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HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #74 - Side A

Subject: Roe Davis

Place: Burns, Oregon

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Interviewers: Pauline Braymen & Joan Davies

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PAULINE BRAYMEN: Okay Roe, you said you first came to Harney County in 1929?

ROE DAVIS: We came in September 1929.

PAULINE: Where did you come from?

ROE: From McCall, Idaho. I'd been in the wrecking business over there two years before I come here. I was employed by another guy, and then I come over here and started up on my own in '29. And we were in there, back of the Ford Garage for two years.

PAULINE: Is that where the old campground is?

ROE: Yes, there's an old camp ground there.

PAULINE: Did people camp there at the time you owned it?

ROE: They had. It hadn't been too long, many years before that, that they had. But they had banned it as a campground. They were just using it for storage then. Archie McGowan was storing his old cars over in there. He had about eight or nine stored in there, old cars, and I bought them and started in with them, and I was in the wrecking business then.

We stayed there two years. And then we went up on the hill where the museum is, and there was an old laundry there. It had been a laundry, and before that it had been a brewery building. And we was up there then till we burnt out. The building burnt down in, oh about '36.

No, it was a little later than that; it was about '38 or '39. '38, '37 we burnt out, that's when we burnt out, '37. And then a couple of years later then we moved out there where the high school is now, you know, we had a wrecking yard there.

And at the same time I was getting into this flying. I'd learned to fly and had a couple of airplanes, so we built that little airport there then. And then we had a little airport there on that back property there.

And then the war came along then in '42, so we went into more training, pilot training over there in Bend, a school, training pilots. And I did quite a lot of flying over there, although I didn't instruct in the flying. I had charge of airplanes in my tent; I supervised that.

PAULINE: Who taught you to fly?

ROE: Oh, most of it, a little of it by a fellow by the name of Ken Wallen. He'd flown a little bit, he didn't have no kind of license, but he'd flown probably 50 hours, I imagine. So, he learned me how to get up and down, and so I went from there on, on my own. And then once in awhile somebody would come along that had, you know, a little more experience, and I'd get some training, anytime I could. And then in the meanwhile I was getting enough flying time and working on these airplanes. So when the war come along, I had that knowledge of aircraft work, and so that's what I did.

PAULINE: What kind of plane did you fly at first?

ROE: At first, my plane was an OX Eagle Rock, 1927 model bi-plane.

PAULINE: An OX Eagle Rock?

ROE: Yeah. It was called an Eagle Rock, because it was powered by an OX motor. A water-cooled motor ... but it was a 1927 model bi-plane. It was an old plane that I just bought and rebuilt, it was torn down, it had never been wrecked, but it was dismantled and over there in a storage in Boise when I bought it. And I hauled it over here on a truck, and then built it up, and then learned to fly.

JOAN DAVIES: How did you happen to choose flying?

ROE: How did I happen to get in it?

JOAN: Yeah.

ROE: Oh, I just liked it, and I had never had the opportunity, and the opportunity come along. Well, me and Oscar both got interested about the same time. He was trying to do a little flying over in Idaho, my brother. And then they had this old airplane over there we found out about, and so I got hold of the owner and I traded him a little old Austin I had, and \$50 for the airplane. So we rebuilt it, and me and Oscar both learned to fly in it, and Daryl Eggleston flew it a lot, you know. He was already flying when I started, and he helped me some too. But he was just learning then too. But he helped me quite a bit, and I learned to fly.

We flew the old Eagle Rock until we got something better, and then when the war come along why they wanted some of those old planes for school class. So we sold it to the College of Idaho to use for a class. They just took it in the building and tore it down. They just used it all for classroom study. I still got the old motor. Later, I'd put another engine in it. But I do have the original motor that was in it.

From there, when we got back then from the Service over there at the school in Bend, when it closed, why I run the airport a couple of years. Just flying all together, chasing, running coyotes, and killing coyotes, and chasing wild horses, and one thing and another. We moved out here then in '64. We moved out, you know, out there where we was out of town.

I eventually sold all my airplanes and finally quit flying, just kinda got away from it. I don't fly anymore.

PAULINE: Well, in addition to the wrecking business, and old cars, you've had an interest in these instruments too. Would you tell a little bit about how you got interested in guitars and banjos?

ROE: Well, this music thing has always been a hobby with me, and I've always liked it. I never had any when I was a kid. We couldn't buy them, you know, we was too poor. But then I had a mouth harp. So, as I worked along in the auto wrecking, most the time somebody would come along and want to trade me an old guitar, an old mandolin, and I'd bought me a mandolin. And I just kept going from there and used it as a hobby, and adding to it. And finally then after World

War II, why the string instruments started coming back, you know. For a long time there they just kinda went to records and stuff, people kinda didn't go for much self-amusement, you know, like self-entertainment. It started coming back then after World War II. So I got fixed up with a music outfit where I could buy parts and instruments, and since then I've repaired them, and sold some new ones, and kept strings. And encouraged and did all I could, you know, and tried to help promote some of them in playing instruments, and we still do.

Got around till we had a little shop there, out there, at home, you know, out at the place. So, when I decided to come into town, why I had this little place here, so Mildred and Fred they built this place here for my music. Those take up my time now, when I want to fool with it. I repair them a little bit, and play them, enjoy it.

PAULINE: Okay, see your wife is Eleanor, and your daughters are Lola Gibbon.

ROE: Lola was just about, let's see, she was born in May, she was four months old when we come to Burns. And Mildred was born here.

PAULINE: That's Mildred Fine?

ROE: We raised our family here. Lived most of our life here. It's been home, you know, its home. Of course, we didn't have much when we come here, and we ain't got too much yet, but its been good to us. It's been real good to us, the wrecking business, and the business we've been in, and the people have been awful good to us.

PAULINE: Did you have any experiences when you were chasing wild horses with your airplane, did you ever have any bad experiences or any funny experiences?

ROE: Well, I never did have any trouble chasing wild horses. I've had a couple of forced landings at different times. One of them, one time the magneto quit in that old Eagle Rock, and I had to land it without any engine. Then another airplane I was flying, it was after I was in a car wreck there a few years back, and I had broken my leg, and I was flying this airplane and I gassed up in Boise and I couldn't get up there and look, and I always made a habit to always look at my own tanks, you see, I never trusted anybody to fill the gas tanks. But they said it was full. But I know it couldn't have

been full, cause I run out of gas just --- well I was between the airport out there and Burns. I run out of gas there, and so I landed. Had altitude enough to land at the other airport.

PAULINE: Now when you talk about the airport, you're talking about the one that was at the Grange Hall?

ROE: Yes.

PAULINE: Well, across from the Grange Hall.

ROE: No, I mean the one over there, that they have now.

PAULINE: The same one that we have now?

ROE: Yeah. The one that used to be there at the Grange Hall, that's where we flew before World War II. They built that other field during World War II. We always flew off of the old field before that. But this time the Eagle Rock quit me; I was pretty close to that airport. I didn't get into the field, but I got into a field right close to it. When an engine dies, why you got to do something.

PAULINE: It's come down or else.

ROE: You got to come down.

PAULINE: You don't have much choice, do you?

ROE: You got to go down whether you want to or not.

PAULINE: Yeah. And then you had an airstrip back here, back of the old wrecking yard out here by the high school?

ROE: No.

PAULINE: No. This is what I was confused about. It was there at the Grange Hall?

ROE: Yeah.

PAULINE: Okay.

ROE: No. Of course I had the little field there between Burns and Hines after I moved out there. We were pretty fortunate all the time really, in this country in plane wrecks, local people never did have any major wrecks.

PAULINE: Well, Joanie, can you think of anything we didn't ask in here that we should?

JOAN: What about your wrecking business, did you ever, were there ever times when it bothered you when you had a bad wreck or something, and you thought, boy I'd better get out of this business?

ROE: Well, the time I was bringing one back from Boise, and I had that wreck and broke my leg, but otherwise we got along pretty good as far as no misfortune in the wrecking business. I can't think of anything else. It's kind of a fascinating thing. It ... you once in a while, that's why I really like to have my music. I could go down for an evening for an hour or two and relax on it, you know. It's quite relaxing to me, from the other work.

JOAN: I know people used to go out and look through your yard and find this part, and that part. Did you ever have any valuable items or something that somebody discovered, or any funny homemade car parts?

ROE: Well, I can't think of anything. There wasn't anything unusual about the wrecking yard there. I had lots of funny experiences, all right, but then it would take a whole book to write them.

One time I tried to sell this Indian a car. It was a pretty good old Ford, along about '36, you know. Well, he said, it was just fine; he'd take it all right. So, he wanted to go get his family and look at it. So, he went and got his family and brought them back, and they looked at it, but they'd brought Grandma along. And old Grandma she looked at it, and I could see she was pretty put out of it, as she kept frowning and shaking her head. She talked Indian and I couldn't understand it. Finally the guy come back to me and he said, "Well, I guess we can't take it," he said, "Grandma don't want it, she don't like them muzzle loaders." It was a two door, you know, and you had to get in from the front. Grandma she don't want no muzzleloader. Oh, they're funny, you know, she called them muzzleloaders, because you get in from the front, you know. And Grandma didn't want no muzzleloaders, so they didn't buy the car.

PAULINE: Well, I know the pickup that Allan bought from you had a very unusual color name. The tag said "pukey brown" pickup on it. The pukey brown Chevy or whatever it was. Did you have some others; did you have your colors by similar colorful names?

ROE: No, that was the color of that. That was an Indian pickup though. An Indian had that out here, he hadn't repainted it, but it was kind of an Indian color.

PAULINE: It was pukey brown all right. Allan's still driving it too. The hired man didn't like the color of it, and he painted it green and white, but we still call it "pukey brown"!

ROE: That was kinda a sad color all right, wasn't it?

PAULINE: Would you play us a tune?

ROE: Huh?

PAULINE: Would you play us a tune?

ROE: Oh, yeah.

PAULINE: Would you?

ROE: I play most of the, I play quite a lot of these instruments, but the trouble is most of them don't sound very good by them-selves. I play this auto harp because it, I can play it alone, see, and I got, kinda got, oh your bass along with it. I got interested in playing, I kind of like play some ... I play these dulcimers.

PAULINE: Have you ever made a hammer dulcimer? Have you ever tried one of those?

ROE: I've got one, but I, a long time getting the dope on, in order to get strings for it. And I finally got the strings, and since I got them I've never have had time to put them on it. But I'm gonna now, cause I've got time. I'll show it to you, before you leave.

PAULINE: Okay. Well, Karen and I discovered a new magazine too; it's called "Picking Magazine". Have you seen that?

ROE: Yeah.

PAULINE: And it's got some music for dulcimers.

ROE: Oh yeah?

(Music, auto harp)

PAULINE: That's nice. That's all right.

ROE: I like them for --- instrument to play alone. Kind of like an accordion, you know. You can

play them with other instruments too, but ---

PAULINE: Well, I've never seen anyone play, the ones people that I've seen play, just mostly corded on them.

ROE: Yeah. They are nice to cord with, you can sing with them. It's pretty simple. I don't know, I've never, I've always played lead, and played so much by myself that I can't do much on this cord thing.

PAULINE: Yeah.

ROE: I can play cords with this.

PAULINE: That's really nice. Can you think of anything else Joanie that we can ask him?

ROE: Did you ever hear them dulcimers played? They're an old ---

PAULINE: Well, yes and no, I heard one. Karen and I went down to Mother's Weekend, they had a bluegrass group there playing in the quad, and they had a hammer dulcimer.

ROE: Oh, they had a hammer dulcimer?

PAULINE: And Karen and I became very intrigued with that.

JOANIE: What was this?

PAULINE: This is an auto harp.

ROE: Yeah, this is an auto harp. The difference in these, a German brought it to this country years ago, it's a real old instrument, although they still make them. But they never did get to be popular, but they use them in schools for just cords. But you see they have, when you press down on a button everything that is left in there is F, see? So it makes them easy to cord on.

It's a C cord, and the G cord, that's G cord. (Demonstrates) A lot of cords on --- But then when you play them, melody, there's not very many people play a melody. Then you pick out your strings that gives you your tune. Only thing this, these button does is it changes your key.

PAULINE: Your key?

ROE: Yeah, you can't play this with the buttons, you got to use your ... But after you play them awhile, I don't know why you pick out the right strings, I don't know, you just come natural.

... (Plays music)

But you see if you don't hook the right strings you still don't have a melody. But I've enjoyed playing it. I've fooled with it quite a lot.

Some people brought one in here to have it turned one time, and I never had fooled with one, but after I got through fooling with it why I decided I wanted one. I tuned it up for them; you tune it right at the piano. You see all your strings are the same as your piano. And you tune right to your piano. It's similar; it's like the big harp they play, only ---

PAULINE: On a smaller scale.

ROE: Yes.

PAULINE: May we see the dulcimer?

ROE: Yeah, sure. Here's the hammer dulcimer that you were talking about. Which I'm going to have playing one of these days.

PAULINE: Yeah.

ROE: But the strings that I had put on it are wrong. But I've got the right ones now. When I got it, it was kind of busted up. This is an original; it's a real old instrument. I bought it years ago over in Yakima. And it's...

And this is the dulcimer that they come out; they built them by hand years ago in the Appalachian Mountains more than anywhere else in this country. And there's a woman that played one when she was a kid. They just drilled them by hand, you know, and she kept the old one. And here about six, or eight, ten years ago she always kept it, and played a little on it. So, I see, I had to do some research on it, and revive it, and her uncle made some more of them. They made them by hand. And then she went, she was a schoolteacher, and she even went to Europe and researched on them. And I got a book on it. It's quite a history on it. And they give me three strings, and they started making them with four, but I still take the one string off, I play it with three strings.

She wrote a book on it. It's quite an interesting book. And then they built a few, and started to sell them. Now you can get them. Well, this one here was made in Korea. They build them all

over the country now.

(Music - Hammer Dulcimer)

ROE: They're kind of a, you can't put them in a band with a lot of electric instruments. But they're self-entertainment and you can play them with a guitar or banjo, and they do pretty good music.

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