, we got a truck coming, just wait a minute here.

JOHN: Yeah.

MATT: You know those folks?

JOHN: Pete French had been to, back east someplace, and had come back and came into Burns the day before Christmas. And then Christmas day why he came out to, and joined the group of cowboys there at the Sod House. And the foreman, a horse had fallen with him, and that bugged him up some, and so Pete suggested to him that, or instructed him to take his buckboard and he'd take the saddle horse, and for him to come to the P Ranch. And then --- he ... had a gun, or a revolver underneath the seat of the pickup and he first, he took it out, and apparently the boys that buckled it on then thought different of it and told this man to put it in his room when he got up to the P Ranch, with his other luggage. Then Pete went down that evening and stayed all night with Emanuel Clark who was his foreman there on the Sod House Ranch. And then the next morning why Pete, or Emanuel come back and joined the buckaroos that had camped up in the field here, and gathered the cattle out of a tremendous field there, and were working toward the Ranch Headquarters there for some reason. And so the next morning why Pete and Emanuel

joined the crew, and Pete was just ... around the lead and open the gate to put them through, when he looked up and saw Oliver coming. Well he had had words with Oliver, I guess, before. And they --- he motioned to Oliver to leave ... to ever come on his property.

MATT: Do you know what kind of argument he had with him?

JOHN: What.

MATT: Do you know what kind of argument that he had with him?

JOHN: Well the argument dated back to, one of the buckaroos was branding calves and ...

MATT: I'm sorry, I didn't hear that.

JOHN: This valley, at that time there was only two places where you could cross it. And so they had buckaroo wagons on both sides. So Pete was here at the P Ranch and the foreman there at the ... camp. Well that buckaroo outfit there, why they had lost a couple of horses from the Bell, and they were young horses. And they were raised over in the Sod House, or the Lava Bed country, and they knew right where they were branding them. So they sent one of the buckaroos a packing too --- well I guess there were a couple of them to find those horses. The first order of business was always to keep the horses together. Well they got back there, why they found a number of calves, ... cows with, oh what you call them --- I have kind of a situation that it is a little bit difficult ... sometimes that I don't get the blood rush to where it belongs. (Laughter) But anyway they found some calves there, following the French cows that had been branded with the neighbor's brand. So he ---

MATT: How did they know that? How could they tell that they had been branded over?

JOHN: Well it was --- Pete French branded with a “P” and Oliver branded a “B”. It was a simple thing. He branded the big calves that were practically ready to wean. And normally if it hadn’t of been for those horses, why the boys wouldn’t have been back there maybe for a month or so, or maybe the whole summer. And so then he sent a man to --- well they took two ... and they sent a man to the P Ranch to alert French, tell French about it. So French, I guess, I don’t know whether he looked him up that time or not, but anyway for some reason or other he didn’t prosecute him, but told him to stay away from him. And Oliver ---

MATT: But this was on the day before Christmas, or the day after?

JOHN: Yes.

MATT: Well I guess the day before Christmas, huh?

JOHN: I guess the day after.

MATT: Okay.

JOHN: Yeah. Anyway Oliver had a homestead which was pretty much surrounded by Pete French’s land. And he had problems with French, I guess, getting in to them. There was bad blood anyway between them for some reason or --- Marcus can give you a pretty good run down on that too. And so I don’t know, that was probably the spring before, or maybe two or three years before.

MATT: Before the murder?

JOHN: ... The next morning after he stayed there at the Sod House with Emanuel Clark’s family, why --- they rode up in the field there to go, to continue the work with

their cattle, and he was just ... around the leader of the cattle to open the gate. And, when he looked up and saw Oliver coming. And he motioned apparently to Oliver to get off the place. And Oliver just kept riding right to him, and rode right straight up to him. And got a short distance from him, he charged Pete's horse and knocked the horse to the --- well the first time he charged, Pete hit the horse over the head with a whip that he carried. Then the next time Oliver charged him he hit Oliver with it. Then Oliver just stopped, pulled his gun, and Pete turned to ride away from him and looked back and he gave him a ... dropped him off. So ---

MATT: What happened then after he fell off his horse?

JOHN: Well they had the trial, which was --- they didn't try Pete at all, or Oliver, they tried Pete instead of Oliver. There was an awful lot of people thought, you know, that if they get rid of French why they could break this thing up and other people can be involved, but it didn't turn out that way. Pete and his first run-in with the people was over the ... land there at the --- That first survey was, I don't remember the date, but it was '79 or something like that.

Well then a number of --- Oliver and a number of others as the lake receded, went down ahead of French's ownership. And under the law, why as the lake recedes the neighboring land owners can go to the center of the lake. ...

MATT: Boy, it's noisy. And now was there an argument?

JOHN: He was trying to evict these people that had settled in front of him. Then they had a case there to settle it, and it was determined in that case that, if what had been the original meander line was not a true meander line. And they ordered a new meander line,

which shot the line way down below Pete's property. So that cut him out of any interest in Malheur Lake. And that was the first problem they had. And then it just kind of generated and you hear all kinds of stories about Pete bragging about he was going to kill this fellow, or that fellow, or would kill them, or offer to kill them or something.

MATT: Do you think those are true stories?

JOHN: Huh?

MATT: Are those true stories, do you think?

JOHN: Yeah. But I guess he was probably --- well one of the old timers told me, he said you were either for Pete French, or you were against him, so nobody ... And apparently was that type of fella. His men were as loyal as could be, and he always had a fine crew and real good too, real good cowboys and ranch hands. Worked a lot of Mexicans ... these Mexicans you see around, you know ... French. ...

MATT: Up here? Up on top of Catlow Ridge? Okay.

JOHN: The ... for ten or twelve miles ... string of them clear over to the river. ... fences.

MATT: I heard that they had something like five hundred miles of fence, of fence that they built on the P Ranch.

JOHN: Well, they had a lot of it alright, because see he owned Diamond Valley then, and they had a fence ... river up here ...to the river. It went clear down to Diamond Valley and, on this side of Diamond Valley, and then over to the Diamond ... And yeah, there was a lot of fence. Now there is only one place that I know of where there is the

original fence ... and that's down there at --- do you know where the Fields Station is there?

MATT: Yes, uh huh.

JOHN: Well as you go out you make a turn there and you go down, there is some ... fence there, and you will see where it has been cut between a lot of the posts and the slats. There is about a quarter of a mile of it, and that's the only fence that I know of that's left of Pete French's fence.

MATT: Oh.

JOHN: And what he did was, he had built that fence up this way, about ten or twelve miles, and the natives got together and went down through it and just cut it between each post ... the length of that.

MATT: That was willow fence?

JOHN: Yeah, that was barbed wire fence.

MATT: Oh.

JOHN: And sent a crew back to revamp ... splices. When we roll that wire up there is lots of places that has got splice between posts there.

MATT: Whatever happened to Ed Oliver?

JOHN: Ed Oliver? Nobody knows. The story that I have always heard was that he finally ran away with the prostitute, deserted his family, and run away, and was seen once in Bend, and that was the last of it. Some claim that some of these boys that worked for him had followed him over there and stuffed him in a hole someplace. But that's just

somebody else's --- But anyway he deserted his family, and then that's when P. C. Petersen married the widow.

MATT: Huh.

JOHN: And raised kids ...

MATT: Huh.

COLIN LAMB: Is there anything left of the Oliver homestead? Anything left of the Oliver homestead?

JOHN: No, that's just a piece of land out there in the middle of the valley.

COLIN: There is no building left?

JOHN: Oh no, never was, not to my knowledge anyway. They built a homestead cabin ... There is a spring, Oliver Spring over next to the lavas, but that wasn't on his property. It was on another claim.

MATT: Anything else you can tell us about, that might help us understand Pete French a little better?

JOHN: Well, no there really isn't.

MATT: You said at one point, about how he was liked by some, and hated by some, but nobody was in the middle. Let's see, I'm trying to remember what you said this morning about how he could, he wanted the land, and he was offered to buy him or something. Tell me again about how he got all this land.

JOHN: Well most of it was under the Swamp Act. And they, this country up here is pretty well homesteaded. You look at the old records down through here --- but if you get down ... then it was just kind of a continuous fault ... after twenty-six miles. So then



under the Swamp Act there was a fellow whose name is --- I've forgotten now. But anyway he bought up a lot of this swamp land. You could buy it for I think a dollar, or a dollar and a quarter an acre. Twenty-five percent down, and ten years to --- So he bought two different pieces, two different pieces of land, swamp land there from fellows that, speculators, that had picked it up, totaling something over forty thousand acres.

MATT: That was the original part of the ranch that he first bought?

JOHN: That was the lower end of the ranch.

MATT: The lower end of the ranch.

JOHN: Yeah.

MATT: But that wasn't the P Ranch.

JOHN: Huh?

MATT: That wasn't the original P Ranch though, was it?

JOHN: Well no, the original P Ranch was right here. And whether this fellow then ... owned any land here or not, I don't know.

MATT: Uh huh.

JOHN: But ---

MATT: How did he acquire the homesteads? He bought out a lot of the homesteaders?

JOHN: Yeah, he bought out a lot of the homesteaders. I think ... belonged to Mexicans who had a homestead. He was --- Probably shady dealings ...

MATT: It's just too busy. (Traffic) ...

JOHN: ... for Oliver's had a homestead. I don't know whether he bought that by the time he was killed, or whether later ownerships were bought. Because when the ...

company kept getting these places here in the valley, until they had all this meadowland, the best part of it.

MATT: Anything more? Well Mr. Scharff we won't keep you any longer. We sure appreciate your time. Thank you very much for talking to us.

JOHN: Well I haven't given you too much, but you can get Marcus --- he did a lot of work to get the history of the country. And I wouldn't know of a better fellow to work ---

MATT: Great. Okay, we'll go talk to him too.

JOHN: Outside of Pete French I think he is ... prejudice. (Laughter) He could --- I could give you ... I could give you a pretty good idea, but he might even ...

MATT: Okay, terrific.

JOHN: Yeah.

MATT: Alright. Well thank you again, appreciate your time very much.

(P Ranch scenes are pictured following this interview.)

This is the long barn on the P Ranch.

(End of DVD)

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