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Interview with Arthur Donlan February, 1975 (Interviewer: E. MacDonald)

EM: Would you tell me when you came here and how you happen to know as much history as you do of the area?

Donlan: Well, my father and mother came in here in 1892. My father was a lumberman and stayed here a short while, I mean, his lumber camps, sawmills, moved and he moved with them; and in 1910-1914 he picked up 79 acres of land right here and they were living in Missoula at that time. I got interested in the history because my wife, -- she and a lady named Mrs. Loiselle got interested in the history -- and it's always that way -- the people from the outside take an interest in it while the people on the inside just kind of forget about it.

EM: Is Mrs. Loiselle an old-timer?

Donlan: Fairly old, I'm not sure just how old. We may hear from her. Mrs. Donlan has written to her... they had the Peterson ranch on the lower road...by the dairy.

EM: Now, if your parents were involved in the lumbering in 1890...

Donlan: Yes, Dad came to the state in 1892; he was over in this country about '93 or '94. In '92, then he worked one year in Great Falls and then came over here.

EM: His full name was...

Donlan: Edward Donlan

EM: Do you know where he did his logging? Do you have much history on that?

Donlan: In the next canyon over here, called Blackhawk, that's where he set up his first sawmill, and I don't know just exactly how long he was there, but then he moved his sawmill over on Mill Creek, and he logged what is called Fournier Gulch. (spelling unsure)

EM: So he had his own mill there. Do you know what year that would have been?

Donlan: Somewhere around 1900.

EM: And the first mill, you think he started right after he got here, around 1894?

Donlan: 1895-96 about.

EM: What else...

Donlan: This is a steam mill... steam-powered sawmill ... there were a lot of small mills in the country around then...

EM: Do you have any pictures of that?

Donlan: I have one ... willing to allow it to be used...

EM: What else can you tell us about mills?

Donlan: Well, not much. I don't know how long it took to get that timber out; then he moved on to the Six Mile and logged there, then moved to where Alberton is now and told me he put the first bridge where the natural pier bridge is ... west of Alberton...there was no Milwaukee railroad then and he had to get the timber across the river; and it's a narrow place and there're rocks with one rock in the middle, and that middle rock made what they called a natural pier.

EM: And he built that?

Donlan: He built the first bridge there because he had to get the logs across... his lumber across to the railroad. I don't know when that was.

EM: Do you have any old records?

Donlan: No

EM: You don't have any idea what kind of volume he did, or what it was like... did he ever tell you what it was like logging in those days?

Donlan: Oh, not particularly. By 1910 I went out and spent summers in the logging camp, so there was no use in telling me because it was still all horses and...uh..just the ordinary type of logging they did in those days, no power equipment of any kind, just horses and men, no power saws or caterpillars...all that came 20 years later.

EM: Cross-cut saws?

Donlan: Cross-cut saws, oh yes.

EM: How large a crew would you have? How long would it take to cut down a tree with a cross-cut saw?

Donlan: A couple of good Swedes could get it out pretty fast. They'd get out 10-12,000 feet a day. They'd fall the tree and they would limb it and cut it up into logs...about 12,000 feet a day.

EM: What particular areas, say in West, do you know he logged? Say, up in Ninemile?

Donlan: No...

EM: Because that was logged in approximately ¹⁹¹⁴ ~~1910~~, wasn't it?

Donlan: Yes...

EM: In the upper part, up near Thisted's?

Donlan: I couldn't tell you why...the Anaconda Company ...Lothrop...you know where that is...across the river there at Latty Creek...a town called Lothrop there is where William A. Clark had a big sawmill there and he logged on the Ninemile, and they used to drive them down the Ninemile at high water and then he'd pick up the logs at the Lothrop mill.

...

EM: Well, then, we should be able to find all kinds of things about logging in the Ninemile from William Clark's records, shouldn't we?

Donlan: Yes...then the Anaconda Company had the big bulk of timber up there, and they put the shay railroad up in there, they built railroads...logging railroads up there.

EM: In the Ninemile? Where would those be? There must be remnants.

Donlan: Yes, there's remnants. The road that goes past Cyr's there, and that bench there, I think that all the way up there is all where the logging road...and when you get past Harrington's where it makes that sharp bend, I'm sure that's all old logging road. There's people here that could tell you, but it was gone before I ever went up there.

EM: Where do you personally remember logging?

(with)

Donlan: Oh, mostly down in Sanders County...Dad, after he moved to Sanders County...and he logged a lot in the reservation -- Indian timber.

EM: Could we go on to what you know about the other mill on Mill Creek? I understand you had some stones from it?

Donlan: Yes, all I know is...I got an article out of Palladino's book, Indians and White in the Northwest, and one out of Miller's book, and one out of Leeson's book. The thing I had to do was to show that there actually was a mill, and I wrote a presentation that I gave to the Ghost Town Society at their meeting when I presented the stones.

EM: Where did you get the stones?

Donlan: Well, rather than put it all on the tape, I have a presentation...

EM: Is that probably as complete as we could find on the mill...or do you know of other people who would have any more first-hand information about it?

Donlan: I don't know that anybody would -- Ed Hamel, now, who's 84 years old, all he can remember is seeing the foundations or something. He doesn't remember. He has a general idea of where the mill was, but actually he didn't see it in operation. His father -- the Hamels and the Bedards-- they built another mill in Frenchtown; it was a more modern mill. That old mill, I imagine, was rather crude, because it was built in 1859... whip-sawed...

EM: Your information about that came about just because you got interested in it and dug into it? It wasn't because you had any original knowledge from anybody in particular?

Donlan: No, I was given these stones, and I didn't know what to do with them. I had them for 5-6-7 years, and I, as I said in this little article I wrote, I hated to see somebody put them in a patio, and so I got the idea of giving them to the Ghost Town Society, and you can't just say "this is this" unless you're going to back it up a little, I thought. And there is evidence to prove that there was a mill there at one time.

EM: What else do you feel you can contribute, as far as your personal knowledge goes...you mentioned, I believe, about the irrigation system...you know a lot about that?

Donlan: Oh yes, I know a lot about that.

EM: From first-hand experience?

Donlan: Oh, yes...but that would be...the Irrigation District...it would be very easy to write to the Bureau of Reclamation in Boise and get a history of the Irrigation District. They kept a history of it. It was a ...you see... from reading among those papers ...that in 1903...they built an Irrigation District ...the farmers did, on the upper part of the valley. Then after they got the drought in the 1930's, the farmers down here got interested, and they were able to get some WPA money -- ^{two funds} they got the money from -- and the government, the Bureau of Reclamation used those funds to build this irrigation district.

EM: Do you recall names of people involved, the ranchers?

Donlan: Well, my father was...it's a legal subdivision of the government...a district, same as the school...my father was president of of it; _____ Loiselle was a member, Ralph Scheafer (Tom Scheafer's father) was a member...the first engineer, I don't recall his name...but as I say, you can get all of this information, the history, from the Bureau of Reclamation...

EM: How does a group of people go about getting something like this?

Donlan: Well, it had been talked about quite a bit; my father was quite instrumental; he was anxious to get water; he had what I have now, and the King place next to us...

EM: How many acres would that have been?

Donlan: At that time, including where Sorrell Springs now is, would be about 1700 acres; of course that's 60%, so we had about 1100 acres down here...and my father had been in politics all of his life and had a good deal of influence in the state, and in Washington too, and he was probably the moving factor...I was living here and we were farming together, and he had time to get out and get amongst the farmers and amongst the politicians and gather the money up and get the thing going.

EM: Could you explain where the water begins, and how extensive the system is?

Donlan: Well, the water is diverted from the river by the _____ Ranch, right behind the _____ Ranch, lower road, called the Miller place, too...about 6-7 miles up (from Frenchtown) the valley...there's approximately 5,000 acres under the Irrigation District...I don't know what else to say... the water is diverted there at that last farm just before you go over the hill to the Sunset Memorial Gardens.

EM: Now, that...if the individual wants to be in it...does the government build the ditches...and do you have to put up the money?

Donlan: The government doesn't have anything to do with it anymore, really, but when it was built, they brought the water to each man's land, and on his own land he had to hook up his own irrigation system.

EM: What qualified you to be in the district? Just having land?

Donlan: Well, your land has a mortgage on it to the government, and if you have 60% of the landowners and 40% of the land, you could force the other people in, as in a Special Improvement District, you might say, and most of them were willing to come in.

EM: And it didn't cost them anything to come in?

Donlan: No down payment, but the Irrigation District made a contract with the farmers, the Board of Directors and approved by the farmers, and they are paying so much every year on the construction charges, and the Board also has maintenance and that is assessed every year on the taxes... there's not too many years until the District will be owned by the farmers and the government will be paid off.

EM: But you're actually still paying on that, then?

Donlan: Oh yes; they figure those things take about 40 years.

EM: I'd like to backtrack a little, and ask you about your own family history; when and where you were born, what you remember of your earliest life in this valley.

Donlan: I didn't have any early life in Frenchtown; I was born in Missoula and went to school in Missoula. We used to drive down here once in awhile; the Turmells father always leased this out; first to Mel and then to Joe Norman, Louis Norman's father; he had it for about 10 years, and I didn't have a great deal to do with Frenchtown until about 1929; I moved down here in the fall to start farming.

EM: Could we retrace a little about your parents -- when they did live here, or was your father just here logging but lived in Missoula?

Donlan: Well, I was born in 1902 and the family was living in Missoula, and he was spending his time in the logging camps. After he left here, he moved his family to Missoula, and ... everything was railroads if you were going anyplace, and that was where the main line was...

EM: So it wasn't until 1929 that you moved out here? What was it like then?

Donlan: Well, in 1929 the whole valley was French with the exception of the Stiegler's, the Sols, and myself.

EM: Did they speak French, mainly?

Donlan: Yes, amongst themselves almost entirely. Of course, there had been schools, so the younger people were getting away from talking French, and ..but in the homes, Grandpa and Grandmas, mothers and fathers, mothers especially, talked French.

EM: For our records, what pictures do you have?

Donlan: I have the one picture of the sawmill on Mill Creek; and I have the one that shows early day Frenchtown. (St. John's Day)