

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #91 - Side A

Subject: Gladys Denstedt Ausmus

Place:

Date: March 19, 1972

Interviewer: Pauline Braymen

Daughter of early pioneer, wife of Harney County grain producer. Tells of Burns Flour Mill, homestead, drought, rabbit bounty, Hines School, farming lakebed.

Gladys Denstedt Ausmus is the daughter of Fred and Ida Denstedt. Fred Denstedt came to Harney County in 1885. He came to the United States in 1883 from Germany when he was 24 years old. He spent one winter in Chicago, then came to Salem, Oregon, where he spent part of a year, then came to John Day and finally to Harney County where he took up a homestead about six miles east of Burns.

This homestead was located on what is now known as the Jackson Ranch. It is directly south of the Old Experiment Station headquarters (now owned by Dorland Ray) and the stone cellar where the home site was is still in existence. Fred Denstedt built a two-story house where he and his family lived until about 1925, when they took over the Burns Flour Mill north of Burns. His son continued to farm the land for a couple of years until drought conditions became so bad they couldn't farm at all. The severe drought conditions brought hard luck to the Denstedts. In about 1934, both the homestead and the mill were foreclosed by the Federal Land Bank. The Fred Denstedts then moved to Burns.

Gladys' mother, Ida Lampkin, was from Illinois. She had come west to Salem with her older sister's family and when they ran out of money they headed back to Illinois. It

was about 1896 when they came through Harney County and Ida decided to stay here and work. She met Fred Denstedt and they were married in 1897, at the home of "Grandma and Grandpa" McMurphy whose home was in the Sagehen Hill area. (The place is still there ... the Hal McUne place.)

All five of the Denstedt children were born at the homestead. They were Charles, Gladys, Walter, Teddy and Leslie. Teddy died when he was about nine years old. Gladys and Leslie are the remaining family living now. Gladys was born in 1902.

The Denstedt children went to grade school at Rye Grass School on Rye Grass Lane, and to high school in Burns. Some of the Rye Grass school teaches were Alice and Lois Sweek, Mrs. Hurlburt (A. A. Hurlburt's mother) Laura Dawson, a fellow named Stewart and a Mr. Taylor.

Mr. Taylor was a favorite teacher. He liked to read and recite to the children. Their favorite piece was, "When He Set The Old Blue Hen," and they asked him to recite this over and over.

In about 1925, Fred Denstedt and his son Charles took over operation of the Burns Flour Milling Company. The mill was located on the Silvies River just above the present Indian Village. The mill had been operated by a company comprised of Burns Businessmen, and a fellow by the name of Sturtevant showed the Denstedts how to run it. They used all locally grown grain and were able to process all the grain local producers brought in to them.

The flour was electrically bleached. "It was chemically bleached until my dad got a hold of it. Then he changed to electricity bleached because they said chemicals wasn't the best thing to have, so they bought the equipment and made it electrical. They made their own electricity from the water power," Gladys says.

Gladys has one of the flour sacks that was used by the Denstedts. It says on it:

"Burns Roller Mills

Our Best Flour

The Denstedt Flour Milling Co.

Burns, Oregon

Noon Bag Co.

Electrically Bleached

24 1/2 lbs. when packed."

They had 50-pound sacks too.

People used to swim in the millpond and there was a diving board just above the dam. In the winter the pond was a place to ice skate and several youngsters drowned at various times when they broke through the ice while skating.

People in the community used to cut ice at the millpond in the winter and store it in the icehouse, packed in sawdust, for use in the summer.

There was an apple orchard at the mill and some of the trees are still growing there today.

The mill was disposed of about 1934 and later burned down.

Gladys recalls the time the French Hotel and Livery Stable burned up.

The hired man came riding home from town with the exciting news of the fire. The Denstedts could see the flames and smoke from their homestead home east of Burns.

"Oh, it's a great tragedy ... there's lots of lives been lost," the hired man said.

The Denstedts became very concerned.

"Yes, it burned up all those bed bugs," the hired man explained.

Gladys tells that she was 18 or 19 years old before she ever rode in an automobile.

She tells about one trip to town her mother and father made in the buggy. As they came up Main Street, someone started up a wood saw in the neighborhood. The terrible

screeching and buzzing frightened the horses and they took off at a run up main street, lickety split to the top of the hill at the north end of Burns. As they run out into the sagebrush and rocks (the present Library site), the buggy was upset and Mr. and Mrs. Denstedt were thrown out into the rough ground. They were bruised and banged up considerably.

Fred Denstedt was active in community affairs. He took a concerned interest in the development of the county. He served on the school board for many years. One project that particularly interested him was the establishment of a bounty on jackrabbits. Rabbits were so heavily concentrated in the county that they were destroying crops. Gladys remembers that about all her dad could raise at one time was wild rye grass hay because the rabbits ate everything. The county finally put a bounty of 5 cents a pair of ears on rabbits.

Gladys remembers the storekeeper from Waverly (Saddle Butte area near Crane) driving past their house with two freight wagons full of ears, pulled by a team of six horses. He could take the ears on trade for groceries and supplies at 3 or 4 cents a pair and then haul them in to Burns to collect the bounty at a profit.

Gladys said her dad never took advantage of the bounty, to her knowledge. He was just glad to see it there as an incentive to others to get rid of the rabbits. She remembers that he fenced his haystacks with a tight wire fence that the rabbits could not get through. Then he would leave an opening at one end so they could get in. Every night the Denstedt children were sent down to the haystack with the dogs and clubs to kill all the rabbits that were trapped in the hay corral.

She recalls a rabbit drive in the area where J. S. Poteet's corrals are located across from the Poison Creek Grange Hall. 20,000 rabbits were killed there during the drive, she recalls.

Gladys remembers that the Indians used to come every summer and camp across the road from their house. She says she used to play with the Indian children. She doesn't know why they camped there, except perhaps, to hunt along the slough.

She remembers that there was a schoolhouse located north of the airport at one time. Annie George was the teacher.

Gladys was the first teacher at the Hines Grade School. When she began teaching the school was located on Sagehen Hill, about 12 miles from Burns. "You know out there where that big hill comes down to the road and there's a gravel pit on top of it ... Well, the schoolhouse was a quarter further west against the side of the hill there." Some of the children were the Stones, the Baker girls, and Chester and Elmer Baker. There were about eleven children in the school. The next year they moved the schoolhouse building into Hines and Gladys was the only teacher for about two months. Then, with the influx of mill worker's children, two more teachers and two more rooms were added. The other teachers were Ida Barber and a Mrs. Case.

The winter of 1929 saw the completion of the new Hines Grade School and the children were moved in after Christmas to start the year of 1930 in the new building (present building). Gladys taught third and fourth grades until school was out in 1930. She had married J. O. (Ormand) Ausmus at Christmas time 1929.

Gladys remembers that most of the houses in Hines were empty the first year the school was open there. The children, at recess and after school, liked to go around and peek into the empty buildings.

When Gladys and Ormand were first married, he was farming property (his father's homestead) along the Malheur Lake at Lawen. The 1930's saw severe drought conditions in Harney County and the Malheur Lake dried up ... it was the first time white man had seen the lake dry. Farmers living around the edge of the lake farmed the lakebed raising

oats and rye. They found buffalo heads in the lake at this time.

The Ausmus' first lived in a tent house and later a house was moved down to the lake for them to live in. They lived there until May 1937. Ormand became concerned that the baby would get dust pneumonia. They had three children then, Louise about 7, Margaret about 4, and Donna was just a year old. The dust blew so bad on the lake bed that Gladys covered the crib over to keep the dust off the baby. Sometimes it would blow so hard, you could see only a few feet away, she remembers. They moved to the "Jetley Place," near Burns at this time. (Now part of the Henry Ausmus ranch.) They didn't farm much on the lake after that, Gladys says. The water started coming back and they did farm the high knolls for a while. This area is now part of the Malheur Bird Refuge.

The Ausmus Brothers, Ormand and Standley, farmed several areas around Burns and bought property at Lawen called the "Verdo" where they farmed several thousand acres of grain and hay for many years. For more information about farming operations see interview material on Henry Ausmus.

Gladys Ausmus still lives at the Verdo, along with her son-in-law and daughter John and Margaret Trainer. Another daughter's family, Jim and Louise Bamberry also have a ranching operation in the area. Daughter Donna, the Gordon Avery's live at Weiser, and Arlene, Phil Harris', live in Montana.

Gladys has pictures of the Hines School when newly finished, of the sawmill that Herrick started to building at Hines, of the flourmill pond and mill, of the Denstedt Homestead, of field day at Old Experiment Station and many others.

Gladys also tells of going to the forest to cut firewood for the winter. No permit was needed, you just went up and cut what wood you needed and hauled it home. She says the first two or three years they were married, she burned sagebrush. Then they started going after wood.

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