

Bessie Helen Jones Oral History Recording

An audio recording of an oral history of Bessie Helen Jones of Cornelius, Oregon, born in 1896. Most of the interview concerns her early life in Minnesota, North Dakota and Wyoming. The interview took place in 1987 and was possibly conducted at Pacific University's Old College Hall.

Bessie Helen Jones = BJ

Interviewer (possibly Mary Cowan?) = II

[00:00:00]

[BJ]: I was born in Preston, Minnesota, which is 150 miles south of St. Paul-Minneapolis. My father's father was a medical doctor. My father was born 1859, and my mother 1863. Her father was a farmer there in Minnesota. So I was born in 1896.

Last year, my daughter and I were in a store and a boy was sitting at a table there in Fred Meyer. He looked up and said, "How old are you?" and I said, 90. Well then we went out and we were in a beauty shop and a lady was in there, and she says, "How old are you?", and I says, I'm 90. But she says, "What year were you born?" I says, 1896. She says, "1896? 1896! 1896!" She repeated that 1896 three times, getting [higher in the pitch?]. When she knew I was 90, that was OK, but when she asked what year it was, she wasn't [thinking?] to subtract. It kind of floors you, it just surprises you.

[00:01:34]

Well I was born there in Minnesota and I went down to school. My folks moved to North Dakota. You've probably heard of Dickinson. Richardton was a town 25 miles east. My father was a bricklayer. In Richardton ND, the Catholics built a cathedral. My father worked on that two different years, in 1907 and 1909. My folks moved to ND in 1909, but I stayed in MN and went to school that year, stayed with my old grandmother there.

There were six of us girls in the family. My oldest sister earned her way through college. And all of us did teach country school, if we didn't teach in the town school. And you survived. Sometimes when I think about it, I think we were what you call church mouse poor at times, but we never went hungry.

[00:02:47]

When they moved to ND and the folks went on the homestead, in order for me to get a high school education, and the other young boys and girls, you had to go into the towns, like on the Missouri River. I went to Mandan, ND, and worked for my board and room. People did the same across the Missouri River, to go into the towns like on the other side of the Missouri, like Bismarck. And that's the only way that the children got a high school education. You and the boys, you worked for your room and board. I was always treated very nicely. The men, when I worked for my room and board, or when I taught country school, the men never did go to harm their wives. My father never did either. We didn't know anything about any man going and harming their wives, like you hear of so much nowadays. We didn't know anything about that. So I don't know whether things have come out in the open more, but still.

[00:04:21]

I worked for my room and board for three years in high school and then my mother moved to town so my two younger sisters could get to high school. My sister Lois worked her way through college and then she became superintendent, county superintendent of schools in Dunn County, out of Dickinson ND. Like I said, we all did teach school, the six of us girls.

[II]: No brothers?

[BJ]: No brothers. There were two, three other children born, but they didn't live. There was only one boy in the whole bunch of 9, and he didn't live either. So my father had a harem, I guess you'd call it. [Laughter.] Only he didn't call it that.

[00:05:16]

I was brought up in a Presbyterian family and we were taught to read the Bible. In fact, my own grandma, we lived in her house when I was a girl in MN. There was a big old long hall from the front door to the main part of the building. Grandma had a room there inside. I used to go down to her room, and she had a coal burner stove. You put your coal in here, and there was coals all through there. And the coal burned down. So she had gotten me to reading the Bible. It was the Psalms. I was telling my daughter this the other day. I said, when I got to the last Psalm, I didn't say anything to my grandma. I said, I've laughed about it since. I bet she knew that I was done with the Psalms, but I never said anything. When I went back the next day, I told her then, I was [smart?]. I think she probably had me read the story of Ruth. That did my [inaudible].

[00:06:53]

I said my folks moved to ND and I worked for my room and board, three years in Mandan and Bismarck. Then mother and father went to Dickinson and my two sisters Mildred and Ruth. Ruth is living in Spokane. She's the only sister left out of six girls. I'll be 91 this week. My sister, she's six years younger than I am. But I understand that she's not too good. She was in the hospital last year [inaudible] with her husband. He couldn't stand it, he had to do something different [inaudible].

[00:07:45]

[II]: What was your father's name?

[BJ]: James Gage Viall. G-A-G-E. That was my grandma's maiden name back there in Ohio. And I understand that my grandmother was born near the shores of Lake Cleveland. My father was born in Fort Dearborn. Fort Dearborn is what Chicago came out of. That's what I've always understood. Fort Dearborn was part of ... Chicago.

[II]: What was your maiden name, Vale?

[BJ]: V-I-A-L-L. Of course, Viol, is a ... there used to be a lot of teasing. But it was an easy name to say.

[II]: Were you married back there, or?

[00:08:54]

[BJ]: No, I was married in Denver, CO in 1921. I wrote to my husband for 4 years before I ever saw him. It was one of those wartime correspondents. He was over there in France and Germany. But he was in a [inaudible] down there in Texas in a camp when it started. He had written to a sister of mine up there in Montana. They had had a hard [mance?] here, her husband. He had written to them and wanted them to write to him cause he was lonesome. Jim had the letter because the man had moved. She sent the letter onto me and it was one of those deals. [Laughter.] Wrote to him and wrote to him.

[00:09:53]

[II]: What grades did you teach?

[BJ]: I taught country school.

[II]: All 8 grades?

[BJ]. Yeah.

[II]: How many students?

[BJ]: At one time? Gee, I never thought about that. Probably 12 or 15. I never thought about that. How many students was in the different school. There in ND, that first school, there was German-speaking students, but they had learned enough English that they could get by.

[00:10:34]

And then out of my, there at the homestead, where my father and mother were, in one section of that, one corner of that section of that -- you were allowed to prove up on 160 acres -- there was a family from Germany. I think they were German-Russians. And then there was a Russian family on the other side of the section. An elderly man and woman. If they had any kids, they never showed up. They had come from Russia, and I don't know how they ever got over to America. But we had tried to talk to them. Course, we didn't try to learn Russian, and they didn't ... He learned to speak some English but I don't think she ever did. My sister Mildred would go over there sometime. They made wonderful bread. One time my sister Mildred, who was 3 years younger than I, she came back home and told my mother, she said, this lady took the bread out of the oven, so to make it look nice, she took her saliva and spread that on top of the bread. So mother never bought any more bread! [Laughter]

[00:12:09]

There was some Germans in town. They wouldn't do that. But they made wonderful bread. I mean, it was really wonderful bread. They'd put those big loaves up there like this, and take the butcher knife, like this, [inaudible], want to cut their [?] off, or cut their chest, but they never did. I'm glad I never have to live those days over again.

[II]: You were married in Colorado. How did you get from ND to CO?

[BJ]: Well, in 1920, Yellowstone National Park, they had put out the word, and it had been going on I don't know how many years, that if teachers wanted to get a job to work at the camps, they can get their room and board and thirty-some dollars, or something like that a month. So I wrote, and they accepted me, and I rode the train there to Livingston MT, and then you took the short cut. The train went down to Yellowstone Park at the north. I worked at Mammoth Hot Springs. I worked at what they called the camps. They had a big dining room there. But there were small

cabins all around. But they still had a big hotel at the big camps, and if you felt rich enough, or wanted to stay in those big hotels, why if you could afford it, a lot of people did. But they drove their cars in and could park their car at the camp and eat at the dining room.

[00:14:13]

So I applied for a position and I washed dishes all that summer. [Laughter]

[II]: In one of the big dining rooms?

[BJ]: Yeah. It was a big community dining room. They fed you in the kitchen, different. When I left there, when the summer was over, I took the train and went to Portland and then down to Medford where my sister Callie had moved. She and her husband. But he had been killed. I said, I don't ever want to see any more lamb, or any sheep. All I'd had all that summer [to eat] was sheep, sheep, sheep. [Laughter.]

[00:15:01]

But then, what you say you never do, why you... I lived in Wyoming, and I lived up there on a homestead in the sheep country where we were 40 miles from the railroad. This mountain was huge across. They said there was 1 million sheep on it. My husband had a homestead, had filed on a homestead. A merchant there in town, there in Casper, wanted him to do that because this 120 or 160 acres, on the North Fork of the Powder River, was at the head of that. That was very valuable. That they had to water the sheep once a day. At least once every 24 hours, so that's why that was valuable.

[00:16:02]

So my daughter Janet, who was killed on Mount Hood, was six months old. And Juanita is living here. And my son lives in North Hollywood. So I lived up on that homestead that summer with those three babies. My husband would bring up groceries every week. There was a grocery store a mile below [me?], that was built for the sheep tenders, for the shepherds, across the mountain. They would go there and get the supplies. The salt and other supplies for the shepherds and take them back to their ... what do you call them, they had their homes on the trucks and everything. That was what happened in those days. You survived. You wondered how you did it, but you did.

[00:17:26]

There was a spring not very far from the cabin door. So my husband and another man had cut a barrel in two, and so protected the spring, and put a lid over it. But then a ditch was dug, so it would run right down to the river, not too far away. You just did it, that was all.

[II] How long were you on the ranch?

[BJ]: I was up there like from the first part of July, like the fourth, until Labor Day. They had to start, they started running the sheep up onto the mountain, the sheepmen did, the ranchers, like from Declaration Day to get their flocks up on the mountain. But then they started ahead of Labor Day to get them off. But sometimes there was a killing snowstorm, and they lost their flocks of sheep, so they figured on having them down off that mountain right after Labor Day.

[00:18:49]

I had a, I don't know whether any of you know about it, a kerosene stove, that was a canister like about that big around, and stood about that high, and you'd put the kerosene down in the bottom. So that's what I had for heat. Then a friend of ours, they had a gasoline little stove. They gave me to use it. I would cook what I needed to cook on that gasoline grill. And I had a revolver. I'd buy [inaudible?] all around. In those days, you could, they bought oranges in wooden boxes, so my husband would put them up along the wall, above the cot that I slept it. He couldn't reach it, the little boy couldn't, so I kept the revolver hidden up there. But the sheep men never bothered me. Like I said, there was the sheep store a mile a bit [over?], for the sheep tenders to get all the supplies for the sheep men. And then there was a blacksmith. He lived out there in a truck or, by the store. So he could work on the men's horses when they had to have them worked on.

[00:20:42]

[II]: How many years did you do this?

[BJ]: I did ... we went up there one summer. And he built the cabin. It was the next summer that I lived there. My husband wrote to the government. You know, well of course you stretch the truth, but he really told the truth too. He told the truth about having to live up there such a short time, and that I was pregnant, and so forth, which I was, and so they allowed him to get by with signing up on the homestead. After we were transferred down to Cheyenne WY, the merchant that he had done that for went broke, there in Casper. So anyway we sold that piece of land there after we moved off to Cheyenne WY. The government [inaudible]. And then my husband was transferred to Denver, CO, and other places. But I when I've told people, and I told this to a woman in a beauty shop one time years back, she was pretty [inaudible]. That Bessie Jones sure tells a lot of lies! [Laughter]

Once in a while, the government would come by, the pay masters. There weren't so many. So we were transferred back to Denver, CO. Then I told this story to somebody there in Cheyenne, in the beauty shop. They would tell, oh [inaudible, coughing] I would sure tell some big lies [coughing] ... for Grand Coulee Dam [coughing]. I'm sorry, for 1 million dollars, [coughing].

[00:23:40]

He would work in the office where every month, they'd pay the soldiers that were in World War I. He wrote their pension checks. But she thought I was lying.

[II]: Well I see your throat's started to bother you, so we'll just stop here.

[BJ] I think I've told enough anyway.

[II]: Now you came to Cornelius in 1951?

[BJ] Yeah.

[II]: You came, and you and your husband ran the [Red Robin?].

[BJ]: That's right. We ran it from 1965. [Inaudible.] They call it [inaudible] now. [Coughing.] Black sheep [inaudible]. They like to have some black sheep in the flock. But how many they added of black, what was it, 100, or...

[II] I think it's about at least ... 1 to 100?

[BJ]: Yeah, I couldn't remember that. I was wondering. I was talking to my daughter here, a while back. I wasn't sure anymore.

[II]: Was that all you had to do, was count the black ones [inaudible]?

[00:25:16]

[BJ] Yeah, that's right.

[Audience talking, some of it inaudible, about counting black sheep and black goats follows.]

[00:26:14]

[BJ]: My husband was transferred to Helena, MT. I worked at his office at [inaudible]. He wasn't gonna eat any sheep or any lamb. No sir, he wasn't. He'd had a lot in Denver. Well I bought a leg of lamb. And [he? A neighbor?] and his wife - they loved us, and they had a little girl. A baby girl. So they liked to eat at our house a lot. We had leg of lamb there, one Sunday. I'd fixed it up real good and everything. He said there and ate like a pig. His wife never gave it away. My girls didn't either. [Laughter]

[00:27:09]

[Audience discussion, some of it inaudible, about counting sheep continues.]