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Oral History Number: 120-018a
Interviewee: Clark Grey
Interviewer: Mary Bielenberg
Date of Interview: June 1984
Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project

Mary Bielenberg: ...with Clark Grey. Mr. Grey, were you born in the Bitterroot?

Clark Grey: No, I was born in Anaconda.

MB: When was it that your parents came to the Bitterroot?

CG: My parents came here in February of 1899.

MB: Why was it that they came to the Bitterroot?

CG: Well, I don't know. Father had a large family to feed there in Anaconda and things weren't looking too good. He wanted to get the young kids out on our farm.

MB: Where was the farm?

CG: The farm was three miles northwest of Hamilton.

MB: Oh, northwest of Hamilton? Oh, I see. About how many acres did you have there?

CG: He bought 160 acres from C. Rennicks.

MB: Oh, I see. Now, you weren't old enough to work on the farm then?

CG: Well, no, not hardly.

MB: (laughs) Were there older children in your family?

CG: Oh, yes. There were four older than I was. Three—

MB: Oh, three older than you?

CG: Three older.

MB: I see. Now where he bought this farm, was it in ranching? I mean, did you have animals or...What kind of farming did you do?

CG: Well, It was just hay and pasture principally at that time, although Mr. Rennicks had planted about 500 apple trees several years previous to that time.

MB: He was the one who planted the apple trees?

CG: Yes, he planted the first of them.

MB: Oh, I see. And that was about 500 of them?

CG: Yes.

MB: Good heavens! That was a lot of apples. Did your father plant more?

CG: Oh yes. He saw how wonderful they were, and what those trees were just coming into good bearing at that time after we had got on the ranch. He was really enthused about the apples at that time, so he planted several hundred more McIntosh trees.

MB: They were all McIntosh, were they?

CG: He planted all McIntosh at that time; although, Mr. Rennicks had planted some Waltana and Alexanders and a few McIntosh.

MB: I was interested in knowing why it was that the valley was so prolific in the apples. Was it the perfect climate for apple growing here?

CG: It was a good climate and the nearly all of the soil was virgin soil at that time. It had never run down or cropped to death, and the apples really took off just like a weed and did wonderfully.

MB: About how many apple growers were here during the peaks—the peak of the apple industry?

CG: Well, what?

MB: Don't have any idea?

CG: I don't have any idea. There were a lot of them, of course, after the big ditch was put in and after W. I. Moody picked up all of the cheap land they could on both sides of the valley.

MB: Now who was W. I. Moody? He was not from the valley, was he?

CG: No. He was a pretty sharp individual from the East that planned on making millions and just about did it here. He developed most of the orchards that were raised in the valley after the

first farmers took hold and showed what the apples were like here. He sold land by hundreds of acres up and down the valley after he had planted it to trees.

MB: Well now, in one of the tapes I read about you, you went to Canyon Creek School. Is that right?

CG: That's right.

MB: That's quite a ways from where your original farm was, where the original—

CG: Two miles from where we lived.

MB: Oh I see. And then would you walk to school?

CG: We walked the biggest part of the time except in the bad weather in the winter.

MB: Then did you have what they called the school wagons?

CG: No.

MB: No school wagons?

CG: No. Each one had to get there by on his own legs.

MB: Did anyone come by horseback or anything or mostly walk?

CG: No, not that I remember.

MB: No I have heard the mention of the "Red Car," in connection with the apple industry. What was the "Red Car"?

CG: It wasn't car; it was cars. Those were the big cars that Moody and his partner Nichols picked up the Easterners that he got—suckers you might call them. He picked them up in Missoula and got them up here and took them all over the valley. He showed them what the apples are doing and some of the well-developed orchards at that time which were mostly on the west side, in our vicinity.

MB: I see. There were some up near Charlos Heights is that right?

CG: They planted all that country up there later on.

MB: And he was developing property to sell up there, is that right?

CG: That's right.

MB: What kinds of cars were they? Were they automobiles? Regular—

CG: Oh yes. I think they were Oldsmobiles.

MB: They were big cars I suppose?

CG: They were old big cars and held about eight or ten people in each one of them and cost a lot of money, even in those days.

MB: I suppose women would come out with their beautiful hats and would be riding up and down the valley looking for property to buy? Is that right?

CG: They showed them to a few of the orchards—a few of the best producing orchards—and showed them what were they doing. They were real careful that they didn't let any of them out to talk to any of the natives here. Then they took them back to the hotel and entertained them there and then took them to their train in Missoula.

MB: This was what period of time?

CG: This was probably around 1907 on up to '20.

MB: I was interested in knowing about how many workers would be on an apple farm. When would they have to come? Did they spray for them for the apples?

CG: There was no spraying at that time. There were no insects. They advertised the fact, when they were trying to sell this property, that you could eat a McIntosh after dark. But that didn't last forever.

MB: No. What was it that brought the insects?

CG: They came, so the story goes, that they came from the west principally in Washington, Wenatchee country, and they left...They would sell apples here. They had them in boxes, and the boxes were scattered around there the orchards here. They had the codling moth up in them, at that time, and they soon got in here by the millions. But it was a thing of the past that you couldn't eat an apple after dark.

MB: Now on your father's farm, besides your brothers, who were working in the orchards, how many would he hire in the late summer to pick these apples, do you think?

CG: Now when the orchard was fully grown and produced a large number of boxes, my father sold, oh from 5,000 to 7,000 boxes—packed boxes—a season as a rule. He would hire 15 or 20 pickers.

MB: Now would they be school children?

CG: Oh no.

MB: No, they would not be. They would be people that would come just to pick the apples?

CG: Yes, and they had three or four packers and probably two or three others to help dispose of the crop.

MB: Did you have packing houses on your property?

CG: Yes.

MB: You made up the boxes there, too?

CG: That's right.

MB: That was quite an undertaking. Did each orchard owner have his own packing plant?

CG: I think so.

MB: Oh, I see. Then how were they shipped out of the valley?

CG: When they started to ship them out of the valley, why, they had the Montana Fruit Distributors here and another organization. They had the fruit growers bring their apples to the warehouse here in Hamilton, where they were graded and sorted and packed, wrapped in paper, and boxed and put on the cars. Of course, that was when they first got that market in New York and they started shipping them back there.

MB: The whole valley would send them back to New York then?

CG: Well, I wouldn't say the whole valley, but several of the largest orchards.

MB: What was the harvesting time here? The first of September?

CG: The latter part of September and the first part of October.

MB: After the first frost or something in the—

CG: Well, we usually had a light frost or two during about picking time in October.

MB: Can you name some other fruit growers, some apple growers that were here in the valley at the same time?

CG: Well, Ben Press was right close to us, and he had a nice orchard and raised a lot of nice apples. JB Tanner was a showing place for the easterners that Mr. Moody took them around and showed them Mr. Tanner's orchard. Of course, it was...Ed Johnson over in that neighborhood.

MB: Now on the east side, you mentioned that most of the apples were grown on the west side, but—

CG: In the early days.

MB: In the early days.

CG: Yes.

MB: But when the ditch was completed there was more water on the west side and so—

CG: There were more trees that had been planted, hundreds of acre of the east side, and of course, other sections of the valley, too, up around Darby, west and northwest of Darby, they planted hundreds of acres around there.

MB: It must have been beautiful up here in the spring when they were all in bloom.

CG: Oh yes.

MB: It was too bad really that the industry went downhill. What was it that caused the industry to lose its zip here?

CG: Well, first, the market they developed and thought would be wonderful for the Valley only lasted a year or two, in New York. One of the main things that caused that to go haywire was the fact that it was too far away from the Bitterroot. The freight was a dollar a box to ship them back there. And also other orchards in the country, in the east, are close to New York, they had planted McIntosh a few years before and they were coming into production. There was also British Columbia. They had McIntosh orchards that came into production, too, about that time. I guess they shipped by water, from there, and it only cost just a fraction of as much as it did here on the railroads.

MB: What was the average pay scale do you think for those people that were working in the apple orchards?

CG: Well, I think they, most of the pickers, were paid by the day at that time, at probably about a dollar and a half a day. The packers, Harley Sargent and his wife, were some of the main packers that went from orchard to orchard and they got ten cents a box at that time. I think the most of it was less than that.

MB: You mentioned that the moth came to the valley and then of course, I suppose, everybody had to spray for their apples, and that was an additional expense for the grower. What do you think? Do you think that was one of the reasons it became increasingly too expensive to produce these apples even with all of the competition, or?

CG: Well, of course, that contributed to the downfall, as far as that goes, because it was real expensive to spray. They didn't have the proper machinery for doing a thorough job at that time. Even with the expensive spraying, they still had lots of worms.

MB: Now where did they get their boxes? Where did the growers get their boxes?

CG: Well the A.C.M. Company [Anaconda Copper Mining Company] in Bonner manufactured the biggest part of them. They were shipped here by the carload to the warehouse here in Hamilton down in the mill yard. But the small mills like Lagerquist, here in town, they also made a lot of apple boxes.

MB: Were they pine boxes?

CG: Yes, all made out of the yellow pine.

MB: I see. Now, did these people that came to visit the valley with Moody buy a lot of property as an investment, to come and live here? What do you think--to develop into more orchards?

CG: The biggest part of them, I think, had the intention of making a home here. They came here and bought these orchards which were planted with trees, and the trees run from a year to maybe two or three years old at that time. They paid big prices for them, even land that had trees a year old on them, 400-600 dollars an acre. A lot of those people, as Moody told them, that they could make 1000 dollars per acre every year after the trees came into production, which is five or six years old. And the most of them had hopes of living here the rest of their lives and making a lot of money. But they soon found out that there wasn't much truth to all of that. It was an uphill battle and hard road to hold and there wasn't enough money or income from it to even pay taxes and keep on eating.

MB: Nick Kramis talks about walking to school in Charlos Heights as a youngster, through a lot of these old houses that had been abandoned, but he said that they were such beautiful homes, a lot of them, up in that area that had been built on the property.

CG: Well, if they were built after Moody came in, then pulled the wool over their eyes and made people think there was a fortune there, why probably a lot of them did build nice homes. But they soon found out that they couldn't make enough on those places to pay the taxes.

MB: That's right. And they really abandoned them he said.

CG: A lot of them just pulled out and left the land and the homes...just forgot about them, or tried to.

MB: Well now, after the industry went defunct, what did your father do? Did he go back to another kind of farming?

CG: Everybody, practically, that stayed on the farm, and made a home out of it, they found out they had to diversify. And they had to go into a lot of different things. They raised hogs and had more milk cows or cattle. Lots of them later on and years later, went into gardening.

MB: It was almost a depression here for a while then, wasn't it?

CG: It certainly was.

MB: It must have been pretty bad.

CG: Besides all the hard luck that they had of trying to find a market for the apples to stay in that business, they had several different years up and down the valley that the crop was ruined with hail and also frost. They had two or three years that I can remember that after the apples were small and got started to grow and that they had killing frost that killed nearly all the fruit.

MB: Did your father raise cherries, too, or just the...did he have just the apples?

CG: Later on, they got the cannery proposition started here and wanted a lot of cherries for the cannery. Father planted about 300 cherry trees, and lots of other places did, too. Before we left the ranch in 1948, why, we were producing around 10 to 13 tons of pie cherries a year.

MB: I see. Now did you have the moth...Did you have any disease that bothered the cherries, too?

CG: Yes, they had a cherry fly that started in there, just before we left the ranch, but it was easily controlled by spraying. You only had to spray the cherries, usually, just once, and that took care of it, while the coddling moth required several sprays a season and you still had lots of worms.

MB: Now did you and your wife have a farm of your own, or did you take over your father's farm?

CG: No, we just stayed there from the time we were married and helped on the ranch and took over after the folks passed away.

MB: And you married. What was your wife's name?

CG: Irene Waugh.

MB: Irene Waugh?

CG: W-A-U-G-H.

MB: Oh I see, then, you were a native, too? Oh, I see. Well, then was Mrs. Romney, was your sister? And was she the youngster of the family I suppose?

CG: That's right. She was the baby.

MB: And probably didn't work in the fields too much.

CG: Well—

Unidentified Speaker: He didn't say that. He didn't say (unintelligible), but he wanted us to.

Shut that off.

MB: I have—

[End of Interview]