

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

This transcript represents the nearly verbatim record of an unrehearsed interview. Please bear in mind that you are reading the spoken word rather than the written word.

Oral History Number: 120-020b
Interviewee: Homer Bailey and Betty Bailey
Interviewer: Mary Bielenberg
Date of Interview: October 1984
Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project

Mary Bielenberg: This is an interview with Homer and Betty Bailey formerly of Corvallis [Montana], now Hamilton.

Homer, when did you first come to the valley?

Homer Bailey: My folks came here in 1912.

MB: What was the reason for their coming?

HB: Apparently, they came as a result of the apple boom, I presume.

MB: Did they plant apples down there?

HB: They bought a small piece of land down in the Three Mile country. Whether there were apples on there or not, I don't know, but I'm sure that that's why. They only stayed there one year.

MB: Where were they from?

HB: They were from the east, Wisconsin.

MB: When did they buy the present ranch that belongs to the Baileys?

HB: They bought the present ranch, the main part of it, in about 1916, and into (?) '17.

MB: How many acres?

HB: There was about 240 (unintelligible) at that time. About three years later, they bought another 320 acres that adjoined to it.

MB: In talking to Betty, she mentioned the 1,000 acre ranch, and I heard that mentioned before. Where was that located?

HB: Straight east of our farm.

MB: It, too, was an apple...?

HB: That was an apple operation, period.

MB: How early was that? Was that earlier than when your dad came?

HB: I would assume it started...around 1910 to 1912 is probably that started because that's...That wasn't really part of the apple boom.

MB: How long did that apple boom last?

HB: I couldn't say how long that it lasted.

MB: It was over by the time you were...?

HB: Actually, I don't know really...it lasted over ten years really and just gradually tapered down from the (unintelligible).

MB: I guess it belonged to the Thatchers.

HB: I don't know who it belonged to. The Thatchers were the managers of the property. Whether they were the actual owners or not, I don't know.

MB: When your dad moved to the Corvallis area, you were then about four or five?

HB: She thinks I'm older than I am...about two or three. (laughs)

MB: To Corvallis. I see. (laughs) I don't want to think you're any older.

HB: Yes, I know.

Betty Bailey: Mary, they just stayed there for a year. Then his father decided that he had to do something he could earn a living at. He went to Corvallis as superintendent of the school. He was very instrumental in the consolidation of the Corvallis school system.

MB: How long was he the superintendent?

HB: Three years.

MB: Did he continue in the education field at the end of that time?

HB: No, he went out of the education field at that time after his term as superintendent. He used the summers to work on ranches and look around to see the kind of property he wanted. He put in work most days on the property that he called the Turner Ranch (?).

MB: In consolidating, you meant rather than children going to small one room schoolhouses that existed in that area, they all came to Corvallis?

HB: Yes, that's right. They took in all the little small one room schoolhouses right around that area.

MB: Your dad was involved in what particular kind of ranching when he finally decided that was the field he was planning to go into?

HB: As far as the kind of ranching...at the time, there were just the normal hay and grain operation and some livestock—for the time that he started. Then of course things changed. It took kind of long...they went into the sheep (unintelligible) until about 1920 and then went on to milk (?).

BB: Tell them about potatoes.

HB: They had some potatoes early before...in the 1920s.

MB: When your dad had the sheep, would he sell them here in this area? Or would people, the buyers, come from Missoula and other areas?

HB: The ranch dealt a little bit (?) with buyers that came in. The wool of course was shipped out. At that time, there were good many large bands of sheep in the Bitterroot. They were good.

MB: There were. Can you name some other farms (??)?

HB: The Bitterroot Stock Farm had probably ten bands of sheep at the time.

MB: How many sheep are in a band?

HB: About 1,000 in a band. My dad had two bands of sheep during that period. (unintelligible)

MB: Were there some quite sizeable ranches in the Corvallis area or were they smaller?

HB: I just grew up in smaller area. There were larger operations. I realize that there were some there. (unintelligible) in any part of that...

MB: Did your dad have that (unintelligible) now where the Bailey Ranch is...?

HB: Yes, they had that built.

MB: 1965 (?)

HB: Of course, it didn't cost too much then (?). They had paper someplace...3,000 dollars or something like that.

MB: It's a beautiful place and they couldn't have built...

HB: They had to...all the buildings on the place (?).

MB: At the same time?

HB: Not exactly at the same time. (unintelligible)

MB: Who were the people that worked for you? Were they people that lived around here? Where would you get your workers?

HB: The general ranch hands were people from a ranch from somewhere else (?). I don't know any...it just wasn't anything (unintelligible).

MB: Now when did you take over the ranch?

HB: I don't know...

MB: When you were finished with school?

HB: It was in the late '30s.

BB: It was after we were married. Homer's father had a heart attack. Before that, he went over to Bozeman as head of the...

HB: ASC.

MB: What is the ASC?

HB: Agriculture Stabilization. They were an act as well (?). I don't know what that means. He was the head of the state, but he had a heart attack shortly after he arrived there, so that didn't last long. We took over the ranch between '37 and 1940. I'm not sure exactly when.

MB: In looking at this book that Betty gave me, I noticed that you must have started the beet harvesting about that time, too.

HB: The sugar beet business started actually here during the First World War with the Great Western Sugar Company. They either operated one year or two, 1917 and '18 or '18, '19. I'm not sure which. Then they pulled out; they quit. The sugar beet industry was rejuvenated when

another sugar company, the Amalgamated Sugar Company, bought the facilities in Missoula and had a big commotion then. That's when they moved the railroad from the west side to the east side so that the receiving stations could be built over on the east side (unintelligible). 1920 was when the sugar beet industry really got underway.

MB: Most of the sugar beets then were grown on the east side?

HB: Practically all of them, not all, but for practical purposes, they were essentially on the east side of the river.

MB: Is the soil better over there?

HB: Probably much more natural for that type of a crop. Yes, you could say it is better, yes. There just isn't that kind on the west side of the river that was suitable. There were a few patches over there but (unintelligible).

MB: Betty, what was it like when you were living on the ranch with small children and your husband was busy with sugar beet growing? What was a typical day?

BB: It was the same (unintelligible). The first year on the ranch, I think that was when (unintelligible). We had (unintelligible) in the big house. Homer and I lived in the little house out by (?) the barnyard. (Unintelligible) a bunkhouse and that's when we decided to get married. It was (unintelligible). So we got a roof over our heads.

I found myself searching for strong men while our help went on vacation (?). This was a required (?) thing. Since having grown up in town and preferring Minneapolis to any other place I've lived. My (unintelligible) was during the war. It was very hard to come back. We had a lot of (unintelligible) because our hired men would come to work on Monday morning and they would have all their stamps torn out of their books because they had been home with their wives. So my children's stamp books had to feed the hired men and my children went on potatoes and gravy in a hurry (?).

MB: This was war food stamps?

BB: These were war food stamps. I cooked an awful lot in those years. I would get up 5:00 or 5:30 and do my baking before breakfast and would feed whatever men we housed. I could honestly say I was more efficient then than I've been in my life.

MB: Homer, how many acres then do you think that you had in all in sugar beets?

HB: (unintelligible) On our farm, we only grew about 200 acres of sugar beets a year. It varied from 180-220 acres, but we averaged about 200.

MB: What is it? How did you do it? What time did you plant in the spring? Or did they come up automatically? (laughs)

HB: In the early days, when the sugar beets first started in the valley, basically in the 1920s, we would start our planting about April 10. That would be the normal—the average—starting date and then it would go through the month of April.

MB: You would have plant them by hand?

HB: They were planted mechanically...no, by that point they were planted with a drill. (unintelligible). Later, they'd have to be brought up and cleaned (?) by hand. (unintelligible) use a little machine in the ground and then power it by hand, shake the dirt off, cut the tops off by hand, shovel it in the trucks by hand. That's the way the early part of the sugar beets...It took a lot of labor.

MB: Yes, it did. You mentioned feeding about 12 men, but I imagine, by that time, you even had more, didn't you? For harvest time?

HB: No, not after that particular...

BB: The Filipinos took care of that.

MB: You had Filipinos working for you?

BB:Yes. (unintelligible) they would begin work during harvest about 2:30 in the morning and they would have kerosene lanterns to work by.

MB: Did they come here from the Philippines? How did they get here?

HB: Originally they did, but I don't know...

MB: Were their families here?

HB: No, they weren't families. They were all single.

MB: You got them from...?

HB: At that time, they were probably working in other farms (?) in other parts of the west.

MB: I see.

HB: They would just come in during the season (unintelligible) the harvest (unintelligible).

MB: You would load them on railroad cars?

HB: Yes.

MB: And go down to the sugar beet factory?

HB: During harvest, they would either be loaded directly on the railroad cars or they put in big storage silos to be reloaded again on the trucks and back to the railroad cars to go down to the factory. About a third of these would go directly to the factory. The harvest period would go through the first of November, and the factory would be running through November, December, January, and February. (unintelligible)

MB: Is the sugar from sugar beets of the same quality as the cane sugar?

HB: Yes. (laughs)

MB: (laughs) Who likes to bake (?) with cane sugar?

HB: (unintelligible) but chemically the two are identical.

MB: Are they?

HB: Yes. About the only difference is that, in most of the processing, most of the cane sugar is granulated finer, in processing, than most beet sugar. There was maybe a little visual difference, but chemically they were the same. I could give you the chemical formula, but I'd probably get it wrong.

MB: What were the prices of sugar in those days? Was it a good way to farm? Did you think...?

HB: The sugar beets, during that period, the price was extremely low, but it was the salvation of the Bitterroot Valley from the standpoint of that time. The price of sugar, I don't remember. The price of sugar beets, I do, which was probably 5 dollars a pound or 6 dollars a pound. That was why sugar was very cheap.

MB: Yes, I was going to say that's...

HB: Though as far as I can remember (unintelligible). When that particular crop came in at that time, during the Depression, it had made a tremendous difference in the agriculture here in this valley. A tremendous difference.

MB: How many sugar beet farmers do you think there were?

HB: The total number for the (unintelligible) peaked about 12,000 acres, which about 5,000 of those acres were grown here in the Bitterroot. The 5,000 acres probably ran through the '30s, '40s, and probably up to '45. Maybe a little past there. Then it gradually started tapering down after that year.

MB: When did the sugar beet factory close down in Missoula?

HB: I don't know...(unintelligible)

MB: Did it close down all at once?

HB: No, I think the first closure was in 1917 or '18. Then it reopened after the initial closure.

MB: Did you continue raising beets after the sugar beet factory closed...?

HB: Yes, we continued raising beets after the sugar plant closed in Missoula. We started (unintelligible) Billings.

MB: You sent it by rail?

HB: We sent it by rail to Billings. We grew for them about ten years. Then they canceled those out about five years ago.

MB: I see. You raised them...

HB: We raised beets continuously for 51 years.

MB: You must have become quite the experts at it.

HB: We never quite could make that. (laughs)

MB: (unintelligible)

HB: It would be, if the company contracted us. It's a matter of getting a contract with the company's processor. You can't go...

MB: Isn't the demand...?

HB: No, not from the company's standpoint. Each company could only handle to process about so many tons of sugar beets in their own factory. They liked to handle most of them as close to the factory as they could have. At that present time, the Western Sugar Factory could contract enough acres close to the area, within a hundred miles of the area, that they don't have to go beyond that.

MB: That isn't any longer going is it?

HB: Yes, it is.

MB: Is it? They didn't close that down.

HB: No, that factory is still...business has come down to a very short run (?). The sugar beet contractor is still there. No, that factory is still in operation. Of course, there has been...

MB: 1964.

HB: '64? Twenty years since the [Missoula] factory closed. The (unintelligible) factory has completely gone out of the Montana (unintelligible). There are still two factories out there: one in Sidney and one in Billings. There's two different companies in Sidney and Billings.

MB: Which one is in Sidney?

HB: Sidney's the Holly Sugar Company and Great Western was Billings. They're the ones that dropped us. We didn't drop them. (unintelligible) It's a problem, planting a crop that's 80 percent water. It's not easy to transport water.

MB: Right. Betty, you mentioned that during World War Two, there was a prisoner of war encampment near your place. Where was it? On the highway, at the turnoff?

BB: Yes. It was on the corner there. (unintelligible) one camp for (unintelligible) because the Mexican government and our government had an agreement...

HB: The entire program was a work exchange agreement. So they shipped Mexican nationals up here for several years to the labor camp (unintelligible).

MB: At what time was this?

HB: That was actually...the prisoners of war...

BB: (unintelligible)

HB: The prisoners of war here must have been in the '40s. (unintelligible) the prisoners of war gave supplemental labor during that period.

MB: These were Germans?

HB: There were Germans and Italians (unintelligible), but the main camp down there at that time was German, yes.

MB: About how many were there?

HB: I don't know.

MB: I mean, 35, 50, 100?

BB: There must have been more than that.

HB: Probably a couple hundred.

BB: We had naval (?) personnel on the guard and everything, yes.

MB: When they worked in the field for you, then the guard had to stand around.

HB: They had the guards there, but we never paid for it because you had your own supervisor watching where they were. They also had the state army and they had their own guards there too. Of course you had a lot of security (?) for a short while there.

BB: (unintelligible) because it kept them back from the war, or it was after the war was over. He had been a private at a base in France. George was out in the field working and a German prisoner of war came up to him and asked him if he had been in France at such and such a time. George said yes, and he said, "Well did you go into a black house and take prisoners?"

George said yes he did.

This man said, "I was one of the prisoners you took."

MB: Had he decided to stay here then?

BB: What?

HB: No, he was in the prison camp here.

MB: He was in the prison camp on the ranch at this time and matter?

BB: He had returned to our ranch, (unintelligible).

MB: Do you remember if any of those prisoners decided to stay in the Bitterroot?

HB: No.

BB: The Italians in Missoula...A number of them came back and stayed, and then lived in Missoula. I thought that was interesting. They were treated royally.

HB: They were.

BB: The Daly Hospital had them. Some of those Italians would cook during World War Two. People out here still wanted to know how they cooked carrot tops. (unintelligible)

MB: Homer, who were members of your family? Were you the only son?

HB: I was the only son, but I had two sisters.

BB: He had two sisters.

HB: One older and one younger. (unintelligible) Katie was the younger sister. Of course, she didn't stay around here much after she got out of high school. (unintelligible)

MB: The (unintelligible) had a son.

HB: This was about the same time. They operated a (unintelligible). They were in sugar beets, through all the same (unintelligible) that we were.

MB: I wanted to ask you about the government's participation in the price fixing of beets. When did that happen?

HB: There wasn't any price fixing. There was a support program that was established in the early '30s. What they did: they did manipulate the price by the import quota because this country has never produced over 50 percent of its own sugar. They held the foreign imports down. The price could be held at a level that was acceptable.

It turns out that they were held never artificially high, that the quota was (unintelligible) because they always took into consideration...they were trying to figure out the quotas. The consumers participated in it, the growers participated in it, and the Department of Labor. All factions participated in the program at all times. They tried to keep it in balance as it could be.

It wasn't the fact that we were just trying to keep the price down along the line (?). As a matter of fact, it never did. As far as the government itself putting money into it, the government itself never put any money into the program. There was a sugar program where we apparently received money from the government, but the money came directly from taxes on the sugar itself. It was a redistribution of their own money and some of this money came from the taxes on imported sugar.

MB: Is that system still prevailing?

HB: No, the system went out in about 1973. The summer of the year it went out, sugar just skyrocketed. I don't know whether it was just coincidence, or just what happened, or whether there was a shortage of sugar coming in. Sugar...the government (unintelligible). Sugar got way too high, double of what it normally should have been. Then the artificial sweeteners got a big holding in the commercial...in the soft drink business. Domestic sugar has never recovered. It was a disaster, a (unintelligible) really for the sugar beet industry.

There has been a program that has been in effect since then, but I'm not too familiar with it. It hasn't been too effective. Actually it just got stable from the '30s clear up until 1970. They (unintelligible) around the various foods. We always wanted more money for our sugar beets. We thought we could have more, but they always thought they could us steal (?) them from us. It was a real balance regulated (?) by the government. In fact, we had one of the best agriculture programs that ever in effect, for the valley, really.

MB: I suppose you were very active in these kinds...

HB: We had to be active in it for our own profession. We had a Beet Growers' Association and would work very diligently in it through our own organization, through our state organization, through our national Beet Growers' Association. Of course, we had to keep busy in it all the time. (unintelligible).

MB: After you decided not to stay in the sugar beet business, your ranch became a cattle ranch, was it?

HB: Actually, the decision for us was made up to not be in sugar any longer by the company. The old (unintelligible) came to pasture the place, to raise more cattle, and more hay, and more grain. Everybody (unintelligible) is what essentially happened. We were raising grain, and hay, and cattle anyway. It just got expanded to fill the gap of the sugar beets.

BB: Of course, the sugar beets were of good value (?) for cattle. We fed the tops, and we also fed the molasses which we got from the factory.

HB: (unintelligible)

MB: You've been very active in REA, the Rural Electrical...Administration.

HB: Right.

MB: Is that on the east side?

HB: No, the REA, they did all the Bitterroot and the outside areas, all the way to Hamilton...all of the areas (unintelligible).

[End of Interview]