

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #90 - Side A (No Tape)

Subject: Shelby Petersen

Place: Burns, Oregon

Date: September 17, 1972

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

Peter Christian Petersen came to the United States from Denmark. "He didn't have enough money for fare so he half-way stowed away. He paid what he could and worked a lot to get to America," his son, Shelby tells.

He wandered out as far as the Walla Walla and Pasco area and he saw a band of sheep. "That was the prettiest thing I ever saw," Dad always said, and he decided then he was going to raise sheep.

Petersen came into Harney County probably sometime in the 1890's, Shelby thinks. He had come from the Washington area down to Idaho and had been grazing in the Owyhee country. He eventually drifted into the Steens Mountain area and later bought a ranch at Warm Springs. (The Double O country where Virgil Moon now lives.)

Petersen run sheep for a long time without owning any land at all. At one time he had seven bands of sheep with as many as 2,500 sheep in a band, and never owned a foot of land. That's 15,000 head of sheep.

After he settled at Warm Springs he also raised horses, which were sold to the Army. Lambs were usually raised to yearling or two-year-old wethers before they were sold. Mutton was a popular meat in the county because you could butcher a mutton and eat it up before it spoiled. Even the cattle ranchers would use mutton for their meat supply rather than butcher a beef and have it spoil.

They drove the sheep to Riverside to the train to ship them.

The sheep man and the cattleman didn't always get along too well. And Petersen had his problems with one neighbor in particular who even threatened to kill him. But as time went on things began to ease a little.

When the baby of the cattleman died one winter, Petersen went over to help with the burial. Later the cattleman sent over a half of beef to repay the kindness Petersen had shown. Next time Petersen butchered he sent the cattleman over a half of mutton. A bitter relationship became, at least, a cautious friendship.

In about 1900, Petersen married Ida Peralee Simmons Oliver. She was the daughter of Shelby and Nancy Simmons who came to Harney County very early. It was two or three years after the Whitings came, Shelby thinks. The Whitings arrived in 1874.

Ida married Ed Oliver, the man who killed Peter French in 1897. Ed Oliver had taken a homestead in the middle of a field that French claimed. And it was here the family was living at the time of the killing. Ed Oliver was acquitted by the jury as not guilty. He disappeared. It was said that he had left the country, but his family has always believed that he was murdered by friends of Peter French and that his bones lie buried someplace in Harney Valley.

"My Aunt Sadie always said that Ed Oliver never left Harney County alive," Shelby says.

Considering that this was a day and age when people quite frequently took the law into their own hands, the idea that French's loyal buckaroos would not allow the man who had killed their boss to escape without punishment seems valid. And even though a fellow by the name of Lou Willard, who worked for Bill Hanley, reported seeing Oliver at Pendleton, the family was never able to find any trace of him once he disappeared, Shelby states.

The four Oliver children were Ada, Burt, Roy and Leatha. To the marriage of Ida and Peter Petersen, Shelby was the only child born. His mother died when he was small. He hardly remembers her. His father went back to Europe in 1910 and remarried there, bringing his new bride back to Harney County. Three children were born to this marriage: Bob Petersen of Portland, Charlie Petersen of Hines, and Herb Petersen of Burns.

The Simmons home was southwest of Burns on the Sagehen Creek watershed. Sandy Morris owned this property in later years.

After Shelby's mother, Ida, died, a woman by the name of Grandma Winters took care of the Oliver children and himself. He remembers Grandma Winters with a great deal of affection.

She could hitch up a team, or mend a fence, or cook the finest meal in the world, he remembers. He has a picture of her and the children and she looks like the kind of woman anyone would want for a grandmother.

She used to sit in her rocking chair and rock with one of the children riding on her crossed feet and sing, and if everyone was quiet enough her bird "Pedro" would whistle along. When Grand-mother Winters moved into town, she put her bird in a shoebox to travel and it smothered. We had to bury him for her. My, that was the saddest occasion, Shelby remembers.

Grandmother Winters was from Missouri and she smoked a pipe. She used Union Leader Tobacco, which came in an oblong red box.

"We used those boxes for safes," Shelby says, and he has a couple of them yet today filled with the sort of treasures that accumulate in boxes.

Shelby went to school in Burns and in Stockton, California, where he stayed with his Aunt Truckee. She was named after the Truckee River where she was born when her parents were traveling west by wagon train.

In 1910, Shelby and his half-brother Burt Oliver watched Haley's Comet move across the sky. It was about 2:30 in the morning, Shelby recalls. Burt often told Shelby, "I doubt if I'll ever see it again, but maybe you will live to see it again." The comet is predicted to return in 1985. Burt Oliver lies dying in a Portland Hospital at this writing. But Shelby is hale and hearty and he feels maybe he will have the chance to see the comet again.

Shelby recalls that his father saw two depressions, the money panic of 1892 to '96 when all the banks closed their doors, and then the 1930's. Shelby says he's seen one and wonders if he will see another in his lifetime.

Peter Petersen sold out his sheep and horses and moved into Burns in 1918. He later became president of the Harney County National Bank. After World War I he took over the Frank Baker place north of Burns which eventually passed into Shelby's control, and Shelby lived there and engaged in the ranching business with his wife Birdie until his retirement a few years ago.

Although Harney County National Bank was among the most successful in the Northwest; embezzlement of funds by an employee caused the ruin of the business.

Shelby told about a fellow who worked for his dad by the name of John Hoss. Everyone pronounced his name "Horse". When he lived in Anderson Valley the post office was Mule, Oregon. Mail came to him addressed to John Horse, Mule, Oregon.

John Hoss was quite a fighter. He had a long arm and he whipped every Basque he took on. But when the Irish came along he couldn't whip them.

Hoss was courting Mrs. Calkins who run the Oregon Hotel. That was located where the Burns Post Office is now. There was a fellow who liked to tease John Hoss and was always pulling jokes on him, like putting Limburger cheese in his hatband.

Well, one day he told John Hoss, "Say John, Doc Geary told me that you couldn't

make a fit husband for Mrs. Calkins." So John went up to Doctor Geary's and hauled off and knocked him flat. They called the Marshall and in the fracas that followed they had to get someone to hit John over the head and knock him out before they could take him to jail.

Doctor Geary proceeded to sue Hoss for damages. He was working for Peter Petersen at the time and Petersen took him back out to the sheep camp to keep him out of trouble. Hoss bought a pistol from Charlie Haines store in The Narrows, but Petersen found out about it and took it away from him. When the trial came up, Hoss' temper hadn't cooled much and Petersen knew that if he got into town there would be more trouble. So he went to the judge and convinced him that he needed Hoss to stay with the sheep, that lambing conditions were critical, and that he, Petersen, would appear at the trial and represent Hoss. The judge finally agreed to this unorthodox arrangement and Petersen attended the trial as Hoss' representative. A small judgment was made in Geary's favor and Geary told Petersen later, "If you'd have stayed out of it, I would have won the full amount."

Shelby remembers Rube Haines, the Marshall of Burns. He used to spank the kids he caught playing hooky before he took them back to school.

He would walk up and down the board sidewalks with a hammer and drive in the nails that had worked up. He kept an eye open for broken boards where a horse had stepped through and would repair the damage. In the winter he rigged up a snowplow device to plow the snow off the sidewalks.

On Halloween night he would pick up young pranksters and take them to jail. So one Halloween, the kids got a padlock and locked the jail door shut. When Haines arrived with several kids he had rounded up, he couldn't get into the jail and had to let them go while he went to find a hacksaw to get the padlock off.

Another prank the kids liked to pull was to ring the fire bell. The big bell had two ropes to pull it and loops at the bottom so that you could put your feet in and use your body weight to pull the bell. The fire bell was also the curfew bell.

Rube Haines was shot and killed by Joe Cavender, a state driver.

Shelby tells about an Indian named Tabby who was with the Indians who attacked the Smyth's in 1878. He has a picture of Tabby when he was quite old. He used to saw wood around town for people and his woman washed clothes.

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