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Interviewee: Mildred Dufresne
Interviewer: Gladys Peterson
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Gladys Peterson: I am speaking today to Mrs. Mildred Dufresne. Our main topic will be the Depression of the 1930s.

Mildred, before we talk about the Depression, I think it would be nice if we went back and found out when you came to Montana. Where were you born?

Mildred Dufresne: I was born in Missouri in...Shall I say the date?

GP: Whatever you want.

MD: 1909, then we moved to Montana in 1922 when I started high school. So I went to the old high school here, where Hellgate is now.

GP: What brought your family to Montana?

BH: Several things. One was—we lived on a small farm in Missouri, and it wasn't quite prosperous enough to send two girls to college—the folks thought. So Mother had a sister here, who encouraged her to come out here that there was a good college for Eunice (?) here, and I could go to a good high school. It was just the thing to do. My folks were always very eager to go somewhere else. They moved several times when we were in Missouri. They both were ready to come out here, so Dad sold the ranch and the farm [unintelligible] and we came.

GP: When did her sister come?

MD: Her sister had come to Terry, Montana, about four years before that. At Terry, it was all right at first because they had a livery barn. About that time cars, especially Fords, became very popular, and the livery barn was not a paying proposition anymore. So then they came to Missoula also because there was a school there.

GP: Did your father find work when he got here?

MD: Yes, he did several different things. He was a carpenter, and he even worked one of the houses at the end of the block here. He also worked on the old Milltown Dam; they were repairing it at that time. He was very interested in the nationalities who worked there. We had never seen—

GP: Ethnic groups?

MD: Ethnic groups, particularly. Of course, my dad had been raised near St. Louis in the German community. But they were about third generation by that time. So he had never seen the Finnish people, and the Swedish and those that occupied Bonner at that time. [laughs] So he would come home with new stories to tell about them.

GP: Were you living right in Missoula?

MD: Yes, we lived at Edith Street, just three blocks from here.

GP: Did you and your sister attend the University of Montana then?

MD: I went to high school for four years first, but she went to the university. You would be very interested in reading her autobiography that I'm doing, that tells about that. She had been very good at English and history in high school. But that little high school we had in Missouri didn't have any, really, oh you might say, homeopractical (?) things, like industrialized sewing (?). Hannah said, "I've always wanted to sew and never been able to take anything that would lead to it." So in this autobiography she bemoans the fact that she never got to do that, and she never got to do it at the university, because she didn't realize...Well, there was hardly such a thing in the university for women at that time. You did take a college-bound [unintelligible] to be a teacher or something like that.

GP: What did she major in?

MD: English and history. After about three years, she got a teaching certificate. I still have her first-grade teaching certificate that she got. Taught about four years in the schools around Missoula.

GP: What about you? When you graduated?

MD: When I graduated from high school in 1926, I didn't realize then, just what there was that people could do. Maybe it was much less in those days, that women could do, but it didn't worry me much either. I loved what I did.

GP: What were you doing?

MD: Just the going to school and the working. The summer after I graduated, I worked at Heinrich's (?) ice cream store here on South Higgins.

GP: Would that have been where Hanson's (?) is now?

MD: [Speaking at the same time] Yes. Oh yes, that's Hanson's now. That was fun. Then, went to Dillon, because well, you did that if you wanted to teach or something, whatever.

GP: You had decided you were going to teach.

MD: Oh yes, I suppose. It was already decided for me. Just was the thing to do.

GP: Now at that time, you didn't need a four-year degree to teach, did you?

MD: No, just so you passed some kind of teacher's examinations.

GP: Did you need any number of credits though, at all?

MD: I can't remember that you did. I think, that the certificate could be granted with high school education and passing the tests.

GP: So how long did you go to Dillon?

MD: One year. Went there one year.

GP: Then you got a job teaching?

MD: Yes.

GP: Where was that?

MD: That was at the Cormier School, which is the Six Mile School, west of Frenchtown, west of Huson.

GP: Can you tell us something about that school?

MD: Oh yeah. It was a very primitive school. The usual two outhouses, unpainted outside, windows on both sides, box-stove in the middle, and barely enough books and papers. Very pleasant people.

GP: How many students?

MD: I think I must have had 16 or 18, something like that.

GP: All grades?

MD: Well, we'd skip a grade once in a while if there didn't happen to be anybody that age. But it was a pleasant thing. Boarded at a house about a quarter a mile away down the hill. Came into Missoula quite often.

GP: There was no teacherage out there at the time?

MD: Oh no, not there. There were at many schools.

GP: Now, what year would this of been?

MD: This was 1927, and I taught there until 1928—two years.

GP: This was probably the end of flapper era.

MD: Oh, absolutely. Yes, we had knee-length dresses just about the knees. We had the hats that came down over your head like a helmet, and they were very chic.

GP: These were good times, weren't they? People were getting along well in the late '20s.

MD: Yes. No one realized, the ordinary people—maybe the Wall Street people or something, but ordinary people did not believe...Well, they did not know there was such a thing as a depression, as a big depression. Of course, the historians know today.

GP: Of course, it had not started that early in '27, '28.

MD: Oh, no. No, but it was beginning right in 1929.

GP: '29, the crash, the first crash occurred, I guess, in '29.

MD: But, of course, I was young and naïve, I did not know much about economics at all. But I considered the [unintelligible] 100 dollars I got for eight months of school the first year.

GP: Hundred dollars.

MD: Yeah, 100 dollars a month. But that was fine. I always a little money left over for the summer. Of course, then I came home and...Things worked very nicely for one person who wasn't too serious about anything perhaps.

GP: Do you remember when or if there was kind of a job layoff due to the Depression.

MD: After that. A little awhile after that. We were married in '29, and of course, my husband's brothers and relatives, a lot of them lived in Bonner area. They had immigrated over there from Ninemile, and many of them were laid off. They'd come up to the ranch [laughs] for quite long visits sometimes—

GP: Had they been working at the mills out there?

MD: Yes.

GP: Now, was there only one mill then in '29? The one in Bonner.

MD: Some of them had worked at the Western Mill. Most of them had worked at the Western Mill, and then it closed, I think, before '29.

GP: The date I remember is '28. But I could be wrong.

MD: Yes, I think so. I think so. Anyway, it was in the process, so there was layoffs.

GP: Were they working at all?

MD: Yes, I think they did part-time.

GP: Your relatives, your husband's relatives were working part-time, but they were having tough times.

MD: Yes, they were. They borrowed from each other, and I would heard them say, well, I owe this one some money, you know, that sort of thing. I think they kind of considered that because we were on the ranch that—there was always food there and it wasn't always that easy. My husband's parents were living with us.

GP: Oh, they were living with you?

MD: Yes.

GP: Did these families have a lot of children to feed and support and worry about during the Depression.

MD: Not so many as the original families had. Let's see, one of them had only one child. Another one had three, another one had four, I think, and another one one, so they didn't [unintelligible]. A lot of the children at that time were gone or in high school.

GP: Did the people seem to be depressed—

MD: No.

GP: —about the conditions.

MD: I think they were startled. They had no idea such a thing would happen. Because especially in the lumber business, if you wanted a job, you went and you got a job, either in the camps and woods or somewhere, mines, somewhere.

GP: Do you remember many businesses closing around Missoula or in Bonner or Frenchtown?

MD: I remember how the grocery-man in Huson was very eager for his money at the end of the month, which was a little difficult at that time.

GP: In other words, you could charge groceries.

MD: Oh yes, that was the usual way, and in Bonner and Milltown, that very usual. In fact, that's when the Anaconda Company Store was still there, and when they worked, they had the privilege of charging and a lot of them [unintelligible].

GP: Do you think in general, that people had enough to eat?

MD: Yes, I think so. They ate differently than the way we eat now. They didn't have fresh vegetables and citrus fruits and everything that we expect now.

GP: Do you remember whether hunting provided quite a bit of the meat for those people?

MD: Yes and the recreation—for the men. Oh, yes. That was the topic of conversation to no end.

GP: Now, was this for the people in the Six Mile area or Bonner or in general?

MD: All over.

GP: All over.

MD: When these relatives, you see, would come to the ranch, it would be to go hunting usually, and that was the conversation.

GP: What about the ladies?

MD: Oh, we'd just listen. None of them hunted, I don't think.

GP: I mean what did they do for recreation?

MD: Oh, [laughs] embroider dishtowels or work and cook.

GP: Was there much money or any money for going to the show or—

MD: Yes. People would go to the show once in a while. It didn't cost much. I remember kids could go for a dime.

[Pause]

GP: What about the radio? Was that important in your lives?

MD: We didn't have one. We didn't have one. There was one fellow who had one, who lived a few miles away and it was the kind you had to put on earphones and that was it.

GP: Would this have been in the early '30s?

MD: The last of the '20s, I'm thinking of now. In the early '30s, I don't think we had money to buy, really. So very, few people did. Well, the reception wasn't as good as it is now.

GP: I suppose, mountains interfere.

MD: Well, the machines themselves weren't receptive.

GP: Did the ladies make the clothes for the children?

MD: Those who were so inclined, yes. There were some that weren't, just as there are now. They didn't like that sort of thing and couldn't do that sort of thing. But there was more home sewing, yes.

GP: Now, you were married, and you were working as a teacher. Was there any conflict there, was there any, oh, feeling that a maybe a married woman shouldn't be working at that time.

MD: Well, I was married in '29 and I had just taught those two years.

GP: Oh, and then you stopped working.

MD: Then I stopped working for working for about four years. It was during that time that the Depression was the worst—those four years. But when I went back in, I got another school up Rock Creek. You know Quigley?

GP: Oh, yes.

MD: I was there for one year, and my little girl and my husband were with the folks on the ranch. They'd come up and visit every once in a while, and that was lots of fun. Yes, there were remarks. One fellow remarked to somebody else, of course—that's the way those things usually happen—that why isn't her husband working.

GP: Were there a lot of women looking for jobs?

MD: Yes. Jobs became very scarce. In fact, the reason I was up there that year, was because a certain lady had gone to another school, then she found out that she didn't like that other school...or they closed it up, I've forgotten which it was. And she wanted back. So, she got back.

GP: And you left there.

MD: I left there for a year, than I went back again. Something happened to her again, I've forgotten what it was. I went back then for three years, and I took my little girl with me.

GP: Quigley, now that's an interesting place.

MD: Oh, it was. An old ghost town place.

GP: How many students did you have up there?

MD: The most that first year, I think there were maybe eight or ten. Then the next three years, there were not more than six at a time, for sure.

GP: Were these ranch families up there—

MD: Yes.

GP: Or were they mining?

MD: Ranch and just squatter families. There was one main ranch family, who supplied kids for a long time.

GP: Where did you go from Quigley?

MD: I went to Grass Valley for one year, and then I got the upper-grades at Target Range.

GP: By that time, was the Depression about over?

MD: Well, I don't know if you would say it was over—it was such a gradual thing, you see. It was over, and it wasn't. You know how things happen. People's finances, industry, and all—

GP: In these schools, beginning with Quigley, did you notice that the people up there were having a tough time because of the Depression? Were they making a—

MD: Yes, they were, definitely. They didn't buy very much. They didn't have very much.

GP: Were they raising their food?

MD: Well, maybe a few people canned, that would be about it.

GP: No garden?

MD: Not much.

GP: Probably wouldn't grow very well up there.

MD: No, it wasn't that sort of a place, and I don't think they had that sort of inclination.

GP: Then when you were at Target Range, probably when that would have been, about late '30s?

MD: The last fall I was there was when war was declared. '41. So '41, '40, '39. I went there in '39.

GP: Do you remember during the Depression, whether the railroad laid off a lot of people in Missoula?

MD: I don't remember about that much, because I was acquainted with anyone too much. We used the railroad a lot, everybody did. It was a big thing, really a good thing.

GP: Do remember whether in the Missoula papers much was said about how bad off the people were?

MD: Not like it is now, no. No, no. There didn't [unintelligible] poor people or people who were disadvantaged. No, it was, it was a thing you didn't talk about quite so much as we do now. There was, I would say, a very distinctive social feeling, much more—a strata—much more in those days, in Missoula, not in the outlying, I suppose. Although there was some. Two illustrations of that is that when in Bonner, you've heard of the feeling between Bonner people and Milltown people in the early days, because the Milltown people were first-generation ethnic groups and in Bonner it was [laughs] all the second-generation that had spoken English all their lives. There was a feeling between them...Well, there was some of that in Missoula too. That is, as we would say now, the nonessentials were empathized so much by the upper crust. Such as how your, what teacup drank out and who had the finest house and so on. People could have money and it seemed all the others sort of...it was a hands off thing. Mustn't criticize them or talk about them too much, or anything like that. But that's just the way it was. Reminds me—

GP: Accept it.

MD: Yes. Reminds me of some of the old English novels you read, and like one lady who had an English grandmother said, when she had heard that the Tsar [Tsar Nicholas II of Russia] had been killed, in those days, "Oh, isn't that is too bad."

Somebody said, "He was oppressing people."

"Well, but he was royalty."

GP: That made it okay.

MD: That made it okay, right, to look up to. So I think there was a lot of that in Missoula. To aspire to this and that.

GP: That probably was part of the great American dream in those days.

MD: I think so. I think it was all over America, but it was much worst in the Middle West. Both Eunice and I have spoken about how when we moved to Montana, there was less uptight feeling about who we were or what you were, than here, than there was in Missouri. Because, they were the old...same time

GP: It was probably an-established town that you came from.

MD: Village, village. Who was who. You had known their ancestors forever and that sort of thing. That social strata still went on through the Depression, certainty did. But one time, one of the university professors...might have been a first-year professor [laughs], but came hunting to the ranch and got a deer. It was for food, we understood too. They needed that. Because you see their warrants for not cashed right away, because the state was in a bad situation.

GP: As I understand, they took a cut too, because they had to share their wages with other state employees. Well, there was a drought in the eastern part of the state, and they needed some money to aid the farmers. I think the state was giving some money. I remember a little bit about that.

MD: In those days, the farmers and the Anaconda Company controlled the Montana legislature.

GP: Oh, that's a good point.

MD: Oh, yes. Yes, they did.

GP: I haven't been told that before. [laughs]

MD: Yes, I'd say they were both very strong forces in what happened in the legislature.

GP: I knew about the Anaconda Company. I didn't know about the farmers.

MD: Oh yes, yes. Big ranches. Not that they were so well off, but the people here didn't get their representation because of the Anaconda Company, you see. It was the only money that was [unintelligible] or anything.

GP: Getting back to that professor too, I know that their salaries were terribly low.

MD: That's right, and they couldn't [unintelligible]. Anyway, this fellow wanted to call in home, and it had to be...We had this homemade telephone from the ranch to Huson, and the Huson always demanded a fee to connect, it was about a dime or a quarter. I don't know.

GP: Did you have a coin box on the phone?

MD: No, there wasn't a coin box. It wasn't that automatic at all—nothing was. Crank the phone, you know. Anyway, he did not have one bit of change, and so my husband had to lend him enough to make his calls, so he could tell them to come get his deer. [laughs]

GP: I suppose that the Depression probably meant that some students couldn't go onto college. Do you remember anything about that?

MD: Possibly. It didn't affect me. Now, I know instead of getting married that I could have gone on—not that my folks were well off or anything. But they had moved [unintelligible] two homes by that time, and Daddy had a pretty good job as a foreman. So I'm sure, with what money I had left, I could've gone on. But marriage was attractive at that time.

GP: So, eventually, you did go on.

MD: Oh yes, then it was harder work, of course, in summers, in between times correspondence courses. Yes.

GP: I know all about those too. [laughs]

MD: It was harder then it would've have been if I went another year to three years.

GP: Did World War Two change things financially or economically?

MD: There was lots of work. Everyone who couldn't get work here or didn't want it went to the coast or somewhere. Oh, yes. By that time, of course, there was rationing, but that didn't affect people very terribly. Everyone had enough really.

GP: Backing up to the Depression for a minute. Do you remember the WPA [Works Progress Administration]?

MD: Yes. [pause] I'm thinking of the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] really right now—the Civilian Conservation Corps—which was one of the—

GP: One of Roosevelt's [Franklin D. Roosevelt].

MD: Yes. There was a cutover piece of land above the ranch, west of the ranch up on a hill, that was rather pretty. It had the second growth [unintelligible] vines on it, and it was a good place just for hunting or whatever. They had to, of course, make something for these CCC fellows to do. What did they send them to do, but to cut all that off—all of it. It wasn't wonderful timber, but just cut it and destroyed it. They made work for them, which nobody [unintelligible].

GP: Do you remember anything at all about the WPA in Missoula? How it was received, or how it helped the people.

MD: Oh, I don't know if it helped or not. Not like what like most of the agencies do now. I really don't really remember the details about it. There were signs around everywhere, these big insignias—WPA and all. It was derided a little bit. It was like a lot of the...work, make work things, work, [unintelligible].

GP: Do you think that the people if they were deriding those things, generally accepted Roosevelt as a president.

MD: Yes, they did surely. Because, this is a Democratic community. [pause] But they didn't voice their opinions about politics a great deal, unless there'd be someone that they had heard something terrible about. Usually it had to be more local. Now, I remember when Senator Wheeler [Burton K. Wheeler] -came here and talked. That seemed quite important to a lot of the Democrats. They were interested in him particularly.

GP: I should know, but I've forgotten, was he a Republican or a Democrat?

MD: I think he was a Democrat.

GP: Must have been a Democrat, because there weren't very many, if any, Republicans senators were there?

MD: [laughs] I don't know.

GP: I think, wasn't Clark [William A. Clark] elected, or kind of bought his way into the Senate or sometime or another earlier.

MD: Oh yes, he was supposed to have done that.

GP: Well, to continue our discussion then. We left you at Target Range, and I know that's not where you were last went.

MD: [Speaking at the same time] Target Range, yes. We heard the declaration of war on the radio at Target Range that day. I don't know if the kids remember—those who were there.

GP: I imagine they do.

MD: Some of them of might, yes. Then I had my son the next year, took that year off. Oh, by the way my husband had been out at Farragut working for a year.

GP: Idaho?

MD: Yes, at the naval base. Then he came back that spring...spring of '43? Yeah. Spring of '43, and worked in Deer Lodge for a while.

GP: Then you took some more time off before you went to Bonner to teach?

MD: Just that one year, and then that fall of '43, I got the job at Bonner and settled here.

GP: And you had a long career there.

MD: Well yes, 28 years, counting the one...not counting the one I took off for other boy.

GP: Are there any other observations you'd like to make about the Depression?

MD: Well, it certainly was a surprise to the ordinary person. It didn't really sink in, I don't think, until afterwards. It was not easy at all. There was no money. While we were on the ranch, I guess I told you about my husband not being able to sell [unintelligible] hogs.

GP: No.

MD: Frankly, he couldn't handle them. He had to give them away to his relatives. Couldn't get the money for them. Also, the time that he and the neighbors got together and put all their cattle in freight cars and were going to ship them to Spokane. Frank was the one to go with the cattle, someone had to go along. So went to Spokane. Nobody would get them. Here was the freight [unintelligible]. So he took them to Seattle.

GP: More freight.

MD: More freight. So he got just about enough to pay for the freight and [unintelligible], but nothing like the beef would have been worth.

GP: Was he pretty depressed about that?

MD: Oh, yes. Yes, yes. It was happening all over. Couldn't sell anything. We had to give it away.

GP: But, you did manage. Somehow, you managed.

MD: Yes, but we didn't really leave the ranch, until after I had Donald (?). He left the ranch in 1935 and went to Bonner. Then we sold it once. The people couldn't pay, we had to take it back. Then things were still kind of tight. So we sold 160 acres for 2,000 dollars. I understand that they've gotten around 100,000 for that place now, not too long ago.

GP: One hundred thousand?

MD: Yes. Not that it was the best bottomland or anything like that, but it was a pleasant place. It had several springs on it and woods, fields. It didn't have much improvements anymore. Deteriorated, nothing left.

GP: When Frank moved to Bonner, did he have a job out there?

MD: Yes.

GP: At the mill?

MD: At the Anaconda Company. Now, that was before World War Two.

GP: Yes, '35, you said.

MD: Yes.

GP: Well, thank you very much. Unless you something further you would like to say.

MD: About the Depression, I don't think. I think it left its mark on all of us, all right. That's why we can't understand our children sometimes. Because, they had not experienced anything like that. Until you do, you don't know. I don't know if it's because we don't want to recognize that such a thing can happen. I don't think so. I just has to be experienced before it can be a part of us. So, it does color our lives.

GP: Yes, I know. I have to agree with you. Thanks again, Mildred.

MD: You're welcome.

[End of interview]