Oral History Number: 049-002  
Interviewee: Bernice Batey  
Interviewer: Mary Melcher  
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Project: Montana Women’s Oral History Project

Note: When this interview was conducted, the interviewee requested to remain anonymous in the transcript and audio. Archives and Special Collections has chosen to lift this restriction now that the interviewee is deceased.

Mary Melcher: I'm interviewing Bernice Batey. It's June 19th and we're in Forsyth, Montana. Mrs. Batey, you said you came from Minnesota? You were born there?

Bernice Batey: Yes.

MM: And you're the oldest one in your family.

BB: I am.

MM: There were seven kids.

BB: Seven children. Ya, I'm the oldest.

MM: And your family had a farm in Minnesota?

BB: Yes, yes. But there were, let's see. There were only four born in Minnesota.

MM: Four were born in Minnesota.

BB: Four were born in Minnesota and the rest were born in Montana, the other three.

MM: How were you born? Was there a midwife who came in when you were born?

BB: Yes, yes.

MM: Was it someone from the neighborhood?

BB: It was an aunt of my mother's.

MM: And she delivered all four of you?

BB: Yes, she delivered all four of us in Minnesota. But after we came on down, Mother had a doctor. Ya. But she never went to a hospital.
MM: Do you remember what chores you did around the house when you were growing up on the farm?

BB: No, not particularly. I helped with the work, of course, because I'm the oldest. I remember dishes especially and, oh, making beds and things like that.

MM: Do you remember if the boys did different chores than the girls?

BB: Yes, they helped outside. The boys did.

MM: And you mainly worked inside?

BB: Huh?

MM: You mainly worked inside?

BB: Yes.

MM: What type of social events did your family participate in? Did you go to dances, or...?

BB: Not much after the...no.

MM: Not much in Minnesota.

BB: No, no.

MM: Did you have neighbors that were close by?

BB: Yes, quite close.

MM: Would you visit them on Sundays?

BB: Every once in a while.

MM: And you said that you went to ...[Tape cuts out]

MM: You went to a couple years of school in Minnesota? Grade school?

BB: Yes, before I came out here.

MM: Was that a country school?
BB: Ya, a country school.

MM: How far was it away from your house?

BB: Oh, 'bout a mile.

MM: About a mile. Did you walk?

BB: Yes, yes.

MM: Do you remember if you had any books or musical instruments around your house?

BB: A what?

MM: Any books or musical instruments around your house?

BB: No, we didn't have any. Not then. We never, in fact, we never had any instruments—musical instruments—until we lived in Clyde Park, shortly before we moved down here. Then we got a piano and a violin.

MM: Did you learn how to play?

BB: No. Some of the other girls did, but I didn't.

MM: Did you celebrate holidays and birthdays when you were growing up?

BB: Yes, yup.

MM: Did you have birthday cakes?

BB: Birthday cakes, ya. That was the main celebration was birthday cakes and a gift for the one who's birthday it was being celebrated. Ya.

MM: What about Christmas time?

BB: Oh, yes we always celebrate Christmas, ya. New Year's and Thanksgiving—times like that.

MM: So, when you came to Montana, you were eight years old. Did you come on a train? How did you come out here?

BB: On a train—on a train, ya. We came first over to Malta. I don't even know where Malta is or not. My mother's sister lived there and then we came, after we visited her a while, we came around by White Sulphur Springs and over to, well, we were north of Livingston to my aunt.
mother had two sisters. The other one was near Livingston and that’s the way we came down—five or six shares of land and decided to settle that.

MM: In Livingston?

BB: No, not in Livingston.

MM: What were your aunts doing in Montana?

BB: They were, the one in Malta, her husband was in the mercantile business. But the other two were ranchers. Ya, ya, they were ranchers.

MM: So, did you come out here to visit and then you decided to stay?

BB: That’s right, ya.

MM: Was your dad along on the trip?

BB: Yes, yes. And then he went back and got our things—I mean, the things that were wanted, shipped out. Rest of us never went back. I went back later on to school over there in the grades. I lived with my grandma. My grandma had lived now where we moved from, and that’s where I went to school.

MM: That was high school?

BB: Well, grade school.

MM: You went to one grade school there.

BB: Ya.

MM: How did you like Montana when you first came out? Do you remember?

BB: No, I don’t.

MM: You were only eight.

BB: Ya, and I don’t remember. It’s been my home ever since and I just grew up with it, so. And I was, of course you had to be twenty-one when you took your homestead, which I was. I was just twenty-one...

MM: So you went back to Minnesota for one year of grade school.
BB: Ya.

MM: And your brothers and sisters stayed here?

BB: Ya.

MM: Then you come back to Montana during the summer?

BB: Ya.

MM: And you went to all four years of high school in Minnesota.

BB: Ya, ya.

MM: Do you remember what you did for socialization when you went to high school? Were there any, were there any dances or parties or anything like that?

BB: I don't remember and I don't think I hardly ever went because my grandmother lived a long ways from the high school. And it was too far. And I had to go right up through the worst part of town to go. She never much wanted me out alone at night, even with other chicks, ya. So, I didn't socialize.

MM: Did you help your grandma around the house a lot?

BB: Yes, yes.

MM: Did you have to study hard when you were in high school?

BB: Well, I was just average. My schoolwork was never too hard for me, ya.

MM: Did any of your other brothers or sisters go back to Minnesota for high school?

BB: No. No, not any.

MM: Did they go to high school out here in Montana, then?

BB: Yes, yes. See, the one brother and sister died. Our folks, the brother died when our folks were on the ranch. When they moved to Clyde Park and my father ran a furniture shop for about six years and the other sister died then. And then we moved to the homestead, and Mother would do her best during the school year to send the kids to school. And Gladys, she was the fourth one, she graduated from Roosevelt High School and then Gene had one year of high school and Gladys graduated—she graduated. Gene had one year of high school. And then the folks moved out. We lived out on what we call the B Ranch, where the [Toolrit's?] live now.
We didn't feel we could afford to move to a [Rosemont?] and so Gene missed two years of school. And then when I came through it was Gene and I remember the other kids then were staying with me and the principal, he used to like to come down to play basketball. And the principal said to him, "Why don't you go back to high school?" He said, "Your sister is teaching here," and I had a little apartment. And he said, "You can stay with her and go back to school." So he decided to. And, you know, I think that was his sophomore year and I think he was about two or three weeks late in starting school, but when he graduated he was valedictorian of his class.

MM: He was, wow!

BB: Ya. And then he went on. He was out of school for, oh, I can't remember, anyway, he got married and his wife taught school one year, you know, send him to school. Then my aunt died over at Malta and she left him some money and, anyway, he got through school and was a civil engineer. Ya, at Bozeman. He went to school to Bozeman and then graduated and was a civil engineer. He practiced that for over there at Fort Bragg for a while, and then he was sent from there to Albuquerque, New Mexico. He lived there, I don't know, he lived...They had three children. They raised their family there, and they were there. He died when he was seventy. He had heart disease and arthritis and a lot of things was the cause.

MM: How sad.

BB: Yes, yes it was sad.

MM: Did you remember if there was any type of sex education when you were going to high school in Minnesota?

BB: Did we have what?

MM: Sex education?

BB: No, I don't remember a thing about it. No, not even in high school.

MM: Not even in high school. Was there any in the home?

BB: No, I don't think so. No, I don't think so.

MM: Do you remember if there were any young women who were working while they were going to high school in Minnesota?

BB: I don't remember. I don't remember.

MM: So, after you finished high school, you came back to Montana and you went to a summer
school for a summer.

BB: Ya.

MM: Then you started teaching?

BB: I took teacher's examinations and started teaching. And then I used to go, in the average summer, to summer school because, you see, I didn't have much [muffled] and I loved to work. I had to start with...you took teacher's examinations in those days. I got a second grade certificate. That was the first. That was the low one, I mean, that was the first one you could get. Then I got a first grade certificate later on after I taught a while and gone to summer school a while. Then I got what they call a professional certificate and that's what I had when I quit. Ya.

MM: Did you enjoy teaching?

BB: Yes, I did. I enjoyed it, ya. I taught third and fourth grade most of the time, except for two I taught all together. I taught three years in the country and the rest of them were in small towns, like.

MM: What other kinds of jobs were available for young women other than teaching? Do you remember?

BB: Well, I remember before I started teaching, I used to work in a drug store. At that time the drug stores had soda fountains in them. My main job was to take care of the soda fountain. Ya.

MM: Was this in Minnesota or Montana?

BB: Montana.

MM: It was in Montana?


MM: Where did you meet your husband?

BB: Down here. The folks lived on a ranch a little bit, and my father had known him for many, for quite a number of years because my father worked for Freeman [Filrick?] and so did George. And my father, and then, when I came to work he came down to visit the folks one time and that's when I met him. Ya.

MM: Did you go to dances, then, when you were a teacher?

BB: Yes, yes.
MM: Were they at Rosebud, or...

BB: Rosebud. They used to have hunter dances up at Pleasant Hill—that school is up on the hill. And then my folks, my husband bought it and uses it as a granary now. They quit having school there. They're on a bus. Ya. My children went all their school life on a bus. Ya. My children did. They went all their school lives on a bus.

MM: And you had taken out the homestead when you started teaching, when you were twenty-one. Is that right?

BB: That's right.

MM: And you didn't work the homestead—your father worked it?

BB: My father worked it.

MM: Was it a common thing for young women to take out homesteads around here?

BB: Oh, maybe not common. I wouldn't say it was common. Some of them did, but I wouldn't say it was common.

MM: Did you go to the county seat to sign up for it?

BB: Oh, yes, you had to go to what they call the land office. Ya. I, when I first filed on that one, see I, later on they passed a law that you could take a whole section, but you had to be single. And, about six months before I was married, I took one over that joined land my husband owned, see? But you didn't have to live on it, this last six, this last half section. But you had to improve it, so my husband improved that, ya. But, my father was my original, ya.

MM: And you had taken that out in 1916.

BB: Ya, '16. And the other one I took about 1925. The additional, ya. The year before I was married, ya.

MM: When you were teaching and you went to dances, did you usually go with a date or did you go with a group of people?

BB: Sometimes one way, and sometimes another. Ya, sometimes I went with a group of people and sometimes I went with a date, so.

MM: Did you enjoy those years a lot?
BB: Yes, very much, very much, ya.

MM: You weren't in any rush to marry?

BB: No, no. No, I was thirty-one years old when I got married.

MM: Were you considered an old maid then when you married or were people considered old maids if they didn't marry here?

BB: I don't think so. No, I don't think so.

MM: Women could do what they choose.

BB: Yes, ya.

MM: Did you ever feel any pressure to get married?

BB: No, I never felt pressure.

MM: Was it hard to give up teaching when you married? Did you ... ?

BB: No, no.

MM: You were ready to quit teaching?

BB: I was ready to quit, ya.

MM: Then, did you start helping your husband with the ranch?

BB: Well, I started helping and a year and a week, one year and one week after I was married, I had my first baby. That was Imogene, the one that lives in Missoula now. And then Ray is the next and Marianne is the youngest one. And she lives in Great Falls and her husband, and I don't know if you remember, you maybe weren't old enough to remember Ed Boyd who used to work in the bank here? No, he was related to the Boyd's though. They were his uncles. Scoop Will, you remember him?

MM: Ya.

BB: Ya, Scoop Will was Ed's uncle. And Ed's own father died when he was thirty years old. Ya. And he's a lawyer now. Now, he practices law in Great Falls. Doing very well.

MM: You had your children with a doctor? A doctor came into the house?
BB: No, I had them in this old hospital out here. All three of them were born in this old hospital.

MM: In Forsyth here?

BB: Ya, ya. They were all born in that old hospital.

MM: Was there any birth control available if women wanted to use it?

BB: Not that I know of. Not at that time. No.

MM: Were there any midwives in the community then?

BB: Not very many. Not that I know of, no.

MM: In your marriage, did you and your husband sit down together and make decisions when you had to make a big decision?

BB: Very often.

MM: Very often.

BB: Very often.

MM: One of you didn't make all the decisions?

BB: No, no, no, no. Usually talked it over. Ya.

MM: Did you handle finances together?

BB: Yes, ya.

MM: You said you were involved in a woman's club in Forsyth.

BB: Well, not, I don't think I ought to really put it down because I didn't take an active part. No, I didn't take an active part.

MM: Okay, what about the Rebekah Lodge Club?

BB: I was in the chairs of that, ya, ya.

MM: What did that club do?

BB: Huh?
MM: What did the Rebekah Lodge Club do?

BB: Well, it is an organization and you, you pick the chairs. That means you sort of, oh, offices and work on them. You're what you call, we call Passionable Grant and that's local and as you went on into state offices. Ya.

MM: Did the club help people around in the community, or what type of activities did the club do?

BB: What?

MM: The Rebekah Lodge Club.

BB: They didn't do too much, no. It was just an organization all themselves, ya.

MM: So, when you came out to this part of the state, your parents were still out in Livingston?

BB: Huh?

MM: Were your parents still back in Livingston when you came out to this part of the state?

BB: No, they, my father was out there. Ya, my father was out there. In fact, he filed on his homestead before I did on mine.

MM: Right, right.

BB: I would say about six months before I filed on mine. And my mother stayed up, that was in the fall of the year. My father filed one summer and then I filed, I remember I came down. My mother came with me and we came to Miles City, and my dad got all the training in Forsyth and went with us to Miles City. There weren't buses in those days, just trains, and we didn't have very few cars. And we didn't have any buses. I took, I think it was at the time of Columbus Day, and at that time they observed Columbus Day. They don't now, but they did at that time. That's when I came down and my mother came with me and, I filed on my own in Miles City on that one. My second one I filed here in Forsyth. Ya.

MM: How large were these homesteads?

BB: Huh?

MM: Were they large enough to make a living on?
BB: No, they, each one of them was a half section—320 acres each one. Three hundred and twenty acres so you couldn't say that you could make a living on them. And that's, my father worked out most of the time. The folks lived on the homestead, ya.

MM: Do you remember the Forsyth Flats that were up here?


MM: Did you have any contact with the people who lived on them?

BB: No, no, no.

MM: Do you remember if you ever thought it was too crowded up there, or anything?

BB: No, no. To me it wasn’t crowded at all. No, no, no.

MM: You didn't ever participate in politics too much?

BB: No, no, no.

MM: Did you start voting when women got the vote?

BB: Yes, I think I did.

MM: Were you happy that you were able to vote then?

BB: I don't know about happy, I just took it as matter of course. Ya.

MM: Did you participate in the Prohibition Movement?

BB: No.

MM: What did you think of it?

BB: Well, I think it's a good, was a good thing. Yes, I think it was a good thing.

MM: Do you remember when you were teaching, what other types of jobs women were doing who weren't married?

BB: Oh, they were clerking in stores. They didn't do the jobs that they do nowadays, at all. And very few, very few married women worked in those days in comparison to nowadays. You know there are a lot of married women who work nowadays. But, in those days, very few.
MM: You were kept pretty busy on the ranch, weren't you?

BB: Yes, yes.

MM: You had a lot to do.

BB: A lot to do, ya. Ya. And we had, we had a pretty fair size and we had bought land and kept adding to it. Ya. And my son has bought, since he's been on it, he bought his uncle's ranch, [name of ranch removed at interviewee request]. So, all together he has quite a big lands. He has about 400 head of cattle.

MM: Did you see many Indians when you first came to Montana?

BB: Oh, yes, they used to go in Rosebud in their wagons and teams.

MM: Oh, they did.

BB: Yes. That's the way they used to go, especially at fair time around then. They used to have a camp over by the river. Ya.

MM: Over by the Yellowstone?

BB: Ya. That's where they'd camp at fair time. You'd see their wagons. You know, they had these covered wagons, ya.

MM: Were you afraid of them?

BB: No, no.

MM: Did you talk to them very much?

BB: No, no.

MM: Why would they come down for the fair?

BB: To go to it, I suppose. Ya.

MM: So the whites and the Indians kinda stayed away from each other?

BB: Well, they didn't exactly stay away from each other, I don't think, but they didn't mingle together a lot. Or they mingled in a crowd, like that, but I mean they didn't have too much to do with one another. Ya. I think they did up there on the reservation. I think they did there, but not down here.
MM: Were sports available for women in Rosebud?

BB: Huh?

MM: Were women playing basketball?

BB: Yes, they were.

MM: When you were teaching in Rosebud?

BB: When I was teaching in Rosebud. And before that too, because I remember my sister Gladys was on the basketball team.

MM: She was?

BB: Yes, yes she was.

MM: And that was around 1918 or so? 1920?

BB: Ya, ya.

MM: Did you ever go swimming and wear swimming suits?

BB: Huh?

MM: Did you ever go swimming?

BB: No, I don't know a thing about swimming. I just swim like a log. Worse, too, a log will float. I couldn't float. No.

MM: Okay, we'll stop there. Thank you Mrs. Batey.

BB: Oh, well—

[End of Side A]
[Side B]

MM: Mrs. Batey, we have your permission to use this information in published form without using your name.

BB: Yes.

MM: That would be okay?

BB: You may.

MM: Thank you.

[End of Interview]