

**Oral History Number: 120-007**  
**Interviewee: Byron Thraikill**  
**Interviewer: Robert Philip**  
**Date of Interview: August 3, 1983**  
**Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project**

*Note: When this interview was conducted, the interviewee asked that the interview not be made public. Archives and Special Collections has chosen to make it public since the interviewee is deceased and says nothing harmful.*

Robert Philip: ...Thraikill on August 3, 1983. Byron, I was interested in getting your recollections on some of your early days as a youngster around here.

Byron Thraikill: When I was born and so forth?

RP: Yes, that type of thing, and where your ancestors homesteaded and this type of thing to start off with. Was it your grandfather that came into the valley?

BT: Father.

RP: Your father.

BT: Yes, my father. They came here in the fall, October, 1889. They settled down around Bell Crossing, for less than a year, and then they bought the old Willup (?) place, two and a half miles north of Woodside. I was born there, April 3 of 1895. I got my schooling mostly just here in the valley at...

RP: Was it the Fair Play School in the area?

BT: The Fairview, yes. I went to the Fairview Country School. We moved to Hamilton in 1907. We were just here for just a couple, three years. I should mention that my father died. We moved here in October 1907, and he died December 26th, 1907, after we had just moved to Hamilton.

RP: Was he in the orchard business at that time? Did he have an orchard?

BT: No, he had a farm. He raised practically everything on it: vegetables, hay, grain, cattle, hogs, and practically everything you could have on a ranch on those early days. I worked for my brother at the Woodside Store from the time I was about 14 years old until I was about 19 and had odd jobs in between. In 1917, April 1917, I went braking (?) on the railroad out of Missoula

and I hung onto my rights there until 1929. I got cut off the board down there and so I come up the valley looking for a job.

Between times, I had poisoned gophers up here on the Gold Creek District in 1922 and the Victor District in 1924. That year they were going to start poisoning gophers in Missoula, and I was cut off the board, so I came back up the valley looking for a job. I thought maybe I could maybe get a job out in Missoula. When I got up here, Shorty Merritt had been poisoning gophers. He said there was going to be a vacancy over at the laboratory and also that a poisoning job was open. He said, "Why don't you put in your application for the job at the lab as well as Missoula?" I did and I got the job of working up here for six months. I worked up here for six months and went back on the railroad. By that that time, I could work.

RP: Six months, now that was in 1925?

BT: 1925. When I went back, I got a letter from Dr. Parker, if I wanted to go back and work in October. So I came back to work in October and then I worked steady from there on. In the meantime, Spencer had been here and he mentioned something about wanting to close the laboratory down. He came in and told me, "We're going to have to close the laboratory because they locked down everything when I came here," he said, "I'm going back to D.C. and getting something else." Then he came back for two days and said, "Dr. Parker figured he could use a lot of work in fieldwork," he said, "We're going to let him stay at with that for a little while." Of course that continued.

We moved. Spencer came back...now I'm getting ahead of my story. We moved over here, but before we moved over here, there was something brought up about...after we moved over here, I had to go back on the railroad. I was told, you either come back to work or else. So I went down and found out. I talked to the train master, who I had been a conductor on the road and I had worked for, so I knew him real well. That was in '29. He said, "You'd be very cool (?) if you quit down here now because you've got your 12 years rights and you're promoted to conductor and you'll probably never be cut off of the board again."

I came back and told Spencer that. I thought, the way he acted, that he was tickled to death that I was going to quit. Finally, he came back and he said, "How did you like your work here?" I said that I liked it fine and I hated to quit. He said, "I tell you, get this place closed up. I think I can get you a job someplace else in the government service, if you continue to do the work like you've been doing things." (unintelligible) He said, "I can get you more money." And so forth and so on. I quit with the railroad then and stayed with the laboratory.

RP: Did you work for Spencer or for Parker?

BT: It was Spencer. Spencer was in charge at that time. I just don't remember what led to...what you might want from there on. We moved over here in '28. If you want to go back and mention

about Roy Corley (?) and his death...you don't want me to go into all of the details like I told a while ago, do you?

RP: Yes, just some of it.

BT: Anyway, Roy Corley got spotted fever soon after he went to work from getting out of college at Bozeman. He hadn't worked there too long until he got spotted fever by...I don't think I ever mentioned about...

RP: That isn't necessary.

BT: Anyway, I always thought my idea was true that washing dishes had caused him to get infected by infected material.

RP: Were they doing any centrifuging at that time? Did they have a...?

BT: Any what?

RP: Any Centrifuging? Do you know what a centrifuge is?

BT: No.

RP: It was animal inoculation that he was...?

BT: Everything was inoculation. We carried all of our strains at that time. I can't remember just exactly how many I had in my room. We had spotted fever, endemic typhus, European typhus, South African tick bite fever, (unintelligible) disease, and numerous others. We carried them all in guinea pigs. We had to change those strains at various times, maybe four days to eight and nine days, into guinea pigs.

I don't remember just what year it was, but Martin Lowell (?) was working for me. He had tularemia. Finally, he was getting along fine and he was almost ready to come home, and then he got pneumonia. He finally died. The thing that was different to me about that was that, when I would go up to see Martin Lowell, he was just tickled to death about how much money he would save up when he was in the hospital, then turn around and have to die.

RP: Did you grow up with Earl Malone?

BT: Yes.

RP: Was he the same age as you?

BT: He was older than I was. He was about three years older than I was. Three or four years. Yes, I knew him. We were kids together as far as that is concerned.

RP: I ran across an interesting article in the *Western News* about Earl's father who proposed that he could get rid of the gophers and take care of the gopher problem with dynamite.

BT: (laughs)

RP: He'd take a quarter of a stick of dynamite and put caps on it and then fill in all the holes of a particular colony. He'd stuff this in and set it off and it would kill the whole colony. Sounds like Earl's dad was very much like Earl.

BT: He was quite religious. When you speak of that...I'll have to tell this. I went to a (unintelligible) with Earl one time up at the Harlan's (?) place. Their yard fence was only about six feet from the edge of the house. We put on this (unintelligible), and Earl decided it would be a lot of fun to put a stick of dynamite on top of one of these fence posts. He went home and got a stick of dynamite and come back and put it on the fence post, and it raised all the shingles off the roof. That ended the (unintelligible) right there.

RP: In those early days, you spent most of the time in the laboratory working for Spencer while he was here. Later on, didn't you get out in the field and do a lot of trapping of small animals?

BT: Periodically, but not very much. Just on special trips. Earl and I went up to (unintelligible) and trapped side stripes (unintelligible). Then, too, every year for 20 years...for 20 years, I went with the various doctors vaccinating at the schools and working at their (unintelligible). I don't remember which all the doctors were, there was Doctor K.

RP: Dr. Byington was up here for a while I think.

BT: Yes, but I don't think he ever went on...

RP: Okay. They were vaccinating at the time you wanted to work over there. Did they have the vaccine...?

BT: They had the vaccine. Since they got the vaccine in '24, we were some of the first to take the vaccine.

RP: You never got spotted fever yourself?

BT: No, but I do know that a period of time after taking the vaccine I had been bitten with infected ticks. I never got any results from it.

RP: Were you delivering ticks for the preparation of the vaccine at that time?

BT: I was going and carrying all the strains. Then I would...there's another thing that I did quite a bit of was went out and dragged in ticks in the spring whenever we had a day that we could get away a while.

RP: This is something I wanted to ask you about, too. Nowadays, I get the impression that most of the ticks that are on the north face of these canyons, up among the flat rock (?). That seems to be where they predominate. Was this true at that time?

BT: Yes, I think it was and I'll tell you an experience I had which I know is true. We put poisoning up on Fred Burr Creek, on those rocks—crook rocks (?) we'd call them. We came back and fed those ticks on guinea pigs, 25 at a lot, in capsules. Then we inoculated them after they had fed for several days. The guinea pigs, there was...out of 23 groups of 25, there were 11 of them that were infected of the 25. I thought that was...with the guinea pigs that fed and the pigs that were inoculated from the ticks after they were ground up or that many that were in the groups...So you see your percentage was probably high in that particular spot.

RP: I know that...I get the impression that the gopher situation was much worse at that time than it was...

BT: Yes there was an awful lot of gophers at that particular time just like everything else. We don't have the birds here; we don't have the animals or anything.

Do you smoke?

RP: No, go ahead. [pauses] I did up until...No, no, no thanks, Byron. I quit about 9 months ago so—

BT: [laughs] I quit several times.

I gotta look back and think of various things that have happened. Of course, I don't know...Now, this is...this isn't public is it?

RP: No, no, that won't be public. see

BT: I'll never forget the time that your dad had that area up on (unintelligible) up at the Highland Gulch...

RP: Tin Cup, was it?

BT: Yes, I remember it was up on Tin Cup. You probably know that.

RP: No.

BT: They were up there trapping gophers and getting ticks and one thing or another and seeing what the infection was and the difference on the east and the west side. Your dad went to see how we were getting along and went up there. There were gophers in the traps and there wasn't anybody around! (laughs) He set a trap for them. He come to find out that both of them were up the Lolo stripping salmon! (laughs) I think the both of them almost got canned but they didn't.

RP: You said you grew up with Henry Colin?

BT: They lived down by Victor...I knew Al Murran (?), Albert, and Gus—that bunch.

RP: Are there any towns around that they're in locally that I can talk to?

BT: I don't think there are. One of them was teaching some place. Pete (?) was here for a while, but I don't know whatever came of him. I don't know if he's still alive or not. I didn't know him very well. I can't think of anybody off hand. Of course there are two of those natives (?), but there isn't anybody here from the 1920s that I know anymore. All the people I know are over in the cemetery. Since the improvements that they've made over the period of years since I was working over there, it's just unbelievable.

RP: Did you know Dr. Parker before you went to work there at the lab?

BT: No. I worked directly under Dr. Parker all the time I was over there until he died. After he died, then...was it Carrolson?

RP: Larsen.

BT: Larsen. He came here and of course he had his home assistant. I can't remember his name now. Anyway, that kind left me out on the end, where I was...There was a young fellow here that came from Chicago that had been working for a sweeping (?) company and went to work. I was partially working under him, but I was actually working under Parker all the time. Nevertheless, he and I were working together, and I always felt he was more in charge than I was as far as the department was concerned.

RP: Your chief role in the later years was maintaining strains and this sort of things, was it?

BT: All the experiments. I ran all the potency tests on the vaccines and all of Parker's experiments that he would write up. So he would write up the experiments, and I was to take it from there on. We had those temperatures to take every day. For a while, before the Second World War, for a while there, we were taking as high as 1,500 temperatures.

RP: In a day?

BT: A day.

RP: That's with the old type of thermometer where you had to wait. (laughs)

BT: The kick that I got out of it was that you couldn't waste any time. This was back when Jimmy...Jimmy Corley (?) and Roy Jones worked for me there for a while. We always ran experiments and tested how long it would take us to take the temperature of guinea pigs. With 48 pigs to a cage, we were ranging all the way from 23 to 25 minutes to take 48 guinea pigs on a three minute thermometer, which is supposed to be...the funny part of it was some of those thermometers...if the guinea pigs were shot today, it probably wouldn't have a fever tomorrow. We would take the temperature, but if it didn't start going up, we'd...We had a certain way of doing that we were getting good temperatures of the pigs, but we weren't getting the highest temperatures. Following that every day, knowing how long ticks were going to live, you get into a pretty good cycle.

We had to do it because we had autopsies to make. Besides the temperatures, we had a whole load of autopsies to make and records to make every day, and strains to change besides our experimental work we were doing. Without more people, you had to cut corners to a certain degree. Parker and I talked it over, and I told him what we were doing. We were taking the temperatures, but we weren't taking them to the highest degree because (unintelligible). I got quite a kick out of that because a lot of people thought we weren't taking the temperatures.

RP: Did you ever feel like you picked up a (unintelligible) infection during your work there?

BT: I went to work in March...I was 25 or 26. In May, I got tularemia. Another funny thing is...

RP: That's when Parker got it too.

BT: No, he had another spell. I don't know what it was, but after that...Earl Malone and Alvaro (?)...Alvaro was working for a while up there. He was a pharmacist. He had a ranch down in Corvallis and he worked for the lab.

RP: What's his name? I don't know him.

BT: Alvaro. I don't remember what his initials were either. I just don't know...Anyway, he later quit there and went to Missoula and worked there for (unintelligible) from time to time. They were taking the ticks off of a rabbit that had tularemia. There, at the end of the table where they were working, there was pillar that was about so big around and went up to the ceiling to hold it up. Alvaro was pressed on this rabbit, holding it on the table, and he took a leak. That spray hit that post and it sprayed through the room. Of course, they got quite the kick out of that, too.

About five days later, they had tularemia, both of them. I was over at the sink washing dishes. We had all of our glassware to wash in those days. I think the next day, I got tularemia. The three of us had tularemia at the same time. That's all it was was that that spray in the air that caused it. There was no reason for me to get it because I was over maybe 10 or 15 feet from where they were. That was that.

In the later years, we had some ticks come down from Canada and we were feeding (?) those. We got this disease but we didn't know what it was. Finally, I got it and come to find out, I think they called it choriomegitis.

RP: That must be choriomeningitis.

BT: Choriomeningitis. So those were the only two things I've ever had.

RP: How many were employed at the laboratory when you went to work?

BT: When I went to work...The first time I went to work, there was Ed Fox, Earl Malone, Dr. Parker, and Marie Samington (?) was our secretary or office girl. There was five of us. I think that's how many there was when I went to work there. Then that fall, when I went back to work, there was Chess, Fox, (unintelligible)...On account of appropriation they let Fox go (?). Then in October, that's when Parker told me about if I wanted to go back to work. The state paid me from October until January.

RP: In the late 1920s, it sounds like there was a big expansion on the laboratory. This is when Yellowson (?), Cole, and later my father, came on board. This was more in terms of research activities, I think, rather than vaccine preparation.

BT: Yes, that was an awful lot of research work. We ran an awful lot of series of work in tularemia. We were taking water samples about the valley and picking up tularemia's various strains. We carried out quite an experiment out here on...

RP: Deer Creek?

BT: Yes.

RP: (unintelligible)

BT: Yes, I was trying to think of fellow's name that was running the ranch. Anyway, that was a cattail swamp and we were taking water samples and soil samples out there all the time. They had found muskrats that had died from tularemia. We were getting some soil samples and water samples up there that had tularemia on them. We followed that stream down where it entered into the river, below Woodside. We were getting tularemia in the water samples clear down to...



RP: In some of the old records, it mentions that after Leroy, or Lee, died, his brother went to work there. Was that Jim, Jim Corley (?)?

BT: Jimmy, he was probably in Bozeman when his brother died.

RP: He was younger?

BT: Yes

(Break in audio)

BT: ...just help out because their mother had died. Anyway, Jimmy then worked for Dr. Parker in the same room as myself. He worked there for quite a few years.

RP: He used to cut my hair when I was a kid.

BT: What?

RP: He used to cut my hair when I was a kid.

BT: Is that so?

RP: Yes.

(Break in tape)

BT: They got to playing bridge. I know they were playing...

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

BT: They worked over here, worked over at the old laboratory.

RP: Well, thank you, Byron.

BT: (unintelligible)

RP: Yes. There may be, as I said, other questions that I'll think of and I'll get back to you.

BT: Look at me, I can't think of those things either...That's what I've noticed. Since I've come to be 80 years old, my memory is gone and everything else is gone. (laughs)

(Break in audio)

BT: ...up in my room that kept that in. I had (unintelligible). When the barrel was empty, I got (unintelligible) rolled the barrel out and here was plugs all the way up the back. They were drinking the damn alcohol out. I come to find out that it was a bunch here in town with the help of some of the younger bunch, like Neil and others. Anyway, they'd go there at night and go in the window. They punch a hole in that wooden barrel, drain out the alcohol, and were taking it. Here, there was (unintelligible) all the way up those goddamn barrels! (laughs)

RP: Drained out what they needed.

BT: After that there was a hasp on the door.

RP: The story goes that Earl was quite a rumrunner.

BT: Yes, during Prohibition. That was the deal...Bill—he worked for the Forest Service. What was his name...? Anyway, Earl was over in the Locksaw trapping marten. He was over on the game preserve trapping marten. Bill...I can't think of what his name was. I'll think about it pretty quick. Anyway, they sent him over to catch him at this. By god, he went over, and they finally caught him over there all right. They brought him back.

At that time, that was a government offense. They had to take him to Missoula to have his trial. Bill and Earl, they weren't friends, but they were acquainted with one another. This guy up here was (unintelligible) with Earl. He had the evidence with him and he put the evidence in his room. Earl didn't go to jail. He got him a room at the hotel. Earl left his room, he got the key, and went up and took the evidence and got rid of the evidence. The trial didn't have any evidence! (laughs)

RP: Also the time he got bitten by a rattlesnake. I don't know true that story was.

BT: What?

RP: The time he was bitten by a rattlesnake, and he just tied a shoelace around his leg, hopped on a horse, and rode (unintelligible) for town. I don't know how true that story was.

BT: I never heard of that one.

RP: Okay. I've got to go, but thank you very much.

(Break in audio)

BT: I don't know about his dad. This is all hearsay as far as I'm concerned. That is, this is the hearsay. Jim Bowman (?) I know he took it and I know he was sick with it. Anyway, for years afterwards...after this vaccine came out in '24, they claimed it was [Hideyo] Noguchi's vaccine. That was the name. You couldn't tell these people that it wasn't. I was in Missoula at the time when it came out in the *Missoulian*. That's where I got my (unintelligible).

RP: Was this horse serum or was this rabbit serum that was combined with the strains?

BT: From my understanding, it was rabbit serum.

RP: It may be the serum itself that made him sick.

BT: That's what it was. It was the serum. He didn't have spotted fever. I don't mean that or anything like that.

RP: It was the serum.

BT: It was the serum that made him sick.

RP: I guess they were really sick over the serum.

BT: I don't know of any others, but only this one (unintelligible). I heard about that. Maybe Phil would know about it or maybe someone of the family would. I've known this for the last 40 years or so. That is at least what I found out about.

RP: Noguchi, later, had an assistant that died of spotted fever back in New York City at the Rockefeller Foundation. I don't know the circumstances of that.

BT: What was the guy that got (unintelligible) disease here?

RP: Leroy Jones (??)?

BT: No, I mean how did he get the strain of (unintelligible) disease, I wonder? What I'm thinking about is my doctor, whether it was Noguchi that had the spotted fever...I think it was Noguchi that had perfected the spotted fever vaccine.

RP: Right.

BT: Is that right?

RP: Yes, that's right. Then he came to Missoula and they had a conference down here, I think in 1922 it was.

BT: Yes, something like that.

RP: Noguchi presented this information on his...

BT: That's when I read it in the *Missoulian*. When they had this conference down there. That's how the *Missoulian* got it, in those days.

RP: I think A.H. Downing actually had spotted fever working out on over on his ranch there at one time.

BT: Who was that?

RP: Was it A. H. Downing? Bill Downing's uncle or...Dean Downing's father maybe. I don't know.

BT: I don't know anything about...

RP: I'll let you go.

[End of Interview]