

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #74 - Side B

Subject: Lee Williams

Place: Harney County Historical Society Meeting - Burns, Oregon

Date: 1978

Interviewer:

MARCUS HAINES: Lee Williams is going to tell you about the early stage days. His dad was a contractor over there for many years. In those days the kids kinda helped out, and the old folks as they went along. Now Lee has raised two boys, and I raised two girls, and his boy got away with one of my girls here 20 years ago this month. So, we're kinda related here.

LEE WILLIAMS: Kids get old pretty fast.

MARCUS: Yeah, they do. So Lee, why don't you come up here and tell us all about your experiences here. I know we're all anxious to hear from you. Let's give Lee a nice hand.

LEE: ... can you hear me. Am I talking loud enough? Will it catch my breath every time I do? (Laughter) Am I talking loud enough? Kinda caught me unawares on this thing. I should have stayed home, I guess, that day, but I didn't.

This started on this mail business from the time I guess the post riders of colonial times, on up through the Pony Express, and the overland routes, and clear on down to the present time. Seemed like the mail carriers was a sort of a glamorous occupation. It looks nice to see the coach and the six in hand, you know, stepping it off down a nice dry dusty road, but when you get around and get down to the fundamentals of the thing there, why it was quite a lot of hard work attached to it.

In any event, my folks were mail contractors for, I don't know how many years. My

grandfather, and my dad, and myself, and my older son, who is a postmaster at Drewsey, is a fourth generation of the Williams that had to do with the mail, with my branch of the family.

And about 1908, I guess, the first I can remember very clearly, on the mail route from Ontario to Burns was a two-horse job in those days. But about the most mail that they carried, and the most important mail was first class mail. If they had room for the papers, why they brought some of those along, if they didn't why it was just strictly the first class mail that they were paid to carry. Then that was what the contract was based on.

Now let's go back a little bit, I'm getting ahead of myself. Ben Holladay and Travis, and a bunch of those fellows had pretty good pull in Washington, and they'd gather up a block of mail contracts, and then they would sub those out to different people that wanted to have a part in the mail carrying.

But anyway, my folks came to the Drewsey country in '94. I believe, if I'm not mistaken, that their contract from Ontario to Burns --- I believe that was when the star routes first came into the picture. Before, I don't know just what the status of the standing of the mail contracts were. But after the star routes came into the picture, why they had a designated route, and they had to stay with that route pretty much. They figured on the pay for the first class mail, a paying the cost of the operation. Then their express and passengers and what little freight that they could haul, was what they made their profits on. That was the profit if they, if they didn't go too far behind on the original bid.

But it would take about 30 --- in the wintertime I don't know how many hours it would take, but it was around 40 hours, I believe, from Ontario on into Burns. And there was two rigs going each way all the time. And when the mud was deep, and the snow was deep and everything, why they could be as much as a day behind with the mail. But that was getting back on something that was pretty much before my time.

Now I started in to tell you about my experience in carrying the mail. In the summer, or the spring of 1921, I was about 19 years old, I guess. My father had a contract in Grant County, and to give me some experience in the staging business --- So I went to Grant County in the spring of 1921, took the run from Hamilton to Fox Valley. It's a pretty nice drive now to go through on the pavement. In those days four horses and a light wagon, and you had to kick right along, empty, a coming from Hamilton to Fox in about five hours. That was in the summertime when the roads were good. And put on a load of mail, and freight, and parcel post, and what have you, and it would take about five hours and a half a going back.

Well I did that that summer, experienced some of the darndest thunderstorms that a person could imagine across that mountain from Fox Valley to Long Creek. Give you an idea about what could happen on the thing, one day this thunder storm came up and I held up at Fox, which is real adobe country. And if you started out when it was raining, and about the time that adobe started to dry you didn't go very far, very fast. But if you would wait a half hour why you could skip right along.

In any event, I crossed that mountain after that storm and dropped down to the other side, and had the mail changed at Long Creek, and I pulled out of Long Creek about a half a mile, I guess, and another one of those thunder storms came along, and the horses stopped and trying to settle down a little bit. You could see this ball of fire dropping down on that mountain behind me. I knew it was pretty close because the thunder came before, pretty near any-thing else. But the next day when I came back why the road made a bend about half way up the mountain, and around a big fine tree about four feet through. That evening that that bolt of lighting hit up there, why that was a good sound tree. When I came back the next morning it was splintered, scattered around probably for 150 yards all around that tree. It was a stump probably as high as that ceiling

here, and the rest of it was all gone.

But that was just one of the things that --- well in any event why, I drove that run until about September, I guess. And my dad bought a Ford truck, hard rubber tires, and moved me to the Canyon City end, the head office, and put me on the run from there to Mount Vernon, which is only about 10 or 11 miles out there. But it sounded pretty easy when he first told me about changing me, and I felt golly, I'll get that new Ford truck, I'll just be alright. But that was in the days when the parcel post, I think, had been sending stuff with parcel stuff for about a couple of years. I could be mistaken now on the date that parcel post came into the picture. Anyway, it was my job to keep the parcel post cleared out of the Canyon office. Sometimes it come in pretty heavy.

To give you an idea of what they did send by parcel post, why they'd put two fifty pound sacks of stock salt in a number three mail sack, and if you've ever tried to pick up a 100 pounds of salt in a number three mail sack, in two sacks, why --- But flour, sugar, anything that came under the 70 pound limit came through in those mail bags. Sometimes it would be as much as a couple ton of parcel post would come in at one time. And that was besides the papers and the first class mail. So some days it would take me three or four trips to move that stuff out of the main office down to the weigh station there at Mount Vernon. I'd have to get up before five in the morning and get my load on for the first trip. I could get through the John Day office at 5 o'clock. And so the days that I had to make two, three, or four trips why it was a fairly long day before I got done.

I remember one time that there was a stack of parcel post in the Canyon office, and Monument was on the far end of the route and there was quite a large package came, it had been miss --- it had been miss-sent, it was addressed to Monmouth. So I caught it the first morning it came in, and I put it back in the Prairie City stack. And the next morning well it was back in my side of the --- and I picked it up, and saw it was the

same one so I put it back over in the Prairie City --- excuse me a minute --- And so the third morning it was over on my side of the pile, why I thought well I'd better do something about this. So I just set it off to one side.

Of course at 5 o'clock, or at 4:30 in the morning, that was before any of the rest of the stages was coming, or starting out of the Canyon Office. That evening when I came in why Mrs. Dick Clark, was the postmaster, she was a little grumpy too sometimes. And so she collared me about that package, wanted to know what I meant by putting that package to Monument back in the Prairie City pile all the time. She said that driver, the driver from ... from Prairie to, from Canyon to Prairie. I guess he had objected to it. Anyway I said, "That doesn't go to Monument." "Oh yes it does." So I got it out of the pie there and set it up there, and she took a good look at it. We had quite a little argument before I did that. But in any event, that was the last that I saw of that package. (Laughter)

The next evening when I came in, well I guess she got to feeling kind of bad about hopping on to me about this package, and she had a nice big plate of divinity fudge, you know, that kind of smoothed things over pretty good.

Amongst all the things that went over that route, now that was back in the days when there was no roads as we know them today, they were just trails. And I know they weren't cow trails because I never saw a cow on one of them, just teams, you know. I mean they were just plain old wagon tracks. In the wintertime the snow was belly deep, and the mud was belly deep in the spring. It was quite a problem.

And to get back to my story about the baking powder. The first summer I was there, I don't know how many hundreds of pounds of baking powder went into that Long Creek, Hamilton, Monument country. People was wondering what in the world people did with so much baking powder. But anyway, why I guess it was all right. But one time I went into Long Creek on a trade with that driver on the end. And there was some great

big packages came in on the stage, and dumped them off at the post office in Long Creek. And the same place that these packages went to was a tremendous user of sugar and raisins. This, oh about a week after this bunch of big packages came through here, here come a fellow inquiring about what happened to some of those big packages that came in on the mail. And before I could get started to tell him what I knew about it, something came to me to keep my mouth shut, so I did. So I got into Long Creek and there was quite a bunch of people around the post office. I don't know how word got through that fast, but anyway it did. I wondered what the deal was.

The next morning when I came back Elmer ... was the post master, and he said, "Did you know who that fellow was that you brought in on the stage yesterday?" And I said, "No." He said, "Do you know what he was a doing?" And I said, "No, but he was asking about the large packages." He said, "Well that was a prohibition man." And had those big packages you was hauling, in his thinking, was a still. Whether it was or not, I don't know, I never heard of anybody being picked up there for using a still. I know they had some pretty good results from some of those stills.

It took about 12 hours on a good dry day, Canyon City to Long Creek, and then 5 hours from there on to Monument to make the run. That's how long it took to get a letter, or paper, or package from Canyon City to Monument. It was about 60 miles through there.

One night it had been storming quite a bit and the driver from Hamilton to Monument wanted me to go down with him, 9 miles from Hamilton down to Monument, so I did. We got along pretty good going down, but coming back that adobe started to roll at what they called the Schoolhouse hill, so it was about 4 o'clock the next morning before we got back from Hamilton. That adobe would roll up on a buggy wheel, maybe the wheel would turn over twice, and there would be a gob of mud on each one that big. So

you'd have to take a shovel and dig that off, then you go on. I wouldn't be surprised if what maybe some of those piles of adobe are still back on the ---

But I'm getting kind of off my story on the thing. The driver took the mail out of the head office, and there was one thing that he did, and was to keep the lock sack with him at all times. If he had to drop a rig somewhere and walk a mile or two, why that lock sack had to be right with him all the time. Sometimes those lock sacks were fairly heavy too.

I remember one morning I started out of Canyon City and just over the hill out of Canyon City about a mile, I guess, out of town, there was a man and his wife lived there beside the road. And somebody had borrowed the gasoline out of the truck. I had to stop and I walked back, and that was the first house. Don might remember, and Jessie, and some of those folks there, it would be ... is the man and his wife that lived there right out of Canyon City. Some of you might remember George ... and that was his son. Anyway, why they had a gallon can of gasoline and they loaned it to me, enough to get me on down to John Day so I could pick up some more.

Getting back to that lock sack, the cussed thing weighted about 75 pounds. So being an honest mail carrier, I shouldered it and packed it back, and packed it back down the road along with the can of gasoline. But that was how serious that we took the mail carrying in those days.

And I think about now when six inches of snow ridged up between the mail carrier and the mailbox, you don't get any mail delivered to that mailbox. That's happened a number of times. I read in the paper the other day where a person stood in line to buy some stamps at the post office window, and he happened to be the last one in line, and just as he got to the window, this nice, good looking clerk slammed the door in his face there and said that they was closing. I thought that was kind of a wrong way to treat the public, even if he was a government employee.

I don't know of anything more that I can tell you other than that the year and some months that I carried mail across there, we averaged a ton of parcel post mail a day. So that'll give you an idea about how much freight we had to carry.

The highlight of one trip was that they had a teacher's institute in Canyon, and the teachers would go over on the north end of the county, all rode the mail stage into Canyon City. There was, I think, about six or seven. That was quite a hilarious trip, I'll tell you.

But we had pretty good weather. Going through we didn't happen to hit any rainstorms. I don't know how they got back, because there was only one or two of them rode back with us. But anyway ---

MARCUS: You'd better tell us a little more about it. (Laughter)

LEE: Well there were both men and women, so it was interesting. There was something else that I was gong to ---

MARCUS: Tell us how long, Lee, it takes you to get a letter from Burns to Drewsey, 44 miles now.

LEE: Well, some of them don't get there.

MARCUS: Well when they do get there, how long does it take?

LEE: It takes about, well I don't know. I read where this post master, I read in the Times-Herald that this post master in Burns told us that the mail went from here to Drewsey in one day's time. You folks probably read that. But it didn't say how many other days it took besides the one day.

NELL: How are your papers delivered now, your Burns paper?

LEE: Well we have a nurse here in Burns that carries the papers across to Drewsey. That's the way we get the town paper. She picks it up and takes it ---

LADY: Lee, be sure you introduce your guest, they got some history behind them. Bill ...

LEE: Oh yeah.

MARCUS: Excuse me.

LEE: I wasn't going to slight them Eleanor, I had to get through with my own story first. I wouldn't get another chance, I don't think.

JACKIE: One of the people from Drewsey told me the other day that they write to people in Alaska, they get a letter from Alaska quicker than --- They live here in Burns now, they get a letter from Alaska quicker to Burns, than they do from Drewsey.

LEE: Yeah. Well there was no turning back, and the mail carrier or the postmaster could do anything to see that a piece of mail got through to somebody. But they put in quite a little effort to find out if that person was around the country someplace. And if they were, why they'd find some way to get word to them that they had mail at this certain office. They wouldn't send it out by somebody to give it to them; they had to come to that office. They was real careful that they got that mail to them. Now if some piece of mail comes in, I guess, from what they tell me, they don't even bother to send it back to the addressee, it goes into the dead letter office.

And another little item that I caught in the paper a day or two ago, that they are considering real strong in eliminating the parcel post factor in the mail service today. Goodness knows, if they'd get the thing back like they did in the pony express days, before they were just handling the first class mail, I think maybe they might have a reasonable chance of getting that handled maybe. It seems like they, kind of like the welfare and one thing and another, they attach everything else to the mail service, and the job was too big for the people that were trying to handle the thing. And it just makes it kind of a mockery out of something in my estimation, and was, and is, the most important part of our communications today.

I think that when they started this mail service back in colonial times, the idea was

to get, to have communications from one place to the other in the least possible time. Now I don't know whose fault it is, but I would suspect perhaps that the people they're putting in to make this thing work, probably aren't very practical people. And getting down on the bureaucratic side of things, I'll tell you ... jump the creek there if you don't like the way they're handling things. But I'd better get off of that, because I don't think there is any of them to defend themselves, so I don't think ...

I could probably talk from now till dark on this thing. I think I told you most of the pertinent facts in the mail stage business in my time, that I know. But again I'll say it isn't a glamorous coach and shot gun guard, and what have you, and the man with the long whip and the six horses tearing up and down the roads. But it was a lot of hard work in the mud and snow, and long hours. But to my knowledge, I never knew one of them that knew what it was to turn back, any of the mail carriers that I ever knew might put in twenty-four hours, they went ahead all the time.

I recall one story that they told about my dad crossing Bendire Mountain. They called them drummers in those days, salesmen, and it was a storming, and snowing, and the team kept getting off of the beaten track. They'd have to stop and get out and tromp around in the deep snow and find the track again, and put the team back on. This drummer kept wanting to go back. Dad said, he listened to him talk, I guess he got tired of listening to him, and said, "Alright, the next place we can find we can turn around, why we'll turn around and go back." So they made it on across the mountain and dropped down to Fopians. Said this fellow remarked, "Gosh," he said, "I'm sure glad you turned around and went back." He said, "Maybe we can get some sleep here." Dad said, "The stage is changing teams now, if you want to go on to Ontario you'd better be getting on that stage." He says, "You mean we didn't go back?" I don't know what my dad told him, but I can imagine it. The man that told me, he said anytime that you think one of those

old time stage men is going to turn around and go back, why you'd better get on another rig, because they won't do it."

Well I think I'd better cut this off now. But I didn't hear any comment on all the baking powders that went across the road there, that I told you about. But the next summer there, there was quite a population explosion over in the northern ... (Laughter)

(END OF TAPE)

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