

JERRY AND NELLIE FIALA

Tape 1, Side 1

August 8, 1996

M.O'R.: This is Michael O'Rourke for the Washington County Historical Society. It's August 8, 1996, and we're beginning an interview this morning with Jerry Fiala, and we've got Nellie Fiala sitting in as well. The interview is taking place in the Falias' home on Johnson Road.

So you were born on the farm?

J.F.: Yeah, yeah. My folks bought this property in 1906, parts of two donation land grants, the Crawford claim on the north and the Athey claim on the south.

M.O'R.: So your folks bought -?

J.F.: And the house, the original house was on the Crawford claim. We now live on the Athey claim.

M.O'R.: And when your folks bought the property, they paid - who owned it before, then?

J.F.: When the deal was made, they paid \$2600 in gold coin, and there was no house within a quarter of a mile of here. The closest one was up on the hill above us.

M.O'R.: So your folks then lived in the house, the original house?

J.F.: Yes. I lived there until I was, we were married, and I was past 30.

M.O'R.: And how many acres do you have here?

J.F.: Fifty-seven acres.

M.O'R.: And do you still have all of the original property?

J.F.: No, when my folks passed away, it was divided into three parcels. My brother is gone; his wife still has the property; she has the center section. And my sister is gone; she

had the west end of the property. And now my nephew and I own that in joint fifty-fifty.

M.O'R.: And I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your folks, your parents?

J.F.: My parents were both born in Europe.

M.O'R.: Where in Europe?

J.F.: What is now Czechoslovakia. It was then called Bohemia. And my father came over when he was 16, and my mother - in Europe they never knew one another. They got acquainted here in Portland.

M.O'R.: But they were both from Bohemia?

J.F.: Yes. And my father settled in the southern part of the country first, and when Oklahoma Territory was opened for settlement, for homesteads, they were in the land rush, but they didn't get the land they wanted. So a group of them from there came by horse and wagon to Oregon. That was in '88, and my father settled in Portland. His brother went up to Spokane and from there over into Idaho.

M.O'R.: And what did your father do in Portland when he first came?

J.F.: My father was an ironworker. He made and installed on the Customs House in Portland all the grating on the Customs House. He worked for what was then Pacific Iron & Bridge.

M.O'R.: And then he worked there for several years, it sounds like, before he bought this place?

J.F.: Many years, for a good many years until he came out to the farm here.

M.O'R.: And then did he start farming at that point?

J.F.: Yes. This was mostly all stump land. The land here was all cut over by the Chinese, and they made charcoal here for the smelter in Oswego when it was first started.

I knew several of the old men then that hauled charcoal from here and the surrounding country to the smelter in Oswego with ox teams.

M.O'R.: So you saw that? Do you remember that from your own life then?

J.F.: Well, I knew the men that hauled the charcoal.

M.O'R.: Now, when your father bought this land, did he immediately start to farm it or -?

J.F.: Yes, they started. He a team, everything was done with horses in those days.

M.O'R.: So all the timber that was on the land -?

J.F.: There was no timber here. It was all cut off.

M.O'R.: All cut off.

J.F.: The timber that is here now grew up since.

M.O'R.: I wonder if you could tell me a little bit more about your father. What kind of person was he?

J.F.: Well, he was a very stern man. I used to help him blacksmith, and he always told me, he says, "When the sparks fly, keep your eyes on your work. It won't hurt you, they'll bounce right off." I helped him set wagon tires on the wheel. We would cut the rim of the wagon wheel and take a chunk out and open-fire weld it, and then reshape it to be round. Then we would build a fire and heat the rim and put it onto the wheel.

M.O'R.: To expand it a little bit, huh?

J.F.: To expand it. He had very large calipers that he would check to see that the rim was big enough to go on the wheel.

M.O'R.: So he continued to do ironwork here on the farm?

J.F.: Oh yes, we had regular blacksmith shop.

M.O'R.: So did he do it for others beside -?

J.F.: Yes, he sharpened ploughshares and did all kinds of ironwork, sharpened grub hoes. That was one of the main things.

And the only trouble he ever had was to get enough old rasps to weld onto the grubbing hoes when they wore down.

M.O'R.: Old rasps, you say?

J.F.: Yes, wood rasps, or rasps that they used to work a horse's feet over. When they wore out, why, he would take those and cut them and he'd weld them onto the grubbing hoe.

M.O'R.: What exactly is a wood rasp?

J.F.: Well, it's a very high-test piece of steel that they use to rasp the horse's hooves off.

M.O'R.: Oh, I see. Oh yeah, a file, sure.

J.F.: A very very coarse file.

M.O'R.: And that would be used on the horse's hooves, and he put them on the grub hoe as well? Was it still a rasp when he used it on the grub hoe?

J.F.: Well, no, no. It was ...

M.O'R.: He just wanted the metal from it?

J.F.: It was welded onto the old grub hoe, so that there was more metal there, and they could be used yet. Otherwise, the grub hoe would be filed away and ground away until there wasn't anything there.

M.O'R.: So he made a little extra income by doing the blacksmith business here?

J.F.: The income wasn't very much. To sharpen a ploughshare, he charged 25 cents, and a grubbing hoe with new cutting parts put on it was 50 cents, and to set a wagon tire was a dollar.

M.O'R.: Of course, back in those days, a dollar was worth a little bit more than it is today.

J.F.: Oh yes.

M.O'R.: So you used to help him with that?

J.F.: Yes, yes, I was always there helping.

M.O'R.: So did you continue to work metal when you were farming as well?

J.F.: Well, then I went and I served my time as a machinist.

M.O'R.: Well, I'll ask you more about that, but first of all, let me ask you about maybe your earliest memories here on the farm. What are some of your earliest things that you remember about living here and about life on the farm?

J.F.: Well, it's hard to say. When I was young, there were no people hardly around, just the family. I had one brother and one sister, and things were much different than they are now.

M.O'R.: In what way? Just less people?

J.F.: Less people. The water was pumped with a pitcher pump. My family was one of the first to have water in the kitchen, running water, where you could - father took and put iron pipe into a spring down below the house, and hooked it up to the pump so that my mother had water at her liking, instead of going and pumping it somewhere.

M.O'R.: So she could pump it in the kitchen?

J.F.: Pump it right in the sink.

M.O'R.: And do you remember when that change occurred?

J.F.: No, that was before I can remember too much. But I know the pump was there. I think the pump is around somewhere still; I still have the pump, and I have most of the blacksmith tools. I have the forge, I have the anvil, and I have some of the hammers, and smith tools, cut-offs and so forth.

M.O'R.: I wonder if you could - I asked you what your father was like, and you said he was stern.

J.F.: Very stern man. He was about 5 foot 10 and weighed 240 pounds.

M.O'R.: And was he politically involved at all?

J.F.: No, he wasn't much in politics. He took out his first citizenship paper in Oklahoma Territory. I still have those, and in 1914 in Oregon City, that was when the old courthouse was still there, he took out a second paper. I have those.

M.O'R.: So he became a citizen in 1914, or he was a citizen before from the Oklahoma time? He then became a U.S. citizen in 1914?

J.F.: Yes, 1914.

M.O'R.: Okay. Well, I wonder if you could tell me a little bit about your mother, then. What was she like?

J.F.: She was a professional cook.

M.O'R.: A professional cook, huh? You mean, she cooked outside the house?

J.F.: Well, not after they moved here, but in Portland she cooked for a family, a lawyer, I forget his name, and in Chicago before she came west, she worked as a professional cook.

M.O'R.: And what kind of crops did you father grow here on the farm?

J.F.: Well, the mainstay was a small dairy where he could grow all the crop to feed, so you didn't have to buy, and at one time we had 30 cows, a team of horses, and we raised all the feed on the property. But they sold cream to - in Oregon City it's still in existence.

M.O'R.: The creamery in Oregon City?

J.F.: Yeah, Larson's Creamery.

M.O'R.: Oh yeah, I've heard of Larson's, I think.

J.F.: Yes, Larson's Creamery.

M.O'R.: I want to backtrack for a minute. You said your mother was a professional cook. What else would you say about here? How would you describe her personality?

J.F.: Well, she was had a stern disposition also. And she was a small woman. At one time, she said she only weighed a hundred pounds.

M.O'R.: And you had one brother and one sister?

J.F.: Yes.

M.O'R.: And are you the eldest or the youngest?

J.F.: I am the youngest.

M.O'R.: Okay. And when were you born?

J.F.: July 28, 1909.

M.O'R.: Okay, and your sister and brother were how much older than you, then?

J.F.: Well, my brother was four years older, and my sister was five years older.

M.O'R.: And what were their names?

J.F.: Lillian and Arthur.

M.O'R.: And of course, the river, the Tualatin River, runs right by your farm.

J.F.: Yes.

M.O'R.: I wonder if you remember the river then?

J.F.: Many floods.

M.O'R.: A lot of floods, huh?

J.F.: Yes, and in 1924 my father cleared up land along the river and planted 400 peach trees, and in the flood of 1936 and 1937, when the earthen dam at Gaston broke, the tops of the trees were covered with floodwater, and they lost the whole orchard.

M.O'R.: That must have been a real blow.

J.F.: And this year, the water was just as high, if not higher, but in other years, there were many floods that weren't that high, and when they built the Scroggins Dam, they said that the Tualatin River would never flood again.

M.O'R.: That turned out not to be completely accurate, right? Not totally accurate, that prediction. Did you swim at all in the Tualatin in those early days, or use the river?

J.F.: I always swam. My father taught me to swim when I was young, and we always had a boat on the river. When I was very young, my grandfather lived with us - that was my mother's father - and I used to do a lot of fishing. And that was a very good bass stream, and in the fall of the year at the dam down the river from us, I have seen salmon jump continuously up over the dam during the peak of the running. Those were silvers, and in the creek that runs past the house down below here, we used to catch cutthroat trout with the sea lice still on them.

M.O'R.: Did you catch salmon, then, also in the river?

J.F.: No, we used to catch steelhead, steelhead up in this creek. The creek is named Wilson Creek after the donation land claim it runs through.

M.O'R.: What was the water like in the Tualatin in those days?

J.F.: Well, the water was just as clear as it could be.

M.O'R.: Really? So it wasn't a muddy stream like we think of today?

J.F.: No, it wasn't muddy. And you could catch trout any time of the year. It was still cool then, the water stayed cool in it. In fact, it was almost too cold to swim in at times.

M.O'R.: Now you mentioned that flood in 1936. I meant to ask you a little bit more about that. It destroyed the orchard, but you said the dam broke up at Gaston?

J.F.: There was an earthen dam.

M.O'R.: On the Tualatin?

J.F.: On the Tualatin, and that broke loose. My father and I stood and watched the water rise after that dam was broken. We

heard on the radio that the dam up there, earthen dam had broken, and we stood and watched the water come in waves down the river, one bank behind the other one, and he told me, he said that that's just the way in Nebraska when there was a big thunderstorm and lightning, and the water in the ...

M.O'R.: In the Platte River, you said?

J.F.: It's just the way the water came down the Platte River, and it kept rising higher and higher here until the water had leveled off.

M.O'R.: And how long did it stay flooded?

J.F.: Almost a week, and the bottomlands along the river, we had cow pastures there, and they were divided with fences, and friends of ours came with a boat and outboard motor, and they went right over the fences with a boat. The water was that high up, well, 500 feet from the river.

M.O'R.: Besides fishing and swimming, what other kinds of things would you do to have fun when you were a kid?

J.F.: That's about the only thing. In later years, I got a bicycle, one of the old ones with wood wheels and the tires glued on, and always the tires would last. There wasn't much money to buy things in those days. But we managed to get along, even take and had some glue and old overalls and would wrap around the tires when they would wear down to almost be ready to blow out, and use that for the body of the tire.

M.O'R.: So you just add an extra layer on with the overalls. And you mentioned that you helped your father with the blacksmithing.

J.F.: Yes.

M.O'R.: What other chores did you have to do on the farm?

J.F.: Well, we always had at least a dozen cows to milk. In the summertime, there was hay and grain to put up. We had

neighbors, and all the neighbors used to help one another, and we had a neighbor up the road by the name of Borland, one of the pioneer families. He came here, the Borland family came here in '89, and ...

M.O'R.: Borland Road must be named for them; is that right?

J.F.: Named for the son.

M.O'R.: For the son, okay.

J.F.: And I was fortunate enough, the elderly gentleman, Christopher Columbus Borland, taught me how to make a grain stack, a stack of grain after the miner was done with the bundles, to make it out of bundles, a round stack, small at the bottom and tapered out and then tapered in. There are pictures around of that.

M.O'R.: Hold on one second.

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

JERRY AND NELLIE FIALA

Tape 1, Side 2

August 8, 1996

M.O'R.: So you learned how to make a grain stack from Mr. Borland.

J.F.: Yes.

M.O'R.: And you said that people all helped each other bring in the harvest?

J.F.: During the harvest. If there was hay to bale, we used to bale with horse balers.

M.O'R.: What is baling hay with the horse baler like?

J.F.: Well, very tricky. The horses went around in a circle, and the baler was operated by a pitman, I guess you would call it, that pulled and compressed the hay, and every time they had to take and put a big forkful down in the chute, so that the plunger would bale it, push it into a bale the right size. It's hard to explain.

M.O'R.: What about school? You must have gone to a school?

J.F.: There was a school right up on the hill here above us on Stafford Road, Azalea School District No. 37, one of the older school districts in the state.

M.O'R.: What was the school like?

J.F.: Well, the first one I went to was a long narrow little building, and that was during my first year, and the second year in the summer, they had built a new one which was very modern at that time. It even had a basement. One teacher.

M.O'R.: One teacher for several classes?

J.F.: For eight grades.

M.O'R.: For all eight grades. So what was that like?

J.F.: Oh, all eight grades she taught.

M.O'R.: In one room?

J.F.: In one room with a big stove in one corner.

M.O'R.: And would you be divided up into different groups?

J.F.: Well, different rows of seats, and when the teacher was standing [in front of] the class, to the left was first grade and then it went on down the line until the eighth grade.

M.O'R.: Did you like school?

J.F.: Well, yes, I learned a lot. Math was one of my favorite classes. I loved history, but there was so much confusion with so many people. At one time there was 36 students in that school. Things were beginning to build up.

M.O'R.: Too many students for the teacher to keep track of, or -?

J.F.: Well, when I was in the second grade with a young lady by the name of Genevieve Ivon, she taught, and later she married the big hardware store owner in Oregon City, Fredericks, and I kept up with her, and I still - I don't know now if she's still alive, but I doubt it.

M.O'R.: But she was one of the teachers that you remember? What was high school like then?

J.F.: Well, I had a pretty tough time.

M.O'R.: Where did you go to high school?

J.F.: West Linn Union. That was the first year.

My sister and brother went to it when it first opened, and I went four years, four years later because it was practically a new school yet.

M.O'R.: Why do you say it was a tough time for you in high school? You said it was a tough time?

J.F.: Well, I wasn't far enough advanced to really know what was going on. I was what you call slow learner or something.

M.O'R.: So you just weren't fully prepared for high school then?

J.F.: Because I didn't do so well in English and - well, math was all right. I was sometimes confused with the way I acted, I guess. In other words, I was growing up, but my mind wasn't growing with me.

M.O'R.: So you got into trouble in high school?

J.F.: No trouble physically, it was just my mind.

M.O'R.: And it was a much bigger school, I assume.

J.F.: Oh, yeah. I wasn't used to all of that. Nowadays, they consolidated all those schools, those little schools, and they understand what it is to be with a crowd, where there's more people.

M.O'R.: People have that experience now in grade school.

J.F.: Yes.

M.O'R.: Right. Now, when you lived out here on the farm, did you get into town much?

J.F.: Very seldom.

M.O'R.: And when you needed to make a trip into town, would you go to Portland, or where would you go?

J.F.: Well, mostly it was just to Oswego.

M.O'R.: To Oswego, okay.

J.F.: What they call Lake Oswego now.

M.O'R.: And what was Oswego like in those days?

J.F.: Well, when I was young, the population was 6- to 800 people.

M.O'R.: And what kind of people lived there?

J.F.: Well, the only industry they had there was a pipe foundry. They made cast iron pipe. That was owned by Oregon Iron & Steel Company, and the smelter was gone, and they had built a newer smelter, but they abandoned that, and they had this pipe foundry, and the cement plant was starting then. There was

employment there. They hauled lime rock from up at Dallas by freight.

And the main attraction there was the red electric train that ran through from Portland. That went as far south as McMinnville.

M.O'R.: Did you ride that train?

J.F.: I rode the train to Portland several times.

M.O'R.: In those days, was Oswego like it is today, a place for rich people to live on the lake?

J.F.: No, no, no. It was very poor people there. In fact, I had a friend there by the name of Minnie Blanken, they were old-timers, and he said that if they owe you money, they won't confront you on the street. That was very tough times, and there was a family had the Ford agency on Main Street. They had a garage, a gas pump out front, and ...

M.O'R.: This was Minnie Blanken?

J.F.: He used to be the banker. There was no bank in town, and he used to - people used to go to him and cash checks, and he would charge them for the right to have - he always had money.

M.O'R.: And this was Mr. Blanken?

J.F.: Ditzen.

M.O'R.: Ditzen was his name?

J.F.: Man by the name of Ditzen had the Ford agency and the gas pump, and I knew the son well. He used to come out here.

M.O'R.: Now, when you made trips into Oswego, what kinds of supplies would you buy there, or get there?

J.F.: Well, there were two grocery stores. One was Bickner and Sons, and the other one was Rosentrader. They were half a block apart. The bank that had been there burned down, and they never replaced it, and then in later years, friends of my folks came from Skylar, Nebraska and started a bank, what they call the Oswego State Bank.

M.O'R.: And what were these stores like in Oswego?

J.F.: One is still standing, one of the buildings. Bickner's is still standing there, two-story, great big high ceilings, and they had ladders that run along, had stuff up on the shelves, and they'd have to walk up a ladder and get the things out, and it was a general store. They had thread and yard goods, groceries ...

M.O'R.: Hardware, too?

J.F.: And a little bit of feed for the cattle.

M.O'R.: So a little bit of everything, huh?

J.F.: Little bit of everything. It was a general store.

M.O'R.: And how would you get to Oswego from here?

J.F.: The only way was either with horse and wagon or horse and buggy.

M.O'R.: When you would make the trip into Portland on the ...

J.F.: The red electric.

M.O'R.: ... the red electric railroad, that just ran on the tracks along the river then?

J.F.: Yes.

M.O'R.: Was that something you enjoyed doing, riding the train to Portland?

J.F.: No, it half scared me to death sometimes.

M.O'R.: Why is that?

J.F.: Oh, going over the trestles over the river.

M.O'R.: Oh, yeah. Were they high trestles or -?

J.F.: Yeah, very high, around what they called Elk Rock Hill. I think the railroad still runs over that same trestle.

M.O'R.: And why would you go to Portland.

J.F.: Oh, I went with my folks. My mother used to go shopping. What she always used to call the January clearance sales.

So many memories.

M.O'R.: Once you got to Portland, what, you would go to the stores with your mother?

J.F.: Well, I was half scared to death. I was afraid I would get lost.

M.O'R.: Yeah? It seemed like a pretty big place probably?

J.F.: Yes. Very, very big place.

M.O'R.: I wonder if you can tell me how your family made it through the Depression. Was that a bad time for them like it was for some?

J.F.: During the Depression, they were very fortunate. They had no debts. Everything was on a cash basis. They had a little money in the bank, and my father said when butterfat got down to 16 cents a pound and eggs 12 cents a dozen, that if the butterfat prices went down any further, he would give all the cows away. That was a pretty broad statement, but that was the bottom price, and in later years during the Depression, I sold the number one potatoes for 50 cents a hundred pounds.

M.O'R.: So prices were pretty low.

J.F.: And we used to raise a lot of pigs, pork, and 180 pound, 150 to 180 pound dressed pig brought around \$15.

M.O'R.: It's pretty unbelievable these days.

J.F.: It's unbelievable, but I saw it, and we used to sell him around to different people to put up, and we got a little more money out of that. But to the butcher shop, we used to sell to one big market down in Portland, Kessel and Fry. They always did pay top price.

Things weren't very easy.

M.O'R.: Did you have to bring the produce into Portland then to sell it?

J.F.: Yes, and then in later years, over on the east side of Portland on East Taylor, there was a early market, what they called

a vegetable market. I used to haul cabbage in there. I used to grow a little cabbage.

M.O'R.: And you'd sell it to that market, then?

J.F.: Yeah, you'd have it in your truck, and if grocery stores wanted to buy it, why, they would pick up a crate and pay you.

M.O'R.: So did you sell directly to people, too, or just to grocery stores?

J.F.: Well, anybody that had the money.

M.O'R.: Okay. So your family ...

J.F.: Managed to get along.

M.O'R.: They managed to get through the Depression okay, and it sounds like maybe most of the food that you ate came from the farm right here. Is that right?

J.F.: That's right.

M.O'R.: Would you barter with other farmers?

J.F.: No, no. There was no barter. I was real energetic, and I used to go out and cut cord wood, and saw it, split it, and pile it for a dollar a cord.

M.O'R.: Again, pretty unbelievable.

J.F.: One winter, I cut 60 cord of wood.

M.O'R.: Where would you get the wood?

J.F.: Well, a land owner by the name of Patella had timber right next to us here, the farm was all timber, and I would cut wood for him.

M.O'R.: Now, once you finished high school, did you go on to college at all?

J.F.: No, I went to work for American Can in later years.

M.O'R.: Back to the Tualatin just for a minute. You would boat and fish here on the Tualatin?

J.F.: Oh, yes.

M.O'R.: And did you go to other parts of the river, too? Like maybe up to Roamer's Rest or any of these places?

J.F.: No, I never went that far by boat. The farthest I ever went was to Tualatin. There was rapids there, and in the summer-time it was hard to get over them. That has been all taken out, all those rapids. I don't know, 20 years ago, maybe 15 years ago, they deepened that right at the city of Tualatin for flood control. The Tualatin was never supposed to flood again.

M.O'R.: So after the Depression, of course, came the war. Did you have to go to war in World War II?

J.F.: No. My number was 113 in Clackamas County. I had an examination and I didn't pass, and then later I was working for Monarch Forge and Machine Works in North Portland, Northwest Portland, and Mr. Hirschbille, the owner, kept me deferred.

M.O'R.: Oh yeah. Now, your father, once he started farming here, did he work outside of the home?

J.F.: No, he didn't. He didn't go away from the home to work, unless it was a county road job somewhere and they would fill in with a team of horses to haul the dirt to make fills and so forth.

M.O'R.: And then when you went to work for American Can were you still living here on the farm?

J.F.: Yes, and I was still living here when I was working for Monarch.

M.O'R.: So you never left; you've always been here on the farm?

J.F.: Yes. I always managed to get along.

M.O'R.: Well, you say that you didn't pass the test for the military? Why was that?

J.F.: I don't know. They didn't tell you anything.

M.O'R.: Oh really? Were there others around here, some of your friends maybe, that did have to go to serve?

J.F.: Now, there was one by the name of Kenneth Baker. He was in the Navy already. He went to college and he was a electrical engineer, and he chose the Navy. But one friend was in the Army, just passed away a while back, and lots of those that I went to high school with were in the service.

M.O'R.: Hold on for one second, and I'm going to change tapes.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]