Oral History Number: 120-004c
Interviewee: Fern Severns and Sadie Summers
Interviewer: May Vallance
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May Vallance: Good afternoon. I am awfully happy to have you two girls with us today, and I know that you both went to the same school. I have Fern Severns and Sadie Summers. I am sure they’re going to tell us some very interesting things. Fern, do you want to start out first and tell us about your—

Fern Severns: Well, I don’t remember what year I started to school [Como School] there, but I went through the 8th grade in that school. I think we had probably eight or ten different teachers. One year we had four or five different teachers.

MV: Why did you have so many teachers?

FS: Well, can you tell them why?

Sadie Summers: Yes.

FS: Why?

SS: They were all local girls, maybe one or two that weren’t, but they were practically all local girls, and I don’t think they ever went through more than the 8th grade. I don’t think they went through high school.

FS: Cora Gilmore (?) was one, Hazel Nickelson (?) was one, and Eunice Spencer (?), she an outside.

SS: Yes, she was an outside (Talking over each other) [unintelligible].

FS: She was a Normal graduate [Montana State Normal School in Dillon, Montana].

SS: Marlock (?).

FS: And Marlock was a graduate.

SS: Yes. And another one was that red-headed one.

FS: Oh, Duffy (?)

SS: Yeah, was that her first name?
FS: Duffield (?).

SS: Duffield. She was an outsider.

MV: Why did they leave?

FS: [laughs]

SS: We had kids going school there that were grown men, and they were mean.

FS: They caused trouble.

SS: They didn’t want to be disciplined or anything and they should have been kicked out of school and then high school.

FS: Yes, that’s right.

SS: They were that old.

FS: One teacher had trouble with—

SS: Oh, don’t say it.

FS: [laughs] Lynn Kyle (?) was going—

SS: I wouldn’t names, I don’t think. Because, you know—

MV: Oh, it’ll be fine.

SS: Well, if they're still living it might be...you know.

FS: He isn’t.

SS: Isn’t he?

FS: No. He’s been dead years. He was going to set fire to that tree, that big pine tree, outside the schoolhouse. Jenny Burby (?) was the teacher. She was later Genevieve [unintelligible].

SS: Platt (?).

FS: Virginia...Eugenia.
SS: Virginia Platt (?).

FS: She married Arthur Platt (?) eventually. She was the teacher, and she went out and she scared the very daylights out of Lynn. [laughs]

MV: How did she do that?

FS: She was tall, she was French, she had black eyes—snappy like that—and she just said, “You let that alone.” And he just wilted. He already had set fire to it.

MV: How many—

FS: She made him put it out.

MV: How many youngsters were usually in school about?

FS: Oh gosh. [laughs] All the grades up through the 8th grade.

SS: Of course, the best thing to say, how many was in that little county. You know, I mean you go from down Logan’s (?). You take Logan’s, it the farthest down.

FS: Platt’s first and then Logan’s and then Harlem’s (?) and then Taber’s (?)

SS: Logan’s had 12 children. Logan’s had 12.

FS: Yes. Then Harlem’s only had one. Oh no, Harlem’s didn’t have any.

SS: No.

FS: Then Taber’s, they had two. Shaver’s (?), two. Cook’s, how many...Did Kate go to school there? Yes. Three.

SS: I suppose they all went to school there. I don’t know.

FS: Yes, three from Cook’s. Hiram was in college. It was Kate and George and Marcus all went to school there. The Shaver’s, there was Tish and Fred. Then the next place was my home—two with my sister and me. Then the next place was Kyle’s (?). How many were there from Kyle’s?

SS: All I remember is Ned.

FS: Roy?

SS: Ned’s the only one I remember.
FS: And Ned. Roy went to school there, and Ned. Then—
SS: Then our place.
FS: Then your place.
SS: We had...Well, I guess they were all...No, not [unintelligible] didn’t.
FS: Bertha?
SS: Irene and, I guess, Bertha went to school there. That’s the only place [unintelligible]...Oh, no...I guess she did.
FS: Yes, she did because Kate—
SS: She must have. She was born over around Bannack or some place. She and down to Alice were born [unintelligible] some place. They were born in Dillon around in that part of the country. From Alice on up.
MV: When did your folks come to the valley up there?
SS: Oh, gosh, I can't remember.
MV: About?
SS: I don't even know that.
MV: Where did they come from?
SS: Around Dillon, [unintelligible].
MV: Were they raised there?
SS: No, my father was from Springfield, Illinois. My mother was from Canada.
MV: How interesting.
SS: She was born in Montreal.
MV: I see. Your father came from Bannack and just farmed there?
SS: Yes. I think they took those farms up. I don’t remember, but I just kind of think they did.
FS: I think they homesteaded.

SS: Homesteaded I believe.

FS: I think they did.

SS: Don’t you? Because he took one up for grandmother, too, his mother.

FS: Yes.

MV: Their names were?

SS: McKinney (?)

MV: McKinney. What about your folks, Fern?

FS: Well, my mother was born in Michigan—Kalamazoo, Michigan. I don’t know what year they came to Montana, but they settled in Boulder. My father was from Tennessee, and I don't know what year he came. I think it's in that history that you have in the—

MV: Yes.

FS: Down there in the bank. They settled in Boulder in...I do not know what year they came, although I should know because I was just two years old when they came and I was born 1893. I think I was just two when they came to the Bitterroot.

MV: Yes, well that must be ’95.

FS: I can remember that they came by wagon train to the Bitterroot from Boulder. We settled...We stayed with the Cooks (?) for a while. Mr. Cook and my mother were sister and brother. Then my father was working in the woods for Topman (?). Mr. Topman was a big man here, remember?

MV: Yes.

FS: He was running a mill up there.

MV: He was running the meal for Daly [Marcus Daly].

FS: Yes, and my father was working for him. A tree fell on my father and killed him. Mr. Topman, we had just started building our home there at [unintelligible], and Mr. Topman finished building that. Sent his men down there and finished building the home and that's that.
MV: Yes, and you went to school at—

FS: I went to school there. Generally a teacher boarded with my mother. Quite a few of them did. Miss Spencer (?), both of the Spencer girls taught school there.

SS: How many?

FS: What?

SS: How many?

FS: Two. Eunice and Jessie Spencer, they taught school there and Mr. Morlock (?) and Jenny Platt, Cora Gilmore.

SS: What?

FS: Cora Gilmore.

SS: Yes, and Hazel Nickelson.

FS: She taught there later.

SS: Yes.

MV: Well then, your mother didn’t have very much of a source of income.

FS: No, she boarded the school teachers.

MV: Do you remember how much she was paid a month for the board?

FS: Haven’t the slightest idea.

SS: I’d like to know if [unintelligible].

(Talking over each other)

FS: I think down there in the museum, there is a journal. It might tell in that.

MV: I see.

FS: I think you took care of that journal. You cached it someplace.
MV: Well, Irma did.

FS: Yeah, and I think it tells in there how much she got per month.

MV: Well, did they ever have any box socials or any community gatherings?

FS: Oh, goodness yes, lots of them.

MV: Can you tell anything about that?

SS: I can't because I was too small then.

FS: I can remember my mother used to have lots of parties at our house for the young people, get them all together and have parties for them. We played all kinds of games. She'd always have a lunch.

MV: Can you remember some of the games that you played?

FS: One game we played was “what's it like.”

MV: What?

FS: “What’s it like” was one game we played. We sent somebody out the room and by the other room they would pick an object in the room that they could compare to this person out of the room. That was one of the games we played, don’t you remember that?

SS: No.

FS: Alice would remember it.

SS: Probably Alice would.

FS: But I don’t remember what the game was called. I guess it was “what's it like.” That caused a lot of fun. That’s all I can tell you.

MV: Well, what's an example of the game? What would they do? They send someone out—

FS: Well, the person that went out of the room, while they were out, the people here would choose some object in the room that they could compare to this person out of the room. Then that person would have to guess what it was. And it would go on and on and on.

MV: That was fun. Did you ever play “wink ‘em”?
FS: Yes, we played “wink ‘em”.

MV: And “post office”?

FS: Yes, and—

SS: [laughs] And she always kissed Ned.

FS: What? [laughs] [shushs Sadie]

SS: [laughs]

MV: What did you do to play “post office”? How did you “post office”?

FS: I don’t remember ever playing “post office,” do you? I remember—

SS: I don’t know.

FS: -We used to play [pauses] “what’s it like.”

MV: Yes. Did you have any special dances? Did you do “Skip to My Lou”?

FS: Not to my knowledge. Did we?

SS: I can’t remember. I remember when Blanche...they used to dance at school a lot, too, as I remember.

FS: Yes, we used to have lots of dances in the schoolhouse, lots of them.

SS: If I remember, Blanche and I—my older sister than I—we were about the same size. We were only about 18 months apart. We get together and away we go around that hall on the outside. Just dance our heads off. [laughs]

MV: Oh, that was fun.

SS: Yes.

MV: Did you ever have anything like debates? Did the older people?

SS: Oh, I think they did.

FS: Yeah.
SS: What’d they call that? Christian Endeavor?

FS: Yes.

MV: Oh, they had a Christian Endeavor [Society]. I think that church—

FS: Yeah, that was kind of...at the school house, they had, I think.

MV: Was that mostly on Sunday?

SS: I think so, it was.

FS: Then my mother used to give a lot of parties for the young people. Because my father was gone and we were alone, so she’d entertain the young people. We’d play games, lots of games, and we always had a lunch. Mother would always prepare something for a lunch.

MV: She did very well.

FS: Those parties included all the young people in the community: the older children and the younger children. We had lots of good times. My mother would always have sandwiches and punch of some kind for the—

MV: Well, Marcus Cook was from there, and then he was one of the first ones that...Didn’t he go down one—

[Break in audio]

SS: —can’t remember the year, but she was short and redheaded.

FS: Duffield.

SS: Her name was Miss Dufffield. Don’t remember her first name, and she had some pretty good big boys in that school that year. There was one that, he was sort of unruly, and she started to discipline him. She got a strap, and she was going to hit him with a strap—

FS: The buckle end.

SS: What?

FS: The buckle end.

SS: Yes, I guess buckle end, and he grabbed the strap. Then she started to, you know, hanging on to it. And he grabbed her some way, and her hair started coming down and it fell clear down
to her shoulders and she had this rat in it. Her hair was over the rat, and the rat fell down over her head, I guess. I don’t know what else happened. We were all so scared, I think, over this strap and the fight—

FS: She started to beat him with the buckle end of that strap, and he grabbed the strap and he said, “You can beat me with a strap but not the buckle end.”

SS: Oh. See, I was little, and it scared the dickens out of me.

MV: Well, I was wondering about your referring to a rat, when you say what the rat was.

SS: Well you know how...Have you ever seen them put...Well, I can remember my sister, Bertha—she had pretty hair, too, and her hair was sort of curly—they had a rat about this long and they call them rat. It was artificial hair, you know, that they made into these little forms. So she put one here and her hair never grew very long. She brought it up and put it under that and made it kind of smooth when it came down, and I think I’ve got a picture someplace of that.

MV: Well, what about the teacher? What kind of rat did she have on?

SS: A round one. About this big around.

MV: And did it go all around her hair?

SS: Yes, it went all around, and then—

FS: She’s redheaded.

SS: Yes, and then she pulled it all like this around, see?

MV: She pulled it all up and tucked it underneath the rat so it would be round?

SS: Yes, see bring it up like this and then stick it in.

FS: He pulled that rat out. [laughs]

SS: Yes, well, over their fight. Trying to get a hold of the strap, I suppose.

MV: Do you recall who were on the board of trustees, anything about the trustees?

SS: I have no idea.

FS: I have no idea who the trustees were. Your father was probably one of them.
SS: I don’t know, Fern.

MV: Probably Mr. Cook.

SS: Well, I’ll tell you, my dad had plenty of work to do at home. My mother died in 1906 and left a tiny baby. The baby was born at night, and the next morning she died. So you see, he had six children with the baby at home. Yeah, six.

MV: So the baby survived.

SS: Yes, and between Mrs. Kyle (?) and my Grandmother McKinney (?), came to take...be with us—take care of us to help him for, I don’t know, maybe four or five years, maybe five years. But there was Wes (?) and Irene and Holly all younger than I was. Holly was the baby.

MV: Were you the oldest?

SS: No, my oldest sister at home was only 12, wasn’t quite 12. She would have been 12 on the 22nd of June, and mother died in February the 28th.

FS: And your older sister had left home.

SS: Well, yes, and the two older boys. They were working away from home. Alice was the oldest one home.

MV: That was quite a tragedy—

SS: Yes, it was.

MV: and work for and hardship on your father and your oldest sister.

SS: Yes, yes.

MV: But it was wonderful that the baby survived, you know.

SS: Oh, she was a healthy little thing when she was born.

FS: Yes, she was.

SS: [unintelligible] was a butterball.

MV: And that was Ned Kyle’s mother that-

SS: Yes, Ned Kyle’s mother that came to help us take care of [unintelligible].
MV: Well, I think this is very fine for you two girls to get together. After all you went to school together a long time and have been friends for many, many years, and we certainly appreciate it. I'm sure that the people of our community and those young children that are coming along and wanting to find out a little bit about the history of the valley are going to appreciate this very much. We certainly thank you.

[Break in audio]

MV: This concludes the interview with Fern Severns and Sadie Summers from the Como School, district number 20.

[End of Interview]