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Interviewee: Malcolm Sizer
Interviewer: Mary Bielenberg
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Mary Bielenberg: —recording of an interview with Malcolm Sizer, of Hamilton, who was here in the era when the apple and cherry industry was at its peak. Mr. Sizer, when was it that you first came here?

Malcolm Sizer: In March 1, 1922.

MB: How old were you then?

MS: I was 20—21, I guess, 22.

MB: Did you come here for some special purpose, or to join your parents?

MS: No, to join the parents and run the ranch, which we did.

MB: Was your father a farmer here or was he in the orchard business when—

MS: Well, they--the orchard was given to them on my mother's side by a brother of hers through an estate that they had and was why he offered to give them the ranch, this part of it, for her share of the estate. So they took it and moved up here. They came up here with one of the first trucks that ever came into the valley.

MB: Oh, I see. Well now, you were out of school by the time you got here?

MS: Well, I quit school come long before that because I got married young.

MB: Oh, I see. You brought your wife with you then?

MS: Oh, you bet, wife and two children.

MB: And where was it that you lived then?

MS: We lived in Castle Rock, Colorado, just out of Denver.

MB: I see. But you came up here and you lived---and where was your—

MS: I lived right there on the ranch because there were two houses on the place.

MB: And where was your ranch?

MS: The ranch was the old Grover place out on the west side. Do you know where D.C. Grey's place was?

MB: Oh yes, okay.

MS: It was right square behind it.

MB: Did you---was the apple industry going at the time that you came?

MS: Oh, you bet. That's all we had over there on the west side. At that time, the valley shipped about 300 railroad cars of apples out a year.

MB: Did they have a packing plant here?

MS: They had two or three.

MB: Oh.

MS: Where the mill is over there that belongs to the boy from Ronan...what's his name?

MB: I know who you mean.

MS: You know who I mean...Ralph...Lake...The place that Lake has, all of that was a packing warehouse. Also, the Sportsman Motel was all a packing plant and it had a half basement underneath it that could store apples downstairs in the basement. Half of it could be stored, oh I suppose, 10, 15 carloads of apples, railroad cars.

MB: Now were these apples scheduled to go to special companies? Did they come in and contract for them?

MS: Oh no, no. We had two outfits, like I said, the one over there, the red warehouse over on Main Street going out of town, and Mr. Gerer, out here on the west side, was president and chairman and he sold the apples through that warehouse. And Hackett (unintelligible). Hackett...that doesn't sound exactly right. Well, one of the other boys that had the 1,000 acre ranch at one time had the other warehouse down here. Some of the farmers would go through one and some would grow through another. But the apples were hauled in there originally when I first came. All the apples went to one or the other warehouses and were packed there.

MB: Was it one special kind of apple?

MS: Mostly McIntosh, 90 percent McIntosh.

MB: How many orchards do you think there were here in the valley?

MS: Oh, that's kind of hard to say. We were all orchards out on that hill. From the river everything was orchards out there. But there was a lot more. There was quite a few on the east side on Hamilton 9th, and we had them on the west side all along here on this west side road, there's orchards all along there, but—

MB: And Charlos Heights?

MS: Charlos Heights was almost out when I came.

MB: Oh, I see.

MS: It was pretty near over when I came. But, they still did have the...they call it Westmont? Up at Darby, just west of Darby, the largest orchard in the world, 2,000 acres of McIntosh up there and was run by the DuPont Powder Company.

MB: Oh, I see.

MS: They had six different...they called them...divisions to their 2,000 acres and my brother ran one of them for two years. They had four or five sprayers on each division to spray that part of orchard and those 2,000 acres up there of bearing orchard at that time.

MB: I understand that there were some lovely homes up there and beautiful places.

MS: Well, they were nice homes for those days. The homes were nice, but the...Up there at Darby, they didn't have...they had a main hall, for people that they were keeping there to work there, too. That was straight west of the town up on the hill. There were no real fancy homes up in there at that time on the west side.

MB: And now, besides the apples, were there also cherries here?

MS: Yes, we had cherries, and quite a few more had cherries. Quite a few of the cherries were raised in the valley. The old Never Sweat Ranch up here had an orchard in on top of the hill. You can't even---you could go by there and not see a tree or a stump or nothing at the back of the new road, you know, you have to go up off the new road there to that. We always had cherries out here. We had cherries all the time. I was here 50 some years. We produced on our---on my own 20 acres, anywhere from 10 to 30 tons of sour cherries every year.

MB: Did people come from out of town to pick these or were they mostly school kids?

MS: Oh no, local people. We always stuck with local people. You'd get a few outsiders to pick cherries sometimes. Sometimes it's true that they would be picking sweet cherries up at Flathead and when they was done, they'd come down here maybe and come and pick for us. I had a few of them. Professional pickers never did please me very much because they're pretty rough, pretty rough with the fruit. And then John Parker, of course, got (unintelligible) towards the last with the (unintelligible) machines. He didn't use the hand labor. I'll take that back. He did use some hand labor to clean up where he couldn't get to with his machines or where it wasn't possible for him.

MB: Before that there was a cannery here, isn't there, for the cherries?

MS: Parker filled up the cannery, but the cannery that originally canned our cherries when we first came wasn't Parker's. It was in Stevensville. The first year I was here, the first two years, down at Bass Spur, do you know where Bass Spur is?

MB: Well, Bass Creek Road you mean? I don't know where Bass Spur is.

MS: Well you go down past Stevensville, you go along that straight stretch and you make a bend before you go up over that little hill?

MB: Yes.

MS: Well it used to be a bridge across there. It was just inside of there, see, just on the right side of the road before you went to that bend. And that's called "Bass," and there was a cannery there for canning cherries. And Stevensville canned cherries. I hauled some of the cherries to Stevensville, even after Parker started, because their price seemed to be a little better there for a year or two. Johnny had my cherries for 30 years or more anyhow.

MB: Well now, where---He's still is in operation. Where does he get his cherries?

MS: Well he's got about 400 acres of his own. He's got one of the biggest cherry orchards, sour cherry orchards, in the United States.

MB: Right here in Hamilton?

MS: Oh yes, here on Dutch Hill. Over on Dutch Hill, and he's got another on down at the Curlew Mine. And his son runs that one now, Tommy. And they put in quite a lot more down there again. They had about 30 acres when Johnny bought that and they put in some more. So he's got those two orchards and he did have an orchard on the east side. I believe that has kind of gone by the wayside. There used to be an orchard right west of Victor, just going towards the cemetery. There was an orchard there and that hasn't been taken care of.

MB: Where were these apples picked when you were in—?

MS: Well originally when we came, I would say about 75 percent of the McIntosh went to New York City, of the total production of the valley was sent to New York City, put in cold storage and then sold later in the year.

MB: I see.

MS: In fact, I sold one car in New York in June, the following June after they were picked and sent back in, put in storage, I sold one car that brought be a dollar more a box than extra fancy Red Delicious box on an offer.

MB: When you---what time of the year do they mature here?

MS: Well you always pick in somewhere after the 20th of September.

MB: I see. After the first frost, or?

MS: Well, you don't wait for frost. If they don't frost, you pick anyhow because McIntosh will fall when they're ripe. They'll fall and they have to be picked. And of course, we were earlier than some of the rest of the valley. I was out here when the earliest one was picked because we were as about as early as anybody in the valley with the apples. We were on a south slope there with a lot of the apples so we could start picking a little earlier than some of the others. As far apples were concerned, my goodness, you don't know what an apple is anymore.

MB: A lot bigger?

MS: A lot smaller.

MB: Oh really?

MS: Oh my. We shipped 20 railroad cars ourselves off the two ranches one year, wrapped and packed, 800---798 boxes to the car and we shipped 20 railroad cars off our own two ranches...one year. Last year or three or four years ago, when I sold to Mr. Waldo, I picked 3,000 boxes of apples plus about 18 tons of sour cherries off the ranch. They say it won't pay, well, those people who say it won't pay, are the people who don't want to work. They just don't want to work, that's all because---apples got so---we got worms in the valley finally. There were no worms when I came to the valley. That is give them a carload that they could find a worm and maybe one in our cellar. We had a cellar where we hold 3,000 boxes, big three foot walls, rock walls, with a hollow space between them. We could hold apples year round there or hold them as long as you could anywhere, not as good as cold storage of course. But you didn't have cold storage when I first came. There was no such thing. Heck, we had to get our ice over here at the mill pond and haul it home.

I can't remember the fellow's name that had the mill pond. He owned that place---he owned the building where Rummel is. He built that little mill, you know, that was small before and Rummel built onto it. He built that building for his ice plant and his coal deal. One year, since I been here, we had no ice through all the winter, until in March, in about March the eighth or tenth, somewhere along there, the men that run it, called me and told me that they're going to cut ice said, "We're going to cut ice tomorrow. We've got four-inch ice." And he said, "I don't think we're going to anymore this year, so we're going to cut." They had to fill their icehouses, too, him and (unintelligible). The same (unintelligible) had went up on the (unintelligible) tower. And the other guy had his right down here at the Mill Pond. So we kept pulling this ice. In those days you didn't have trucks and the transportation you have today, so we drove a team. I brought a team to town, I get four inch ice and the sun was shining and the water was just running off that ice. When I got home and put it in my icehouse, I had three inch ice. That's all I had. But we had ice all fall.

MB: Now did you store the apples here and then ship them back east?

MS: Oh sure. There was no storage here, no storage other than these two houses we're talking about. They had a little storage but they were shipping them about as fast as they could pack them. Of course, those days, these apples were all wrapped, extra fancy and fancy. You had to size them. There couldn't be over three sizes in the box. If they varied more than that, the inspector turned you down. So you had three sizes to go on. We packed them at home at the ranch. And Mrs. Reynold taught me to teach—Mrs. Frank Reynold—taught me how to pack apples.

MB: Oh, I see.

MS: I didn't know a thing about it, but she sure did. We sold one year to a fellow by the name of Whitelaw in Missoula, and I learned to wrap then and later on, when I run my own crew, of course, I learned just as good as anybody else could learn. You knew what would go and what wouldn't go but you'd slide it along...If you found a packer that could pack 65, 60 to 65 boxes a day, you had a cracker jack—just a cracker jack. Most of them were around 40 to 50 boxes. Of course you're sliding along here...you get an apple that big, you've got it way down here on the end because you've got too many of them, see? So you slide it way down here or put that in...it's got to go in there perfect. It's got to go in one in the corner, one over here, and one in the middle. Then you put two in there, then you go three, and then two, see? However many that was up there was what you noted how many apples were in the box. You knew exactly, you see. All you had to do to know was stock, and you knew what was going to be in there when you got done. We run from 216 up to 96 size with McIntosh. I packed many a thousand boxes myself, many a thousand. That's when we probably would have bought the box deal. My gosh, you talk about work! We bought two carloads of boxes from the Interstate down at...What's the little town east of Missoula? First one (unintelligible).

MB: Bonner.

MS: Bonner. We bought two carloads with 8,000 boxes shipped in it, in each one. That's 16,000 boxes we bought one year. In those times, you had to have the lids and all. He had to haul them...unload them from the river, and haul them home. Then we had to make them our own selves. You had to put them together yourself. I guess I could probably make probably five hundred a day, which is one heck of a lot of boxes.

(Unintelligible) handle business and putting eight nails on each side, eight nails on the bottom, two cleats on the bottom, you were putting 24 nails in every box. I guess I could make a box in about 30 or 45 seconds sometimes when I...You understand it's just like anything else, like (unintelligible) or anything. When you first start you don't do very good, but after you've done this for a while, you get faster and faster. Well, I had a man who worked for me for four or five years, fellow by the name of Moe, and his kids helped and his wife packed. He was complaining about us one day. We were making a box and another of his boys helped me, and he was making and I was making on a machine. He was complaining about the boxes because we had bought those over at Lagerquist.

MB: I see.

MS: You know where Lagerquist was right? There by the fairgrounds.

MB: Yes.

MS: I bought all my boxes there and his were all two piece sides, which did make it a little bit slower to handle, all the ones you got the other way were all glued so they were one piece sides. He just said, "I'll just bet you a dollar if you don't make 500 tomorrow night."

I said, "I'll just take that then." So I went to work at eight o'clock, the fellow (unintelligible) would stop and smoke a lot and then when he would come back. He'd lost his rhythm so he wouldn't get started and couldn't make near as fast as he could, but I stayed right there and pounded nails. When noon came I had to have another keg of nails, so I run around and got another keg of nails. The three of us would take a whole keg of nails every day. The three of us would knock out a keg of nails a day. (laughs) I made my 500 and piled myself and handled my own lumber and everything and went to town, lost 15 minutes on that. (laughs)

MB: (laughs) How many people did you hire during a season?

MS: Well at one time, when we had both ranches, we had 65 people picking alone and they had two bosses with them. I had seven apple packers out in the orchard. We were packing out in the orchard with then, started packing immediately, as soon as we could. We had two wagons to haul them in from the orchards to these...to the packers and haul them into the ranch. We had 65 people working for us, besides the extra. We were loading cars at the same time, so he had three men over at the car.

MB: The railroad was really a very important factor then?

MS: Oh we didn't have no equipment, no trucks. We finally got a fairly good-sized truck to haul it down, but my goodness, it didn't haul as much as I'd haul my two ton truck afterwards. It got so that you could do real good...The apple business got so tough there one time, I mean the market did, I sold wrapped and packed extra fancy and fancy for 55...For the small apple, 55 cents now—for the small size apples—and 65 for the preferred sizes. The preferred sizes were the three middle sizes. They preferred them and gave you a little more for them. I put them on the car, and I had about 12 or 14 cars that year, and we never lost a penny. We didn't make very much, (laughs) but we didn't lose anything.

MB: Fifty-five cents a box?

MS: Fifty-five cents a box. Fifty-five and 65, yes. That's the cheapest I've ever sold.

MB: What was the average pay that you paid you pickers in those days?

MS: Five cents a box and sometimes four.

MB: Oh, I see. They would have to hustle wouldn't they?

MS: You bet they had to hustle. Well, gee, they made a lot more than I was banging on the boxes, on the box of apples, or on ten boxes of apples, or 50 boxes of apples. We only had about two-cent spread on our apples—on our boxes at that price. You had to watch everything, or you wouldn't break even. You couldn't break even.

MB: Why was it that the industry sort of dropped out of sight here in the valley?

MS: Well, I'm sure because I said, these people didn't want to work and the other thing was that the apples were beginning to get wormy and they didn't want to spray. The guy with the little patch couldn't afford a big sprayer, for one thing. Because a sprayer at those times...I think when we bought our new one, I think it cost us about 1,700 dollars for the sprayer. Now it's about 17,000 dollars for the same kind of a sprayer.

MB: How about the Washington apple industry? Did that have anything to do with taking Montana out of the running?

MS: Well, you're asking me. I sold my own apples most of the time. I got to going out with them in a truck and selling them all over the state, everywhere. I took apples to Bismarck, North Dakota, I shipped a car over there. I took them out of the car and sold them. I shipped a car to myself in Banego, Montana, run over two trucks and took them out of there. I took two trucks on the way and unloaded, sold them, and sold the stuff out of the car and delivered that back home to get some more, see. So we got to selling our own, but the biggest shares of people

wouldn't go out and try to sell their apples and they wouldn't spray them. Half of them weren't clean, and the inspection, the department wouldn't let you get out unless you hid them or something.

He had one fellow who used to be in Corvallis and he would buy a wormy apple (unintelligible) and load loose apples into the cars. He would put good apples over the front, so when the inspector would come along, he would get away with some of the stuff that shouldn't have been...shouldn't have went out of the valley at all. But most of that stuff went to North Dakota where they didn't know much about apples and didn't care as long as they got them fairly cheap. The apple business got so tough for the people that I think that's the biggest reason most of them went out was the fact that we got the worms in here. Before that time, you could go pick an apple of anybody's tree anywhere and you would not get a worm. But when we got to bringing boxes from other places and whatnot, then you brought in the worms, the moth, you didn't bring the worm, but it was in the moth stage. I had seen boxes with hundreds of them moths in them. They have a cocoon, you know. It's kind of a like...oh, what do you call this white stuff that you have?

MB: Kind of fuzzy.

MS: Cotton candy. That's what they looked like. The cocoons were white.

MB: And they were in the wood.

MS: They were just in the crack, along the crack of the wood. They wouldn't be in the wood itself. But where the boards come together, there would be kind of a crack there, and that's where they always would nest. Then they would come out of the cocoon stage and go into a caterpillar, and then into a miller, and then she's the one that did the damage. She'd lay 50 to 100 eggs. And the other thing was, that half the people, half to I'd say three-fourths of them, didn't watch her, and didn't know when to spray. They just didn't know. You only had three or four days of time to spray. You either get them at the right time, or you're done, one of the two.

MB: Well now with the cherries, it still continues, and really there aren't a lot of sour cherry orchards anymore around Montana?

MS: No, not hardly.

MB: But right here in the valley, there are quite few still, still belonging to Parker.

MS: Yes, the most of them belong to John. Most of them stayed in his family. They've got I'd say around 400 acres I think down there. That's a lot of cherries. They pick theirs with a picker with a shaker. That's another thing I can't see. I can't see the shaker myself yet. John wanted me to

buy one awful badly. You can just pick them so easy, and I said, "Yup. But this way if we're going to pick them, we don't give the children here a chance to make any money."

MB: To work. Yes.

MS: I said, "I get along with the kids pretty good, so I'm going to stay with the kids. That way, they can come and work and if they make a dollar, a dollar and a half a day. That's a dollar and a half they didn't have. We can help the kids maybe to get their school books or help them get the..." Maybe they want a new pair of shoes or something, then maybe they can buy their own.

We had three, four families, or maybe five or six families that would come pick and they their own children and they would police their own kids. Most of the families would see that they weren't throwing the cherries or trying to steal somebody else's or running around picking all the cherries on somebody else's row, which is wrong, see. Of course I always kept a boss out there all the time. I kept a man in the orchard right with them all the time. I never had too much trouble. Sometimes the kids didn't leave you alone. You needed something done and they'd sit there and hop, like they couldn't take it anymore, like little Odin. I know you know her!

MB: No.

MS: You don't? She's married to—

MB: Frank Stevenson?

MS: Peterson. Yes.

MB: Okay, right.

MS: Well, she used to pick for me. The darn kid used to come up to the horses and tie them there to the tree and when about twelve or one o'clock and when they quit at noon for dinner, why it would be pretty hot by that time and they'd all have to go swimming. (Unintelligible) How many crates of cherries I needed? Why, we're not going to pick them anymore!

MB: Besides you, were there some other families that made their living exclusively with the apples here?

MS: Well D.C. Grey I think made more money on his apples than he ever made on his cattle. He had cows a lot but (unintelligible) not very good. He had quite a lot of cherries and lots of apples. Always a lot of them here that had a good cherry deal. Over on Dutch Hill, there was a nice orchard there. Why, those people quit. Well, we quit, because he told me that the cannery wouldn't pay enough. That one particular year, I think, they were paying a nickel and he

thought he ought to get eight cents a pound for them. He said, "I just ain't going to raise cherries for no five cents. I can't."

I said, "Well if you feel that way about it, I guess you're just going to have to let them go," and that's what he did. He just let them go. Of course, the cherries finally got worms in them, too. You had to spray for worms and we do now. You have to spray for worms. That's no problem. You can get the worms out.

MB: The weather, is that a factor here in this valley like it is up in Flathead with the (unintelligible)? They always seem to me to have to worst weather right about picking time.

MS: Well sour cherries will not split like a sweet cherry, see. They don't do that. It's a different cherry. I don't know if it's the sweetness in the cherry. I can't tell you that part of it. They will split up there in hot weather. Now if they get a rain and get hot weather, then the cherries will split on them. They can't use them for anything, only jam or something. They can't sell them on the fresh market at all. You can't ship split cherries. Nobody will buy them. The other thing that happens in the Flathead, I told somebody this just a couple days ago. Twice since I've been in the valley that the Flathead Lake froze over. If that freezes over, they lose their trees, just thousands of them. But as long as that thing is open, I don't care if it's clear out in the middle of the lake, if it isn't froze over, that protects those people with their fruit up there. That's one of the reasons we can't raise sweet cherries.

MB: I see. Our weather isn't mild enough?

MS: No, we don't have good enough weather for sweet cherries down here. You can raise a few. Sure, I had a few at the ranch, and (unintelligible) they raised. But it's not consistent.

MB: Now, you also were in the grocery business. Was this after you were in the apple business or did you decide this is a good time and place to sell your apples and open up a grocery? (laughs)

MS: No, I got into the grocery business kind of funny. That's a different story. (laughs) Ray Armature, or Harry Armature, and some of the boys that was at Safeway, running a Safeway store, called me one night and asked me to come back that night. They wanted to talk to me and I said, "No, I don't want to come in"—we were playing pinochle with the girls—"and I'm going to go to bed pretty quickly."

"Oh come on, we want to talk to you now. You come on in." So I jumped in my old flivver and went to town. I had a Model T, you know. (laughs) Went to town, come back, I was home in an hour. I told my wife when I got home, "Well, we're in the grocery business."

"Oh," she said, "What are you talking about you're in the grocery business?"

I said, "We're going to open a store in Hamilton." (laughs) If somebody would have told me that an hour before I went over there I would say, "Oh, you don't know what you're talking about," because I had my mind all made up to do something else besides this. But anyhow, I got into the grocery business for the family, and we wound up seven stores finally. We had a lot of stores and a lot of people working. We had about 75 people working for us in the stores.

MB: Oh, isn't that wonderful!

MS: So I had my hands full.

MB: Was Hamilton the only store in the Bitterroot? Or did you have one—

MS: No, we had Stevensville. We bought Safeway out in Stevensville.

MB: Oh, I see.

MS: And in Missoula.

MB: Was this the Stop and Shop? Or what was the name of it? Super Save?

MS: No, Economy Foods.

MB: Oh, Economy Foods.

MS: Sure. Economy Foods. And we had the first self-service store in the State of Montana. The first self-service. We knew Safeway was coming with self-service, but we beat them to the punch when we opened our little store on Second Street there. Why we had baskets, these wicker baskets to carry around, and women carried them around. And Safeway hadn't even (unintelligible) with self-service yet. (Laughs) We kind of beat them to the punch on that.

MB: Well you were with Economy Grocery Store for a long time here in Hamilton. You must have been tired with it the last ten years haven't you?

MS: Yes, well I had the last two stores out of the whole thing. The rest of them got out. And I had the last two stores on my own.

MB: Oh, I see. Did you like the grocery business?

MS: Oh, sure.

MB: Got to know lots of people?

MS: (Unintelligible) The grocery business is just like everything else I say...Well, it's a lot worse. The percentage of profit in the groceries is very small. You got a lot of people out here that don't make it. And the other thing is you better have people that'll speak to people all the time, I don't care who they are. I always told my girls that were up in front that you're the ambassador of the store, and I want you to speak to everybody that comes through that door. I don't care if they're dressed up, or how they're dressed, or if they're black, or white, or yellow, or green, it doesn't make a bit of difference. You speak to them when they come through that door. You don't know if they have a million dollars or if they haven't got any. They may look like bums but still they might have a lot of money. I've seen it, too. So I always talked to my people, and I said if they want to talk to you a few minutes and you're busy, you excuse yourself for a little bit. I said, "Don't be afraid to talk to the customers. We need that." We always had delivery service. We charged some accounts. I never had no trouble (unintelligible) Safeway. They didn't bother me.

MB: People always like to really go to a local store anyway if they can.

MS: Well yes, and if the prices aren't...if you don't have your prices clear out of line. Then you might get a cent more on something, but we tried to stay pretty close to Safeway because that was our competition, so we stayed pretty close them all the time. (Unintelligible) got in a fight with them over watermelon one time. They finally put the sign out there and sold the watermelon for about two cents less than what we paid for them. (laughs)

MB: (laughs) But they sold them faster!

MS: But they had a lot of fun, yes. And then one time when I was running the store, I had never painted a sign in my life on the window, never painted a sign. We built a big store where we built that. When we opened that and I was doing business, and I thought (unintelligible) a big sign up. First, Mrs...I can't recall her name. She had the little store on Main Street. Then Safeway, they got in an argument over milk prices. So I went out and put milk on there. I believe the M was about four feet and the K was about a foot and a half. (laughs) So (unintelligible) comes to me and says, "Malcolm, is that the best you can do?"

I said, "Yes, thank you. It is." They had cut the price so I cut another dollar a case on it. They called us in to Helena, all of us, and Safeway's man was scared to death. He was over there. He was really scared. He said, "Malcolm, I wish I was—"

[End of Interview]