

**Oral History Number: 169-001**

**Interviewee: Eldo Raph**

**Interviewer: Dale Johnson**

**Date of Interview: November 13, 1986**

Dale Johnson: This is an oral history with Eldo Raph of the Dillon Implement Hardware Company in Dillon, Montana, on November 13, 1986. Eldo, can you give a little history of the Dillon Implement Company?

Eldo Raph: It was founded in October 24 in 1886. Incorporated at 120 shares at 100 dollars each and 12,000 dollars. They dealt mainly in machinery to start with, but they also brokered grain. They did their business, because of only 12,000 dollars operating capital, by issuing notes to [unintelligible] and such as that, a year down the line at eight percent interest, and they internally sold the merchandise, took a note, filed it with the courthouse at one percent per month. That was the way that they, in turn, paid for their merchandise.

DJ: Who were the officers, or the early organizers, of the company?

ER: It was Morse (?), B.F. White...trying to think of the other fellows right off hand. Charlie Phillips' brother was one of the originators and then Charlie Phillips came in upon the death of his brother and then it passed on from Phillips into McGuire (?) and his son-in-law—Charlie Phillips' son-in-law, Eugene Bond (?)—and Charlie Phillips' grandson, Gene Bond's son, Phillip Bond, which kept it in the family until 1972.

DJ: What was the marketing area for the company generally?

ER: All the way from Salmon, Idaho, to [unintelligible] the Gold Creek, Montana, down into Spencer-Dubois, Idaho, east to Ennis almost to Bozeman, north almost to Butte-Melrose area. It entailed a lot of different towns and such that [unintelligible] that are no longer in existence—the old mining towns—mid-west into Wisdom-Hamilton area.

DJ: Most of this was farm machinery and [unintelligible].

ER: Farm machinery, wagons, a series of ropes. They had their own harness shop here. They built harness, bought some harness, made their own saddles. Talked to a fellow the other day by the name of Phillip Brown (?) and he's 70-some years old. Said when he was a little boy and came to town, where he wanted to go was going to the Dillon Implement and set astride the old gray horse made out of papier mache lifestyle and watch, and there was a Mexican who has a saddle maker and that was the only thing he wanted to do when he came to town.

There's a lot of different stories about one time when they made saddles, and they made five saddles, or sold five saddles this one year, and they were only paid for four of them. Every saddle had a serial number on them and stamped with Dillon Implement Company on them.

Johnson's Saddlery over here has a saddle that was made by Dillon Implement Company—they had it on display. But they realized when they checked over the books that they'd only been paid for four of the saddles. So they thought the best way to do it was to send a bill to all five, and hopefully the one that didn't pay would pay. Well, what happened was they received five checks. Then they were in a dilemma what to do, and Gene (?) never ever did tell me. He started telling me the story and never did finish what they did on that on that one saddle [unintelligible].

DJ: Now, I noticed on some of the letterhead, they were in grass and seeds, did they sell to farmers? Is that...was that—

ER: Yes, they bartered too. They would buy seed grain and such as this here, and then also when the crop came in, they would come in and they'd weigh it—it would be sacked by and coming by team and wagon. It would go over into the warehouse, and they would barter it onto their bill and also possibly, if necessary, they would either be paid for the balance if there was an overage or it would be carried over as a credit. There was also some people that to pay their bill would bring in cord wood. They would bring the cord wood in for the furnace for during the winter to pay on their bill and that's recorded in the books.

DJ: Everything shipped out of here went on Union Pacific, south?

ER: Union Pacific, yes. The warehouse was on railroad property and it was a leased property there. They also dealt in barbed wire and fencing and such as that and would bring it in by the carload into that warehouse.

DJ: Were the early owners of this business also in other businesses in Dillon area? Gene Bond (?) was originally a dentist. Then had the Bond Grocery prior to coming over here to run the Dillon Implement. At one time Bert McGuire (?) had 51 percent or 49 or 51 percent—I can't remember which way it was—of the stock. Phillip Bond and Gene Bond had the balance of the stock. So it was a three-way business with Bert McGuire running the business. I believe that when Charlie Phillips in his will [unintelligible] that he willed some of his stock to Bert McGuire to manage it, in trust as such as that, for Phillip Bond's grandson and for his son-in-law.

There was a habit here too that they charged all year, and if the bill ran over 100 dollars, they would come in once a year and they would pay it. This was in later years. We had a fellow come in here for the 100th anniversary of the name of Herb Wheat (?) who lived here all his life. He was, I believe, close to 80 years old or such. We had free knife sharpening, and he brought in his knife—pocket knife—and because the bill was over a hundred dollars and they paid it on time once a year, Charlie Phillips would give them a pocket knife as a bonus for coming in and paying. Well, he brought his pocketknife in from over 20 or 25 years ago and had us sharpen it.

DJ: You mentioned the original Dillon Implement Company was in the building we're in now—this part—and next door was an addition to this.

ER: Yeah, this here were the store is now and on the corner here, the building was built in 1900, and a lady got 3,400 dollars for freighting the rock walls here are 25-inches thick. It's a high two-story building. She got 3,400 dollars for trading it in [unintelligible] frying pan ten miles out of town. The other side—the new side when we moved over into five years ago—this 50 by 100 building, was built in 1914. It originally was rented out, and it was rented out to the Beaverhead State Bank, which was in existence for about four years. And in the rental books, it will bear out that it took them six months to finish paying their rent which was 100 dollars a month. After they left Safeway, which was then Skaggs United (?) grocery store, rented it and started at 75 dollars, and then went up to around, I believe, it was 125 dollars a month. Then in the Depression, they lowered it 75 or 90 dollars a month to keep them there. I think they were there until 1940s, the Safeway store was. Above it there was a rental the Forest Service rented area there for their offices—U.S. Forest Service—and then they did some remodeling in the '20s and put in sewer and such as at. They had apartments above the old side and the new side.

DJ: I noted in some of the letterheads too, or in some of the photos, they sold carriages. They sold them out of this building or out of the warehouse building?

ER: Well, before the new side was built before 1914, there was steel sheds on the south side in the area where that building was. They used to bring the buggies and carriages out of the basement here on the old rope-pull elevator and go out a big sliding door, which we found when we remodeled five years ago, and the door still slides. They would take them out and put them in the steel-shed type building which was open on the north side of the building. They also had a blacksmith shop in the parking lot behind the store here which was operated by McLaren (?). It was totally separate business from the businesses that are in here. One time there was a plumbing shop in the front part of this old building on this side. For one quarter of the building was a plumbing shop, and that's where [unintelligible] 75 or 76 years old did his apprenticeship. Eventually he married the daughter of Bert McGuire, who was managing the store at that time.

They used to take the cord wood down with that elevator. The furnace is still the original furnace that was converted from cord wood to coal, and it's now natural gas.

DJ: Were they always in the hardware business, or is that something that came along after?

ER: Well, when they start selling buggies and the machinery, why, they started carrying the accessories for the buggies and repairs and such as that. So therefore it led to having to have oil cans and sickle bars and rivets and bolts and this sort of stuff to repair the buggies and wagons which they were selling. Of course, when they had to set them up—they came sometimes all knocked down and they had to assemble them down in the basement. There still is cases of wagon box rivets and square-flush bolts, keyhead-flush bolts—all types of rivets and brads and stuff for leather work and such as that in cases [unintelligible].

DJ: Were there any competing hardware stores in Dillion that you're aware of?

ER: Yes, there was Dart Hardware (?), and there was another one...I can't, right off the top of my head, remember the name of the other hardware company.

DJ: But this was probably the earliest.

ER: I don't know if it was the earliest or not. I don't remember if Dart was, and Dart would probably be very close to being the first hardware store. The implement part of it, I would say, [unintelligible] in the first place, but as far as hardware, Dart was probably the first. Which is ironic in that fact that Dart Hardware...When I lived in Shelby, there was a teacher there by the name of Dale Dart (?), who now lives in Butte and has a business there. It was his grandfather who owned and ran the Dart Hardware.

[Break in audio]

DJ: Did Gene Bond practice dentistry all the time that he was with the corporation, or was that a separate thing?

ER: No, he graduated from University of Iowa and came back to Dillion. I believe it was either his father or his uncle was a medical doctor and [unintelligible] in Dillon. So he set up practice as a dentist for...don't remember exactly how many years. It's in the records there. But it seems like it's four or five years. After that, he just tired of being the dentistry, and so therefore he went into the Bond Grocery and ran Bond Grocery, giving up the dentistry practice altogether. I don't know if he kept up his practice or his license in the state of Montana. I never did find out from him. He never did tell me about that part of it.

DJ: Did he start Bond Grocery, or did he take that over from someone?

ER: That I don't know. I don't know the true history of that. I know that he was in partnership with Dale Tesh, Sr. (?) in the Bond Grocery. Possibly if you get a chance to talk to Dale Tesh to relate more on that part of the Bond Grocery. They were, same type of deal that they ran their groceries bill for one whole year, and they had quite a few people in talking about that for the 100th anniversary about how they would buy their groceries for one whole year on credit and then go in and pay for it once they sold their crop. From there, I don't know exactly what it was, and then Charlie Phillips passed away the possibility that came over here for to maintain the store and such as that along with McGuire's.

DJ: Then they ran it right up until it was sold [unintelligible].

ER: Yes. The Bonds ran it up until they sold it then to Jim Flynn (?), who was [unintelligible] of Montana Fish and Game, and Joe Morris (?), who runs Dillon Disposal in town. They brought me in as manager. I was working over in [unintelligible] accounting firm as a CPA, and asked if I'd

come over and manage it and gave me a percentage of stock to manage the hardware business because they still had their sanitation and garbage disposal business. Then they turned around and had it sold to make Nicholas [unintelligible] at state bank. I heard about it and exercised my minority stockholder option to be able to purchase it, and therefore found somebody with some backing and two of us got a new loan from the [unintelligible] Bank through the help of Gene Bond to purchase it from Morris and Flynn.

DJ: Now, are any of the Bonds still living?

ER: There is no living relatives. When Phillip Bond passed away, he left everything in his will to Yellowstone Boys Ranch. They went through all of the personal stuff of Bonds and anything they felt of value to the Yellowstone Boys Ranch—

[telephone rings; break in audio]

DJ: How is the hardware business now in Dillon?

ER: The hardware business now is very depressed through the fact of economics as far as farmers and ranchers, which we did mainly the greatest amount of our business is with farmers and ranchers. There is far more competition now in Dillon, a town of 4,000, with one, two, three hardware stores—Equity Supply (?) [unintelligible]. When we first started here in '74, we had three hardware stores, and that was just get [unintelligible] a small amount [unintelligible].

DJ: What's the trade area now? Does it still go down south into Idaho?

ER: We still do business with Oxbow Ranch and [unintelligible]. We have a number of ranches of Salmon area and [unintelligible] area. They come up occasionally, not as much as what they used to before because of the distressed prices and such as that. Business was, up until three years ago, we were one of the larger hardware stores and sales and such that for [unintelligible]. Since then, sales have decreased in the last three years.

DJ: Do you still go over into the Big Hole are too?

ER: Oh yes. Yes. We still sell some 7/16 cable and such as that, especially during [unintelligible]. Sold 17 [unintelligible] of number 5 and 6 horseshoes last year to Jack Hershey (?) over there when he was using draft horses. [unintelligible] 17 dollars apiece.

DJ: What is the outlook for the business community in Dillon?

ER: It's going to be nip and tuck for a lot of the businesses within this area because we're largely dependent upon the farming and ranching. Twenty-three foreclosures and takeovers within the county. [unintelligible] same or decreased sales for another two or three years until the farmers

and ranchers can get back on their feet. The largest county in the state of Montana and only 10,000 population. You have to really scratch and dig in order to bring in the sales.

DJ: You mentioned the apartments that were upstairs in this building. Did they always operate rentals out of here as part of the business of the—

ER: Dillion Implement? Yes. The rentals were always part of the Dillon Implement Company. I think the books show they started in 1916—rentals on both sides. And apartments—there are 13 apartments upstairs to this date. There is no number 1 and no number 13. They go from 2 through 15 so there are 13 apartments up there. They're all old or antiquated with a lot of antiques within them, especially furniture and fixtures. But we try to maintain and make sure they stay up there. We rent mainly now one-bedroom apartments with one as a studio apartment. We rent mainly to college students at Western due to the fact is that they in turn, during the summer sublet their apartment to somebody that's going to summer school. We've had some apartments rented to one party for four years so price is low [unintelligible]. They are not a money maker, but you have to do something them due to the fact is that they're part of the existing building. There is no zoning [unintelligible]. It's all steam heat from that [unintelligible] furnace.

DJ: Is there anything you'd like to add? Anything that comes to mind about some of the earlier history or some of the things we haven't covered or have covered?

ER: I could tell you a little funny story. Not to put a bad name on any other business or any other type of company. Gene Bond used to [unintelligible], you could tell he was the one involved in it. This fellow came into the store one day and wanted to know if Gene had such and such a tool [unintelligible]. Gene said, "I believe I have it." He walked down the store and picked it off the wall, walked back to the front counter and laid it down in front of the fellow and asked him if that's what he wanted.

He said, "Yes, that's just what I want." He said, "How much?"

Gene Bond says, "It's 7 dollars and 95 cents."

The fellow just ranted and raved. He said, "I can buy it from Sears for 4 dollars and 67 cents."

Gene finally said, "Well, if you're going to feel that way on everything, just give me the 4dollars and 67 cents." So the fellow laid down the 4 dollars and 67 cents, and Gene Bond rang it up at the cash register and picked up the tool and started towards the back room with the tool. The fellow says, "Hey, where're you going with that tool?"

Gene looked at him and says, "You get it in five days same as you'd get it from Sears."

The fellow turned around and says, "Well, I need it right now. I'll pay you extra money."

Gene was a very stoic fellow and very much involved in the whole community and involved in people and liked everybody. When we went over there and told him that his business would have been down the tubes if I hadn't come into the store to operate it six months prior as I was trying to buy, why I'd gotten a loan and such as that, I made him promise to stick around to see the 100th in the store. [unintelligible] highly successful that we had an awful lot of people in here and we had a big celebration and drawings. We wrote letters to manufacturers. We wrote to 70-some manufacturers, and we had responses from 34 of them with merchandise or drawings for door prizes—directing manufacturers to a hardware store—I thought was phenomenal for the response we get. So therefore during the three and a half days that we did have the celebration, we were able to hold drawings every hour for people that came in—customers—customers with merchandise [unintelligible].

DJ: How many employees worked here in earlier times and now as sales on the floor and repair?

ER: The earlier days I can't rightly tell. [unintelligible] part of it, and I couldn't tell exactly how many. It looked like they had quite a number of employees in the '40s and early '50s, but that was probably due to the handling of the warehouse and working over there and maybe in earlier days they had quite a few. Right now we have ten employees. Prior to opening the other side, we had eight employees, but we still have one man in the shop. [unintelligible] '74. One time we had two fellows back in the shop. One was retired, [unintelligible] and the other one was a retired electrician. One is retired machinist is now 85 so he had to quit when he was 81 because his wife was ill. He was a master craftsman [unintelligible] or any appliance or any other piece of equipment that needed to be repaired. We received one national and four state awards from the American Legion for hiring retired veterans. The workforce I have of ten, there are a number of them part-time. One is going to college and one is part-time bookkeeping and the mechanic only works half day. I can't reduce the workforce [unintelligible] the fact that we are in essence two buildings with two aisle-ways going in between the two buildings and to cover and give the necessary service, why, I have to have that many of the employees. We still do an awful lot of repair work. We probably carry the largest selection of bolts of anywhere in most in Montana. We rely on the fact is if they can't find it anywhere else, they can possibly find it at the D.I. [Dillion Implement], which was the history of the store. Now it's getting tougher than ever to try to find any of the old-time parts that people are looking for. So I don't know. I hope the history continues. They keep telling me that you still can find it here if you look hard enough.

DJ: Well, thank you very much. Appreciate that.

[End of Interview]