

Maureen and Mike

Mansfield Library

UNIVERSITY OF MONTANA

Archives and Special Collections

Mansfield Library, University of Montana

Missoula MT 59812-9936

Email: library.archives@umontana.edu

Telephone: (406) 243-2053

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: 120-003

Interviewees: Bill Ralston and Robert House

Interviewer: May Vallance

Date of Interview: circa 1978

Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project

May Vallance: Good afternoon. I'd like to have you two men tell us a little bit about what you remember when you went to the Baker Creek School. Would you please tell us your name?

Bill Ralston: My name is Bill Ralston and I went to school there through the 8th grade—from the 3rd grade through the 8th—and I'm going to let Robert talk first because his folks taught there and he'll have a lot of interesting things to tell us, I think.

MV: And you are?

Robert House: Robert House. I went to school in Baker Creek from the 5th grade to the 7th grade. When I was in 5th grade, I had my mother was the teacher, and the next two years, my father was the teacher. It was a very enjoyable three years in my life as far as education. Probably an experience that I'll never forget, and I've always wished that my kids could have. We learned a lot and we enjoyed all of it, and the closeness of all of us together was always remembered. One of our learning experiences I remember the most is we always did two spelling books a year. If I was in the 5th grade, we did the 5th and 6th. During the 6th grade, we did 6th and 7th and so forth. Those were the kind of things we did, and yet we had a lot of time for reading books and playing softball and fox and hound chases in the noon hour and things that were very enjoyable to us country kids. We did excel in our studies very well, and most everyone in the school did extremely well. I think examples of that were Bill's sister, Nancy, jumped a grade during those years and Paul Zalon (?) jumped a grade during those years, and yet they were excellent students in high school. There were a number of kids that came during the years that we were there because of the sawmill that was above us there or road construction. The first year when I was in the 5th grade, we were only supposed to have seven or eight kids in the whole school and we ended up with, what was it, 25 or 30?

BR: [unintelligible]

RH: There was several Indian children in there, and we had someone in every grade from the first through the eighth grade. That was a very interesting year.

MV: How did it happen that the Indian children were there?

RH: There were several Indian families were brought in to work in the mill that Lee Shook (?) had up at Christensen Creek (?). That just about better than doubled enrollment in the school that year. As I recall, part of them were gone the next year, although there was, I think a couple of Indian girls all the time I was there.

BR: Yes, there were a few that [unintelligible].

RH: One thing we did when I was in the 7th grade that Bill and I were talking about earlier that we had a track team that went to county track meet when we were in the 7th grade, and I think it was the only year that Baker Creek ever had a track team. [laughs] We didn't do very good, but we were there. We enjoyed it.

MV: That was very important. Did you have parties at the school? Did you have basket socials or any community...Did you have church or Sunday school or anything like?

RH: We never anything like that that I remember. Do you, Bill? We had a big Christmas program, of course, connected with the school. I remember when I was in the 5th grade, my mother was teaching and she had this big play that she wanted to put on that would take the entire school to do it. But the one thing wrong was that the play called for one more girl than there was in the school. So I got picked to be the girl. [laughs]

BR: [laughs] You or me, I guess.

RH: So my mother put a mop on my head for hair, and I wore one of her skirts. They couldn't find anybody shoes that was big enough—women's shoes—so I wore boys' shoes, but after the program, why Bill's grandmother asked my mother, "Who was that strange girl that I didn't know?" [laughs] Bill's mother just about died laughing because she knew all the time that it was me. My mother coached me on how to talk in a high voice. Some people didn't even recognize me. I remember that Christmas program very well.

MV: Bill, do you have some memories, too?

BR: Oh, yeah, a lot of them. In fact, what Robert said reminds me of a few things, too. I remember a lot about his mother because she taught, I believe, it would have been 5th grade, probably when Robert and I were in the 5h grade. I remember her as being an excellent teacher, and I know that she really did love all the kids that she taught. You don't see too many teachers that do that. But I also remember that I was more afraid of her [laughs] than I've been of any teacher that I've ever had before or since. I mean, she didn't have to raise a finger, but when she told you to go sit in your seat, you just naturally went and sat in your seat. She was a born teacher, there's no doubt of it.

One thing I remember real well about her that really brought this home to me, I think, was that she read to us every day a little bit. This one particular book, I'll never forget it. She read us *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and that was quite an education, quite an experience for I'm sure all of us. I know it's stuck in my mind ever since. She read that, and I remember when we got to the parts that required it, I think we were all in tears. [telephone rings] I know I can remember her being

in tears during some of those parts in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. I remember her very well, and probably better than any teacher that I've ever had.

Then Robert's dad taught us two years, and I was telling Robert today, I remember things that he taught me that that I've never forgotten and little things. He taught us some real important things, too. [laughs] A lot of real important things. He taught me how to, just for example, I was telling Robert, he taught me how to brush my teeth, which sounds ridiculous, but there's a proper and an improper way to brush your teeth and it stuck with me all these years. I still remember who taught me that. He taught me how to stack hay, too. That wasn't in school, however. [laughs] He taught practical things that we really needed to know, you know, to get on in the world.

He also had a real imagination when it came to...he taught us social skills that I think have probably stuck with us all these years. My wife reminded me there's one game that we used to play that Robert just touched on briefly. It was a game, we called it, I think, fox and goose, didn't we?

RH: Fox and hound.

BR: Fox and hound, yeah. It was an interesting game, and of course it went very well with the terrain around there. What we did was during noon hour—correct me if I'm a little slack on the details here—but we would take one person would be the fox and at noon hour, when we got done eating lunch, why, this person would leave and head up into the **low, timbered** hills close there. He'd get five minutes?

RH: I think five minutes start.

BR: Five minutes head start, yeah, and then the rest of us were turned loose, and the idea was to try to catch him before he could be gone 15 or 20?

RH: The rest of the noon hour I think.

BR: I guess so. There was a specific time anyway.

RH: Had to be back before the bell rang.

BR: Yeah, but he had to stay out, too, he couldn't just run and make a little circle and come back. He had to stay out a specific time and before he could come back in, and if we could catch him, of course, it was a real fox and hound. It got pretty exciting to us, anyway, especially if you were the fox.

RH: If you caught him, you got to be the fox the next time, next day.

BR: Yeah, but it was it was pretty exciting. You'd have to leave and go up through the timber, and you'd try to track him in the snow and try, to you know, figure out where he was going to go and cut him off or something. It was a real fascinating game, and Mr. House somehow thought that up for us to do.

You mentioned the track meet. That was a very interesting thing. I would like to add something there that I did remember, though. We probably weren't the first track stars in Baker Creek because a fellow named **Walt Frasier (?)** that grew up in that country held the county high jump title for a number of years until, I think, they changed and went to the new style You remember, he came up and gave us a little instruction, do you remember that?

RH: Oh, I'd forgotten that.

BR: Yeah. Of course, he's a lot older than we are, and I wish he was here. I'm sure he could tell you clear back with Baker Creek. He was born, in fact, on the Frasier Ranch (?) down there.

MV: Yes, yes.

BR: I'm sure he could tell us a lot of interesting things about the real early years of Baker Creek. I do remember that for a number of years he had county high school high jump record.

MV: You have no idea when the school was established?

BR: I don't, no. He would know that. I wish he was available. He lives in Nevada now, but he would know that. No, I don't, and I'm not real sure—we've been discussing the possibility of when the school was closed and the bus started running—and I think it would have been somewhere around '56 or '57, according to what we can figure out.

MV: Yes. I have been very interested in your story. It seems to me as though you had ideal children—no one mischievous or anything like that.

[Interviewees laugh]

RH: Well, lots of practical joking went on. [laughs] I remember one kid put a caterpillar down my neck one time. I was being a smart-aleck, I just left it there. [laughs] That night, my mother was up most all the night rubbing my back with rubbing alcohol. My whole back broke out from the spines on the caterpillar. [laughs] During recess we'd started...let's see. It was with spears, wasn't it? They were about so long, about a foot long, and they grew to six and eight foot long until finally we got one kid in the back of the neck right like that.

BR: In the back, I think, yeah.

RH: [unintelligible] hole in the back of his head so we quit that, so then we went to bows and arrows. We had a huge woodpile that came off the right-of-way from West Fork Road when they built it. We hollowed the inside out of it and made a fort, and we'd choose up sides and we'd have the settlers inside of it and the Indians on the outside. I was inside of it this one recess, and my dad came out and rang the bell and I jumped up and thud, I got an arrow stuck right there. [laughs]

MV: Right where?

RH: Right in my chin. [laughs] We pulled that out and that was the end of the bow and arrows. There was always something like that.

BR: One thing about Mr. House was that he liked activity, and he, you know, until we got to the point where we were endangering each other's lives, why, he liked to see us doing things, you know. I think kids really appreciate that. They don't like to be squelched every time they think up something new.

RH: We'd have softball tournaments in the spring, you know, and we could get out the middle of the afternoon, even, and have a game of softball if we got our work done ahead of time.

BR: Do you remember another thing we did in the wintertime when it was too cold or too bad to play the fox and hound game, remember the beanbag tournaments we used to have?

RH: Oh, yeah, I had forgotten all about that.

BR: Yeah, we really got involved in that. We'd have regular tournaments, and we'd have beanbags and have to stand behind lines and throw them into boxes or baskets. Remember all winter long we used to do that and got pretty involved in that.

MV: Did you do that inside or outside?

BR: Yeah, inside.

MV: Inside when the—

BR: When the weather was too bad to go outside, which had to be pretty bad.

RH: It had to be pretty bad.

MV: Bill, how long did you live up there by Baker Creek?

BR: We moved to West Fork in 1945 and moved there from Laramie, Wyoming. Then I lived there, went through grade school there, went to high school a couple years in Hamilton, then

came back to the ranch and went and finished high school in Darby. Then my wife and I lived on the ranch for about two and a half years after we were married, when we left there in about '57, I believe it was, and moved away.

I remember a lot of things. When you mentioned churches or anything like that, I do remember that sometime during the early '50s while I was in high school, I remember we used the schoolhouse during the summer for square dancing about once a month as I recall for when the weather was good. And not always good, either. We'd have square dances there, I remember, in the school house.

MV: And it was only square dances? You didn't do any round dancing?

BR: Oh, yeah. We did "Cotton Eyed Joe" and [unintelligible]. Yeah, we did anything that goes with square dancing, we did, yeah. We all learned to square and round dance, and then that's about all we learned. I never did learn to waltz properly. [laughs] But I learned to square dance a little bit.

MV: Robert, have you anything more that you would want to add to that? Did they have basket socials?

RH: I don't remember having them. I do remember **Agnes Cooper (?)** coming up to the schoolhouse when she was county superintendent and teaching us to square dance in preparation for that...what was it? All of the country schools got together at Grantsdale every spring?

BR: Did they call it play day or something like that?

RH: Play day. Yeah, that's what it was. That was my first introduction to square dancing.

MV: That was fun.

BR: That's right, I'd forgotten that. In fact, we went to, I believe, to Lone Rock a few times, too, didn't we? Seems like we did.

RH: Oh we did? I remember going to Grantsdale a couple times.

BR: Yeah? For some reason Lone Rock sticks in my mind. Maybe on occasion or two we might have done that, too.

MV: That was a good thing because you didn't travel very much in those days.

BR: Right, that was a pretty big world to us [unintelligible] that far.

RH: Yeah.

MV: Yes, that's right.

BR: I would like to say, though, when I think about my years there that we moved here from Laramie, Wyoming, and I had been going to a large school there and we'd come there from Seattle—I think I went to the first grade in Seattle—I know, looking back, I can see that I got a much better education when it comes to reading and writing and the very basics of what grade school should be about. I got a real good foundation at Baker Creek. I'm confident of that. When I compare that with what happening in our grade schools now and what even happened to me even that early in grade school, learning process was certainly much better, I think, in a small school with the individual attention like that.

MV: So where did the Indians—you said they worked on the roads—from where did they come?

RH: Bill was saying they came from reservation up around Arlee, and I think that's probably correct. Some of them were with us the whole three years that I was there. I remember Sadie Pelcher and—

BR: Yes.

RH: —there was another girl.. What was her name?

BR: They came...let's see.

RH: I remember Sadie Pelcher—

BR: There was a couple of families. They came to work in the sawmill, up there, and I kind of think some of them stayed to work on that road job.

RH: I think so, yeah.

BR: [unintelligible] anyway.

RH: There was that large Fisher family that ended up in Hamilton.

BR: Yes, now those people, I think, actually came to the valley from there and came to the West Fork first and then migrated back to Hamilton.

RH: Yeah.

BR: I kind of think. Maybe I guessing a little there, maybe. They came to work in the mill. As I recall, the mill closed there in a year or so and a few of them, then, stayed and worked on the new road there.

MV: What did they think about you playing cowboys and Indians?

RH: Well, they were all for it. They, of course, chose their own side. It ended up into kind of a war, but there was never any hard feelings that I can remember.

BR: Not lasting, anyway.

RH: No. [laughs]

BR: Maybe temporarily, I remember a couple of times.

RH: When we'd play cowboys and Indians and chasing each other with spears, they were, I think, a little faster afoot than we were. We were a little bit outnumbered, but we had a lot of fun with it.

MV: Well, thank you very much. I'm sure this is going to be very valuable in years to come. Younger generations coming up get curious about what happened in the rural schools, and I think this is going to be very valuable and I thank you.

[End of Interview]