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HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #56 - Sides A/B

Subject: Percy Davis

Place: Drewsey, Oregon

Date: April 19, 1972

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

Release Form: No

PAULINE BRAYMEN: This is Pauline Braymen; I'm at the home of Percy Davis in Drewsey, Oregon, on April the 19th, 1972. Well Mr. Davis, would you start by telling when you came to Harney County, or how you happened to get here? When did you come to Harney County?

PERCY DAVIS: Well, I was about six months old when they brought me here from Kansas.

PAULINE: What year was this?

PERCY: That was in 1893.

PAULINE: And what were your parent's names?

PERCY: Milton Davis, I. M. Davis, and my mother's name was Emma Davis.

PAULINE: Emma?

PERCY: Emma.

PAULINE: Did they come to this location right here?

PERCY: No, it was on a rise 16 miles west of here, on Muddy Creek. At that time of year, they come from Ontario with a team and buggy.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PAULINE: Did they come by train then from Kansas?

PERCY: From Ontario.

PAULINE: Ontario.

PERCY: My father came out several years earlier ... from San Francisco and up to Portland by boat.

PAULINE: Did he settle here at that time, and then send for your mother later?

PERCY: They stopped 16 miles above here; they had a homestead. ... and they stayed there for, oh I think --- 1900 or 1901 they moved to Drewsey.

PAULINE: Do you remember your father ever say why he came to Harney County?

PERCY: Well, he came to Oregon first, Western Oregon by boat from San Francisco, he had relatives there. But he was always interested in livestock, and horses especially. And that's why he came. When he came from the Willamette Valley to John Day, he was working for wages in those days; he brought a band of sheep from the Willamette Valley to John Day. He drove them through the hills.

PAULINE: That would have been quite a trip.

PERCY: It was. But that's all they knew in those days. They didn't have any highways, or railroads, or anything. ... But Drewsey was a mainline, freight lines, freight wagons for a long time from Ontario to Burns. It took several days to make a, to bring it through. Three days and nights I guess to get from Ontario to Drewsey.

PAULINE: With the freight wagon.

PERCY: Well buggy, or ... anything. Freight wagon was a lot slower, I guess. But in those early days, Drewsey had a larger population than it is now. They had, well they had town officials, a mayor, a marshal, they had a doctor, barbershop, everything to go with a town in those days. A

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

doctor, and a dentist, a barber, drug store, and two hotels, and two livery stables, two stores.

PAULINE: Do you know about how many people lived here when they had the most --- what the biggest population was?

PERCY: Oh, I couldn't say. It was a lot greater than it is now. It was the center for all the stockman, the shepherders, cattlemen from all around, for a hundred miles, I guess.

PAULINE: Well, I understand that it used to be called Gouge Eye. Do you remember when it was called Gouge Eye?

PERCY: Well, I don't know, I guess some of the rounders started that. Shepherders come to town and get drunk. And they'd say they overcharged or something. But they thought it was a good name for it, I don't know why.

PAULINE: Do you know why they named it Drewsey?

PERCY: Yes, a man by the name of Purington lived in Burns, and run a sawmill there then, and he had homesteaded land right here. And an old timer had a store here about as big as an ordinary chicken house. But anyway, Purington was here, and he named it Drewsey after an old sweetheart of his, Drewsey.

They used to have a flourmill, built a four mill down here. Had it all set up, used waterpower from an eight-mile ditch up the river. Waterpower run the flourmill. But they never did get the ditch built, and it set there for quite a while. Then they moved it to Burns, and they used it over there.

PAULINE: That's where --- I didn't know that. I had heard some about the flourmill there at Burns, but I didn't realize that it was moved from Drewsey.

PERCY: Yeah.

PAULINE: Well, this is something that I found in talking to different people, that the fact that

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

buildings were moved all over Harney County, from here, to there, to the other place.

PERCY: Well from Harney to Burns, they had a --- the county seat used to be in Harney.

PAULINE: Uh huh.

PERCY: They had quite a fight over that, but they finally moved it to Burns.

PAULINE: Was it just --- I wondered, was it because lumber was fairly scarce, and that it was easier to move a building, even though it meant moving it several miles, than it was just to build another one?

PERCY: Well, the center of population warranted it, I guess. There were sawmills all around in those days. There were more local mills then than there are now.

PAULINE: Well, someone was telling me about sawmills the other day, and they mentioned, I think his name was Ott, that had a mill at Drewsey.

PERCY: Yeah, John Ott, yeah.

PAULINE: Can you tell me anything about his sawmill?

PERCY: Well now he had a sawmill up about 18 miles to timber from here. And he, well they run it for several years up there. And then they decided to put it on the river and use the waterpower. Had a logging pond there for the logs, float them down the river. But it was pretty rough there, and they didn't last long. That fellow up there by the name of Harry Clark worked with them running logs, and he had a narrow experience, escape. In the log pond, someway, he fell in there and he went under, over the dam or something under the logs, and come out, he got out alive. But he had a pretty close call.

PAULINE: I'll have to ask him about that. I hope to talk to him, and I'll ask him about that.

PERCY: Oh yeah, he lives up there ... Well, when they first came to this country, the first settlers they lived in a cave up here about three or four miles. A fellow by the name of Joe Lamb.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PAULINE: Joe Lion?

PERCY: Lamb, L A M B.

PAULINE: Lamb, and he lived in a cave.

PERCY: First winter, yeah. Later on, people homesteaded there and built a cabin in front of the cave, and lived there for a number of years. My dad finally got the land, and we owned it for quite a while.

PAULINE: Your dad got it? You grew up then on Muddy Creek?

PERCY: Yeah, well not altogether. Dad moved about 1900, or a little sooner, or earlier to Drewsey, and he started a livery barn.

PAULINE: A livery barn?

PERCY: They didn't have garages then, was a livery barn. And they had a smallpox scare here, and a lot of people got smallpox. My mother got it, and I had it. My mother never recovered, so my dad took her, sent her back to Kansas, where we came from, and then she finally died there, when I was about 8 years old. My little brother died back there too.

PAULINE: You were the oldest in the family?

PERCY: Yeah. And Dad sent me into Iowa to live with an aunt. I spent two years in Kansas, and three years in Iowa, and that's all the time I was away from here.

PAULINE: So, you would have been about 15 when you came back out here, or 14, or 13.

PERCY: 13, about 13 or 14, yeah.

PAULINE: Have you been in the cattle business here?

PERCY: Yes, Dad was always, started in with horses, then cattle. Then the Taylor Grazing come along, and too much regulations to suit the old timers, and we finally sold out the cattle, and sold most of our land. So, I've got 500 acres yet of land, but we had about 5,000 acres at one time.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PAULINE: So, you're more or less retired now?

PERCY: Oh yeah. Oh, I've run bees for a long time. At that time there was a world of white sweet clover here. Made the best honey they could find anyplace at that time. I shipped ... to Southern California, of 5 gallons cans by express, people that come through and want to take this honey with them. I got first premium at the state fair in Salem at the stock show. People are still asking for that honey, but I had to quit. Things changed, and Drewsey honey disappeared like the Dillard cantaloupes, you might say. Something changes, and they didn't do good anymore.

PAULINE: Well, what's this about Dillard cantaloupes?

PERCY: Well, there used to be famous cantaloupes that these people bought in this country, shipped in here. But they finally quit. There was just something, they quit ... or something. Don't know what it was.

PAULINE: They were grown here?

PERCY: No, ... Southwestern Oregon.

PAULINE: Oh, and shipped in here, I see. Did you go to school in Drewsey, or did you go to school at Pine Creek, or Muddy Creek or

PERCY: Well, I went to school at a lot of different places. Well, I started school out at Pine Creek. The teacher boarded at our place. I went to school a horseback, and I'd ride on the horse behind him and go to school. Then we moved to Drewsey, and I went to school at Drewsey then for a while. And after that I went to school in Kansas and Iowa, and come back and started high school in Drewsey, but that played out. And I finally went to, the first year of high school at The Dalles. Dad's brother lived there at that time; I stayed with them. His name was Percy Davis too. ... that time they had the typhoid fever here. All open wells, and contaminated water or something.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PAULINE: This would have been about what, 1910, 19---

PERCY: 1908.

PAULINE: 1908. Did quite a few people die?

PERCY: Well, I don't know just how many. I don't remember anybody that died. But my dad had it and almost died I guess, while I was in The Dalles.

I was going to say something, but it slipped my mind, almost. Let's see --- I was going to say about these people here tried to start a new county ... people going to Burns. And so, they was going to name it Davis County after my dad.

PAULINE: Oh. Well, this is new information, I hadn't heard much about this before. Do you know about when this was that they tried to do this?

PERCY: Well, it was around 1909 or '10, I suppose, maybe a little earlier. Actually, it was about 1909, I think.

PAULINE: Did they petition the state legislature? Or ---

PERCY: Well, they brought it to an election, but it failed, the election, so that was that. And after that, Bill Hanley was a big cattleman over at Burns, and he was on the state highway commission. And he was going to build a highway up to Burns from Ontario, through Crane. But Dad and the storekeeper here, they both went down to Salem and spoke to the highway commission, and Dad told them it was a shorter route through Drewsey to Burns, than through Crane to Burns. So that's the way it went. Got within two miles of Drewsey, so that's better than 35.

PAULINE: Yeah, that would have made quite a change in the population of the county, and the way that --- Well it would have made a lot of difference on the community if the highway had come ---

PERCY: Well, it was a great help to us. But then, of course when the people first came here there

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

was bunchgrass dragged your stirrups on the saddle horse, you know. Of course, there was so many, everybody had their cattle and sheep in here. And they finally pretty near killed that grass out. You can see the result of it on this Stinkingwater Creek up here. When Dad first came here that was just a beaver swamp. Willows in the ... there was only one or two places they could cross a horseback with it. But now it's just one great big wide dry stream, except in the springtime.

PAULINE: Well, do you think that the change in the weather pattern too had something ---

PERCY: Well, it was overgrazed, and killed the bunchgrass off.

PAULINE: It didn't, the water dried up, the water then? Didn't hold the water.

PERCY: Well, it washed off early in the spring, and the water didn't last. And the grass, the tall grass kept it, the snow from melting so fast, I suppose, in the spring too.

PAULINE: Well, it would keep the water from washing --- soil away.

PERCY: Erosion.

PAULINE: Do you know what the name of the storekeeper was that went to Salem with your dad?

PERCY: Yeah, it was Clarence Drinkwater. His wife run the store up here.

PAULINE: Wasn't the store called the Porter-Sitz Store at one time?

PERCY: Yeah, still is.

PAULINE: It is still the Porter-Sitz. Are they the ones that started it, or did they have ---

PERCY: Well Abner Robbins, an early timer, he had a little cabin about 8 x 10 for a store. Then John Derrick took over, and Derrick and Robbins then started a store, and built the rock building there. In 1889, I believe it is marked on the rock there. There was just one store left at that time. There was two. Clarence Drinkwater's wife's father run a store here then too.

My little brother was three years younger than I am. One day he got lost, we couldn't find him. And so Ace Johnson went to unlock the store after supper that night, why he was there. He

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

walked out, said, "I guess I go home now." (Laughter) Another time he got lost and the freight wagon picked him up way down the road. They asked him why he was out, down there. He said, "I was going to Chicago, going to `Cago'," he said.

PAULINE: How old was he then, he must not have been too old?

PERCY: No, he was three years younger than I was, hardly old enough to go to school.

PAULINE: On the right road anyway, he was headed the right direction.

PERCY: Yeah, he would have been a live one if he'd lived.

PAULINE: He's the one that died with the smallpox earlier.

PERCY: Well, he got sick with something, you know, in Kansas there. He ... something, I don't know what it was.

PAULINE: Were you the only one in the family then that grew up and lived here?

PERCY: Yeah, just Dad and I up here, after that. He came back to Oregon in 1906, ... San Francisco. During the diphtheria scare here, the school quit here. And there was a couple of school marms and they homesteaded out there in Stinkingwater Valley. So, Dad got, got them, I finished the 8th grade out there on the Sagebrush Flat, with those school marms. Went from the sixth grade in Iowa to the eighth grade in Oregon.

PAULINE: Well, you had quite a varied experience then.

PERCY: Yeah, I was in school there --- finished high school in Burns for three years. I went the first year in The Dalles and graduated in 1912. There was eight of us in the class. There is over 50 nowadays, I guess.

PAULINE: 1912, you say?

PERCY: Yeah.

PAULINE: And there were how many in the class, eight?

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PERCY: Eight, at graduation time. But there was more earlier, but some of them quit.

PAULINE: You said they tried to start a high school in Drewsey. Did it go a whole year even, or --
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PERCY: No, they couldn't keep it up. They had a schoolhouse with three teachers at one time, but they didn't last long. They tore the old building down and moved it to Vale. Moved the lumber.

Now they have a good schoolhouse, and a good community hall.

PAULINE: You mentioned that the freighters, that this was sort of a freighting center at one time.

Can you remember anything about the freighting people who came in, and what kind of rigs they drove?

PERCY: Oh, they had just regular mountain roads. They went from; well, they started out at Ontario, and go through Westfall, and over the Bendire Mountain to Juntura, or not Juntura, but Beulah. And over another mountain to Drewsey. There was one freighter that it took him pretty near a month to make a round trip from Drewsey to Ontario and back. Freight wagons all had bells on the lead. They'd have six, eight, twelve, fourteen team of horses on those freight wagons. Used double wagons, sometimes three. Big team. Driver would ride one horse and steer him with a jerk line. That was the principal use of a livery barn here at Drewsey at that time, taking care of the horse and buggy travel.

PAULINE: I imagine you worked then in your dad's livery stable quite a bit, helping out.

PERCY: Oh yes, yeah. He had a contract to haul, pick the mail up the river, twenty or thirty miles up to Van. So, I'd have to go with a new stage driver to show him where the mailboxes ...

PAULINE: Did you ever go on a cattle drive, or a sheep drive?

PERCY: No, no, I --- oh I buckarooed up --- the PLS Company had dozens of ranches around.

And they had lots of cattle year around. They had a big crew and buckaroo boss. And when they'd

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

ride for their stock, the ranchers would go with them and they'd camp from one ranch to the other, all around here. ... would have their grub, what you call them, driver and cook, drive a wagon.

Have a cooking outfit right in the wagon.

PAULINE: Have a chuck wagon.

PERCY: ... busy ... different places. But I got tired of that, so finally we sold all our cattle. Then I raised a little bunch myself here, oh got up to 60 or 70 head. Finally sold the place with the cattle to another fellow, and I started in the bee business. I bought a hive of bees and got a book to tell --- how to handle them. Finally got up to --- one year I had 35,000 pounds of honey.

PAULINE: That's a lot of honey.

PERCY: I had to haul it to, truck it to Juntura, and sent a carload to Portland one year. The next year I bought a truck and hauled it. It cost \$300 to ship a carload of honey from Juntura to Portland, so I put that money in a truck.

PAULINE: Well yeah. That's quite a bundle.

PERCY: I still get inquires from stores wanting my honey. But it played out here. Alfalfa weevil, and there was lots of land where the sweet clover was growing along the willows, rivers, ... lot of farming then. They ... the farming and killed that out. Didn't make good hay, it was too coarse, but it made fine honey in the world. So, when that disappeared I sold out. I have a garden, and a shop where I do woodwork.

PAULINE: Well, I was going to ask you, I understand that you make some beautiful things from sagebrush wood. Am I at the right place ---?

PERCY: Oh, I made all this stuff here, these things, this thing, and that table. That's inlaid with sagebrush, that coffee table.

PAULINE: That's beautiful.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PERCY: I'll show you, you don't raise these things anymore, a cow horn.

PAULINE: Oh, that's a cow horn, and you've made a fish out of it and --- is this sagebrush wood in here?

PERCY: See that's --- no that's juniper.

... (Discussion of different items)

PERCY: Framed the high school class with the same kind of frame.

PAULINE: Oh, isn't that pretty. This isn't juniper. It is?

PERCY: Juniper, with sagebrush inlay.

PAULINE: Well, it's such a much lighter color.

PERCY: Well, there is so many different colors of juniper. White juniper, red juniper, and yellow.

PAULINE: Is this one you here? Or is this ---

PERCY: As far as I know there is only three of us left alive in the class. There is two of them, I don't know where they're at.

PAULINE: Well, they certainly had the beautiful dresses on that night.

PERCY: Wore long skirts then.

PAULINE: Who was the other fellow?

PERCY: ... Sweek. He disappeared soon after he graduated. ... don't know if he'd know what happened to him.

PAULINE: I've heard of the Sweek girls, they taught school in Harney County, here and there, around. Alice Sweek, wasn't there an Alice Sweek?

PERCY: Oh yeah. Her father was a lawyer ... Let's see, this ... lives in Portland. I think she is ... King's daughter.

PAULINE: I've heard that name.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PERCY: And ... Hotchkiss. Those three, those two girls and myself I know of is alive.

PAULINE: Bee Hotchkiss.

PERCY: Yes, Bee Hotchkiss, I knew her.

PAULINE: Who did she marry, do you know?

PERCY: In Nebraska, a rancher, I don't remember, I don't know.

PAULINE: But she is a sister to ---

PERCY: Don Hotchkiss.

PAULINE: Don. Well, that is beautiful. Well, I was interested to see this. I wanted to see some of the sagebrush because I'd heard it was such beautiful wood. Well how do you find, I mean, you said it was hard to find the solid piece. Where do you look for it? And what do you look for in it?

PERCY: You have to look at every --- the cow, rubbing around on the sagebrush ruined a lot of it, splintered it up. I haven't got out and found any sagebrush for quite awhile.

PAULINE: Well, you look for a, you take a piece that is growing at the time?

PERCY: Yeah.

PAULINE: And then cure it?

PERCY: Yeah.

PAULINE: I imagine it's ---

PERCY: ...

PAULINE: How do you cure it?

PERCY: Let it dry out a little. It don't seem to check as bad as any other wood, I don't think.

... (Discussion of other pieces)

PAULINE: Well, your dad lived to be quite an old man, didn't he?

PERCY: Dad was 102 when he died.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PAULINE: Well, I was just thinking that he was well over a 100.

PERCY: ...

PAULINE: Well did you have a family?

PERCY: No, just the two of us. I was married in 1940; I was about 50 years old.

MRS. DAVIS: When we was married? I was 43.

PAULINE: Had you lived in Harney County a long time?

MRS. DAVIS: ... North Dakota in the '30's. ...

PAULINE: ...

PERCY: She was teaching school in Juntura and trying to take care of her aging mother at the same time. I was up here with Dad, pretty old too. I moved them up here, built that other part of this house.

MRS. DAVIS: This used to be a CC Camp.

PAULINE: Oh, it did? I knew that the CCC had come into Harney County and worked a lot down on the Malheur Bird Refuge. But I didn't realize they had worked up here in Drewsey. Well can you tell me about that?

PERCY: Well, they had the Taylor Grazing, had the men working in different camps to improve the water springs, ... springs, and troughs, and made quite a crew there at one time. This part of the house was the office building. And the shop down there was the bathroom for the crew. And they had a mess hall, and an assembly hall here, two big buildings. And when they moved out why we bought the buildings and used the lumber, and part of it made the kitchen and two bedrooms. Dug the basement with a team of horses and a scraper.

PAULINE: Well, speaking of horses, you said that your dad started raising horses. What, I mean what were they sold for? Did he raise them for the army, or were they used for --- did he break

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

them for riding?

PERCY: Well, he shipped them back East to the grain farmers and sold them back there.

PAULINE: So, they were cow horse type horses.

PERCY: Work horses, yeah.

PAULINE: Workhorses, that's what --- Well I have one more question that I really want to ask you before I go. Do you remember the first car that you saw, or that you rode in?

PERCY: First car?

PAULINE: Uh huh.

PERCY: Well, the first one I ever saw was back in Kansas, with old high wheels, buggy, looked more like a buggy than a car. And I remember they'd scared a horse to death whenever they seen one of them. And then the next one was in Burns. After that they was in Burns then. And the Ford Garage there was the first garage, when they used the Ford cars. Well let's see --- no the fellow in Iowa had an automobile with iron tires on them. Noisiest thing you ever heard or saw. Just an experiment.

After that, the fairgrounds was quite a ways from town, and a fellow there had a car, and he charged 25 cents to take people out to the fairgrounds. So, in the meantime, I'd found a \$5 bill that had been carried in some horse's hoof, dropped off in the middle of the street. I didn't find any owner for it, and I sure celebrated.

PAULINE: You had a good time.

PERCY: I'd buy rides to the fairgrounds, and they were two bits a ride. I had a great time.

PAULINE: Was this the first time you'd ridden in one, or had you ridden in one before?

PERCY: No, that was about the first time I'd rode in one back there.

PAULINE: I've gotten some interesting answers to this question. And one lady was telling me that

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

she was just frightened to death.

But most people said that they just really liked it, they thought it was very exciting, and they really enjoyed it.

PERCY: The first airplane ride out here, I didn't like that.

PAULINE: You didn't care for that.

PERCY: No, I couldn't stand the dropping in elevation. When they got up there, they hit an air pocket. I thought they was supposed to do the loop-to-loop. I shook my head at the pilot, and they knew I was --- He just had an open cockpit and a board seat, and I was sure hanging to that board.

PAULINE: I think I would have been too. That would be kind of scary to be sitting right there in the open and do a loop-to-loop.

PERCY: When Dad went up, when they come in for a landing, he was standing up, waving his hat.

PAULINE: I've heard that he was really quite a gentleman. He had a very interesting life. ...

PERCY: Dad and I went to Southern California to sell cattle. But those days, well we went down to Portland and took the train to San Francisco. We got to San Francisco just before breakfast time, and they ferried the train, or dining car across the bay while I was eating breakfast. That was, I'll always remember that. And from San Francisco on to Los Angeles, we went in open buses then, they didn't have covered buses. Took one of those and went on that. That's when I got the flu, 1919.

MRS. DAVIS: You had to learn to walk all over again, didn't you?

PERCY: I was pretty weak when I got over it. They put me in a hotel there, and they tried to put me out, the hotel. But I had the flu. But the doctor, he put a stop to that. I had a cousin that was a practical nurse, so we got her up there, and I got through with all that.

PAULINE: I talked to some of the other people that had the flu or knew of the flu epidemic about

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

that time. And they told me that they really didn't know what to do for a person. And they did some of the wrong things too.

PERCY: Well ... lots of people then.

PAULINE: Well, this was pretty much --- I mean it just wasn't in Harney County.

MRS. DAVIS: ...

PERCY: All over.

PAULINE: Well can you think of anything else that we haven't talked about, that you think is important about the history of Drewsey, or the people that were here?

PERCY: Well, it is kind of hard to think about all of it.

PAULINE: Well, this is the thing about this kind of a talk, that it is impossible to, you know, to cover everything in one short time. So, but these little bits and pieces are fitting together. It's, you know, I'll talk to someone, and they'll mention something about a certain thing, and someone else will tell a little more about it. And it all fits together.

MRS. DAVIS: ... telling your mother's names. Her name was Emma. Her maiden name was Tindell, T I N D E L L. I thought probably he didn't mention that.

PAULINE: No, he didn't, and I forgot to ask him.

PERCY: Well, my father --- she had the smallpox here and never got over it. Dad took all three of us back to Kansas, where her folks lived.

MRS. DAVIS: She was sick all the way over there. Had to take care of two little kids. ... She died just a few months after that, didn't she?

PERCY: Yeah, not too long. Yeah, my grandfather took her to Colorado Springs to the doctor there. It was 30 miles buggy ride to get to the railroad.

MRS. DAVIS: For a sick person, just imagine.

AV-ORAL HISTORY #56; PERCY DAVIS

PAULINE: Well, I can't. Well, they don't even consider smallpox anymore. It's just an unheard of thing. You know this winter, the flu that we had there in Burns, I don't know whether it affected out here the same way, but I think we had people that were sicker this winter from the flu than I had ever seen.

... (Flu discussion)

MRS. DAVIS: His mother was only about 28 when she died.

PERCY: Yeah, I think so.

PAULINE: Well, I sure appreciate you taking time to talk with me. I'm enjoying it; I'm having lots of fun with this project.

MRS. DAVIS: Will be quite a job to put it all together, though.

PAULINE: Yes, it will.

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