

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #49 - Sides A/B

Subject: Freight Teams & Wagons - Discussed by Ted Graves, Marcus

Haines, and Lee Williams

Place: Harney Valley

Date: November 1972

Interviewer: Marcus Haines

(Tape quality very poor, difficult to understand.)

Note: The majority of the following is a summary of the conversations held.

MARCUS HAINES: ... The teams positions are wheel team, pointers, swing team and the leaders. The names of the positions in a twelve horse team are the wheel team, pointers, swing team, eighth, ninth, tenth, eleventh, and the ones out in front are the lead team regardless of how many horses there are in the team.

The right hand horse in the lead team is called the "off" horse. The lead horse is the left hand horse. They, you drove the whole team with a jerk line, one line hitched to the left hand lead horse.

TED GRAVES: You had the jerk line to the left side of his bit, not tight, just a loose line and you had a jockey stick from his right hame to the near leader's bit, or a curb strap. If it was a good old lead horse they never fastened it into the bit. They just had a curb strap, and fastened the jockey stick into it. But you had this short line, it was a slack line from the hame ring into the right hand bit ring on the lead horse. They called him the line horse and he was the boss.

MARCUS: The left horse with the jerk line on him was the number one horse and the head of the team. What was the purpose of the pointers?

TED: To hold the wagon on the outside curve.

MARCUS: To be able to do that they had to be able to jump the chain. How did they do that?

LEE WILLIAMS: They just hollered at them. They were trained. They were pretty near as important as the lead horse. Or the ones I seen operate anyway.

TED: As a rule, Marcus, they'd give him a tight pull there on a sharp turn. They had them horses learnt to, your lead horse would slack up a little on the pull, and he wouldn't hold that chain too tight. He'd hold it tight all right, but what I mean is he'd slack off and give the pointer team a chance to hold that tongue out there.

MARCUS: Well now if you got into a little shorter turn then, then the swing team, did they have ---

TED: The swing team went out first before the pointers went out. Then they was all pulling out there. They kept all them horses pulling out the side as long as they could until they get down to the pointers. And then the wheel horses, they kept a short stay chain on them. Like you was going out to the right; your left hand horse, they'd pull hell out of him on that wheel on that stay chain to keep that wagon on there.

MARCUS: Well the bronco now, the horse you were breaking, which, where would you put him?

TED: Generally put him in ... to the swing.

MARCUS: ... I'll show you a picture after bit. But I've been telling people this is in the swing team. He's in there ...

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TED: And if they were home, the lead horse would go to the barn by himself when you

told him to, and the rest of the team would follow right along. He'd go in the barn and into his stall ... his stall was always on the backside. And when they'd come to hitch them up, they'd take that lead team out first and they'd all come out in a parade right behind them.

They'd always handle them the same way, whenever they handled them it was always the same way, and the horses learned what to do. A lot of them camped along the road and they'd hobble them horses and they'd put a bell, generally on the line horse, and he was the leader of all of them. They could put it on some other horse but as a rule it was him. In the morning they'd get him and take him to the wagon and the rest would all follow. When they unharnessed, they would drop the harness right there. They'd put the nosebags on them and they'd get right into place and they could harness them right where they were standing. Once in awhile they might have a young horse they'd have a little trouble with, but them old horses would get right into place where they were supposed to be all the time.

MARCUS: I was talking to George Hatt, he did quite a lot of freighting when he was up in ... country and he did quite a lot of hauling for Charlie Haines. He bought some farming equipment from Charlie and he paid for it by hauling freight from Vale for Charlie. He told me he planned on loading 1,000 pounds per horse. Is that kind of a rule of thumb for freighting?

LEE: Well no, some of them loaded heavier than that. It depended on how far you were going and what size animals you had. Some loaded closer to a ton to a horse. I think Cramer figured pretty close to a ton to a horse.

A lot of these ranchers, you know, planned on going to the railroad once a year for their supplies, and maybe some for some-body else. Old Wally Kleshman (sp.?) was talking about it. He was going to Huntington. He met some fellow on a narrow road there and it was closest to back the other fellow's wagons up. He just had two wagons, the

other fellow. So they uncoupled that and got hold of the tongue, and had somebody working the brake. And they started backing that down the road to get it out, and you know that brake block, if you're going the wrong way, it will pop out, and it did. Oh, he said they had a hell of a time. But they finally got it down and didn't upset it.

So they came back to get the other wagon, the front wagon, and the fellow started to nail the blocks and Wally says, "I told him, hell, that god damned things a Studebaker. You won't have to nail the blocks on that." He says he doggone near got whipped.

But that was the reputation of a Studebaker wagon, they were the hardest pulling, you know, but they were stout. But the funny thing about them wagons was the heavier they were loaded, the easier they pulled. But empty, they were the hardest pulling. Well, I thought they pulled just as heavy empty as they did loaded. ...

TED: You could hear a good running wagon, you could hear that wheel slipping back and forth on the ... against the nut there, but you never heard an old Studebaker wagon doing that. It would go out this way to the side and then you'd pull back and it would cross right over and go out the other way just like an old Model-T car in the sand.

I hauled grain one time from Fort Rock. I bought a homesteader out. He had a bin full of loose rye and I hauled that loose in a god damned old Studebaker wagon. It had a 14-foot California stake rack bed on it. It had two-foot sideboards, you know, and then we put another foot on top of that. I put about seven or eight ton in on that wagon, and then load six horses. And that son-a-bitch ... I went as far east and west as I did north and south getting that thing back, especially after it was loaded. You just couldn't keep that wagon in the road loaded. Empty it wasn't so bad, but loaded ...

LEE: We had an old stiff tongued Mitchell that was about as bad. Boy, that thing would beat a team to death. It just went about where it wanted to, too.

TED: Mitchell was a pretty popular wagon. But this one was an old timer and hard to

control. Charlie Voegtly used to sell Mitchell wagons there in Burns.

MARCUS: What are these old freight wagons at the Island Ranch?

TED: Those were special made wagons, Marcus. They had a small axle in them. It wasn't built like these other factory made wagons with a spindle you could change, you know. A lot of them old wagons they had a solid axle through there and you didn't have to hug the boards. There was a tube down from the outside where you greased them.

MARCUS: You didn't take your wheels off to grease them?

TED: No, you didn't take the wheels off to grease them. They'd grease them three or four times a day with oil.

LEE: Did they have a sold iron axle across them?

TED: Yeah, it went clear across under the wooden axle.

MARCUS: Oh, they were big and heavy. You bet.

LEE: Oh, you used to be able to get boxes and ... You could make a new wagon out of a wore out one.

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TED: But them old Island wagons they was all stiff tongued.

LEE: I think most of those freight wagons were stiff tongued.

TED: They didn't have no lazy bar across the back hounds at all above the reach. The factory made wagons there was a lazy bar across the reach on them back hounds to keep your hounds from dropping down there. That stiff tongue would hold them back hounds up against the reach all the time.

LEE: There was a bar, a hunk of wood or a 2 x 4 or something, right across in front of the hounds there under that brace there that kept the tongue from dropping down in front. The reason for that, I guess, is that they were stouter than the ones that had the hounds on the tongue on account of the team being fastened to the end of the tongue there to

move that wagon around.

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MARCUS: But getting back to the wheel, I helped one time up here at the Sod House, Ed Anderson shrink a wagon tire onto a wheel. The first thing he did, he had a wheel that he rolled around the tire to measure it and decided how much he had to take out of it. Then he cut the tire in two and rewelded it and then he got a big pile of sagebrush and threw the tire in that and I guess we heated that for a couple of hours. He got the water all ready and dropped that tire down on that wheel and started pouring water on it. As it cooled off he got the sledge hammer and started whamming and banging on that tire, and by the time it cooled off, boy it was on there.

TED: If he'd used a hide shrinker he wouldn't have had to cut it.

LEE: In these blacksmith shops they'd just heat that tire and they had this lever on there.

TED: They had two sets of dogs that was about that wide and it was open. A set of dogs going together like clamps, like a ... on each side where you was going to shrink it. Then there was another set and they just shoved that together. Got it boiling hot. They'd heat that till it was pretty near melted and then they'd set them dogs on there on the outside, and they had this lever about ten feet long and pulled that down and just shoved it together.

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LEE: If you didn't have a tire shrinker or a blacksmith to cut it and weld it, you'd just put a strip of ... and wet that right good and stretch the tire down over it and pour your water over it and that would take up the slack.

MARCUS: We used to back it off in the ditch, that's about the only way we had.

LEE: If you did that too long, pretty quick your wood would go to pieces on you.

The way most of them did when they wanted to soak them up, they had a

galvanized trough about that long and they'd fill with linseed oil and heat it and roll that wagon wheel around in that. When they got through, that oil would seal the wood. I guess that trough would hold a gallon or so of oil.

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MARCUS: When you hooked up three wagons and ten or twelve horses, you're pulling on a chain. Did this chain go clear back to the back wagon?

TED: Your lead rod would.

MARCUS: Something had to go back. You didn't pull from the tongues?

LEE: Your crotch chain went through between the sand boards and the axle.

The wagons were chained up so that when the horses pulled they were pulling all the wagons together. They were not pulling the front wagon, which was dragging the back wagon, etc. The pull was distributed so that the entire caravan moved as one wagon.

MARCUS: The whole pull was on all of the wagons. There was so much slack on the tongue so they'd all run together. Just like a freight train, huh?

When the team was going up hill they had what they called a chuck that dragged along behind the back wheel of the back wagon so if they rolled back, everything would roll back again, so that you'd only have one wagon to start and the weight of that wagon would help start the rest of them.

Let's go back to the jerk lines. The teams I was acquainted with were finished teams, except for a raw horse maybe they were working with. The fellow I knew just used a curb strap on their lead horse. A steady pull was a haw signal and a jerk was a gee. That's where the term jerk line came from. A jerk on the line was to make him turn to the right. That was the purpose of the short strap from the line horses hame to the inside bit ring. You could jerk that and he'd kind of throw his head and that would turn him to the

right. And the jockey stick from his hames to the off leader's bit when he started to turn would push him over. Of course those horses that had been used to working together, one knew just as well as the other what the other was doing, but the jockey stick in this case was just a safety feature.

TED: That butt strap that I was telling you awhile ago across from your line horse to your off leader horse would hold him even or just a little behind so that he wouldn't crowd to get ahead of him all the time. It would just let him go so far.

MARCUS: Tell what a stay chain is.

TED: A stay chain is a chain from each end of your double tree to your axle. It has a hook on the axle so you can shorten it. It's made of long links, about three inches long, so you can shorten or lengthen that chain out so if you want to pull that wagon over, if you want to pull it to the right you can do it with just two horses on a wagon. Shorten up the chain on the left side and make that horse do the biggest share of the pulling and that will turn your wagon to the right.

MARCUS: Talking about single trees and double trees, the double tree was on a pivot with a pin down through the center of it and then you had two single trees out on the end and the teams just worked back and forth. And then you put the stay chains in that, kept one horse from getting too far in front of the other because he'd come up against the stay chain and he didn't get that see-sawing action on the double trees.

LEE: There's something else people would ask you, what in the devil it was, and that is a wagon hammer. That was the pin that held the doubletrees down through the pivot. All you had to do when you got ready to grease the wagon is to pull that pin out and it was a wrench to fit on a big square nut. You talk about a wagon hammer and they wonder what in the world you're going to do with it.

TED: A fifth chain, that was from the set of stretchers or eveners, whatever you wanted to

call them, nine feet long. That was standard length.

MARCUS: Well we see four wheels on a wagon, but they talk about a fifth wheel. Where is it at? It's under your front bolster. That's how your wagon turns. Your wagon turns on the fifth wheel.

LEE: But most of the freight wagons that I ever saw didn't have a fifth wheel under them, because your fifth wheel was fairly solid and your bolster was fastened to that and if your axle turned, so did your bolster, and it warped your bed. The front bolster on the freight wagons I was acquainted with just had the king pin down through them and a sand board under them, and then on a turn, why your front bolster stayed fairly level. Those with a fifth wheel were usually fastened together so that if your front axle tipped, so did your front bolster. I don't know when the fifth wheel came in.

TED: Well I think when they got to building them; they had a ring about 14 inches across on the sand board, fastened right level with the sand board. You still had the sand board and you had one of them rings on your sand board, and one on your bolster and it turned just like the sand board. And I think that's where the fifth wheel originated from. People my age speak of it as a fifth wheel, and people older, a generation ahead of us, just called it a sand board. They never called it a fifth wheel.

MARCUS: The sand board is a piece of wood that sits right over the front axle. Now a wagon has a reach, believe it or not ... between the front and back axles. And it has hounds too. Two sets of hounds, one front and back.

TED: They were for the purpose of keeping your axle from turning edgeways in the wheels, and they kept your wagon bed on, too. And kept the axles square with the wagon.

MARCUS: Square with whatever type of wagon, or box, or poles, or whatever you were hauling on your wagon. That was the purpose of your hounds. They had rings on them,

when you tightened the load down on them; you used them as much as possible. Your back hounds were fastened up to your wagon bed to keep your brake from pulling your reach out.

TED: Them old freight wagons weren't that way. The brake bar across there that held your brake box had a big strap of iron come down from the middle of your wagon under them, and then back up again. And they just rode on that, they weren't fastened. Your brake box on your back wheel wasn't fastened anywhere to your wagon outside of your brake rods there.

They had what they called a rut lock chain and a slick shoe. If it was froze up, they'd take this rut lock chain, which was about three feet long, and it generally had a ring in it and a big link that was made out of seven or eight inch iron. Some of them was inch iron and they just take and double wrap around the wheel, around the ... of the tire and what they called a rut lock and then the chain was just a short piece of chain about eight or nine feet long, and had a big heavy monkey tail in it, and as a rule the Turlock was put on the tail wagon. They'd never put it on the lead wagon. They put them as far back as they could. The chain was fastened onto the back axle so if you only had two wagons, the monkey tail was fastened onto the back axle of your lead wagon and the rut lock was on the front wheel of your trail wagon. And this monkey tail you could just buckle it right up there and hook it up so the chain would dig all the time you were down on it. And they'd always put it on the lower side of the grade. It was on the upper side, it would throw your wagons right off. They just used that if it was awful steep or froze up.

The other, what they called a slick shoe, it was a piece of iron, had a sled runner snout on it. Had two big U-clamps come up about eight inches high and it was made just the width of a wagon tire. Two feet long on the bottom and you'd just slide that and run your wheel up into those U-irons, and that would slide and you'd just drag that and you'd

just fasten that on your rut lock. It had a big link in the end of it. If it was rough country, they'd generally take those U-irons that stuck up there six or eight inches, and put a bolt in each one of them to keep your wagon wheel from jumping out of there. And you'd only use them in dry weather.

LEE: There's something interesting about the rut lock. If you were using a sled, you had to hook up on the opposite side than you did a wagon. If you rut locked on the same side that you do a wagon, it would throw you off.

TED: I seen my dad one time, my brother-in-law and him was hauling wool and they had two six horse teams and two wagons apiece. They had to cross a dam on a reservoir. This was just a dirt dam and it had rained and it was slicker than hell. And my brother-in-law and his pair of wagons slid off. He was pretty near off this dam. He'd slid off the road and he just kept a going towards the dam reservoir, you know. It had a pretty good big load of wool on it and if it had gone much farther, it would have tipped over. He would have had to unload that to get out of there, or so he thought. My dad was in the lead. He stopped when he saw him in trouble there. He was probably a quarter of a mile ahead of him, I guess. He came back, and they didn't have no rut lock chain or anything, so they just took a chain and took a couple of wraps around that back wheel. They brought four head of horses back and put on ten head of horses, and hell, that god damned wagon just went right back up on that grade, just like nobody's business.

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LEE: I seen a freight train coming up out of Cottonwood Canyon one time. They had to double up there, they were overloaded. It was pretty steep coming up out of there, and come along evening when they were getting pretty tired, they just couldn't pull. But you put two or three of them together; they pulled up there with one outfit, then took six horses back and pulled up the other. They was coming up out of there and that fifth chain let go.

Just pulled those links in two like they were made out of solder.

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LEE: Those chains are big and heavy. I've got one over here kicking around that is as big as your arm. Got a ring on one end and a toggle on the other. Where they got eight or ten horses pulling on that chain, they're generally pretty heavy. Well, this chain I got over there is so heavy, it's about all one man can carry. I think it's a seven-eighths chain. It's bigger than a three quarter.

TED: I have one of the crotch chains from one of those old company outfits, and it's long. It must be ten feet long, and it's made out of five-eighths iron rod and hand welded. It's just all a man can pick up; at least it is all I can pick up.

LEE: Well those freight outfits coming in that are running over rocks, oh, as big as a teacup, they'd hit a rock like that and it would be just powder, and they were pretty good rocks too. Most of the freight wagons I seen were all double-tired too.

TED: Hind tires, especially, was always double-tired. Them old borax wagons they used down in Nevada had four and six inch wide tires on them. And the wheels were eight feet high on them old borax wagons.

LEE: My dad used to tell about these wagons they used down in Arizona and New Mexico. He was a good big kid, and could stand in the hub and had to reach up to reach the top of those wheels.

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TED: I drove a cook wagon from Klamath over here one time with, I think, a five-eighths tire on it, and that damned thing would hit a rock forty feet away from you. You couldn't miss a rock with it.

LEE: I think that's why most of these freight wagons had a narrower tire on them. You could drive between the rocks.

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LEE: Well, those were interesting times to live, but we took all those things for granted. Didn't pay too much attention to how things were done.

TED: Well my dad was quite a freighter and I got most of my information from him. I drove a jerk line team when I was a kid, but hell, all you had to do was sit there and hold the line. Sure, I thought I was driving, but hell, the old team knew more than I did.

LEE: I drove old Charlie Cramer's jerk line horse one time. He had eight horses on two wagons hauling lumber. He was hunting Sagehen and he told me, drive the team up there about a quarter mile. All you have to do is pull that brake off and speak to them. I said, "Hell, I can't drive them," and he said, "that's all right, they'll get along." So I pulled the brake off and hollered at them and the old lead horse went up the road here, and made the turn and we got up to about where Cramer intended for me to stop, and he didn't wait for me to say whoa. He just stopped on his own.

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LEE: Lots of time, coming down a steep grade there, that brake box would get hot and get to smoking and get slick. The only brake lining that I ever seen freighters use that they claimed wouldn't get slick was cottonwood, green cottonwood. It wouldn't get slick. Some of the others would get hot and kinda char and get slick, but cottonwood wouldn't do that.

TED: I bought my first gallon of whiskey right here when I first hit Harney County. Old lady McManus was living there. Old Bob was gone and Johnny Crow and I went down there and bought a gallon. Five bits and a gallon of whiskey, was a gallon in those days.

... Discussion of buildings at The Narrows.

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