

Oral History 308-01

Interviewer: Linda Wight

Interviewee: Ellen Higgins Little Anthony

October 1993

Linda Wight: .. Your name.

Ellen Anthony: Ellen [inaudible] Higgins Little Anthony.

Wight: And I'd like to find out about when you were born and your family, when they moved here, a little bit of everything.

Anthony: I was born December 25, 1908. My father was Christopher Higgins, who was born in Eustonia, Missouri, in 1881. My mother was Emma May Warner and she was born September 20, 1889 here at Stevensville.

Wight: You have two sisters.

Anthony: I have two sisters, Alda [inaudible] Higgins Daly and Dell Clark Higgins Franks. Alda lives in Stevensville and always has. Dell lives in Forest Grove, Oregon.

Wight: When did you move here? Or when—you were born here.

Anthony: I was born here. The three of us were born here. Myself and Alda and Dell were born here in Stevensville.

Wight: Essentially, I'd like to know a little bit about what life was like when you were younger here. Now, if I'm correct, you lived in another house before here?

Anthony: Oh yes. Let's see, I was born about three-quarters of a mile right up to Deet's (?)Bank. Dell and Alda were born on the Charles Flannagan place over here, just south of the [inaudible]. Everything was quite primitive in those days.

Wight: What was the house like? I mean, this wasn't the original house?

Anthony: No, this was not. This house was here—not this house, but the old house that we lived in until we were grown—was here from in the late 1800s. I think it was here before 1900. But when it was built exactly, I do not know.

Wight: And then they built this house on the same foundations?

Anthony: No, different. This house was built in the summer of 1931 [4?]. Part of the old house is the shack out there, the bottom part.

Wight: Did the three of you girls go to school around here?

Anthony: We went to Stevensville. We all graduated from Stevensville High School in Stevensville.

Wight: I remember Henry telling me about that you did have.. People worked in the fields and you had Indians that worked in the fields when you were younger. I'd like to hear a little bit more about when you were younger and what it was like then.

Anthony: When we were little children, we had no roads, even down on the East Side Highway it was nothing but just a dirt wagon road because there weren't cars. Although my grandfather had a car, one of the first cars in Ravalli County that he got in 1906. My mother drove it. She was probably the first woman driver—well I know she was—in Ravalli County and probably in the state of Montana.

Wight: The first woman driver, huh?

Anthony: My grandfather, Frank Warner, came here in the 1870s from (?) Pennsylvania. When he first got here, I don't know exactly why he did but in 1883 he bought the, or preempted the Furling homestead and he owned that until 1896 and then I can't remember who bought it from him, but the Stranges—[inaudible] Strange—bought it around 1900. My grandmother, Anna Mariah Sigley(?), was born near Bethdale, Pennsylvania. I think about 1871 she was born. My grandfather was born in 18 [inaudible] pioneers. The Indians were all here, the Salish, and were around St. Mary's Mission down here and had little tracts of land around.

Wight: Did they live along the rivers?

Anthony: Yes, mostly along.. They had mostly encampments, I think. There were quite a few around Victor and they were around the little streams.

Wight: But they worked on the farm here?

Anthony: Not those, no. We didn't have them. My father started raising beets in about the late '20s and they put that east side railroad from Florence up the east side of the valley. Previous to that it had gone on 93, Highway 93. Then they brought Mexicans in to.. They had a sugar beet refinery in Missoula and they raised beets up at Flathead and here and I don't know about the Blackfoot, but I know they did in the Flathead and in the Bitterroot. They got the Mexican nationals to come up and work in the beets because none of the white people would do it. As poor as everything was in the '20s, [inaudible] young boys would go work in the fields or anything else so they got the nationals in as cheap labor. They were under a contract to work for them. I think it was the Great Northern Sugar Factory in Missoula. It was kind of piecework and

they were paid a certain amount, say, for the thinning of the beets because they planted the beets in rows and you would have to thin them out to about a half a foot apart.

Wight: Because they'd get big, wouldn't they?

Anthony: Yes. Oh yeah, they get like this long.

Wight: Like about five to six inches across to about a foot long?

Anthony: Oh yeah, big. And then some of them would be twenty-four inches long. And then they had two hoeings and they got paid so much for each hoeing. And then in the fall, when they harvested, they went behind the digger and topped the beets and threw them into sort of windrows. And then the tractors came in and shoveled them onto the trucks and they were hauled to the sugar beet [inaudible], which we had. There was one at Dell Crossing and there was one out on Three Mile. There was one at Corvalis. Of course most of the beets were in this area and in the Three Mile area that were grown. Then the dumps were situated along the railroad track and when the cars came up from Missoula and the beets were loaded into railroad cars and shipped down to the factory in Missoula and there they were processed into sugar.

Wight: Was that the main crops at that time?

Anthony: Yes, at that time. Of course, before the sugar beet industry came in, it was just hay and grains and canning and...

Wight: But your father raised beets?

Anthony: Yes, started. And then he died at the end of the war and when my husband came home, he continued...

Wight: This is World War I?

Anthony: Two. The beet raising. And that's when we had the Indians from Browning, the Blackfoot Indians. We had them the one year and then about that time it seemed like. Well, we had Mexicans before. Joe and I had Mexicans here before. And then when the—I guess the government got so they wouldn't allow them to come in to the United States so they had to use the Indians and that's when we had the Indians from Browning. I can't tell you about what year that was. I don't remember. Probably in the 50s. Then there was the canning, the Red Lodge Canning Company came in here. My dad was still alive then and on the ground we couldn't raise sugar beets, we raised peas for the canning, green peas. That was quite an industry until the war came along because there was nobody—the men left—to work the fields and raise these crops. The cannery just went out of business.

Wight: Just no one to pick.

Anthony: And the cannery started out raising peas. Then they got into canning cherries and then they canned beans and they made sauerkraut in the fall. So it got to be quite an industry.

Wight: Where was the cannery?

Anthony: Just north of the old creamery out there where Purdue had.. .Selway is now. That's where the cannery was. They had a warehouse right on the road as you cross the railroad track and had all their supplies in there, cans and all that. Railroad cars of cans, that's where they were all kept. Then the cannery was directly back of that. We all worked in the cannery at that time, the women did, in the summer. The men did the machinery type of work but the women did the handpicking and all the wet, sloppy jobs.

Wight: All the work.

Anthony: Yeah, the hard work. [laughter]

Wight: Did you work in the cannery?

Anthony: Yes, and Alva did and Dell did. The women could only work one shift and usually it never was full shift because of the way the [inaudible] came on. At first it would be slow and then when everything was about in the middle it was big and then it tapered off toward the end. But the women got 10 cents an hour and the men got 12 V2 cents an hour.

Wight: [inaudible] in wages.

Anthony: Yes. We made sixty cents a day. We made eighty cents. [laughter] [inaudible] work both shifts, because they'd run a morning shift and a night shift, but they let the men do that because they thought they were stronger and more able to take it than the women. So men got to work two shifts, so that made a little more money.

Wight: So this was during the war but not during the Depression. What was it like here in the Depression?

Anthony: Well, it was terrible.

Wight: Did it make much of an effect.

Anthony: Yes, it did. That's about when the cannery [inaudible] was at that time and that kind of changed it for the Valley. Made a little bit more money but wages were so terrible no one had any money. They only allowed the men, one person to the family to work [inaudible] in the schools and office and work downtown. They just allowed one member of a family to work so it spread it around and everybody had a little because there was no welfare in that day. Before that, the poor, the county kept care of them. They had a county poor farm up northwest of Hamilton and they'd take the old up there and pay somebody to cook for them. And if their family were at

home, some of them would get a little money each month out of the county. That's how they got along. I can't remember what it was they got, but they were. That poor farm was also sort of a pest house because anybody got a smallpox or diphtheria, then they had to go up there. Those were the serious illnesses. Of course measles and all we didn't take them there. Then after welfare came in, which was sometime later—I can't remember when it was, probably after the war—then that poor farm just totally disbanded because they paid for people to stay in their homes.

Wight: Do you remember what it was like before WWI?

Anthony: [inaudible] too little. I can remember...

Wight: Eight or nine years old?

Anthony: Yeah.

Wight: Because the war started like 1917?

Anthony: '14, 1914. It ended in 1917. I think I was in the third grade. It must have been more toward the end of the war. We used to crochet or knit little squares for afghans to send overseas to the soldiers and everyone was doing that.

Wight: Like [inaudible] squares.

Anthony: Mmm hmm. And then my mother, the women, went down here to where that daycare center is now, back of the old bank—it was a hospital then—and the women went down there during the war and made bandages and dressings and all of that kind of thing.

Wight: You remember quite a bit, actually, when you think about it.

Anthony: For the Red Cross, I guess. And then they sent them overseas. What else could I think of? Makes you think [inaudible]

Wight: Did you ever work outside the cannery?

Anthony: Then I went to college over at Dylan, a teacher's college. I taught school.

Wight: Here?

Anthony: I taught at Legion Hall [inaudible]. That was the grade school. There were eight grades up there and I taught the first four and my friend, Harriet Rome, taught the fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth.

Wight: And what year did you start?

Anthony: 1929. And the year before I taught near Broadus, Montana, in eastern Montana one year.

Wight: So you taught there how long?

Anthony: Just the one year. And then I taught up here on a (?) floor. And then I taught substitute at Etna School. And then I did in Cecil(?) school later.

Wight: So you taught elementary five, one through four, most of the time?

Anthony: No, it was just two grades at Edna too and I had the lower grades up there. And in Cecil I substituted the fifth grade.

Wight: What was it like being a teacher in a small school like that?

Anthony: Well, it was hectic in those days. I almost came home from my first job because I wasn't prepared to have so many grades. You had to make out lesson plans for each grade. You had to get the time to get all the grades in. [laughter] And then you didn't have anything for seatwork, only what you could make up. It was hard. Now all this stuff is.. School districts buy it for each grade and you have everything. Teachers today don't have anything to do.

Wight: They don't know what it's like.

Anthony: Down here each teacher has three helpers. They don't in Missoula schools. I know they don't, because my niece has taught down thirty years and she has never had a teacher's helper. She's had girls coming in that were finishing their last year at the university.

Wight: As student teachers?

Anthony: She taught them as students for five weeks.

Wight: Five weeks? [inaudible] full semester now.

Anthony: They didn't. They might now, I don't know. I don't think she's had any for a long time.

Wight: She might consider requesting one because she can get the young students.

Anthony: Well, she teaches at Lewis and Clark. It's out near the university. She had about twenty-five children and she does all of her own. Of course she has all of these aids that are manufactured and you can buy whatever you want. But she does all the teaching to the children.

Wight: So you had to.. I mean you didn't have really even many books?

Anthony: No.

Wight: You had to do everything.

Anthony: Just reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography for the older. When I was in eastern Montana, I had had four grades for about a month and then one whole grade was one family and they all moved away to [inaudible] or something. So I had three primary grades and I had one seventh grader. That was entirely different, of course, because she had more subjects and all.

[END OF INTERVIEW]