

Maureen and Mike

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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: 099-015
Interviewee: Joe Pocha
Interviewer: Edd Nentwig
Date of Interview: June 15, 1981
Project: Fur Trappers Oral History Project

Edd Nentwig: Today we are doing an interview in the home of Joe Pocha in Augusta, Montana. You pronounce your name Pocha don't you? Poch"e"?

Joe Pocha: Yeah, it's a sound—it's an "e" instead of an "a".

EN: I've heard it pronounced both, I never did know. You were talking earlier, Joe. You said your family came here in what year in the 1900s?

JP: Well, my dad came here in the 1800s, when he was about 17, from Canada.

EN: Came down from Canada?

JP: Yes.

EN: What brought him to the United States?

[Interruption]

JP: I don't know what the reason was. He ran away from home. He had some disagreement with his folks and he ran away from home. I think he was 17 when he ran away, and then he was here three, four years, and then he went back. I think he didn't go back until after he was married. He married my mother here. I think he was here four or five years when he married my mother.

EN: Was she a local gal?

JP: Yes, she was raised by one the sisters and she went to school there in St. Peter's Mission—that's over around Cascade [Montana]. I think she was 14, 15 when they got married. They raised a family of, I think, 11.

EN: Your folks did? You had 11 brothers and sisters?

JP: Yes. Two of them died when they were young, but there were nine of us living up to the last few years.

EN: Did they homestead right out here?

JP: Well, he homesteaded in Dearborn Canyon. Then he turned around and sold the homestead to one of the ranchers there, Moisers (?). Then he worked for Moiser, the Moisers for years there. Then he finally worked for Kenck, Doctor Kenck. I think his father.

EN: His dad?

JP: His dad. We lived up in what they used to call Harrison Basin. That's up at the head of Dearborn Canyon there. He was running the ranch up there for Kencks, then he let us keep a few horses, cattle, and stuff like that. Then when Kenck sold out—I think that was in 1918—my dad came down here and bought the place here. Three or four acres.

EN: What was the name of this town site again?

JP: Gilman [Montana].

EN: Gilman. Was it quite a town in that time?

JP: Yes it was. It was, oh, I would say around 400 or 500 people.

EN: What was the main industry around here, agriculture?

JP: What got Gilman started was building those dams there in Sun River, see?

EN: Oh, I see.

JP: This was the end of the railroad and they'd freight the lumber and stuff up to here, and then from they would take it—

EN: Put it on wagons?

JP: Wagons, and stuff like that, and take it on up to Sun River Canyon.

EN: Looking at those pictures here, you said your great grandfather came from England?

JP: Yes, that's—I think it was him and his brother came from England, and they landed there in Canada.

EN: Did he marry up there and live up there?

JP: Yes, he married up there in Canada. He married a full-blooded, I think it was a Chippewa-Cree up there. I think they had about eight or ten kids.

EN: What providence? Do you remember what providence?

JP: Well, it was around Duck Lake. I think that's up close to Prince Albert.

EN: When you were a young boy, did you trap much then, or how did you begin trapping?

JP: When I was about 12 or 14, we were living here along the creek and that's how I got started trapping. I'd go down along the creek and set for muskrats and mink. In those years, I don't think you were allowed to trap beaver without a permit you know, special permit.

EN: What year about was that period in?

JP: That was, I think, in 1926, something like that.

EN: How did you learn to trap? Who taught you, or did anybody?

JP: Well, no, I just kind of learned myself, kind of.

EN: Oh, did you?

JP: Well, to start out with—I had to—used to trap gophers, with these Number One traps. Then I went from gophers to muskrats, and mink. When I got to catching mink, I thought I was a pretty good trapper.

EN: Did your folks—did anybody else in your family trap? Your dad?

JP: No, my dad never did trap. But in those years you'd get maybe a dollar, dollar and a half for skunk. A dollar in those days was worth some money. I used to catch them and I didn't like skunks. So I'd bring them home, and my dad would skin them for me, see? So that worked out pretty good.

EN: Kind of a family enterprise there.

JP: Yes, yes.

EN: Did you trap all during your youth?

JP: Well yes, until I was about 17. That's the year my dad died. I had to get out then. He left my mother with three kids, younger than I was, so I had to get out and make a living for them. I went to working for the ranchers around here. I didn't do much trapping then until the last few years.

EN: Just recently, then.

JP: Yes.

EN: You trapped over in Helmville [Montana] country?

JP: Yes, in the '70s there, I think '70, '71. I was there two years. Trapped along the Blackfoot [River] there for beaver, mink, muskrat.

EN: When you worked the ranches, did you work in this general area or all over the place?

JP: Well, yes and no. When I got married—I think I was 22 years old when I got married—I bought a little place up here towards the foothills. I was there two years surrounded by all these big outfits, so I couldn't get any more land. I had a chance to sell the land for twice what I paid for it, so I sold out and went to Helena [Montana]. I bought a place there, then I sold that place and got a little better place. Then I went to work for the smelter there. That's how I paid the place off, you know, working in the smelter.

EN: In Helena?

JP: In Helena, yes.

EN: Were you—go ahead.

JP: Then, when I retired—when I got to 62, I retired—I went up to the (unintelligible) ranch out of Helmville there. I helped him out for a couple years in the summertime. Irrigating, and helping with the hay, and then in the wintertime I trapped.

EN: Trapped mostly beaver over in there?

JP: Yes, it was a great place for beaver on that Blackfoot.

EN: How'd you learn how to take care of your furs? Did anyone teach you with that?

JP: No, I just kind of—just kind of go out there yourself, you know. I learned more going to the—there were rendezvous, the trapping rendezvous.

EN: Types of fur handling and things like that?

JP: Yes. I think it was in year '70, I went down and took a course for trapping coyotes down in North Dakota. You know, (unintelligible)?

EN: Yes.

JP: Yes. Before I had—well, I'd catch a few coyotes, but I just didn't know how to do it, you know. I went down and took that course. I came back and got pretty good.

EN: Trap right around here for coyotes?

JP: Yes, there aren't too right here, but up towards the mountains, there are quite a few of them.

EN: You got a good colored coyote in this area?

JP: Yes.

EN: Nice pales?

JP: Yes, they're pale.

EN: How did you ever get to know old Dick Kenck [Richard Kenck]?

JP: Well, I'll tell you, my dad, up there in Dearborn, my dad worked for his father, see? And us kids went to school together as long as I can remember. Dick used to trap, you know, and ever since I've been good friends with Dick.

EN: I know you both come to the rendezvous together all the time. He is a quiet fellow, old Dick.

JP: He is, yes.

EN: He was a government trapper for a while, wasn't he?

JP: I don't know whether he was or not, but around here, anybody that wants to get rid of a beaver, anything like that, they'll just go to him because he knows everybody, and is one of the best trappers around here.

EN: Does your creek down here still have much fur on it?

JP: Well, not too much. Beaver, there's very few beaver in there. Last winter I got two beaver down here, about three miles on down. I got a few mink, and a muskrat, and a coon.

EN: Oh, you have coon in here too?

JP: Yes, you know, it's only been in the last, I'd say, 10 or 15 years that the coon has been in here. Years ago, there never was a coon in here.

EN: You think they migrated from over east?

JP: I think they come up the Missouri River. Now, you can catch them clear up back in the mountains.

EN: Oh, is that right?

JP: Yes.

EN: I'll be damned. Did you ever trap many cats?

JP: No, very few. I've trapped one or two, but that's all.

EN: How'd you like (unintelligible) methods that he taught?

JP: Well, I think he's one of the finest.

EN: Do you? Do you think it was worth the challenge?

JP: I think it was, yes.

EN: Made you a little better trapper, you feel?

JP: Yes, it does.

EN: I'll be damned. When you worked at the smelter then, did you raise quite a family when you were married?

JP: Well, I raised three girls and a boy, four in our family. I had five, and one of the boys died when he was young. I put two girls through college, and the boy and one girl through high school.

EN: So you'd done pretty good at the smelter there, educating them and all?

JP: Yes, yes.

EN: What was—go ahead.

JP: It was a steady job. That's one reason that I quit when I did. It was kind of getting to me, you know?

EN: Working hard?

JP: Yes, a little too much lead.

EN: Oh. That's what they smelter over there, is lead?

JP: Yes.

EN: Those smelters are kind of tough on a guy.

JP: Yes, they are, if you stay there too long. I was there 18 years.

EN: That's quite a spell. Did your son—does he trap at all?

JP: No, he doesn't know much luck. But he has my grandson. He was down there with me last time.

EN: Yes, last fall.

JP: He generally helps me in the fall, doing the trapping.

EN: Oh does he? Is he pretty interested?

JP: Yes, he is.

EN: Well, that's good. How's he coming along? Pretty good?

JP: I think he's doing pretty good. He helps his dad in the summertime, and in the winter he traps.

EN: Goes out with grandpa and traps?

JP: Yes.

EN: Well, that's good. I think it's kind of interesting that you got interested when you were a youngster, got away from it for a long time, and came back to it right now.

JP: Yes, once you get that fever in your blood, you know, that trapping fever, it never leaves, you know? But when I was raising a family, I didn't have much time you know, working at the smelter and trying to run a ranch too, you see? So I didn't have too much time to trap.

EN: Yes. You snare any at all?

JP: I snare some, but trouble is when they are around stock or anything, you got to be awful careful. If you're operating to get away from the stock, that's a good way to catch a predator all right.

EN: Did you and Dick trap partners ever, together, or did you both go alone?

JP: No, we go separate. He hasn't trapped with a partner for years, I don't think. He used to.

EN: Gave that up, I suppose?

JP: Yes, he used to spend winters in the mountains, trapping martin and that.

EN: Were there any other old timers right around Augusta here that you remember that were trappers?

JP: Well, not that I know of. Maybe Dick would know. There's one guy in Augusta, I don't know how long he's trapped. I just can't think now. Dick would tell you.

EN: You ever had people give you a bad time about trapping and all?

JP: Well, once in a while, yes.

EN: Is that right? How do you handle those type people?

JP: Well, you've got to try to get along with them. As long as you open and close their gates, and get permission to trap on their land, that's the best. If you get permission, and they tell you to go ahead, and that you're careful. If you don't leave any gates open or leave anything canned around, stuff like that, you know? They're usually pretty satisfied.

EN: Was this the—did you build this house here?

JP: Yes. Of course, I had help to build it.

EN: Just recently since you retired?

JP: Yes, we just finished this last fall.

EN: Yes, that's a nice house. You said your folk's place still stands down here?

JP: Yes, yes, the old house.

EN: Is it on your property here?

JP: Yes.

EN: That's nice. It's kind of something that you came back here after the smelter and built your home here, where you homesteaded.

JP: Yes.

EN: Do you like—how do you—do you trap in the summers at all, with predator control or anything?

JP: No.

EN: Just wintertime?

JP: Just winter, yes.

EN: Do you build any of your own lures or anything?

JP: Well, I make my own for mink and coon out of fish oil, and beaver castors.

EN: Did you learn by yourself how to do that?

JP: Yes.

EN: How did you pick up on that? Just by catching the animal? How to make what he wanted to get after?

JP: Well, I just found—I take an old fish, and let it rot till it's down in a liquid form. Pour off most of the oil, and then I mix in little dry beaver castors. Oil and beaver castors. That makes one of the best scents there is, and it's cheap.

EN: Works pretty good for you?

JP: Yes.

EN: How are you feeling about—you going to continue to trap for quite a while?

JP: Yes, I think I'll trap so long as I can keep going.

EN: Well that's good. What is yelling?

[End of Side A]

Note: The audio on Side B of the cassette tape is too faint to be transcribed.