

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 152

Interviewer: Paul Sandry

Interviewee: Lyman Ferguson

Date: February 15, 1986

Paul Sandry: The interviewer is Paul Sandry. The interviewee is Lyman Ferguson. And the date is February 16, 1986. Ok, Lyman, you want to tell me a little bit about your beginnings in Montana and where your folks came from?

Lyman Ferguson: Yeah, I was born out of Helena on a farm, right on the ranch, and I grew up there. My father and mother was there. My mother was raised in Minnesota and my father was born and raised in Scotland. He come over here at the age of eighteen. He worked for different places around; he had had a cotton trade to start with. He helped build, what's the name of that hotel on the other side of Central...

PS: The Regal (?)?

LS: The one on Central.

PS: I can't think of it right off.

LF: Anyway, where The Downtowner's at now; he helped build that.

(Woman in background): Park Hotel.

LF: That's the Park Hotel. My mother raised seven children. I was the youngest one. I had one brother that was County Commissioner about ten, twelve years back. Let's see, some men and my father took up a homestead out on Casper Coulee.

PS: What age was he at the time he homesteaded there? You know?

LF: He was eighteen when he come over here, so I would say probably... twenty-five.

PS: That young, huh?

LF: Uh huh. I imagine he was about twenty-five. Then in 1928, December 28, my mother passed away. He no longer wanted to stay on the farm, so he sold out. We moved up to Spion Kop, that little town half way between Raynesford and Geyser on the railroad. There was a road that went through there, but not anymore. He's done.. .he done some work out there, but he was getting kind of old, so he used to help with cooking on a big cattle ranch out there. Then he had a

stroke and had to quit that. He come to town; he lived about a year and then he passed away in 1933. December.

PS: What was the main livelihood of the town of Spion Kop?

LF: There was a school and a lumberyard there. There was a depot, of course. Spion Kop was where there: Spion Kop was at the top of the hill like. The railroad had to have a pusher engine to help them up the hill. When they got up to the top of the Spion Kop, it was what they called the Y, where they used to pull the engine up and turn it around and come back. There was two elevators there, grain elevators. There was a lot of... cattle ranges around there you can find. There's lots of water, rain and such in the spring, and creeks.

PS: You probably already told me, but what did your father do in Spion Kop?

LF: He stayed with my sister. My sister ran the Spion Kop store for, I don't know, couple years I guess, until it burned down. He stayed with them. Then [he] done cooking on a big cattle ranch. That's about all I remember he done and then he had a stroke. He lived about a year with that and passed away in 19, what'd I say, '33? He died in '43.

PS: '43

LF: Yes.

PS: So what's become of the town of Spion Kop? When did that...

LF: I suppose cars and stuff like that took people right to town to buy their groceries, probably to Belt or a lot of them to Great Falls. One farm would leave after another or one person would leave. they had a school there. well a lot of people moved away.

PS: Was that during the depression?

LF: Yes, I would say that would be during the depression. I suppose early '30s. Late '20s and early '30s.

(Woman in background): Tell him about the buildings that were there.

LF: There was a lumberyard there. That wasn't there long after I went there, so I don't know much about the lumberyard. Then there was a hotel, back years ago. There was two saloons.

(Woman in background): Depot.

LF: There were some other things there for a little bit. It just wasn't strong enough to hold the people there after cars come in and good roads. They come to town and stay there.

PS: What did you do during these years when you were growing up?

LF: I worked down on various farms around the country and found them big cattle ranches out there at Spion Kop, Geyser, Raynesford. I worked with the Becks from a company up there, a cattle ranch. I worked for Art Johnson up in Rocky Ridge, just north of Raynesford.

PS: That's good. Do you think during the Depression... I mean, did you feel it?

LF: I didn't feel it so much. I worked for wages.

PS: I see.

LF: I come that way in 1933. I got a chance to get a job in this civic item for wrecking cars, taking used parts off them. That was quite a business in them days. It was during the time I was out of Spion Kop that I met my wife, Tilly. We got married in 1935. April the sixth, 1935. We come to town and I was working for this auto parts company. I worked there for seven years and went to work for Bison Motor. This OK now?

PS: Yeah. From your perspective, who was the hardest hit during the Depression in Montana? I mean, what types of people?

LF: I didn't quite get...

PS: What types of people where the ones that were the hardest hit by the Depression?

LF: I think that that... the farmers, quite a bit. Of course, there wasn't much businesses out there. Depended heavily on the farmers.

PS: A lot of farms were being foreclosed?

LF: What was that?

PS: A lot of farms being foreclosed?

LF: No, I don't think there was. I don't... they didn't have the expense them days on the farm. They didn't have the big machinery. It was all done with horses. Horses on a mower. Two of the horses on a mower and a rake and a combine. Had four head of horses on them, that combine. binder. Ever see one of them?

PS: Yeah.

LF: I shot good many acres of grains. I supposed there'd be lots of more things if I could think of them. If I had known about this sooner, I could have probably thought of some more things, written them down. Everything was done with horses them days. You'd have eight head of horses on a wagon. Grain wagon.

PS: You were telling me earlier about your feelings on prohibition. Could you elaborate on that a bit?

LF: I think that back in the early teens, they closed down bars. That developed into a lot of, what'd they call them, bootleggers. I guess they got the name. they used to put, to hide whiskey in a boot, where a prohibition agent couldn't see it. Everybody's brother was making booze seems like. I bought a little or two myself.

PS: Was there quite a few prohibition agents around? What did you do to deal with them?

LF: I guess there must have been because they caught a lot of them. They was running whiskey from down in certain places around town up to Canada. They call them bootleggers.

PS: Why would they run it to Canada?

LF: They was selling booze up there. It was on the open market then there. Here it was dry, supposed to have been anyway, but I think that's the biggest mistake they ever made because it made more drinkers out of people than they ever had. I guess in Roosevelt's time is when they brought it back, booze back in again.

PS: Do you remember when Teddy Roosevelt came to Montana?

LF: I can just remember. I was very small. I saw Franklin D. one time.

PS: When was this?

LF: Seems like it was in Great Falls here. I liked him. I think I voted. the first time I voted, I voted for Franklin D. Roosevelt. That was back in about the early '20s because I was born in 1909. It wasn't long after that. I suppose I was... I must have been twenty-one years old, which would make me what. 1922, is that when that come back?

PS: I believe so.

LF: Prohibition.

PS: What did a lot of people...how was farming different? I mean, there's a lot of ways, but, in general, from when you were on the homestead with your father and now.

LF: Everything's done in a big way now. They farm about five times as much as they used to. It was smaller, then (?). I always say ordinary farming gave up about five hundred acres, normally. Nowadays, five hundred acres is about the size of your backyard. That's just an expression.

PS: So the spreads were quite a bit smaller back then?

LF: Oh yes. One hundred sixty acres, three hundred acres. A section would be... forty. I think we had about sixteen hundred acres tied up out there. I can pick it up and do that math, but it's not necessary I don't think. We had some land down on Deep Creek. My grandfather, my dad's father, he had a homestead out there too.

Up on the hill, halfway between our place and the land we had over there, there was a colored guy there. He had eighty acres. Another neighbor farmed it for him. This old colored guy, his name was Francis Griffin. Nice old fellow. He had a guitar he used to play for dances and stuff. I had a brother that played with him. It was good music. Us kids used to enjoy it and a lot of grown-ups, of course.

PS: How did they take a black guy being in the territory?

LF: Everybody seemed to like him.

PS: Is that right?

LF: We used to have him working for us once in a while. Like an employer when we would be harvesting our potatoes. We had about five acres of spuds. We'd hire him. He was good worker. He never bothered anybody. We liked him. Really well.

PS: You say some guy swindled your father out of a piece of land.

LF: A homestead: this homestead right next to my dad's place, the one that we lived on. Before dad got in to file on it, this old guy sneaked in there and took it. That made my father kind of mad.

PS: I can imagine.

LF: Yeah, because he wanted us to have a homestead right next to his.

PS: His wife?

LF: He wanted us to homestead right next to his, my father's, so that they'd be together, which is natural. We had lots of good spring water, golly good water. Used to be a lot of the neighbors around there used to come down with barrels to get water out of the trough. They hauled them in from their house because they didn't have water.

PS: What did you do for recreation when you were a kid?

LF: Ride a saddle horse up and down the hill. Go right down to Ulm and buy cigarettes when I wasn't supposed to. (laughter) My brother and I.

(Woman in background): Rode on homemade toboggans.

LF: Huh?

(Woman in background): And you rode on homemade toboggans.

LF: Oh yeah.

PS: Did a little bit of sledding, huh?

LF: Oh yeah, we used to do a lot of sledding. Them hills out there was pretty high. You got to go out there sometime. Nice country. Go across the river there and go right straight south. Then take a turn and go up Butte Creek, is what it's called. Then you'll see the big hill there.

PS: How was the hunting?

LF: Hunting was good. Of course, I had to go. dad and there was people. They used to get in the buggy and go up in the fields and hunt. One time, my father and mother drove some of her family from Minnesota They drove all the way down to Yellowstone Park in a buggy. Can you imagine that? Didn't have no shades on it either. I always thought that was pretty good. Nowadays, you wouldn't think about riding up to the neighbors in a buggy.

PS: How were the Indians treated?

LF: We never had any around there. Not many of them to round up. Indians... I don't think they end up around Cascade anymore. In the brush up there (?) and stuff like that... (indistinct)

(break in tape)

They repaired and things like that.

PS: What did Roosevelt do with the WPA? I mean, during the Depression to help people out?

LF: He started the WPA, got it started. They was out building roads and cleaning brush up in the hills I remember. They was doing all kinds of things like in flood time they'd be out. Run over the water. Well, let's see...

PS: Could a guy make a pretty good... could a guy sustain himself on the program?

LF: Keep you from starving. It's kind of something going on, until they got something to do better. I always thought that was a good program.

PS: Some people were against it?

LF: Oh yeah, some of them were.

PS: Why was that?

LF: The Democrats and Republicans: one will say one is wrong when they know you're right just because he's a Democrat or Republican. You see a lot of that. My brothers and I thought he did everything he could for the working people. I'd like to see him back again. Let's see what should be on there.

PS: How about the Ferguson school you mentioned.

LF: Yeah.

PS: Why was it named Ferguson School?

LF: Because there was a whole bunch of Fergusons going to school. There was two big families of Fergusons. Seven of us and five or six of the others.

PS: All related?

LF: Huh?

PS: All of you related?

LF: Yeah, cousins. I had two sisters and four brothers. That made seven children. The other family was.

(Woman in background): Gordon

LF: The Gordon Ferguson family: they had... maybe four boys and one girl. That's about right. Five boys? They had four or five boys and one girl. Then Dad was a trustee there.

PS: What was the school like back then when...

LF: They built it nice and brand new... when, I don't know as much. Pretty early. Probably about 1920 I suppose. Building was nice; it was a really nice building. You've seen these schools, old schools, in the country. That's about what it looked like. Maybe a little different, but very little.

PS: The one house schools?

LF: Yeah, one-room building. They drilled a well: pumped water out of that with a hand pump.

PS: So there was one through eighth grade? One through eight grades?

LF: Yeah, that's as far as it went, through the eighth grade.

PS: What about the people who wanted to continue education? What did they do?

LF: They had to come to Great Falls.

PS: Oh I see.

LF: They had to come to Great Falls to go to school.

PS: Most people finished eight grades?

LF: Eighth grade, yeah, that's as far as you had to go. One teacher goes and takes eight kids and takes them eight grades. That way, we had to support the teacher a lot too, a lot of times. Not always, but sometimes we did. They got a teacherage. They built a teacherage: little room, one room, about the size of this room here.

PS: At the side of the school?

LF: Yeah. On the side of it. They put it on skids so it could be moved. They had to.

(Woman in background): Talk about wages.

LF: I think a teacher got a hundred dollars a month.

PS: A hundred a month. That was pretty good back then, huh?

LF: Yeah, not bad at all. Really not bad. I'm quite sure because I used to see the check every once in a while. A hundred dollars.

PS: Who paid them? Was it the government or...

LF: It's the tax payers. School board.

PS: You mentioned one time about your horses getting away from you.

LF: Oh yeah, the runaway? The runaway. My brother and I left the coulee and we was raking some hay. When we got done, we had to come out through a gate, of course. We was going to take this hay rake back to my uncle's place just above us there. My uncle had an old 1916 Model A Ford.. .Model T Ford. Never did.. .That's when cars first start coming in, Model T days.

PS: What year was that?

LF: 1916. The fenders in front were straight out. They didn't curve or nothing like that. Of course horses, every time they'd see a car running someplace, they'd want to run. This time, they took up at high gallop when they saw that Ford coming up there out of the coulee. They took off and, like I say, they knocked me down on the tongue. Of course, I was too young to know what to do. I was scared. I was grabbing onto everything I could grab a hold of to keep from falling off. I didn't want to get drug in that rake. I rode then until we got on the (indistinct) and they had them up a hill. When they got up to the top, they slowed down enough so I could get out because I could run a lot faster then than I do now.

PS: Farming, then: how long was the average day? I mean during a peak time like harvest or something.

LF: Probably would have been daylight to dark. While we were here, they'd have those thrash machines going around. They'd pull with an (indistinct). They set that out and they come around right away pull in the pieces and put the belt on. Then they had about eight bundle racks, but. (unintelligible). They had about eight bundle racks and they would haul bundles. I started with. I was about sixteen, hauling bundles.

PS: Who did you do that for? Your father and everybody else around there?

LF: Yeah. Everybody around there banded together. It took eight men on one of the rakes and probably you'd have to have two on a spike pitcher. That's what they called them people that would go out in the field and help them load up there. They had grain oars (?). They had all the grain to shovel. They had a hopper. They put it in the hay rack with our grain wagon. (unintelligible). Anyway, that's the way they used to do it.

PS: Everybody just kind of helped each other out?

LF: Yeah, and then go to the next neighbor, see? And the next neighbor. Dad would be gone from home probably a month or two. Well, not entirely away. He'd be at the neighbors. Sometimes he'd come home; sometimes he wouldn't at night, depending on how far away he was.

PS: There were quite a few people they call vagabonds running around?

LF: Vagabonds? I don't know if I've heard that name. I don't know what that is.

PS: It's kind of a bum that walks around and...

LF: Yeah, yeah. They had them there. A lot of them would come around looking for work.

PS: You give them work and...

LF: Once in a while. If we had something to do, give them a job, couple days of pay.

(woman in the background): Meals.

LF: Huh?

(woman in the background): Meals.

LF: Meals, yeah. Women and them mainly had wood and coal stoves. You could get by alright. Get up early in the morning and start breakfast for eight or ten men. Or more.

PS: Were the women mostly confined to the house?

LF: Yeah. Never seen many women work the yard out in that country. Them farmers used to do a lot of work that a machine does now.

PS: Yeah.

LF: You know you cross the river at Ulm: coming this way, cross the river this way and go along the river, and there's a big field over here. I helped thrash it the first year they put a crop in there. They put oats in there. That's the heaviest dog-garn crop there is. Them bundles were as big as I was. I got through it alright. I was about sixteen years old I guess. Anything else?

PS: What did your brothers turn to do in the years of the Depression?

LF: My brothers?

PS: Yeah.

LF: My brother Donnie worked for HO (?) in the Park's house. My brother Fred, he... he went to California and he got into the auto parts business. Parts, you know, like HO (?). He sold that out about three or four years ago and he retired.

PS: What was the religious community like?

LF: What?

PS: Religious community?

LF: We had Sunday School every Sunday. Catholic, or whatever they are, they'd come. Do you know Angus Ferguson up there on this side of Cascade? Didn't you live out that way someplace one time?

PS: Yeah, I don't believe I know him.

LF: Anyway, that's where they got their religion. Minister came down from Cascade. I don't know if it was every Sunday or every other Sunday. I don't remember. He was real good. My mother played the organ. She was kind of a musician that way. Let's see. I usually liked to hear the old organ sing, play.

(Woman in background): Tell him about Chan.

LF: Oh yeah. One brother got to be county commissioner. 1966 was when it was. Chan Ferguson. He was pretty young yet, I guess. Howard, he went to selling paint and different things. I told you Don was in the auto parts business. I had two sisters. Their life was taking care of kids.

PS: Yeah. That's what the women did, take care of kids?

LF: Huh?

PS: That's what the women did, household chores and taking care of the kids?

LF: Yep. Taking care of the kids. Some raised a large family. There was seven in our family. All living but three. (unintelligible).

[End of Side A]

[Side B is blank. End of OH-152]