

Oral History Number: 167-004
Interviewee: Harold A. "Tot" Nett
Interviewer: David Louter
Date of Interview: February 15, 1987
Project: Old North Trail Oral History Project

David Louter: We're here with Tot Nett in his home in Augusta, Montana. Let's see, it's the day after yesterday, so it must be February 15, 1987. I'm here with Bud Bisnett again, and Betty and Rebecca's in the background. I can't remember his wife's name—

Unidentified Speaker: Jessie (?).

DL: Jessie, so they may pitch in here and there. But we're just here talking a little bit about Tot's life and what he remembers of some things of the Old North Trail, and just about it. Right now I just want to ask you, Tot, if you can tell me where you were born and—

Harold A. "Tot" Nett: Born on the street over here, where [unintelligible] lives now.

DL: In Augusta, here, right?

HN: In Augusta.

DL: About what year?

HN: February 13, 1899.

DL: 1899. That makes you about 88?

HN: Yes.

DL: Hey, I'm a pretty good mathematician. [laughs] Tell me some things maybe about how your mom and dad came to the country, if you remember that at all.

HN: My dad came to the country hauling a bunch of Texas steers.

DL: He did? Was he from Texas?

HN: No. He came from Missouri, but he went to Texas.

DL: We he employed by any of the cattle companies, or was he here on his own?

HN: The old Flourry (?) outfit down here.

DL: Flourry outfit?

HN: Yes, they called it...It was "floury", but they called it Flourry [pronounced "flurry"].

He and a neighbor of theirs in Missouri, he went to Texas, then come from Texas up here.

DL: In about what year that was?

HN: '82.

DL: '82. So was he still a young man when he made it here?

HN: Yeah, still was.

DL: How'd your mom come to the country?

HN: Her folks come from Iowa. They come across, I don't know...they didn't come across the [unintelligible], I guess they come by rail. It was later years when she come here.

DL: About '80?

HN: I don't know just what year they did come.

DL: The Old North Pacific was in here about '86, or least in the '90s.

HN: I think they came in the '90s.

DL: Did they settle right here in Augusta?

HN: No, down the river, ranched.

DL: Which river is that?

HN: Sun River.

DL: Sun River? Closer to the mountains?

HN: My grandfather always said was...[unintelligible] down there. Do you know where that is?

Bud Bisnett: [unintelligible].

HN: [unintelligible] That's my great granddad's homestead.

BB: [unintelligible]. I remember when he lived there.

DL: You remember where that is?

BB: Oh yeah.

DL: Location?

BB: Five, six miles east of here between the highway and the river.

DL: So 287 and Sun River?

BB: No, Highway 21. Towards Great Falls.

DL: Oh.

BB: Down the highway towards Great Falls.

DL: Did you spend most of your boyhood here in Augusta going to school and working on the ranch?

HN: Yeah, I worked 50 years on one ranch.

DL: What ranch is that?

HN: [unintelligible].

DL: They have a big spread?

HN: They did have at one time.

DL: They still running cattle, or they got fences and ranges or—

HN: Yeah. And they ran a lot of sheep, too.

DL: They did? Was ranching a lot different back then than it is today?

HN: Oh yes.

DL: What kind of duties did you have that are a lot different than you would today, do you remember?

HN: We had a haying crew of about 22 and 3 men, and about 10, 14 teams. Well, they don't use any teams now, and they use five or six men and three or four—

DL: Machines. Did you ever leave Augusta to go away to school or out to the service?

HN: I served in the Marine Corps. World War One.

DL: World War I? Where were you stationed?

HN: On the USS Pennsylvania.

DL: You were? See much action?

HN: No. Just floated around out there for fun. We were on convoy duty.

DL: You were? This meant bringing the—

HN: [unintelligible].

DL: Bringing supplies?

HN: Nope.

DL: Just being a part of the Navy?

HN: Just going with the troop ships and back and get some more and go again, you know like that.

DL: What year did you come back into August then?

HN: '19.

DL: 1919?

HN: Yeah.

DL: Did things change much since you were gone, or did you go right back into—

HN: I went right back into where I left off.

DL: Bud was telling me that you were a ranch foreman. Do you remember if being a ranch foreman was any different than being a hand?

HN: Oh yes, lots of work.

DL: What were some of the kinds of things you had to do?

HN: We had to do what everybody did. You get to be foreman, you got to do it all. Had to be able to do it all. First thing I learned about it was irrigating. Always had a couple irrigators up there, and I got to be foreman and tried to tell everyone to do it and I didn't know. So I had to just go irrigate it, so I'd know what to tell them. That was the first lesson I had.

DL: That up for the hay field?

HN: Yeah.

DL: About what year did you begin irrigating, or was that something new when you came back?

HN: Oh no, they'd been irrigating here for a long, long time.

BB: Water rights probably run back clear to the '70s [1870s].

HN: I believe the earliest one was '92, I'm not sure though. Might have been earlier than that. Sam [unintelligible] had the first one up here.

DL: Bud, when did you go to work for...You were working for Tot?

BB: You know how I did some shoeing for them, for Tot, in '51, I think or '52. Then I wintered with them, that would have been '51 or '52, I think. Shod stock for them for years and years after that.

DL: I don't really know what else to ask about your life except if there's anything else you'd wanna put out, any stories you have about things you remember in the ranching business?

HN: Well, we used to train steers up on the reservation up there to Browning, up close to the Canadian line, yeah.

DL: What brought that on? Was that the—

HN: The company had some land up there. Leases. We'd just take a wagon and [unintelligible].

DL: Go on the way?

HN: Go on.

DL: What years were that?

HN: '30. '30 was one of them. We cut just straight across. At that time, we would get on a horse here and go here a half mile out of town, and look right into within three miles of Choteau and never see a fence. It was always wide open. Just go, and that's where we went [unintelligible] wagon.

DL: So you'd just drive the cattle straight north?

HN: Yeah.

BB: Pretty much public domain, except down along the creeks and things. From there on, too, it was just more [unintelligible] except for buildings along creek bottoms.

DL: When did much of that change? Was it slow or over a period of time?

BB: No, it quit kind of sudden-like, I think.

DL: What brought it on, do you remember?

BB: The settlement?

DL: Yeah, people just—

BB: I don't know, all of sudden, I guess there was a yen to own land by an awful lot of people, foreign people and all, and eastern people that wanted to get some free land.

HN: There's a lot of guys around the country that wanted to locate them, look for them somewhere for 200 hours, well they couldn't make 200 hours in 20 years. But they got their fee for locating them.

DL: They were still doing that up there in the '30s, then, weren't they?

HN: Well, no, before that, but around '30 they quit.

DL: But a lot of that was early 1920s?

HN: Yeah.

DL: Before you helped Art Pearson out with the Old North Trail, the Old North-South or whatever you want to call it, had you come across it in any of your work?

HN: Why, I'd worked right along it there for all the years I was up there, yeah. Went right across the ranch, you know.

DL: The ranch was located pretty close up the mountains?

HN: Right, just the outside of Haystack Butte.

DL: That'd be south of here then? Had you heard about it before you ran across it?

HN: No, it was the first I ever thought of it was when Pearson came along here and wanted me to go with him.

DL: So you'd never really given it much thought before that?

HN: I knew where it was. I knew where some of the rock piles were, and I knew where they crossed the streams.

DL: If you hadn't given it much thought then, how did you really know where it ran? Was it just another trail out there to you, or did you know that the Blackfeet—

HN: It was just natural.

DL: It was just natural? Do you remember what it looked like in the earlier days when you saw it? Was it real easily visible?

HN: Well, it wasn't too hard to spot.

DL: Did you see deep ruts in the sod or whatnot? Things like that?

HN: Some places, but not very many. Just above the ranch, there was a campground, Indian campground, that was right along the trail. I think you can still see that, I don't know.

DL: The campground?

HN: I would think so.

DL: Was it a series of teepee rings and circles?

HN: Yeah.

BB: Whereabouts from the home ranch buildings there?

HN: Right up the road towards [unintelligible].

BB: Not to [unintelligible] or anything.

HN: No, below [unintelligible].

BB: And up that draw that goes from to southeast then?

HN: The trail went across the creek right there, and it didn't go in the bottom of that draw. They didn't stay in the bottom, they stayed where they could look around a bit. It went up over that hill, and there are some rock piles just east of that draw. They crossed that coulee over there and headed right straight toward...right south about toward Cross Creek (?). That's not south, but pretty close to south.

BB: Around the reservoir up there? In the [unintelligible] buildings?

HN: It was east of that. Just a little bit to the east of where they crossed Cross Creek. Then they went right, stayed right up kind of high there and crossed the up-creek right about where Art's place is.

BB: They didn't go up [unintelligible] Coulee then, your old home there. They were west of that.

HN: West of that. I remember when I was a little kid, they used to go through there twice a year. Indians, travois and horses and dogs.

DL: Know where they were coming from or going to?

HN: I didn't. My folks did, but I didn't. I was just a little kid, I didn't pay attention to that. I just looked that the good horses.

DL: [laughs] So you were under ten years old then probably?

HN: Oh yes. I went out to work on the ranch when I was 12.

DL: Twelve. A lot younger than I ever started to work. [laughs] Did they have their dogs—

HN: What?

DL: Did they have their dogs hooked up with travois—

HN: No, horses.

HN: Horses.

DL: Horses had the travois on them?

HN: Yeah.

DL: That must've been something.

HN: Big old brown dog come along with them. Sore-footed, skinny and he would just go under the shade of the tree there in our yard and laid down. He stayed there...we had him for years after that.

BB: A big, fat dog, you'd thought they'd have had use for him. [laughs]

HN: They didn't eat dogs, though.

DL: So you first came across, right, in your childhood, they were still using the trail?

HN: Oh yes. Yeah.

DL: And you saw them then? So it wasn't really, like, something that was out of the ordinary to come across the trail in your work. Did you ever use the trail for any of your ranch work?

HN: No.

DL: Was it pretty hard to follow, did they go through difficult country?

HN: We used the creek crossing that they used.

DL: How could you tell their creek crossings?

HN: They were just natural.

DL: Lowest place in the creek?

HN: Just a natural place, just opening in the brush. Natural place to cross. Every one of them.

DL: Were any of those rock markings and stuff, those were still intact you said?

HN: Yes, I think they are yet, but I don't know. I would think so.

DL: When Art Pearson came, you went out with him to show him some of the places from your old ranch where you grew up?

HN: Yeah.

DL: Did you show him the same things you've just been talking about now? Because he had a photo of one rock cairn that I'd never really been able to place where it is, but he shows it in that Fairfield local history of where it is. It would be interesting if it was up near where you'd grown up. But you probably don't have much of an idea.

HN: I was trying to think where it crossed Willow Creek, but I can't...I can't say right off the bat.

BB: Yes, and Ford Creek would be kind of a particular problem for being so steep.

HN: You know where that hill is in the northwest end of [unintelligible]?

BB: Oh yeah.

HN: Right down in that, there's a good old crossing there. Hasn't been used for years, but it used to be an old...We used to cross there with teams too.

BB: Yeah, that's quite a ways deep then, but you almost had to because the Ford was pretty steep and deep [unintelligible].

HN: Would be a good place for them to cross.

DL: Adolph Dale had mentioned that Art had an Indian man or somebody who would take him out to show him some things. Do you remember anything like that? A man who, can't remember, said he was a Cree or somebody who lived in the area would take him out and show him some of the old trail. Do you know anything about that?

HN: I know [unintelligible] John [unintelligible].

DL: Does that ring a bell?

BB: Don't seem likely that Pearson was back that far.

HN: Well John [unintelligible] worked up the ranch for years after I went to work there.

BB: Yes, I know, but—

HN: His dad homesteaded where Moorhead, Minnesota, is. Then the people got too thick there for him and moved across the river to Fargo, North Dakota. John came to Montana with the first soldiers who went to Fort Keogh.

DL: He did?

HN: And his job was hunting meat and getting meat for them, hunting. When the first cattle come into Milestown [Miles City?], he went, changed jobs and he'd herd the cattle out around the fort. [unintelligible] at night, so the Indians wouldn't get them.

DL: [laughs] That must've been 1880?

HN: I think so.

DL: I never was too sure, because Adolph hadn't really known who the man was, but he had mentioned that you'd helped Art out a few times. There are some photos that Art had kept, were you ever on any of those photo-taking sessions where he'd showing a person with a metal detector is out doing something?

HN: No. That must have been later on.

DL: That was later on?

BB: Do you have any idea when Art started that project? Or when he came to the Fairfield country?

DL: No, you're putting me on the spot there. I know he had taken him ten years, and he finished it around the mid-'70s, late '70s, so he probably started it around '68.

HN: I've got the old gun here that my dad wore [unintelligible].

DL: You do? What kind of gun is it?

HN: Colt.

DL: And he brought that up from Texas?

HN: I don't know where he got it, but he had it when he got here. That's as far back as I can remember.

DL: Do you still use it?

HN: Well, I don't. This is like [unintelligible] at a tub, you know? [unintelligible] I have shot it though. It works good enough.

BB: It's probably an 1873 model or so [unintelligible].

HN: I don't know. It's one of the earliest ones, but Arthur sent back to the [unintelligible] to Colt's people to find out what year it was and then they'd had a fire and they didn't know.

BB: Serial number readable on it?

HN: Oh yes. [unintelligible]

DL: I've been asking everybody the same thing, if you remember much about Paul Hazel (?), right? He had written something in an article, I guess, about—

HN: Well, I didn't know him very well. I kind of knew him, but that's all.

DL: Yeah, I was just trying to draw some connections between some of the people who had mentioned the Old North Trail in passing and whatnot. It seems that he'd done a little exploring, researching on his own about it.

HN: He might've. He was always back in the mountains, as far as I knew.

BB: That's right. You had to be back in the mountains if you ever got acquainted with Paul Hazel, all right.

HN: You betcha.

BB: He come out as little as possible.

DL: [laughs] Another thing just occurred to me, if your...No, your father was here in the '80s, right? He'd be here a lot later than some other people that came through here already, like the [unintelligible]. Can you recall just off the top of your head, where you remember the trail running, just from a starting point? Because Art Pearson had mapped in from the north fork of the Dearborn there, down past Bean Lake, he said. From there to about Ear Mountain. Are you pretty familiar with a good portion of that?

HN: No, not a lot of it. Just the parts up in here.

DL: Just between here and—

HN: Ford Creek, Willow Creek, the Dearborn area—Cross Creek.

DL: Is it pretty safe to say that most of the way they traveled just wasn't on one trail, that there was more than one? Just one area?

HN: Well, I think it was pretty close to one. Because it was marked, so they could be up looking around. They wasn't gonna get caught down in the bottom of the coulee or something.

DL: So it was safe to think that maybe they stayed more up in those north-south coulees that were just above where the—

HN: Yeah.

DL: Because that's a lot different than some of those areas up by the Indian burial site up there by J.C. Salmon's (?) where there's a lot more ruts in areas farther out in the plain. But it does seem like they'd stay up a little bit higher so they wouldn't have anything to worry about.

Well, if you have anything else you want to throw at me right now, I don't have a whole lot to say about wearing out the subject. We could sit around and talk about the trail for as long as I could think, but we never seem to come up with a whole lot of answers. It's interesting to find people that still know where the trail ran and were able to...actually, you've done it, seen people use the trail. We also sort of seem to assume that it runs north and south and that it's been used for a long time. There hasn't been a whole bounty of information written on it because—

HN: I guess Pearson had more than anyone else [unintelligible] around here.

BB: As far as I know, yes.

HN: As far as I know he did.

BB: Otherwise, just passing mentioning in quite a lot of different narratives of the country. But nothing that followed it for any distance or knew much about it, really.

HN: My dad was judge of the election, the first election they had in Montana.

DL: [laughs] He was? Well, that's something to throw in. How did he do that?

HN: I don't know, they just appointed him down in Sun River. At that time, Sun River was a kind of a town, and they said Great Falls would never amount to anything, it was too close to Sun River. He had an old fellow with him that couldn't sign his name. He would tell the judge. They had the ballot boxes there. They held them about four days because the roundup wagon was up north, and they wanted to bring him down and vote those guys. So they held the ballot boxes there for about four days. [unintelligible] them in the wagon and the cowboys would get in.

BB: Valid all the way through.

HN: Sure.

BB: Better dig it up and invalidate some of those selections.

HN: Just as honest as they are now.

DL: [laughs] Yes, I can see that.

US: [unintelligible]

HN: Just a pile of rocks.

US: Piles of rocks?

DL: How far apart were those piles of rocks?

HN: Oh, they were a long ways apart, just one once in a great while.

DL: We came across one—what we think is something—Bud and I came across it up there. Remember that? What's the name of that coulee on the other side off the irrigation ditch there by the Sun River? Remember that? I always thought it was like Black Leaf or Black—

BB: Well there is a Black Leaf over there all right.

HN: Arnold Coulee (?)?

BB: What?

HN: The Arnold Coulee?

BB: No, it wasn't that far over. Was that that trip when we went up and picked up [unintelligible]?

DL: Remember we...No, it was the first one with the boulder with all the rocks piled up on it.

BB: Oh yeah. Oh, that one, yes. What?

DL: If you think that might have been a cairn of the Old North Trail, a marker.

BB: Oh, it was pretty historic, for what purpose, I don't know. But to say it belonged to that trail, I mean it would be much more elaborate than what Tot talks up here because that would be, oh, a couple of pickup loads. It was on top of this big, flat rock and around and on three sides of the base was a pile of rock—a lot of rocks. So it's hard to relate as being caused by the handiness of the trail or anything like that.

HN: Yeah, that might've been shepherders' monuments.

BB: Not in a draw like that in a very carefully sorted rocks. Probably from this size to that size. And up there in [unintelligible]. They sorted them because all of the rocks you can see around there, they could've picked a lot of big ones, like this, if they just wanted to make a mound. It was down in the coulee. It just don't look like a shepherders' monument area to me. They were always on the hills, prominent spots, generally, that I ever seen. And they never sorted rocks like [unintelligible] did.

HN: That might have been in one of the stills. There was a still or two down underground, and they had them marked.

BB: It would be an interesting thing to have it kind of looked over and dug scientifically.

DL: Because definitely that rock is, well on one spot, it's taller than I am, the big boulder that's sitting there. Then all in the perimeter, all those stones, big river rocks. Look like the size of what river rocks look like.

BB: Most of them were more of a marine type of rock that hadn't been in the ground as much as being right down in the river bed. They were mostly angular and rougher than river rocks.

DL: You can see the striations on the rocks. So that might be a little out of the ordinary for a marker of the trail then.

HN: Yeah.

DL: Because most of the markers that you've seen were...They were just little piles of rocks?

HN: Oh, they were probably—

DL: Four feet high?

HN: No, about from two to three feet high.

DL: Two to three feet high. That's pretty interesting. This side of the tape's running out, and I'm running out of questions—

HN: I'm running out of—

DL: [laughs] You're running out of air. And I thank you a lot, and if I have any more questions, I'll give you a jingle.

[End of Interview]