Oral History Number: 123-001  
Interviewee: Betty Burton  
Interviewer: Trudy Irens  
Date of Interview: July 12, 1984  

Trudy Irens: —1984, in an interview with Betty Burton. Could you please give us some general biographical information about yourself?

Betty Burton: I was born in Iowa, and I lived in Iowa through my junior year in high school, then came to Idaho Falls where I graduated. In the fall, I went to the Idaho Technical Institute, which is [unintelligible] University of Idaho. I had one year’s work there, and went to teach school in a farming community where I had quite a few experiences. I stayed with a German-Russian family, and I enjoyed it very much. I had boys that were bigger than I, and I had all eight grades. My little first grader spoke German, and as he read in English, he would come upon a word that he didn’t know, he’d put the German word in. So we had an interesting year. The boys went home the first day and their father asked them how they liked the teacher, and they said they didn’t have a teacher they just had a little girl. [laughs] But they soon found that I was pretty consistent with what I wanted, and we had a nice year together. However, when I went, I knew I would be snowed in for the winter, and I would be with this family and without seeing my family for quite a while.

TI: Did you have any female students? Little girls that you taught?

BB: I had two.

TI: How many students were there about altogether?

BB: Eight, I think. Is that...No, ten, I guess. And then that spring, I married, and—

TI: What year was this?

BB: 1927. I am 76 now, and I’ve had a real, full interesting life. I never had lived in the country before, so it was really an experience. [pauses] Then, in 1927, we went to Nevada to live where we both taught school for a couple of years. [pauses] There we lived on the Nevada line, and Wendover was on the Nevada line, and I wasn’t too smart about...but finally realized what the [unintelligible] hotel was, and they say sheepherders could lose their year’s wages in one night. It was altogether a different type of life there.

I had an interesting life there because an engineer stayed with us—we lived in his house—and he had a room there. He took us for a ride in one of the big O’Malley (?) engines one night, up and down the...Well, he was switching in the yards. That was the year that I lost a baby in February. That was my first real deep hurt, and it wasn’t a full-time [full-term] baby. The doctor said five or six months. A substitute finished out my year. We taught the next year in Wendover...
and then my husband’s folks wanted him to come home and ranch, and then Harry was born
the 7th of July, 1929, in Pocatello. Charles’ folks figured I didn’t know anything about ranching
and thought he should have married a ranch girl, and they also thought they should raise Harry
because I’d never been around babies. I became quite resentful. So the partnership at that time
wasn’t successful, and I went home with Harry. Charles finally decided to try another teaching
job, and we lived on the desert in Gandy, Utah.

It was quite beautiful there. It was a different kind of beauty. It was like a desert. The ranches
were large, and we lived in an old house at Gandy. Here, things were different. There were a lot
of wild horses at Gandy, and for pastime, the men would saddle up and ride and corral these
wild horses. They brought one home, but he got away. [laughs] Then we lived in Duchesne,
Utah, first and then Roosevelt, and my husband did coaching there. We were expecting another
baby, and Anne was born on Easter Sunday. Charles had decided that year that there wasn’t
much chance of ever having a home and accumulating anything if he stayed teaching school, so
he decided that he would go home and work with his father, and his father liked to have him
come home. So—

TI: Where was it that his family ranch was?

BB: At Irwin, Idaho. I didn’t want to. In my life, I have done so many things I didn’t want to, I
suppose it makes character, but from year out, life wasn’t easy. In the fall we went back to Utah
to Roosevelt. I had a nice place to live, and about all I got done was take care of Anne and
Harry. Charles was still coaching. Then we went home for the summer to ranch again, and they
offered him a contract for the next year and I really felt bad when he didn’t accept it. But he
decided that’s what he wanted to do, was to ranch. They [Charles’ parents] didn’t like me and
made life very interesting, and they were very critical of a town girl. Charles got a set of house
logs and built a house, or a cabin—14 by 18. The first year, the folks wanted us to live with
them, which I did, and then the next year I wouldn’t go and we stayed...Or wouldn’t go, and we
stayed in the cabin. They predicted that we wouldn’t make it through the winter, but we did
and we had a healthy, healthy winter. The snow was drifted up one side of the cabin, so it was
good insulation, and the children could walk right up the snow to the top of the roof. But the
other side, there was no snow.

If they’d fallen off, it would have been terrible. [laughs] It was in the spring that a Mr. Jones lost
his wife and he wanted Charles to take the ranch, but we didn’t have any money. We had 16
dollars in the bank, but we bought it. My father-in-law went to the bank with my husband, and
he went good on the loan or we probably wouldn’t have been able to have done it. Mr. Jones
lived with us in the summers, and we had to move to Irwin to put the children in school. The
first year we tried putting the boy in school at the ranch, but we had to have a covered sleigh
with a stove in it and a hired man to take him, which was an hour and a half in the morning.
Then he had to go back and get him in an hour and a half. My husband decided the next year it
would be better just to rent a house in the little town and stay there with the children.
TI: Did you have any neighbors nearby so that the children could go to school together?

BB: No, my children...When we lived up on the ranch, my children rode horses to school. They rode horses down to a ferry which were two great big boats with a platform on it, and the man from across the river took them across the his ferry—on his ferry. They came home the same way. Then it was about four miles from home. But they did all right for themselves. They could handle horses, and they weren’t afraid.

Charles had bought a tractor and plowed nights, and we worked hard to make both ends meet. We had a man named Mel Greg (?) who worked for us, and at that time we were quite isolated. I had to feed the man and doing his washing and ironing and do for my family also. I had a lot to learn because I did all my canning and I canned, and the family’s sewing and the mending and the patching and the darning and the churning. I canned fish, beef, pork, chicken, elk, deer, pickles, and fruit and jelly. All of this was stored in a root cellar where it wouldn’t freeze. I also made garden, learned to milk a cow, which I never liked to do. We always had plenty to eat during the Depression. The grain was taken out, and flour was brought home, stacked to the ceiling in a bedroom. We also got pancake flour, whole wheat and germane [germinated?], sugar cane in 100-pound sacks and coffee came in 25-pound buckets.

The snow was very deep in the winter, and none of the fences showed. The winter was beautiful. It wasn’t lonely, but we had to haul water from the river. When I washed on wash day, I went out and cut big chunks of snow and put it in tubs and put it on the back of the stove, and then I filled the reservoir. It was always hot, and I’d fill it with snow until it came to the top. That way I would...The boiler was filled with snow. I’d get enough water to do the family washing with. Then when bath night came, why, for the children, I always melted the snow, but we did bring our drinking water in milk cans up from the river.

TI: Did you wash all your laundry in a tub or in one of those old ringer washing machines?

BB: I washed in on the washboard with a tub and put it out on the clothesline to dry. When I would wash, I would either put on chicken and let it...I had a big iron pot that I put down on the stove, and I’d get the chicken ready and put it in there. Then I’d have the vegetables all ready, because I always had men to feed at noon. So I never got through washing until about two o’clock in the afternoon. Then the next day, I ironed on Tuesday, and Wednesday, I’d bake bread and cookies and cake and the things I needed. Thursday, I’d clean house again, and Friday, I usually had something to do, especially if I...You know, with butchering coming, you had meat to can, and I raised lots of chickens because I’d can 100 quarts of chicken. So they had to be clean. My husband used to help me pick the chickens and get them ready in the evening. There was just plenty to do.

This is where we used to, once in a while, we’d go call on the neighbors, and we’d get the team and the sleigh ready. We’d go over and play cards till about four o’clock in the morning and have breakfast and go home. And—
TI: How far away was this that you went to see the neighbors?

BB: About four miles. But at Christmas-time when we had the school programs, why then, that was when we put straw in the bottom of the sleigh and we had rocks in the oven all day, and put the rocks in. We had sleigh quilts and it would be just real pretty out in the moonlight. The snow—it just sparkled. We’d all wrap up and bundle up, and then we went 14 miles to that school program and we stayed all night there too. That is, we didn’t get home until morning, but everybody brought their families. When they got tired, they rolled them up in their quilts and put them down on the floor or on benches and let them sleep until the dance was over with. We had the Christmas tree and the Santa Claus, and, oh, the kids liked it. They loved it. But they got tired. [pauses]

We got along all right, and we paid the mortgage off on his father’s place that we started on, and later was to buy that place. Charles’ father let the rest of the brothers and sisters think he gave it to Charles, which caused hard feelings, and I was glad I had kept receipts showing differently. Grandpa Burton played one child against the other, which was bad and hard for me. Grandma Burton was good to me. She taught me many things. As she said, she couldn’t be friendly with me because the girls wouldn’t like it. She taught me how to wash wool, card it, how to make butter, and how to quilt, how to make soap, can, and make jelly. She knew lots of things. She was a real pioneer at one time, and Charles was very active in the community affairs. There was only a few educated people in our community, because we were so isolated that the children didn’t get to go out to high school. There were a few families that sent their children out to high school, and ours was one. Grandma Burton was a hard-working person, I felt sorry for her. [unintelligible] was poor, and she had many good things for her...and she did many good things for our family and had nothing. Charles wanted to build me this cesspool, and I wanted it so badly, because it would help a lot, not to have to carry all that water—wash-water and everything out. Grandpa Burton, he just didn’t believe in a cesspool. He just couldn’t see it, so Charles had to fill it back in again.

TI: [Laughs] Oh no!

BB: [Laughs] Then when I wanted a well, because I wanted water in the house. I had saved enough money, we had a big orchard in the front yard, and everybody came for apples, so I sold the apples which Grandpa didn’t like. Thought that was terrible.

TI: Was this during the ’30s too then?

BB: Yes. But I bought me a bathtub and a toilet and I wanted this well dug. [laughs] Grandpa didn’t want the well dug. He said he’d carried the water all his life from the river, and we could carry our water from the river. Anyway, after the well was dug, he sure loved the cool water in the well, and he’d stand out there and drink this cold water. [unintelligible] that well to a [unintelligible], but anyway we got the well. [pauses]
Anyway, we finally got the bathtub put in and the toilet put in. Then this trouble came up in the school and Charles was on the schoolboard. When the dam came in, 80 kids came into that little two-room school that was already full. So Charles finally came home and asked me one day if I’d go down and divide that room and get the enrollment straightened out for a new teacher. I said yes, I would, but I didn’t want to teach it.

TI: They were just going to have one teacher for 80 students?

BB: Oh, no. Can’t have—

TI: Oh, I was going to say, gosh.

BB: [Laughs] So, I did it. Then finally I got to teaching a week, I got to teaching two weeks and I said to Charles “Now, look-it here,” I said, “when are they going to get a teacher?”

“Well, they’re still trying.”

It run into six weeks and I said, “Listen,” I said, “When are we going to get this teacher here?” So they finally came up and asked me if I would take it for the rest of the year, and I told them I wasn’t interested but they offered me a real good salary if I would take it. I said, “I’ve got a little boy, five, and I don’t really particularly want to teach school unless I can have him with me.” Well, they decided that it was against the laws to put five-year-olds in that school so they said if I bought my books for him, why, he could go to school if I’d take it and teach him. So John and I rode the bus every morning to school together, and he did pretty well.

TI: What bus?

BB: The school bus. [Laughs] We had a school bus that went up 20 miles past the dam, Palisades Dam, and brought the kids down to the Irwin school. They consolidated with the districts around, so they were all in one school before the dam was built. I think that was right, if I remember right. [pauses]

Anyway, sometimes, there are a lot of things I don’t like to think about. But at 74, I’m more mature, and I think back and know I could have handled some things differently. For one thing, I wouldn’t let a lot of things that bothered me then, bother me now. [pauses] I did go to teach school at Alpine, Wyoming. That was 20 miles from the ranch. I was snowed in and he was snowed in at home, but in the spring we went back to dry farm anyway and I always liked to dry farm. I usually went up when the combines came into combine and cooked. I could open the door and see the Teton peaks real plain. It was really pretty.

Now, we had some sad things happen too. Charles’ mother and sister were shot and killed in Ogden on the 24th of July, and I can’t remember the year. Charles’ sister looked like a man’s
wife who had left him, and one of his friends told him where she lived. He had seen her, she
didn't know him, and he killed five people that afternoon. So Grandpa came home after the
funeral, and he sold the ranch to Charles and things were looking up for us. It was too bad that
had to happen. It was really, it was really bad. The children went to Irwin to school, and Harry
went on to graduate from [unintelligible] and I had to help him quite a bit. We had a high
school bus, and it stopped running. Not enough children to make it so it was...There just
weren't enough to take a bus out at that time. Then my husband bought a station wagon, and I
think there were eight that went out to high school on that. Each family agreed to pay the
expenses but in the end, it turned out we paid the expenses. [laughs] There were some that
were good. So the next year, why, Harry graduated, and the next year, why, we sent Anne to St.
Mary’s of the Wasatch in Salt Lake City. She went to a girl’s school for two years, and it was
really a nice experience for her.

Then we went off the dry farm and we rented the [bells toll in the background] Earl Adams (?)
ranch, but we still had our dry farms and in the valley—at our home ranch in the valley—and
then this extra ranch. [clock chimes] This put us right down on the river, but we still had to
cross this ferry and my husband built a foot bridge across it. [laughs] After he died, I didn’t
know it was our foot bridge, but after he died, the Forest Service wanted to know what I was
going to do with it. Well, it was quite a few feet across that Snake River. It was a long one. It
would swing when you’d walk on it. So I found out I had to do something about it, so I turned it
over to the Forest Service. [laughs]

TI: What did they do with it? They just kept it there?

BB: The trouble was there that if somebody was hurt on it, they could sue me. If a board was
loose and they fall down on it or something, then I would be responsible, so they said. But
everybody used that footbridge, and nothing ever happened. When they took it, they didn’t do
anything with it. I don’t know that it’s still there now or not. But, you see, we had that dry farm,
and that cut out 23 miles for us to go from one place to another. But the horse would go right
behind Charles across this footbridge. [laughs]

TI: Heavy-duty bridge! [laughs]

BB: [laughs] I didn’t have anything more to do with that. But people were going across it for
years afterwards. Then I thought it would be nice to have another baby about this time,
because money-wise we could afford it very nicely. But I was very, very sick all the way through
it. We had trouble with the positive and the negative, I was negative and Charles was positive,
and believe me, I was one sick gal. [engine noise in background] But I’ve been very thankful I
had him. He’s been a comfort to me many times. Anne was upset with Santa Claus that year
because she was sure the baby would be under the tree. [laughs]

TI: How old was she now?
BB: Anne is 52.

TL: Wow! I [unintelligible].

BB: What?

TL: I think I lost track of—

BB: Well she was about—

TL: You were talking about how Harry had already graduated, and then now we’re back.

BB: We’re back again. See, this isn’t written. This I just things I have put down so that when I get around to it, but then I will sort them out. I don’t know whether you really want something like this or not. [laughs]

TL: No, that’s okay. Betty is reading part of the time from a journal she’s been putting together of her life history.

BB: Well, that year I had to have lots of help, and my children went to St. Joseph in Pocatello and stayed with my people. That was the time the doctor told Charles it would be easier to raise three children with a mother than to raise four without one, so we didn’t have any more. We thought of adopting, but I wasn’t well again and have to a hysterectomy, and I had a bad time. We had moved to the Big Hole in 1949. Here it was much nicer. I had a real nice house, and I had everything to do with. Then I had my summer kitchen downstairs, and we had an artisan well that put water all over the house. I had a dishwasher upstairs, but none in the basement. I did have electric ranges, electric refrigerators in both kitchens, and then in the summertime, why, we had a cook. It let me go visiting when I wanted to and do things I wanted to do.

TL: Why was it that you moved from Idaho to Montana?

BB: Oh, I should tell you that. I meant to tell that a while ago. You see, the government came in there, and built this Palisade Dam. It’s an earth-filled dam, and it took, I don’t know how many acres. It’s a big lake. You can put a good-sized boat on it. We had hay ranches and we had cattle, but we put our cattle on the forest land. You see, we rented forest land, and we leased forest land in the summer to feed them. When that dam went in, it took our forest—our summer feed, our forest reserve feed—. So Charles thought we might be able to get along all right, but he’d rather have a ranch where it was all under fence and his own, so we bought this ranch in the Big Hole. It was 1,960 acres. Then we leased another 2,500 acres, I think, down toward Dillon, where we calved out the heifers and that type of thing. Where if you needed help, you could go into town and get it. You didn’t have to call a vet from Dillon, 50 miles.
were happy there but it was hard going with finances. One year, we’d do real well, and then cattle prices would go back the next year. It was quite hard at times.

Then I had another time being asked to teach, and so I went and taught school in Jackson for a couple years, and then I didn’t teach anymore. Then John wasn’t doing anything in school, so I went back to college and got certified and taught at [unintelligible] for five years. Now that was a place that was seven miles from the ranch where I took a Jeep and went the seven miles, but we had lots of snow and ice and storm. But you know, those people were the best people. When a storm was coming up, I got a knock on the schoolhouse door, “Mrs. Burton, get the children all started for home. There’s going to be a blizzard.” So we’d get them all started, and then they would go behind me and they’d telephone each neighbor and say “Well, she’s gone past now,” until I got home. [laughs] That was real nice. They really were good to the teacher, and they really looked out for you.

TI: How many students did you have here? About?

BB: I had about nine or ten, but I had my son with me too, you see, here. But there was some interesting things there that happened too. In the winter, it was cold, and we had an oil stove. All I had to do was turn up the heat there. [laughs] Wasn’t like the one in American Falls where I went out and swept the floor and brought the wood in and started the fire and got it warm before the kids came. This was a little better. We decided that maybe there was enough heat on the top of that stove coming out, if we’d each bring a potato, we could have a hot baked potato by noon. So I bought one of these—we called it a dripper—it was a big bread pan. And we’d that over the top of these potatoes, and everybody brought their sandwich and a raw potato, and the school room used to smell so good. [laughs] People would come and say, “Oh, it smells good in here!” [laughs] After that I went to Armstead and taught for five years, and I did a lot of going to school in the evening there, and I finally graduated from college in 1962.

In the Big Hole, Grandpa Burton continued to live with us until he died, but just before he died he wanted to go to Idaho Falls. There was a home down there that some of his friends were in, and he just wanted to go down there and visit. Charles told him, “Well fine”—

[break in audio]

BB: —end of the week to get him. He didn’t want to come home. He hadn’t had his visit out. So we left him down there. He thought a couple more weeks would be fine, but he had a bad stroke and fell. They called us and told us. I can’t remember how old he was now, but he was an old man. My mother used to come quite often and live with us. That was a headache sometimes, but she was awfully good. I’d try to get everything cleaned up before she came, and then when she came, she’d decide the walls needed re-cleaning again. So she’d have me up on a chair washing the walls. She wanted to wash the wall, but then she decided she couldn’t see where the dirt and the clean spot left off, so then she got me up on a chair so she could stand back here to tell me where to wash. Well, she’s always done that. [laughs] She cleans all the
cupboards and puts everything back so it looks handy to her, not to me. Then in the summertime in the kitchen, she used to like to come at haying time. Everybody used to like to come and visit me at haying time. She’d go down and help the cook too. She’d go down and peel potatoes for him and help him get things ready. He never resented her, but me, he really did resent having me down there. I guess it was because I took his sourdough bread out and fed it to his dogs. I don’t know what else. He didn’t think schoolteachers were very smart people anyway. [laughs] But you know, that man was 75, and he sure could cook. The men liked his cooking, but I didn’t like his sourdough bread, and I thought...Well, there were a lot of little things that I should be done that I’d go down and do them. Then he’d be upset because they weren’t in the right places, so I finally give up.

TI: So you had a kitchen that was downstairs?

BB: I had a big hay kitchen with a big table that set 19 people.

TI: Did you have that many workers usually?

BB: Lots of times we had. We had a lot of company on top of the men that worked for us. After the boys got so they could take over, each boy took a crew out. Then we didn’t have as much help. Then we got mechanized too to where we had a lot of machinery that was run with gas. It helped a lot.

TI: When did you start getting mechanized? When was the change?


TI: So that was right when you were moving into your new ranch.

BB: Yes. We were getting tractors, and that’s when we got finally got three mowers and we mowed at night until midnight. Then we had two or three rakes, and we had two rakes that pushed the hay in. What do you call those? They’re not bull-rakes. They’re...I can’t remember what kind of rakes they were now. Gee, I look back and I wonder if we did all these things, because I sit here in my comfortable apartment and I just wonder, well now how did I ever do all these different things? How did I keep a family going and cooking going and a cook? Charles never wanted me to wash dishes at night. I would’ve helped with the night dishes, but he always wanted me to go with him, because he got in the Jeep and went up into a pasture—now, we went seven miles from home, and we were still on our place—to look at the cows and see that everything was all right in the pastures. I used to like to go with him too. We had one old dog that rode with the boys all the time in the front seat in the Jeep and he sure didn’t like to have me go. [laughs] I got his seat.

TI: He didn’t like the sourdough bread either! [laughs]
BB: Well, that was our dog. That was a little different. I don’t know as he’d have eaten the bread either. It was nice living in the Big Hole. The Doolings (?) had built the Diamond Bar Inn there, and when Anne was young, why, they square danced a lot there. We’d go in the evenings, and they had a big New Year’s party and you got to visit with all your friends. It was nice. It was kind of fun. Of course, we had snow in the winter, but it didn’t bother us too much because we had a bulldozer on the front of the tractor that cleaned our road out to the highway.

There were a lot of funny things that happened in haying, and you get a lot of characters that are really something. I remember once we [laughs; clock chimes] when John was about five, he was always running around, firing all the hired men if they didn’t listen to him. [laughs] So the cook told him to take some scraps up to the dogs, and he said, “That’s what my father hires you for!” [laughs]

He said, “Young man, you get those scraps up, or I’ll tan your bottom,” and he took them up, and he said, “I never had any more trouble with John.” [laughs]. My sister’s boys always came to visit, and they were little, from about four to ten. I had them every summer, but Mother came along and she kind of kept her eye on them.

TI: Made you wash walls?

BB: [laughs] In between washing walls and doing cupboards and doing all of the bedding. She really knew how to get everything done because she took it upon herself to go hunt all these things up that I don’t do all the time. [laughs] And they had to be done. That was the way she was, but she was awfully good to my kids. When Anne was a little girl, about five, she knew a lot of people that had real nice clothes, and they didn’t know what to do with them so she would take them and make Anne some clothes out of them. So I got a great big box of clothes in the fall with a couple of winter coats made—real nice—and four or five winter dresses and a snowsuit and anything else that she happened to make for her. She made real cute things. When spring would come, I’d get another box of all spring clothes. That helped me a lot. The girl at the store, she said, “Betty,” she said, “where do you buy Anne’s clothes?” She had a little girl.

I said, “Well, I don’t buy any, any of her clothes. My mother makes them and sends them to her.”

Well, she’s the best-dressed little girl in Swan Valley.” It was real nice. She did a lot of nice things for me. Of course, I had her here in town—

TI: She lived in Iowa?

BB: What?
TI: She was living in Iowa?

BB: No, she lived in Pocatello, Idaho.

TI: Oh, okay.

BB: I went to school there. I graduated from high school. We moved from Idaho Falls to Pocatello. I can’t remember now what I was going to tell you. [laughs]

TI: That you had her in town here with you?

BB: I had my mother here until she was 91, and she died. She got so she wasn’t interested in housework after a while, but [laughs]. She was after the boys with the dirt on their feet, and my husband used to get a kick out of it. He used to say ‘Well, Grandma’s here again. Now we got to be careful!’ [laughs] She was a real nice person. Everybody liked her. I have a beautiful picture of her in here.

Then of course I...there were quite a few things happen while we lived there too. My daughter was married there. She wasn’t married at the ranch, but the reception was the ranch. She was married in Dillon at St. Rose Catholic Church. She had four sons and then the one granddaughter. So I had them at the ranch too quite often, but she never let her children come and stay, until one of the little boys had to have the operation done because he had a bad kidney. They didn’t know if it was cancerous until they got into it or not. It wasn’t. It was just a hollow kidney.

Anyway, I got to take the children home with me. [laughs] The first couple of days then Charles went and got a girl to come and take care of them, to help me take care of them because I couldn’t be inside and outside. The two oldest ones were able to be outdoors, but the two youngest ones were inside. So I had the cook and the girl to help with the children. The one little boy liked to go fishing with a plastic angle-worm, and we had a pond out there that was warm. I guess it had fish in it. I never will know. We never caught fish, but there were a lot of tadpoles and that type of thing. We sat out on that bank in the sun for a couple hours at a time while he fished with that plastic angle-worm, and he had a pond out there that was warm. I really had to have a little help to get the boys fishing and the other two little boys satisfied with playing in the house, or if they wanted to play outdoors, all right, somebody went with them. But we had so much water around, Charles was afraid to have the children out. Then we had a big watering tank that was all warm water too. In the winter time, when it got five below zero, you could see steam come off of it. The cattle had that nice warm water to drink all winter.

But water, we had a pond right in front of the house too, and we had one a little ways from the house towards the side of the house. With four little active boys, one could very easily drown before I got around to the other. I hadn’t had any little kids for a long time, around, but we sure enjoyed those children. The little one, I had him...He was a baby and I bathed him every
morning. I bathed him in the kitchen sink upstairs, and Charles and the boys always come in to see him have his bath every morning. Finally the hired men got to coming in and seeing him have his bath. [laughs] We really had some nice times, and it’s a time I look back on as being nice. However, I did work quite a bit because I taught school every once in a while. Now I have three great-grandchildren. I just got their pictures fixed and put in the hall there, framed.

There’s been quite a few things that I look back on that have changed. Even traveling, I can remember when I was a child, our neighbor was an older German man, and he had two beautiful black horses that he hitched to a cutter. You know what a cutter is? It’s a sleigh. With a red velvet seat. He had a mare that had twin colts and he came over and asked if we wanted to go, and of course, we did. I was thinking, when I was flying into Boston last fall, just how many things have changed. Nobody has cutters with red velvet seats to ride in anymore. [laughs] I was used to the train because Dad worked on the railroad, and we did take vacations every year and we had train rides. There’s a lot of things I remember about those too. There was red velvets seats in there, and they had some kind of water tank in the back with a spigot I thought was real nice to go get a drink of water every so often.

TI: They have them still.

BB: [laughs] Then the seats were just one seat, not separate seats, and they’d turn over so that, we kids, they were just big enough for us to lay down and have naps on if the train wasn’t crowded and we could have the two seats. Then, I traveled a lot by sleigh. I really loved the sound in the winter of the sleigh bells. I could always tell when Charles was coming because I could hear the sleigh bells, and the ladies in town would say when he’d haul hay through town they’d say, “Oh, that’s Mr. Burton with his sleigh bells.” [laughs].

TI: Did any other people have bells on their sleighs?

BB: I don’t know, but we did on ours. We had ever since we went on the ranch. I always wanted sleigh bells, and my cousin had some and he gave them to me, so we put them on across the back of them on both horses. They were about this big. Some of the around here some place. I think these are John’s that are home. They just make a pretty sound in the crunchy snow, and it’s cold. There are a lot of nice things that I remember like that. We had a lot of boating, and fishing and going to the lakes. Nothing there, just the lake. We went to Dark Horse Lake. That was a rough ride. Boy, that was almost no road. Anyway, we got up there, and I was on the inside going up, I didn’t realize how awful it was until I sat on the outside going down.

TI: You mean you were driving there at this point? Or—

BB: We were in a pickup, hon, you couldn’t get up there without a pickup or a Jeep. I don’t think we had a Jeep at that time, but later on, we had one.

TI: When was this about?

Betty Burton Interview, OH 123-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
BB: Oh, this was in 1950 or '51. We did a lot of things that were nice things. The people we bought the ranch from, they just loved to go camping, so they would come in and we would all go up to a lake, and the kids would go with us. They were real good to my kids. They didn’t have any children, so they took my children with them lots of times when we didn’t go. It was really nice. We’ve traveled in lots of different ways. In old cars. The roads had ruts a foot deep in them around the Snake River, and the mailman always came in with this old Star Car. I don’t know, I’ve never heard of Star since, but anyway, this was a Star Car. That’s the only way you had of going the 50 miles up to the ranch from Idaho Falls, was in this car with the mailman. It was some ride. [laughs]

Now, we’d go boating, and, well, the boat wasn’t much of a boat. My husband made his boat. Not what the boat was I went to Jackson in last summer. I went where it sleeps four and has this nice top on it and everything. It’s quite a difference the way you travel now and everything that you have.

Go back to that train business. They had butcher boys, they called them, that brought oranges and bananas through the train. Oh, they smelled so good when I was a little kid. I remember they sold beer too, but I don’t remember them selling pop. [laughs] We liked to play while they switched the train and got ready, where we had to lay over. We liked to play around the depot.

I have a lot of things that are pleasant that I can remember in my 76 years. John married after his father died, and he’s an assistant coordinator for fire in the Forest Service in Albuquerque. His wife had three little boys when he married her, but they’re all grown up and through high school now. One is going to go on a mission this fall or the end of the summer, anyway. He’s going to get his call in a couple or three weeks. His girl—he has one child, and it’s a girl—and Annette is a freshman this year in high school, and then their family’s gone. So life is like a book, you have to close it, and that’s it and start a new one.

TI: You were telling me before that you got a lot of strange hired help coming through. Was that like every year you’d get different help?

BB: Oh, every year. Well, some years we had pretty steady help because there was a grandfather and his four granddaughters that we knew from Idaho that used to like to come up and work in the hay. They were good, because he saw to it that they were. There was no fooling around. When they went out to work, they worked. Sometimes we’d get somebody to come, and yes, he was going to work, and I’d give him clean sheets and blankets, and go out to the bunkhouse, you know, the men and Charles would take him out to the bunkhouse. Next morning, he’d have breakfast and leave for no reason at all. He’d got a night’s lodging and his supper and his breakfast and he was gone, and there was no reason. That used bother me some [laughs], but anybody coming through was welcome to come in and eat if they were hungry and they wanted something to eat, I never turned anyone away. There was a couple of kids that had a breakdown and they were from California and they didn’t have any money, and they asked
me if I had anything to eat, and I said, “Well go out and sit under the tree, and the men will be
in, and you can come in and eat with the men, because I’m busy right now but in a half hour or
so we’d eat.” So they did, and the first thing my husband did when he came was go over there
to see what they wanted, and they didn’t want anything they were just hungry and he said,
“Well come on in, we’ll feed you.”

Then there were other men that would come and you’d have a knock on your...and they’d just
drive their team up to the fence and tie it up. They were gone! The rig was sitting there, the
horse harness and everything. It wouldn’t be long before, maybe that same day or the next day,
you’d have a knock on the door and they’d show you their FBI credentials, and they’d give you a
picture, “Was this man at your place, or is this man here now?”

I said, “Well, he was here, but he’s gone.”

“Well, do you know where he went?”

I said, “No, and he just left the horse at the fence and walked off.” We had a lot of peculiar
people. Then too, we lived close to town, it seemed like when they’d draw up their paychecks,
they’d go down and spend it all, and then they’re drunk for a day or two. It’s better not to pay
them if you don’t have to until they get [unintelligible]. [laughs] But if it rains or something, why
then, that’s different. They have the time off. I don’t think Charles, if they wanted their money,
he ever refused them their money. He paid them, but then it’s not very easy to work hangover
guys the next day. [laughs] There were quite a few characters. I often wish that I’d written
down things, but I didn’t realize it. Now, this man remembers a lot of things, see, that wrote
this Harry Lattin (?) history, and it’s quite typical of just the way people are. Sometimes you
hear from them, sometimes you never do.

One thing, mothers and fathers used to bring their kids and want you to hire them, and I’d
rather have men than kids. Kids do a lot of fooling around. If kids are good, we had kids, but we
had our own boys that were kids too, so it was a little easier to have men, I think. Charles never
did say, so I really don’t know, but I just had an idea that maybe that was the way it was.
Charles was quite community-minded. He did quite a few things in both communities, in Idaho
and in the Big Hole. I remember once in Idaho, a man came and asked me if Charlie was home,
and I said, “No, he’s in Boise at a school board meeting.” So he turned around and left. He
talked to me for a while, but I said, “He’ll be back.” So he came back the next day, and “No, he’s
not home.”

Then the next day he came back and said, well, he sure wished he’d get back, he said, “There’s
some water business that needs taken care of,”

I said, “Well, I’ll tell you what to do. You just go to the president of the irrigation company, and
he’ll straighten you out.”
He said, ”Well, your husband is president.” [laughs] I didn’t know what to say to him. I just said, “Well, I’ll tell him when he gets home that you’ve been here.” [laughs] I couldn’t figure out why he kept coming back and back and back, but there’s funny things that happen every once in a while.

Oh yeah, in the Big Hole, one Sunday morning, there were three men came to my door. They were on horseback. They said they’d just come for a friendly cup of coffee, and I said, “Well, you wait until my husband gets home, and you can come in and have a friendly cup of coffee with him.” Oh no, they’d just like to talk to me, and I said, “Well, I’ve got things to do.”

Well they pulled a bottle of liquor out of their coat—they had red plaid jackets on—“Can we leave this in here?”

I said, “Yes, you can put it inside if you want to,” but Charles was just finishing getting hay about a mile away, though. I should never have said I was alone in the first place. I told them that he would be here in just a little while, so they decided to come back. They walked out to the gate with their horses, and then they came back and I wondered “What now?” Well, they wanted their liquor. So I opened the door enough so they can reach in and get it where they set it. Then they said they thought they would leave, and I said, “Well, that’s fine,” but they were drunk. Oh, they were drunk. One guy would help the other one up on the horse, and then he couldn’t get up on his horse, so the other one would get off the horse and help him up on his horse. [laughs] Then they’d take a few steps and then the other one would stop and he’d try and get on the horse, and he couldn’t get on the horse. So the other one would get off the horse. They did that for about two blocks all the way up to the road. They finally, at the top of the road, both got on their horses. [laughs] and they were Hershey’s (?) hired men. At first, I thought somebody’s just being funny here. Somebody down at the bar’s just said, “Go down and have a cup of coffee with Mrs. Burton.” People do crazy things if they think it’s going to be funny, and it was funny. [laughs] But I told Charles, I said, “When you’re downtown, go ask who those guys were.” I described them to him. The Hershey’s were about four miles from us, but they were two men from Hershey’s. They’d never hurt anybody or anything.

You just have a lot of funny little incidents on the ranch. They have a lot of fun among themselves—the hired men and the boys—and they have a lot of fun. Too with different things that go wrong, or different things they have to fix. It’s been a pleasant life. I thought sometimes it was kind of rough, [laughs] but you live through it and it doesn’t hurt you, really. It hasn’t hurt me to learn all these things, but now I don’t do any of them. It’s like I say, that chapter’s closed. But still, I love to cook and I love to bake, and I still go buy peaches and pears to can for myself. It’s just that I like to do it. Even though I had a hard time learning how. Sewing and all these things. I oil paint, and I don’t play the organ very well but I amuse myself. [laughs] It’s kind of mixed up, I know, but I put it together as I thought about it because some day, I just may write a book. There’s lot of things that that have [unintelligible] to my mind. There’s some things I wished I had’ve done though that I didn’t do, and that was put down the funny things that the children did, especially the grandchildren. My own did a lot of funny things, too.

Betty Burton Interview, OH 123-001, Archives and Special Collections, Mansfield Library, University of Montana-Missoula.
TI: Grandchildren are there [unintelligible] now?

BB: Well they’re men. It’s been a long time since I—

TI: Oh, it’s your great-grandchildren now—

BB: No, they’re my grandchildren, but you know, they’re 30-years-old, some of them.

TI: Right, I was thinking of your great-grandchildren that you talked about earlier.

BB: My daughter said to one of the little grandsons, she said, “Now, I want you to go out and tell these people that we’re going to have this fair, and there’ll be booths to go to,” and she had a [unintelligible] for him. So he took the fliers and he told the ladies all about the fair and there was plenty of booze—they had a lot of beer. [laughs]

TI: Where was the fair going to be?

BB: At some school. They didn’t have booze, she meant b-o-o-t-h-s, but Charles thought she meant booze—b-o-o-z-e—so he said there’ll be plenty of booze and beer. They’ve said so many crazy things every once in a while that I often wish that I would’ve written them down, but I didn’t, so I don’t have that. Now, I take, and I buy a little book like this—an autograph book—and I put in that book everything that happens to me this year. All the pictures the kids send me, and the graduation announcements and the wedding announcements, the Mother’s Day cards, and anything that the family has done. If somebody writes me an extra nice letter, it goes in it. It’s a nice way to take care of things. I wished I’d have thought of it years ago.

TI: You were so busy doing all the ranch work and the teaching and everything.

BB: [laughs] It’s been a nice life, looking back, I don’t like the way it ended, but happens to all of us.

TI: It hasn’t ended yet!

BB: My husband’s gone, though—

TI: Yeah, that’s a big part of it.

BB: —and that really bothered me for a long time. He was a wonderful person. Now I have to close that book and start a new one. But the new one isn’t very interesting. [pauses] I do a lot of things. I keep myself busy, and I have a big family so I’m interested in everything that goes on. But, I’ve seen lots of changes and might live a while longer! [laughs]
TI: Well, is there anything else you’d like to talk about?

BB: No, not unless there’s—

[End of Interview]