

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #70 - Side A

Subject: Bill Brown

Place: Harney County Historical Society Luncheon

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DICK COWAN: ... I've got some information, but today, we've got the real thing. We've got it really from the horse's mouth ... made a real study of the life of Bill Brown, and what he did here on the desert, his whole history. Plus, the fact, on my right is Fred Houston, who was the buckaroo boss for Bill Brown on his farm for many years. I don't know how much more authentic you could have history than that. On my left ... are Mrs. Cleon Clark. Many of you --- some of you might have known Cleon when he was superintendent of the Ochoco Forest in Prineville. He was superintendent of that forest when I moved here, and the first man I dealt with on our forest permit. He and John Scharff are old friends.

Mrs. Clark is one of the leaders of the Historical Society in Deschutes County and has probably done as much work in researching the life and time of Bill Brown as anybody. I've spent some time with her, and I find her very knowledgeable and interesting.

Old home week, this is Mrs. Fred Houston, who was born and raised on Silver Creek, just about a mile from where I live, part of the Gibson family over there. And so --- and she is also a neighbor to Jessie Williams, they are old close friends. And it is a real thrill --- personal thrill for me to be here with these people.

Also, many of you might have heard that Zola Shields, another Silver Creek pioneer, passed

away Wednesday. And Jessie and Mrs. Houston are old friends of hers, and so it is very fitting that they be here at this time. The gentleman on my right is Fred Houston, from Prineville, who was the buckaroo boss and general foreman for Bill Brown for many years. Now, I'm incompetent and a newcomer along with such expertise here, and knowledge. So, I'm going to kinda turn this over to Mrs. Clark, who will start out and we'll kind of play it by ear from here. It's an opportunity and we can feel very privileged to have these people that are here today.

MRS. CLARK: Thank you very much. And I'd like to bring you greetings from Deschutes County Historical Society to you people. I'm not going to make a talk, because Fred and his wife knows so much more personal things than I do about Bill Brown. So, I'm just going to sit down and let Fred do the talking. Because I think this is the way you will get the most information. So, thank you.

FRED HOUSTON: I'm going to first tell you a little bit about the history of Bill Brown, and what I'd like to do is find out if you can hear me. If anybody can't hear me, I want them to hold their hand up, because that's one of my failings is my ears have gotten to the point where I have to wear hearing aids in order to hear what people say, and then I miss lots of it.

William Walter Brown was born in Kenosha, Pike County, Wisconsin, July the 19th, 1855. The family moved to Oregon in 1869 and settled at Oregon City. Bill graduated from San Jose Normal School in 1878, and he also attended the Willamette University. He came to Central Oregon in 1882, and he died in January the 11th, 1941. What I'll try to tell you is what Mr. Brown told me from time to time of things that happened in his life.

He went to Willamette University, and he cut cordwood the first winter to pay for his schooling. And then in the summer he went to work for a contractor that was surveying land for the U. S. Government here in Oregon. Their surveys covered areas east of us, over here in the Malheur, and over as far as the boundary, the east boundary of our state. The first year that Brown worked for the surveyors he was a packer. It was his job to pack the supplies and move the camps whenever necessary. He also had to furnish the meat for the camp. In those days there was lots of opportunity to secure what meat was necessary. There was both elk and deer. I think they mostly

lived on deer meat in those days.

The second year, Brown was a chainman and an ax man on that same survey crew, for the same contractor. What this contractor did, he picked up college men to put on his crew, as far as he could. And then as they progressed why they would take more responsible jobs.

The third year, Mr. Brown was a compass man. He ran a compass, and he said that their work was such that they were trying to make miles. Survey as much as possible each day. And of course, they would survey a whole township, and then move to another one.

After graduating from Normal School in San Jose, he taught school for one year. He said one year was enough to convince him that that wasn't the life work for him. He went back to the Willamette Valley and went to cutting cordwood again. He met a lady there that was quite interesting to him, and after a sad love affair why he decided that he would leave the Willamette Valley.

He and his brothers decided that they would look for a good location to set up a stock ranch. They didn't know what part of the country they might settle in, so they --- each one got a good saddle horse, and packhorse enough to carry their supplies. And they went from the Willamette Valley into the fort north --- into Washington, and then back to the eastern part of Oregon. They came on through to Wagonire Mountain. There they --- after surveying that area, they turned south and went as far as Northern California.

And when they had made all that travel, searching for a good place to locate, they decided that Wagonire Mountain was the best place that they had found. They retraced their tracks back to Wagonire, and they each one took a claim there. I don't know how much timber claims --- I mean desert claims, and some were homesteads. But they took the best land that they could, of course. There was no one ahead of them, you might say. And they really got the best of that particular part of the country.

They bought sheep and started into the sheep business. I think they got something like 7,000 head, if I remember the numbers right. He told me that they ran sheep there for a period of

three years. The first winter that they were there with the sheep they didn't have a tent; they didn't own a tent. And they had their main camp next to an overhanging rim rock. They built their fire out away from the rim and they put their bed sack next to the rim, and overhanging rim was all the protection they had from the elements.

After one winter, they found money enough to buy tents. Brown said that one was enough, of that kind of business. And they continued on for three years when they had accumulated about 7,000 head of sheep. And there come a hard winter, and it just about wiped them out. They had less than a 1,000 head of sheep left when the winter was over. They were disgusted, they wanted to leave, and so they sold their interest in what sheep they had left, and the lands that they had acquired, and Brown told them in time he would pay them. He didn't have anything to pay them to start with.

I might say that --- to go back just a little bit and say that when those brothers first started searching for land they had, if I remember, something like \$3,000 a piece, or a little less. And they had put those into sheep, and land, and living. And after the hard winter, the brothers moved back to Portland --- Oregon City I should say, one of them became a banker at Oregon City. One went to Klamath Falls and became a hay king. Ellis went to Portland and made a doctor out of himself, a good medical doctor.

And Brown continued on with the few sheep he had, and from there he built up what was known as one of the largest holdings in that part of the country. He told me that the sheep, he owned 23,000 --- or 22,000 head of sheep at one time. That was his --- the greatest number of sheep that he owned at one time.

When I worked for him, he had about 43,000 acres of deeded lands in Crook County, Deschutes County, Harney County, and Lake County. Those counties is where he had his holdings. In those early days, men like that secured the water. They got the places that there was living water so they could control the range. That in later years brought on trouble.

When I started working for Brown in 1922, Sumner Houston was a buckaroo for him. And

I was hired to ride with the other buckaroos --- there were 12 of us out there on the desert running horses. Brown had sold the 500 head of horses that year, and we gathered those and delivered them to the people that bought them and continued on for a total of about two and a half months. And then the crew was broken up. Brown paid them off, and not much work was done until the next year with the horses.

In the early years when Brown was really handling lots of horses, he had a buckaroo foreman and crews that worked the year round. But, in later years his crew only worked through the summer and fall --- late spring, and summer, and fall with the horses.

During the First World War, Brown sold lots of horses to the army. Most of them went to the French. And they come out there to Wagontire and bought those horses, and Brown auctioned them off. He told me he averaged \$87 a head for those horses. He sold \$50,000 worth of horses in each of two years. And, that had to be a lot of horses, if a person stops to think. Then you wonder, well how did he get such a bunch of horses to start with?

You know in Cleveland's administration, this country, this particular part of the country was brought down on the rocks, you know. A lot of people was having a tough time to live, and some of them owned a small bunch of horses, 50 or maybe a 100. And I would run a couple of hundred. And Brown was able to go around and buy those horses. He paid those people for those horses, bought the whole brand. If a man owned a 100, he bought all of them, not just part, and, so he could have control of that brand. And paid them from \$3 to \$10 a head. Some of those same horses that he paid \$3 to \$10 a head for, were sold during World War I for an average of \$87, around.

When I worked for him, he had about 6,000 head of horses, and about 10,000 head of sheep. Those numbers stayed pretty constant. The only way you could tell how many horses he had was in riding, we would keep track of how many colts we branded, and then estimate. Make an estimate on how many horses were on the range from those records, that's about the only way we could do it. But with the sheep --- why we knew what we had.

I worked with the sheep, I worked with the horses, and I worked on the ranch. I drove truck

for him, I hauled wool, I hauled groceries, I tended the store, any job there was, I did it. Of course, I had plenty of help. He always had a large crew of men, and whenever something was needed, Brown was right there to back you up in whatever you did. I enjoyed my years with Brown. He was a real man, one of the best.

Many stories have been told about what he did with his money, and so on. He was worth, at one time, better than half a million, and it's been said that he threw away one fortune by mismanagement, and so on. He gave away one fortune to a charity, and so on. And there was one fortune stolen from him. That's what has been told. And I think that's a good way of putting it, because Brown himself said that the largest amount of our people are reasonably honest. He said there are a few that are not. He trusted people, and a man come along that needed work, I don't care whether Brown had a job that needed to be done or not, he said, "Sure I'll give you a job." He might give him a grubbing hole and tell him well now you grub sage until we're ready to do something else. But, if that man actually needed work, he got it. There was times when we had some real good men, and times when we had some ornery men. And Brown always tried to treat a man fair and do what he could for them.

Sumner Houston was a foreman for him for many years, buckaroo foreman. And Sumner started riding for Brown when he was 12 years old. He worked under Neumann, and Couch, and Johnny Mosier, all of those fellows, and Baker. Sumner worked as a buckaroo under all of those before he was foreman himself. He had the misfortune to have a team run off with him when he was working for his dad, Charlie Houston, and he was mowing hay in the field with a half-broke team. And another team ran away and went past where Sumner was with his mowing machine, and his team took off. And he tried to hold them, and they hit a ditch, just a --- I should say a wash where the rainwater had washed down, and when ... hit the ditch, the double tree broke. And it threw Sumner ahead of the mower. He was hanging on-to the reins and it threw him off the right-hand side, and the neck yoke was fastened such that it wouldn't come loose, and it carried the machine on.

Well, Sumner got caught in the sickle and cut an arm off. And after he was healed up, why, and able to go again, he come out to Browns and he asked Brown if he could have a job as foreman, buckaroo foreman. And Brown told him yes, and said, "I'll give you the job whenever you want to go to work, why you can do so." And Sumner told him, well, he said about what dates he would be there to start riding for horses. Brown says, "Have you got anything in your pocket that I can write on?" Sumner says, "The only thing I've got is this envelope, letter in it." Well, he said, "Let me see the envelope." Brown took it and tore the envelope up and wrote a check for \$300 and handed it back to Sumner. "Well," Sumner said, "well, that's mighty good." He said, "I'll pay you back when I earn it." Brown said, "I didn't say anything about paying it back." He said, "I'm giving you this. I thought that you needed it." And that's the kind of man Brown was. He helped people that he thought they actually needed it.

So, I think all of us could take a great lesson from Brown if we only had of known him. He gave about \$3,000 to a church there in Prineville when notes came due. Brown was there at the church, and he learned the notes, give the --- what was owed to the church. He built the music hall at the Willamette University. And he gave thousands of dollars to churches and other worthwhile projects throughout Oregon and Washington. Some of his money went to Seattle where it was donated to the church.

He put \$10,000 into the old people's home in Salem. And when he did so, he didn't hold a reservation for himself. When he finally lost everything that he had, he went to this old people's home in Salem, and spent his last days there. His brothers put up the \$1,000 it took to get him into the home.

MR. CLARK: ... she knew him, and I didn't.

DICK: Did you want to talk some?

MRS. CLARK: Not really. I can tell you a little bit about Bill Brown. I won't take --- what I say. My dad worked for Bill Brown long before he ever knew my mother. And I don't know when he started working for him. I imagine it was probably about 1896, when he started, because that was

when he quit working for Bill Hanley on the Bell A.

But in May of 1904, when he was working for Bill Brown, a horse started to buck, and it turned a somersault on him in the lava bed. And Dad was pretty badly crippled up, he was cut right across here, till the skin fell down over his eye, and he couldn't see. And he had 11 broken ribs, 11 breaks in his ribs on one side. And 14 on the other, 1 knee was broken, both ankles were broken, and both hands were broken, and the right shoulder was broken. And they hauled him to Burns, and they took camp beds out in the bottom of a big wagon, hooked four horses to it and hauled him 68 miles on that to Burns, to a doctor, no hospital. And Bill Brown had him taken to the old Burns Hotel. There's got to be somebody besides Marcus that remembers the old Burns Hotel.

MARCUS HAINES: Well, Wally does.

MRS. CLARK: And made arrangements with Del and Rose Dibble to keep him there and take care of him, until he was able to leave. When he was able to leave --- that was in May, he went back to work the 27th of November. When he was able to leave the hotel, Brown had him moved out to the buckaroo camp, said where he could keep an eye on him. And he kept him there, and from the day he got hurt right on until he was able to go to work, his wages went on just the same. That's the kind of man Bill Brown was.

My dad worked for him until 1914. And he was working for him when I was born, well, the four older ones of us, myself, Stanley, Jess, and Lil --- Lillian. Why he was working for him. And, about the only dealings I ever had with Bill Brown --- my mother was an invalid; she was a heart patient when I was a kid.

And when I was 10, 11, and 12, I sold eggs to Bill Brown. We had 200 laying hens, and we had an incubator, and we set the incubator and hatched out the chickens until they got big enough for fryers. He'd come there and wait while we killed and dressed out 15 or 20 chickens, then he'd pay for them and take them to his men. And that's about all the dealings I had with him. But quite often when he returned ... we'd find a \$5 bill in the bottom of it. Say something to him about it, well that's for you two girls, he'd say. That was Lillian and myself, our sister was younger, and she was

too small to have anything to do with it.

But that's the kind of man I remember of Bill Brown, and I think everybody practically that knew the man thought a lot of him. I think I knew him better than Wanda, and she was related to him.

MARCUS: That ain't the way I heard it.

JESSIE WILLIAMS: It's hard to believe that's my cousin.

MARCUS: Yeah, it was in the family though, wasn't it?

JESSIE: Oh yes, Shields family.

MARCUS: You want to tell us anything about Bill Brown?

JESSIE: Oh, I think they heard about all ---

MARCUS: Not much more to tell.

JESSIE: He did go on to marry Judge Shield's oldest daughter. And he went and got a necklace with a horseshoe bar on it and put it around her neck. Said anything that wears a horseshoe bar belongs to me. But they wouldn't allow it.

MARCUS: Didn't work that time, Jessie.

JESSIE: His nephew was at the museum about 4 or 5 years ago when Ruby Street was still alive. 'Course that was Ruby Street's sister. And he went out to see Ruby and talk to her about Bill Brown --- her sister.

MARCUS: Thank you Jessie. ... I don't think so; it's about time to adjourn the meeting.

FRED: I want to tell you a bit about Jessie Williams. In 1923, I came to Burns to help gather a bunch of cattle, the Bunyard cattle. And a few days before I got there --- got to Burns, it was my first trip to Burns. I got a wire that hit my hand; I think it was a barb that did it. I paid no attention to it, and I got infection in that hand, and by the time I got to Burns, I was driving a team, a cook wagon --- bringing the cook wagon in. And my hand was swollen up to where I couldn't use it. And Jim Lumsden, that used to be here --- overtook me coming into town and showed me the way into Burns. When he saw my hand and said, "We'll go to the Welcome's Drug Store, and we'll get

some medicine for that." We went to the Drug Store, and the druggist said I've got some ichthamnol that will straighten that out. So, he sold me the ichthamnol and some bandaging material.

Jim Lumsden said, now then, now let's have Jessie Williams dress that hand for you. And of course, I didn't know who Jessie Williams was, but I followed Jim up there to her place. She was in town here sending her children to school. And when she saw my hand why she gave it one look, and she said it sure needed something. And she dressed that hand for me. And then I went back to -- downtown and went to a hotel and stayed all night, and the next morning before I left town I went back --- Jim and I did --- back to Jessie's house and she unwrapped that and applied some more of the ichthamnol, and told me if I made a sling for me to carry it, you know --- she said you keep that ichthamnol on that, I think it will be okay.

So I went out to buckaroo camp up here on Silvies --- up at the Hotchkiss place, and gathered quite a bunch of cattle there, and then went down the east side of Snow Mountain, over to the South Fork of the John Day, on around to Bear Valley, and by the time I had driven a cook wagon, and cooked for those men, with my left hand, by the time I made the circle, my right hand was so I could use it again.

DICK: I have studied John Devine, Pete French, people like that, and I'm not --- just to criticize them, but most of them were pretty ruthless if people got in their way. All the study that I have made of Bill Brown, I have yet to hear a bad word about him. He always helped people; he would rather help people than hurt them. And it's --- he's really one of a kind, really. It's a study of his life --- it's just amazing, because he was such a kind man, such a fine man.

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