

Oral History 244-12

Hazel Marsh Collection

Interviewee: Hazel Marsh

Interviewer: Jim Scott

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Hazel Marsh: This is the conclusion of the taping of Bearmouth history, made by myself with (?) Jim interviewing me on the first eleven tapes:

These reflections passed through my mind as I was standing practically on the spot where the Lannen's built their first cabin after traveling mostly on the old Mullan Trail from Bannack, Helena, and the other mining camps that were along the way. They made their home here, and operated what they called a ferry. If the river held the same amount as it now does, I cannot see how a ferry could have been operated. Nevertheless, it was a means the Lannens provided to those people who had left the Mullan Trail, perhaps a fourth of a mile south of the river, and (those) bound for the newly developing gold properties in Beartown, Garnet, and settlements along Bear Gulch. It was here that Chris Lannen was born in 1866, and it was with this family, years later, that I grew up.

I recalled the conversations that I had listened to during my childhood while that portion of I-90 (the highway that runs from coast to coast) was being dedicated. There was no mention of the rich historical background, only emphasis on the important fact that it would not be disturbed as a fishing area.

These reflections took me back through the mist of years to a century before, when the Lannens first settled here. Chris was baptized by Father Anthony Ravalli who made yearly or semi-yearly trips to the Bear Gulch and the towns along the way. The Lannen family not only operated the ferry, but they also conducted a gold exchange. John Lannen would take the gold brought in by the miners of the gulch to Helena by horseback and exchange it for currency.

I came on the scene in 1916, and my memory takes me back to perhaps the end of World War I. By that time, Bearmouth had grown into a small town with each of the railroads, the Northern Pacific and the Milwaukee, having depots here. Business was good, as they routed the ore brought in by six horse pulled wagons, and in the winter, horse-drawn sleds, from the hard rock mines of Garnet and that area. There were two large docks where the ore was dumped awaiting the ore cars on which the ore was loaded en route to the smelters of Butte, Anaconda, and Denver.

Some of my earliest memories were of the people who came to the Post Office to get their mail and shop at the little store for the necessities to be found there. By now, the Post Office had been operating for many years by the Lannen's, having been moved from the stage station soon after the Northern Pacific Railroad went through. Up to this time, the people went to the stage station for their mail. It was about one-half mile south on the Mullan Trail.

As mentioned in a previous tape, there were interesting and prominent people coming and going at the time of my earliest memories, such as the Doctors Mitchell and Mussigbrod, who operated the first hospital for the insane at Warm Springs. They came with the first automobile that I ever remember as having seen, especially the white convertible driven by Harold Mitchell. They developed the Mussigbrod Mine, smelter and assay office.

Frank Davey came originally from England via India. He worked for the old Missoula Mercantile Company. A girl to whom he was to have married was killed in an elevator accident and Davey moved to Garnet where he set up a mercantile business, and operated the Garnet Post Office. I can still picture him dressed in what would have, for that day, been synonymous with our brand of casualness. He wore dress shirts left form a more formal day, meant to be worn with a stiff, white collar, but minus that unnecessary embellishment. He always wore a vest over which was draped a very lovely gold watch and chain. His pants and shoes were also from an earlier, more formal period in his life. The shoes were more often worn with laces untied, just as the over-shoes in winter were worn unbuckled and flapping as he walked. He was always very English, always with the black hat with triple dents, and a brim made rakish by many tugs.

Davey always had Christmas dinner with the Lannens. It always included an English plum pudding, which Davey always received from his sister in England at Christmas time. Among the many who came, also, was Billy Miller from his mining cabin in Deep Gulch. He always conversed with his left hand behind his ear to assist in his hearing. Billy made periodic visits to Butte or Missoula, and always brought back a quart of whiskey with him. He said that he kept it in case he became ill with a cold, but according to him, he always got a cold immediately upon arriving home.

My sweetest memory, however, was of Billy Staffey. Billy lived alone in a cabin at the mouth of Bear Gulch. Here he raised a beautiful garden with which he was very generous. In the summertime, he always arrived at the Post Office with gifts of vegetables from his garden. He was a tiny man with very stooped shoulders, a long, white beard, and an abundance of white hair. It was sad when he grew too old to live in his beloved cabin alone. He was from Kentucky and had served in the Confederate Army. Finally, a nephew came from Kentucky to take him where he received the care he so badly needed. They had dinner at our house while awaiting the train. I shall always remember little Billy Staffey standing in our doorway with tears in his eyes, as there were in ours, as he said goodbye and left with the tall stranger from Kentucky.

There are others too numerous to describe here. They were the people who came into the Post Office, store, and often into our home for meals. It had now become known as the Bearmouth Hotel.

The Bearmouth vicinity is located in the area that is formed as Bear Gulch opens out into a flat field and the valley of the Clark Fork broadens after cutting through the scenic limestone cliffs. Those rocky promontories on each side the river almost came together before the railroads blasted them out. The mountains along the valley extend down forming several bluffs which overlook the valley. They make good vantage points for those wishing to look up or down the valley. On these bluffs, one can find Indian arrowheads and other indications of Indian encampments formerly occupied.

The folks talked a great deal about contact with Indians, especially during the Battle of the Little Big Hole. I even remember that when I was a very small child, bands of Indians passed through the valley on their way to hunting grounds in eastern Montana. There would be entire families and the Lannens often hired them in the Fall to pick potatoes.

My days of growing up were busy indeed, between the little store and Post Office, and the many who stopped into our home. Our home had grown from, what was in that day quite a luxurious home, into a small hotel and it came to be known as the Bearmouth Hotel, that not only served meals to the railroad crews but to the general public passing through or going to and from Garnet. Then, there was the ranch with cows to be milked. I always feigned a complete ignorance of that task. I responded with more enthusiasm to the need for someone to ride the cattle range - to count the cattle and check the gates and fences. It allowed me to skip the kitchen duties in order to fill a need elsewhere.

I think I mentioned elsewhere that one of my tasks was to place the mail sack on the apparatus on the side of the track that enabled the speeding trains to catch it as they passed through. Other mail and mail-like packages were loaded onto the mail cars of the train that stopped at the station. There was what was known as the Butte Stub which made up (began) in Butte and stopped at all the small stations on its way to Missoula. It retraced this route on its way back to Butte in the evening. On it were loaded the crates of beautiful strawberries raised on the Harvey Creek Ranch, now a part of the Lannen Ranch.

Although there was much to do as I grew up, my brother and I always felt that we were fulfilling and need, and hoping to take care of the obligation we were under to the Lannen's for having taken us in when we were infants. We had much security, surely plenty of food, but not much in the way of affection. The Lannen's had no children of their own, and didn't understand the need of children for that commodity. However, I would not change any of it should I be able to do so. We retain no bitterness about the times that were not so easy, and are extremely grateful for the things that turned out well.

I regret that, as a person, I was not one who was able to keep the ranch intact and operate it as a beautiful cattle ranch. The people whom I seemed to attract as renters and managers usually had as their goal the eventual dislodging of me and the taking over of the place.

I had some timber removed by very selective cutting. It makes me sad to see what was once a scenic mountain side now completely devoid of trees. The people to whom I sold the ranch - the Bearmouth Land and Cattle Company – removed every stick that could be sold. My wish and that of my brother was to see it developed to its full potential as a cattle ranch instead of being parceled out in small tracts. These were interesting times when great changes were taking place. Motorized equipment was taking the place of horses. Electric power had replaced the steam engines on the Milwaukee Railroad. A double track was installed on the Northern Pacific. The highway which had abandoned the Mullan Trail is in this area. It now crossed over the Clark Fork using the old red bridge. I wound its way around the Lannen hay field and made its way around the base of the mountain, between the limestone cliffs and parallel to the railroad (tracks) to Drummond. It was later to cut through the field along the river. This was a new highway paralleling the river and built by convict labor. At this time, Frank Conley was the warden of the penitentiary and became a good friend of the Lannen's. It was replaced by the new four lane highway that was being started at the beginning of this narrative.

This narrative has gone almost full-circle from the dedication back to 1865, and through the dedication up to the present.

PREDICTION: This began as a history of Bearmouth, but it seems to have turned into a personal history. I did not intend it to be that way, but let me, instead of going back a century, turn toward the future... say, fifty years. Should Missoula continue to expand, perhaps in 2040, the Bearmouth area can easily be imagined as a suburb with coveted homes. The big valley could become a garden spot with an irrigation system utilizing the water pumped over that low place in the hill from the Clark Fork River. We have hopes that all this will take place, but of course, we will never know.