

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-ORAL HISTORY # 458

Subject: Carla Burnside – Sod House Ranch

Place: Sod House Ranch, Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, Oregon

Date: March 1992

Interviewer: Matt Simek and Colin Lamb

CARLA BURNSIDE: (From the Malheur Wildlife Refuge) The fitting that they did like the old ... screen door was probably made right here. My guess is maybe close to some of the real early screens out here. Later on after French discontinued, you know, the activities out here, and somebody came in and it looks like they put cement on the walls to maintain the integrity of this sod house. The roof is a fairly new reconstruction, it was done in the '60's. And the long barn as well was re-roofed. But it's basically considered to be the Sod House that everybody refers to. We're hoping to get some sod back on top of it, and really re-do it as it should. Larry has plans, or had plans to maybe do it as a living ranch sort of thing, and have it open to the public once the buildings are stabilized, if the trees come back, it looks like they are going to come back. I think it is going to be really neat. Original bunkhouse over here. The windows have been put back in. They were taken from the building that was torn down, and no windows in that.

MATT SIMEK: Do you know the date of the wooden building?

CARLA: I'm not sure. I think it might say on the --- I should have brought my book that has the National Register stuff in it. But it's one of the few places on the refuge that's on the National Register of Historic Places.

MATT: Hang on here. Okay now, say that again.

CARLA: It's the Sod House Bunkhouse, and over the years people have been adding graffiti to it. A lot of western stuff. You can see some of the local ranchers have their names on here, and the different families. Some of the real old stuff it looks to me as more weathered wood, and it's white ... may have been some of the original ranch hands that were living out here. It's a real neat structure. And we can go inside. ... find the door.

MATT: Okay, go ahead.

CARLA: They have used the bottoms of, some of them are lead solder cans, as well as other cans to patch some of the knot holes in the floors that have opened up. And it's a lot of the original wood.

MATT: What are we looking at here?

CARLA: ... and let's see, are there others --- yes, it is real interesting the way that they have just gone in and sort of done their own thing. Some round headed nails are in here, there are also some square headed nails that were used in the original construction. So you can see how over the years it has been patched on, and things like that. They had a small kitchen in here with a wood stove. A wood stove in here for heating. I think this was maybe put in later as a closet or storage unit. And I believe in the '30's the

electricity was put in. You can see that it was just sort of tacked on the walls. And it has all settled and everything ...

MATT: Now this was the bunkhouse?

CARLA: Uh huh. Sod House Bunk.

MATT: ... again.

CARLA: Here is one of the old, real fancy, scrolly --- it almost looks like it's a ... or something, real faded. Here is another real old one, you can see that it was really carved in, because it is sitting at the edge of the building like this with the overhang. It's been weathered away a little bit more than some of the stuff was on that wall.

COLIN LAMB: It's mentioned right here, Sod House Bunkhouse.

CARLA: 1973, yeah.

MATT: '73?

CARLA: It's ... (Too far from microphone.) This was, when the water came up during the flood, it completely surrounded the ranch, and they were worried about it for quite awhile that it was going to come up and take away the ranch. But you can see why the ranch was built there. (Laughter) Did you get a good look at the long barn at P Ranch?

MATT: Yeah.

CARLA: Did you go inside of it? Okay. There are some similarities between that barn and this one. This one is not in as good a shape. But some of things about this building that are really neat, it was built with square nails.

MATT: Let me ask you, if you would please, to just come over on the light side here Carla, and the closer you can get to the camera, the better the sound is going to pickup, because unfortunately we don't have a boom yet.

CARLA: Right.

MATT: When we come out here with a full crew it will sure be different.

CARLA: We'll get Marcus Haines out here too.

MATT: You bet. (Laughter) Okay, we're ready.

CARLA: This is what I consider fairly unique structure for out here. It's a two-story building, built with square nails. Some of the windows that are still existing in it have the old glass that has sort of settled with age. And one of the really unique features I think is the fact that the foundation is individual stones. And at P Ranch you looked at where the white house was, you will notice that the original part was just stones, the foundation setting in there. So I'm pretty sure that this dates real closely to the time period when P Ranch was at it's full bloom. It's got a little stairway that goes upstairs, which was probably a bedroom. There is a small kitchen inside. A little bit, the roof was put back on, shingle roof in the '60's to protect the building. And it has been in fairly good shape ever since then.

MATT: It looks like a section was added in on the far right front.

CARLA: It might have been, yeah. Yeah, you can see like a little tiny groove ... I'm not sure what --- in our only photograph dates in the '60's on this structure, unfortunately.

MATT: Okay, okay.

CARLA: Okay, you want me to go ahead and close it?

MATT: Yeah.

CARLA: We have such high tech handles here. (Laughter) To enter in which probably what was the living room --- once again it has been hit by the graffiti artists. Hard to say what some of the wall coverings --- it looks like it had paper on the walls for quite awhile. It would have been sort of a drafty place. Although these are ... nails used for that. So it's hard to say what era that dates from. But you can see a lot of the square nails in the window frames. A fairly old glass in the windows. I doubt if it ever opened. Had a screen over it at one time. And then over here is probably, by my guess, some sort of a kitchen, or something like that. There is a little cubbyhole underneath the stairs. And then upstairs probably a bedroom of some sort. I don't know if we should even attempt to go up there. I'm not sure what state the floors are.

MATT: Sure dark.

CARLA: Yeah. Looks like there was a stove pipe that came up here, a wood stove. ...

MATT: Button.

CARLA: Got a, what possibly was an 1880 something date on this old board. And when they put this in, whatever was here, was missing. There are some lines, and sort of circles or such ... right there. And pretty well worn doors. ... really good. Winnemucca, Nevada, Reno, Denio --- 1918 over there.

MATT: ... focus in here. ... Huh.

CARLA: ... been pieced together.

COLIN: ... goes all the way out.

CARLA: That's great, isn't it?

COLIN: Yeah. That must be original.

CARLA: Yeah, yeah.

MATT: I don't know what that piece is called, but --- ...?

CARLA: Yes, the ...

COLIN: Oh yeah.

MATT: That's not a typical ... house.

CARLA: No.

MATT: I want you to put your hand up there again.

CARLA: Oh look over the window too, very tall. Yeah.

MATT: Thank goodness for editing.

CARLA: The old --- it's cloth.

MATT: What?

CARLA: It's cloth used for screen at one time.

MATT: I'm not looking where you're looking.

CARLA: Yeah. ...

MATT: Some of the detail shots just get so interesting.

CARLA: Uh huh.

MATT: And the fun thing is that with editing you can cut those into the narrative, you know.

CARLA: Right.

MATT: Make all kinds of ---

CARLA: Is a great place during the flood, the herons were nesting in the trees. You can see all of their old nests up there.

MATT: Oh, yeah.

CARLA: It's really wild. I don't know what the fence is going to show. It's an ...

MATT: Okay, before you talk ---

CARLA: Okay, this may have been one of the original fences out here. French really liked the willow corals I guess, P Ranch. But this is a fairly old one. You can look at the notching that was done to this beam, and it was cut with an axe. And what they did is they pounded the juniper post down in, and then the juniper post on that side, were somewhat pounded in there, pretty stable. This was your main support for the fence. And then later on over the years to stabilize the fence, they've gone in and wrapped wire around. That may have been part of the original way that the fence was built. And most of the times they tried to stay with the original construction, when any re-construction was ... A real interesting fact about juniper posts and beams, that the local ranchers around here say that you only go out and cut juniper to use for construction in a month that ends with an "R". So you're looking at September, October, November and December, for doing that. And that may have to be with the slowing down of the growth of the juniper, maybe for sap or something. But that's, a third of the unwritten rule out here, but if you ... the juniper, that's when you do it. It looks like these planks were split ... so none of it is milled lumber.

MATT: Put your hand up there again. What are we hearing.

CARLA: Those are sand hill cranes.

MATT: Okay.

CARLA: May or may not be one of the old outhouses. But ... however was put on with square head nails ... other handle. ... cedar. And it started collapsing in upon itself right now. It's lost some of its handles and stuff like that. But it does have, you know, fairly old hinges ... Sort of a logical distance away from the house. There is another real old one way over that way. ... Up in the John Day country ... near .. and Fossil, and some places like that.

COLIN: Okay. One down in, where is it, Jacksonville?

MATT: Roseburg.

COLIN: Roseburg. ... then apparently Pete French built three round barns.

CARLA: Oh.

COLIN: And there was one at the P Ranch, and I don't remember where the other one was.

CARLA: Boy, I don't even know where that would have been at the P Ranch.

COLIN: Marcus Haines mentioned it was there, and then I saw a photograph of, before I talked to Marcus, of --- let's see, Esther South, who was the daughter of John South who lived there afterwards, and she had a picture of the P Ranch. And off to the side was, and not really visible, was another place, and she said the round barn. And I assumed, well she doesn't know what she is talking about. Her memory is failing, because she did this when, wrote it down I guess when she was 70 or so. And then Marcus said the same thing,

CARLA: Boy, I wonder if from the photograph we could pinpoint that, the location.

COLIN: It's at the historical society over there.

CARLA: Okay.

COLIN: On top of the safe.

CARLA: Yeah.

MATT: They have a wealth of material over there.

CARLA: Yeah, I haven't gone and explored, I have been doing catch-up with all the pre-history out here. I sort of give you a reason why the barn is not in the greatest shape.

MATT: Oh boy this is great with the long house behind you.

CARLA: Oh, good.

MATT: Okay.

CARLA: This is another long barn that was built by Peter French. And I don't believe it's quite as long as the one at the P Ranch. And if you look at it real close the roof on the east side is starting to sag in. And part of that reason why that's happening, is that they built a well not too great a distance away, and the water started seeping in and sort of sitting under there. And it got the soil moist enough that two of the support posts sort of started coming inward. And it's also the weight of the --- I think there were some support posts that were removed later on, maybe '30's, '40's, '50's, so that they could move some heavy farm equipment in and park them under there. And it lost it's center support, because it's got support on the other side. And so it's starting to separate at the top of the roof.

And we've had an engineer come in and suggest various ways of getting it back and aligned. But the whole barn is starting to lean this way. And it looks like it's going

to need some heavy duty equipment and house jacks and all that. But it's, definitely within the next couple of years we are going to get it stabilized, because it's such a valuable resource. And if this does turn into a, you know, a visitor's interpretation center for some of the history here, a living farm. There is a lot of old farm equipment that's been collected from various places around the refuge, and stored in the building right now. And we're hoping to be able to display that and have people see some of the old ranching and farming and haying techniques that went on in the Blitzen Valley. All beginning with Peter French's days, you know, he really had some innovative techniques as far as haying and moving cattle from place to place and not a lot of open range. And so, hopefully we will be able to do a lot of work and improve it. We can go inside and look at some of the original beams that are in it. There are huge junipers, it's just incredible to look at it. They went --- even if there were juniper that big around here, since a lot of them have been cut down and everything. And you've got posts that go up for support, and beams that come across, perpendicular to those ... plus a lot of the milled lumber inside dates to the original construction of the barn.

MATT: While we are here and set up for this, why don't you give us just a rundown of, that this is the Sod House Ranch and the Pete French part about the ---

CARLA: Okay.

MATT: The field near here somewhere.

CARLA: Right. This is Sod House Ranch, one of Pete French's, I guess you could call it an out station. It was the northern most portion of his empire. You don't have to go more than a half a mile and you're on the meander line, which during the original

surveys, and the controversy that surrounded his expansion of range, and the homesteaders on the meander line and all that. This truly was the northern most portion of his little company.

And he was killed --- it's something like a quarter of a mile away from here. Had a little encounter with Mr. Oliver and was shot. And after he was shot his buckaroos came and he was carried back to Sod House. And he remained here for awhile. I'm not sure if they moved him from here directly to Baker to put him on the train or not.

MATT: I think from here he went to Burns for an autopsy.

CARLA: Burns, right, right.

MATT: He was autopsied in the residence over Brown's Store. And then they carted him up, and his brother Burt packed him up --- I think he rented a wagon from --- where was this place in Burns?

COLIN: Oh, the livery stable.

MATT: Livery stable.

COLIN: Burns Livery Stable.

MATT: And then drove to Pendleton where they put him on the train I think.

CARLA: I know he was here at least one night before they moved him. And quite the to do from everything, the accounts that you read.

MATT: Yeah.

CARLA: But he had come down to be with his cowboys, if you want to call them that, to ride around and check out fields and stuff, when they encountered Oliver. Had their little altercation. Nobody is still quite sure who said what to who, and then he was shot as he

was riding away from Oliver. His people weren't too far away from him either, when they heard the shot. ...

Resembles P Ranch in many ways, I think. Just sort of the set-up, and the corrals very close by. And the small out buildings and sheds, especially the long barn. I think that's the thing that sort of pulls them together. I'm sure at one time there was a big ... here, as there was at the P Ranch. That's sort of standard.

MATT: Was there another farm house here?

CARLA: Yes, there was. It probably was built in the late '20's, '30's, something like that.

MATT: But not during the time of French.

CARLA: Yeah --- well I'm not sure. That's one of the hard things out here. We hear a lot of stories, and when people moved in here after it was given up and ... Frenchglen Company sold off the property. There always been a lot of changes that go on at the ranches, and we have --- gosh, I believe since the late 40's, early '50's. I'm not sure, I'd have to check when it was acquired. But we're sort of a, little bit of, we're surrounded on that private property over this way, and this way. And then the Refuge goes on that way. One of the old ... is way over on that side of that field, and you can go look at that. It's real neat looking. ... posts here.

MATT: Okay.

CARLA: Supporting each one of these beams all the way around. But you can't ... Fun with country farming. (Laughter)

MATT: Okay, now speak up.

CARLA: Okay, this is one of the original beams that was put in as a support. You can see it continues up. It is no longer attached to the roof. And the whole structure sort of gets moved back over that way. We have a ... They used ... to cut ... And I think, it appears that, because there are loops ... those big beams here, that they may have been trying to... they set up on both sides which basically ... as the P barn. It differs a little bit from the ... this side was probably always open. ... It would have had, you know, an area over here which would have --- have horses and cows run around a little bit ... And this was ...

MATT: Can you pick up that little ring again please.

CARLA: One of the old iron rings. They used really big --- I don't even know if you would call it a bolt, but it looks like such a huge spike that was pounded in. It's sort of ... and ... connected to this big beam. I think that added more support to the ... Another ...

MATT: We were curious of the round barn. There seemed to be some cantilevered logs in there that aren't attached to anything on the inside, and they're up against the roof on the outside.

CARLA: Right.

MATT: And we couldn't quite figure out what those were for.

CARLA: Yeah, we were noticing those when we went there, what was it a week ago.

LADY: Yeah.

CARLA: I'm not sure how they were breaking the horses, but maybe they were trying to, you know, whipping the rope over or something when they were breaking the horses,

because they broke the horses in that exterior portion of the round barn. And maybe it had something to do with that. But they are too high to drape saddles over ... And they don't show ... I thought there was some square headed nails in here, but I don't see any. ... Years ago the guy wires would come off ... and then slowly ... on the back, you know, once a week or something to tighten it up. Get the ... on this side. I think what really made the difference was the clean-up that occurred last summer out here, really made us realize the potential ... out here, you know.

It's on the National Register of Historic Places, but that doesn't always mean that it is going to be in real good shape, and there is something doable with it, without spending a lot of money. Refuges tend not to have big bucks to splurge on something that's not wildlife related. No cows would be in here. ... strange things that have gone on, with the Refuge acquiring the loans and --- up to this meander line, and over there, and I believe that this was purchased separately, I'd have to look into it. ... living here for awhile, one of our biology ... it wasn't a well loved and well cared for ...

COLIN: I guess this with PR you could do a program on Pete French ...

CARLA: Right. Yeah, it was the Oregon Land Company, Eastern Oregon Land Country ...

COLIN: Was that the one with Henry Corbett on?

CARLA: Yeah. With, what was his name, there was another guy that was a silent partner.

COLIN: Oh, it was Bill Hanley.

MATT: Hanley.

COLIN: Yeah.

MATT: I thought he was just a hiree to run it, I didn't know that --

CARLA: No, there were several partners. I was trying to think where ---

MATT: I know --- Marcus said that he was a partner, Corbett provided the money, and he provided the skill. And then when they got done --- I don't remember, Marcus said it beautifully, but it turns out that Hanley apparently took Corbett for a lot of money. And Hanley was the rich one, and Corbett was now ...

CARLA: Right, right.

MATT: Yeah, when they started off, Corbett had the money, and Hanley had the knowledge. When they reversed it ---

COLIN: When they ended it.

MATT: Oh, when they ended it, Hanley had the money and Corbett had the experience. That's what it was. (Laughter)

CARLA: ... I was told by somebody that you get it really wet, just soak it, and then they can actually use ... to trim it down.

MATT: Like sandstone, huh.

CARLA: Well it's a ... excretion from a volcano and it has ... This stuff was none of those ... under either heat or pressure ... It's pretty soft ...

MATT: And it had a sod roof.

CARLA: Right, it did, yes. Yeah. After thought we could see the wood along the edge holds the soil on there. And then they have sod on top ... water during the summer, it

retains the coolness inside. ... How did you become interested in Peter French? You, you're the culprit?

COLIN: Yeah. We have done a number of programs together on the Constitution, which were on PBS, so we got, we have been doing programs. But I read about Pete French, and the law cases. Years ago, I'd come down here to the Steens ...

CARLA: And then you've got four barbs instead of two, which is what the modern wire does. And I think the modern wire, the barbs are that far apart. ... not real close like that.

MATT: Okay, you want to describe what we're looking at here?

CARLA: Okay, this is one of Pete French's original fences, and when he was having a lot of the controversy between him and the homesteaders, they came out and they cut his fence. And they did it next to every post --- out here. And rather than string new barbed wire French just came in and they sort of pieced it together. And then these pieces of juniper that are in here, rather than smaller posts, they just stuck these in sort of as the stabilizer, keep it all together. And it's just hooked on there with a loop of old wire put in clay. I think you've got, you've got two different kinds of barbwire here. This, the barbs were spaced out a little bit more. These are only about four inches apart, and these look like they are about eight inches. So you've got two different types of barbwire in here.

MATT: Hmm. ... seem to focus on the wire, it wants to focus on the land beyond it. Okay, there we go.

CARLA: So you've got at least two different kinds. I'm not sure if that was some plan on his part, that it's wider spaced at the top. The cattle are going to rub more on these

two, the middle ones. So maybe that's why he wanted --- you can shake the fence and see how unsteady it is in the ground. All the posts have rotted out.

MATT: Show me that loop around the other ---

CARLA: Uh huh, right here, just a couple of twists of wire. And this is alternated through, it is sort of woven through the barbed wire, to maintain it. Because we don't get a lot of sagging and stuff in the middle. Probably split by hand would be my guess on the posts. Then these would just be ... passed off between some ...

COLIN: Do you want to get a close-up of the barbs too, Matt.

MATT: Yeah, I've got a lot of close-ups here.

COLIN: Really get detail for the barbs?

MATT: Oh, for the barbs, okay.

COLIN: Yeah.

MATT: Like one barb.

COLIN: Yeah, and where it is cut too there.

MATT: Yeah.

COLIN: Get one of the experts to look at and tell us what factory it was made in.

MATT: Yeah.

COLIN: What year it was made.

CARLA: It's, you know, quite the thing for a lot of people. I have seen, you know, museums always have them ... But I've seen a couple of places where ... have their little section, nailed to a board, and ---

COLIN: Eighteen inches --- I guess in Texas they have a convention every year.

CARLA: Oh, really.

COLIN: Buy and sell ... Fifteen thousand dollars for eighteen inch sections.

CARLA: Yeah, and I'm sure the land owners just take this for granted.

COLIN: Yeah.

CARLA: It's still up, and the cows aren't brushing against it. ...

COLIN: Yeah.

CARLA: ... there is so much of it probably.

COLIN: Yeah, I'm sure it is just a rare old ---

CARLA: Yeah, some of those where it was like, they cut the barb out of flat pieces of metal and bent it up and ... so it looks more like a spur or something than the little barb.

And there were some that were actually quite fancy, that I've seen in the books.

COLIN: Okay.

CARLA: ... But when we go back we'll drag my book out ...

MATT: Do a little long distant shot of the Sod House there.

CARLA: I'm trying to think ...

COLIN: Okay, I remember reading about that.

CARLA: When you think about it, it's a long way that they had to, you know, come around the lake. Or go into Burns and come over. I sure wouldn't have wanted to have to haul things over Wright's Point.

COLIN: PBS has to be convinced to put it on. I've done that on other programs. It's not necessarily a cinch --- the right funding is ...

CARLA: ...

COLIN: But when ... what would be nice to ... and tell the story of ...

CARLA: Yeah.

COLIN: There is probably no way that ...

CARLA: ...

COLIN: We interviewed him, just to get some of his comments on ...

CARLA: Yeah, yeah.

COLIN: ...

CARLA: ...

MATT: This is, now is this Bill Hanley's residence? Is that his name? I mean Bill Haines?

COLIN: Fred Haines.

MATT: Fred Haines.

COLIN: Another store?

MATT: The store I think was the building behind it, which is now in ruins.

COLIN: Okay.

MATT: The stone store. And I remember asking Marcus about the one building that remains standing, he said that was his residence.

COLIN: ...

MATT: Oh good.

COLIN: ...

MATT: Oh great. Hi. ... to shoot this one.

(End of DVD)

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