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Oral History Number: 049-017
Interviewee: Frieda Geary
Interviewer: Mary Melcher
Date of Interview: June 2, 1977
Project: Montana Women's Oral History Project

Note: When this interview was conducted, the interviewee requested to remain anonymous in the transcript and audio. Archives and Special Collections has chosen to lift this restriction now that the interviewee is deceased.

Mary Melcher: Mrs. Geary, you're from up the Blackfoot you told me—up by Helmville?

Frieda Geary: Yes, we're about a mile from town.

MM: Out by Douglas Creek?

FG: No, seven miles from Douglas—the Vetty Creek (?), Nevada.

MM: And you come from a large family. There were eight children in your family?

FG: Yes, eight in our family, and there's eight in his family.

MM: Eight in your husband's family?

FG: Yes. Only their mother died real early. She was 30, 36 not quite. Ain't that awful?

MM: Yes. Your father had a ranch. He raised sheep and cattle?

FG: Yes.

MM: What kind of chores did you do?

FG: I milked cows.

MM: Pardon?

FG: I milked cows.

MM: You milked cows. What kind of chores did you do while you were growing up?

FG: Well, I milked cows before breakfast and after supper and churned butter and made butter. We ran the churn—the great big barrel churn with the water wheel—when there was enough water.

MM: You made a lot of butter then?

FG: Oh, yes.

MM: Then would you sell this milk and butter?

FG: Yes, take it to the mining camps in Garnet and Ogden Mountain and maybe Marysville it seems to me.

MM: Did the boys and girls do the same chores outside?

FG: Yes. Everybody worked together—run hay into together. It was all by hand then, you know. There was no fancy equipment.

MM: And the girls did the hard, physical labor, too?

FG: Yes.

MM: You were telling me earlier that you always wore a big, long skirt. You never wore pants even when you were working outside?

FG: No. No pants or overalls. Now they don't wear anything but overalls.

MM: And your mother always knit long stockings for you?

FG: Yes, and they'd itch.

MM: (laughs) You lived in a German community?

FG: Yes.

MM: Your parents are from Germany?

FG: Yes.

MM: How many children did they have when they came over from Germany?

FG: Three—to handle those babes. She could walk when they left there, but she couldn't walk when she got here.

MM: Why couldn't she walk when she got here?

FG: What?

MM: She couldn't walk when she left, but she could when she got here?

FG: No, vice versa.

MM: Why couldn't she walk when she got here?

FG: I don't know. There was a long time coming, you know. Maybe they didn't get the proper food on the boat or something. They come over in '89.

MM: 1889? Did your mother ever tell you very much about the trip over?

FG: Well, quite a bit. The youngest sister, she got to go back there for a visit with them in 1921. It was pretty nice then.

MM: But did your mother ever tell you about the first trip over on the boat?

FG: Oh yes.

MM: What did she say it was like?

FG: Well it was awfully...kind of monotonous. Not like it is now, you know. Now they have dancing and everything, I guess. They've real good times now, I think.

MM: So it was boring?

FG: Yes, I think so.

MM: You and a lot of other German people were in your neighborhood, is that right?

FG: Yes.

MM: You all spoke German most of the time?

FG: Yes. I don't even know if I could speak English when we went to school...probably don't...

MM: How old were you when you first went to school?

FG: I don't remember didn't get much schooling. We just had school in those...in the summertime sometimes. They didn't have nine months like we do now.

MM: What did your family do for entertainment?

FG: Oh, we had coffee luncheons.

MM: You went visiting to the neighbors?

FG: Yes, and we always celebrated all the birthdays, yes.

MM: And did you have a big birthday cake?

FG: Yes. We used to make them out...good cookies and stuff.

MM: Would you sing happy birthday like we do today?

FG: Well, no, I don't think so. I don't remember that.

MM: Did you go to dances with your family, too?

FG: Yes, we used to have dances around Douglas Day, you know. And then...

MM: Around Douglas Day. Oh, what was that?

FG: Oh, some big trading party, you know, and everybody danced there. I mean in that competition there.

MM: Was there a certain day that you'd call Douglas Day?

FG: What?

MM: Did you say that you used to have dances on Douglas Day?

FG: No, on Douglas Creek, you know.

MM: Oh, I see.

FG: That was the name of the new settlement that went in. We had two creeks there: Douglas and Murray. Some of kids drown is more than I know. (laughs) So close to the creek area, cross the creek on planks, you know.

MM: You played around the creek a lot?

FG: Oh yes. Fishing all the time, every time, when we had a few minutes go and fish and fish.

MM: You visited your neighbors on Sundays, or else they would come and visit you?

FG: Well yes, usually. They got together more than they do now. Now they...I don't know—TV or what it is, I don't know. People aren't sociable like they used to be.

MM: Did you have any books around your house or musical instruments?

FG: Any what?

MM: Books or musical instruments?

FG: Yes, mouth harps and accordions.

MM: Did you learn how to play?

FG: I can play the mouth harp a little.

MM: You celebrated Christmas time too?

FG: Oh, yes. We always had a Christmas tree, and we had these little candles about so big, you know, to light. Now, why we didn't have fires is more than I know. New Year's Eve they were lit again, too. By that time the tree must've been pretty dry, because we never thought of putting it in a water bucket or something, you know. We sure were careful though.

MM: You had cousins in the area of Douglas Creek - did you?

FG: Yes.

MM: Would they come on Christmas time and birthdays?

FG: Yes. We were together lots. Some of the boys worked at our place, too.

MM: Were they from Germany, too?

FG: Yes.

MM: You lived at home until you were 26. Is that right?

FG: Yes.

MM: During that time you were working with your dad and your brothers and your sisters?

FG: Yes. What a hard man.

MM: Pardon?

FG: Another hard man.

MM: (laughs) Did you enjoy those years working at home?

FG: Yes, I didn't mind it. Didn't know any better. (laughs)

MM: You'd be going to dances on the weekends for fun?

FG: Yes. One of the boys that worked there...There's a teacher in the neighborhood, and he'd said if I'd go and get the teacher on horseback with her suitcase, you know—two of us on horseback—he'd see to the horse to let me go to the...so that's what got me started.

MM: (laughs) You'd go and get the schoolteacher?

FG: Yes.

MM: When you went to dances, did you go on dates, or did you go with a group of you?

FG: Well, we always went with a bunch, you know, but that's when I met my husband then.

MM: At a dance?

FG: Oh, yes.

MM: Where was he from?

FG: From Helmville just three hundred miles from there.

MM: Did you ever think about taking any other job other than working on a ranch?

FG: No, there was enough there to do.

MM: You told me the other day that you spent a little bit...you spent **some time in _____**

FG: Yes, a school came in 1907 and '08, and, oh, I was so homesick—my little brother and I. He was three years younger than I was. Why we didn't run away was more than I know. We were scared of the dad.

MM: Of your dad?

FG: Yes.

MM: Was your dad pretty strict?

FG: Oh, boy was he. I should say.

MM: Did you get along with him pretty well though?

FG: Yes. (laughs) I had to.

MM: How about your mother? She wasn't quite as strict?

FG: No, she was real easygoing—wonderful cook.

MM: Well, when you were in Missoula, you were working for your room and board?

FG: Yes.

MM: And, you were—

FG: That wasn't easy.

MM: No.

FG: She'd scold me when I get home, and the preacher would scold me when I got to school.

MM: Oh, dear. You studied German half-days and English the other half a day?

FG: English half-day and then catechism, too. That was too much. When I got home then, they were having school there. Then I went to school to this lady—she was our cousin's wife—and think I learned more from her than I learned from any of them. That was the end of my school.

MM: You told me earlier that there was no sex education in the home or in the school?

FG: Oh, no. That was never mentioned.

MM: Your mother hadn't talked to you about menstruation?

FG: No.

MM: No, not at all?

FG: No.

MM: Did any of your older sisters?

FG: No, I was awfully embarrassed. I got up one morning, and my hands were all bloody, you know. I slept with my sister, and I asked her if I hurt her. I thought, I didn't know where it came from I didn't have any idea. So she told me then.

MM: Oh, that's too bad. Did you use some sort of rag then when you menstruated? You didn't have Kotex then?

FG: Oh, no, no. I always washed the rags again and used and boiled them and used them again, you know. They were anything but comfortable.

MM: You told me that your sister took out a homestead not too far from your family lived.

FG: Yes.

MM: Was she an older sister?

FG: She was two years older, yes.

MM: Did your parents encourage her in that?

FG: Did they what?

MM: Encourage her to take out a homestead?

FG: Oh, yes. Then, they bought it from her, you know.

MM: Why did they buy from her?

FG: What?

MM: They bought it from her later? Why did she want to sell it?

FG: Well, she didn't want to live there, you know. It was just an improvement for the ranch there.

MM: How long did she work on it altogether?

FG: Well, she never worked on it, just stayed there, you know. The brothers worked on there. I showed you that picture where they were buying a necklace—taken there. Used to have a pretty good ring there at one time.

MM: Where did she work?

FG: Well, at the ranch, too. When she wasn't staying up there.

MM: Did she mainly take out homestead so that your parents could buy it later?

FG: Yes.

MM: Do you remember if most of the women got married in your neighborhood rather than work at a job of some sort?

FG: Yes. I never got (unintelligible) as you know, actually do now...

MM: How old were they when they got married?

FG: Well, I don't know.

MM: Twenty-five or twenty-six?

FG: Two of the girls—one of our neighbor girls and a sister in 1910—and they went to San Francisco. They both got married down there then. But they were adults, too.

MM: What did they do in San Francisco?

FG: Well, they worked. My sister—she worked, oh, housecleaning, you know—maid. She got a fortune when she passed away, and she bought the kids cars and washers. But she killed herself, I think.

MM: Oh...

FG: She was just a really, a really wonderful person. In '64 she...it was her 75th birthday, so she wanted to celebrate it at home. We had a nice birthday party for her. So everybody when they turned 75 had to have their birthday celebration.

MM: Did she marry—this lady that you were just talking about?

FG: Yes. She married twice.

MM: Would she keep working when she was married?

FG: Oh, yes.

MM: So some women would continue working when they married and some wouldn't. Is that

right?

FG: Yes.

MM: At what age were women considered old maids? Or were they ever considered old maids?

FG: Oh, around 25 I think they used to say.

MM: Did you feel any social pressure to marry when you did? Did you feel as if people thought you should get married?

FG: No, I kind of shocked the community by marrying...a German marrying an Irishman. (laughs)

MM: Oh, you married an Irishman?

FG: Yes.

MM: He was Catholic also. Was he?

FG: Yes. A wonderful person, and his dad was a prince.

MM: Your family thought it was okay that you were getting married then—a Catholic and a Protestant?

FG: Yes, they were very fond of him.

MM: But, it was odd in a way then?

FG: Well, you know at that time Catholics...there was difference, you know. But it worked out fine.

MM: How long was courtship with your husband?

FG: Well, about six years or so.

MM: Six years? You met him when you were about 20 then?

FG: Oh, before that.

MM: Before that?

FG: Oh, yes. It must have been longer than that.

MM: You would visit each other and go to dances. Is that what you did while you were courting?

FG: Yes.

MM: Did you have a large wedding?

FG: No, just went to Butte. You got married, and you came home.

MM: Did you rent a...

FG: We had no showers, no receptions, or no celebration of any kind. You just got married, and that was it.

MM: You had a house-warming party, though, didn't you? When you moved into your house, you had a house-warming, is that right?

FG: Excuse me. In our house?

MM: Yes. The one that your husband built.

FG: Oh, the other...That was our home.

MM: Oh. It was...oh. I thought...

FG: Yes. That was the home at Douglas.

MM: Did you run off when you got married?

FG: No, they knew I was getting married. They went away. They didn't want to be gone when I left, I don't think. They didn't want to be there when I left home.

MM: It was sad for them?

FG: I'd been there so long; I was kind of a fixture.

MM: How many children did you have altogether?

FG: Three. The first one passed away at birth. Just strain, you know, too long coming. Just let me suffer it out.

MM: It was the doctor's fault?

FG: No, it was the nurse's fault...I don't know whose fault. They told me to hold my breath when I had a pain, so...but I tried to do...

MM: How long did that...? I think you told me that you stayed all night doing that.

FG: Yes. That was awful. Didn't know nothing then, you know.

MM: You had two other children, a boy and girl or...?

FG: Yes.

MM: Did you ever know anything about any birth control methods?

FG: No.

MM: Did you have your children in a hospital—the two last ones?

FG: Yes, I had them all in a hospital.

MM: In Deer Lodge?

FG: Yes.

MM: But your mother had all of her children by a midwife—a lady who was in the neighborhood?

FG: Yes. There was a lady that took care of the youngest when the youngest one was born in 1902. Her name was Mrs. Blair—Mrs. Joe Blair.

MM: Would the midwives just...or be on call when the pregnant woman was ready to have a baby? The midwives would know that she was about ready?

FG: Yes.

MM: Then they would be able to come on time. Do you think the view of death was different then than it is now?

FG: What?

MM: How people thought about death? Do you think they thought about it any differently than we do now?

FG: Yes. They used to make such a to-do about it. They'd always have wakes at night, you know,

and course they couldn't...They weren't embalmed, but they tried to keep the bodies cold and have them at their home. I always thought that was weird. They used to do that when in the neighborhood there. They even had a wake for two nights, and they would kind of carouse and drink and stuff you know. So, when my husband died—and he died real sudden—I thought, I'm not going to have him brought home and taken away again. Just have him brought to the church from cemetery, from the mortuary, and then to the cemetery. But, everybody does that now, ever since.

MM: You didn't want to have a wake?

FG: (unintelligible)

MM: In your marriage did you and your husband sit down together and talk things over when you had to make a decision?

FG: Yes.

MM: One of you didn't make all the decisions.

FG: Oh, no. No.

MM: Did you handle finances together, too?

FG: No! That was his work.

MM: That was his work.

FG: He used to tell me, "Now, Mother, come here, and I'll show you about income taxes here."

I say, "Oh, Daddy, that's yours."

When he passed away, I didn't know sickum (?). Didn't know from nothing, and believe me, that's hard. That's not right.

MM: Did you have a hard time learning you think?

FG: Yes, see there's a whole bunch there you know, and we had a...well, there's three. The place was left to three boys, and then the girls had to have cash and each age...each place was designated what acreage, you know. So that worked out fine. Well, the youngest boy finally got tired of staying at home, and he'd go off work and have a good time. The ranch had to be run by the other two of them.

MM: This was your father-in-law's ranch, right?

FG: Yes. Then finally he wanted to sell, so the two brothers bought his place then. Then finally the other one wanted to sell, so we bought them. We bought the whole ranch then. But it was hard-plucking, I tell you. The first year we had, I had one man, and the next summer I had 15.

MM: That you were cooking for?

FG: Yes. But we got along fine. Pitched a stove on our cement floor and pitched in.

MM: On this ranch was it a ranch or a farm mainly?

FG: Ranch, just cattle and hay.

MM: Did you have a lot of land there?

FG: Well, quite a bit, yes.

MM: When did your husband die?

FG: In August '61.

MM: So your children were raised?

FG: Yes. Died real sudden talking to a neighbor in the garage.

MM: Just a heart attack?

FG: Yes.

MM: You told me before that you're in a, you were in bridge clubs and then the Helmville Community Club?

FG: Yes. We had what we called our any night bridge club. We'd have big dinners, and oh a nice big to-do you know. There's about ten or about ten couples there, and we had a real good time. Then I forget, I think about '57 or maybe it was before that...I wished I'd knew when we started the hall, and that was for the project. We all worked hard at that.

MM: The community club built the hall?

FG: Yes.

MM: What was the hall for?

FG: Well, for social purposes—for dances and card parties and dinners. Then basketball and so they had to build on for showers and seats...What do you call that?

MM: Bleachers?

FG: Bleachers, yes. It's quite up-to-date now. I guess they have a hamburger factory and all. (laughs) Fryer, you know, and all that. Every summer they have a rodeo, and we had that under a tent for a long time. And that caused...in fact a lot of people from all over...

MM: Who organized the rodeo?

FG: What?

MM: Do you know who organized the rodeo?

FG: Well, it used to be for the guys at church. The same group, you know.

MM: Did you go to a church in the neighborhood?

FG: Yes.

MM: Protestant church?

FG: Please?

MM: What kind of church was it?

FG: Catholic church.

MM: Oh, you went to a Catholic church, then. Did you become a Catholic?

FG: (unintelligible)

MM: Did you discuss politics with your husband?

FG: Please?

MM: Did you discuss politics with your husband? Did you and your husband talk politics?

FG: Oh, yes. We were Republicans.

MM: You didn't participate in the campaign for women to get the vote, though? Were you happy when women did get the vote?

FG: Was I what?

MM: Were you glad when women could vote?

FG: Well, I don't remember too much about that. I wasn't much of a politician.

MM: What did you think about the Prohibition Movement?

FG: Well, that I don't know whether that was so good for our country or not. You know that they had a lot of bootleggers before that. (laughs) Too much drinking in our country—it's not good. They bring on a disease on themselves that they could get along without. Alcoholics—that's a bad disease.

[End of Side A]

[Side B]

MM: From looking at your pictures, it looks like you had quite a neighborhood. You got together a lot and had a lot of fun.

FG: Yes.

MM: I saw one picture where there's just a group of women and a lot of children having a picnic?

FG: Yes.

MM: So, women would get together without men some of the time?

FG: Oh yes.

MM: How often would you do that?

FG: Well, we usually had coffee club lunch every week someplace or the other.

MM: That was just with the women?

FG: Well, the men, too. You know, they finally didn't work so hard when the kids got bigger.

MM: How much time did you spend with other?

FG: Well, I don't know. We didn't have telephones, you know, so we had to go and visit each other, unless kids kept...

MM: What type of jobs were available for single women?

FG: Well, not much I don't think.

MM: Some of them were schoolteachers?

FG: Yes, finally there's a bunch of...in Helena they'd go to school you know, and then they'd teach on permits. In this day and age, you can't do that anymore.

MM: How do you mean they'd teach on permits?

FG: They didn't have to have the...you know...

MM: Oh, a certification?

FG: ...education like they do now to teach.

MM: Were there many Indians around when you were growing up?

FG: Oh, yes and gypsies.

MM: Gypsies?

FG: Oh, they used to be terrible. They used to come and take the chickens right off the nest and take all the eggs. Oh, they were awful. Used to be frightening to have them come. The Indians, Mother would always give them a loaf of bread, and they were happy. They went on their way.

MM: Well where were the gypsies from?

FG: Oh, I don't know where they came from.

MM: Do you know what nationality they were?

FG: No. They were greasy looking. They sure used to scare us to death. I never had no use for the gypsies.

MM: Were there any Indians in your schools?

FG: Any what?

MM: Indians in school with you?

FG: Oh, no.

MM: Did the Indians and the whites get along pretty well?

FG: Yes. I don't remember any arguments or squabbles. They used to travel through the country, you know, go from place to place. We have several Indian tombstones buried there.

MM: On your place?

FG: No, in the country there, though.

MM: Were there any black families or Jewish around?

FG: No.

MM: Were there any Chinese?

FG: No, I didn't know any.

MM: Did you ever participate in any sports?

FG: Did I what?

MM: Were you ever in any sports, like basketball or swimming.

FG: Oh, no. We used to play ball a little bit, but we used to have—well, the girls didn't play it—baseball games on Sunday, but nothing like they do now, you know. They kind of overdo it, I think.

MM: But the girls didn't play baseball usually?

FG: No. Played horseshoe.

MM: When you first got married, did you start doing all the cooking for that ranch there?

FG: No, not the first year. I was homesick as everything.

MM: You were homesick?

FG: Oh boy, I sure was.

MM: Was there another woman there who was doing the cooking then?

FG: Yes, the sisters were doing the cooking then. But the next year, they said they couldn't do it so...I didn't know too much about cooking really, because Mother was always such a good cook, you know, for us.

MM: You never learned how to cook because you were working outside?

FG: Yes.

MM: So that second year you learned how to cook?

FG: We usually got breakfast.

MM: How did you keep busy the first year of your marriage?

FG: Well, that was it. If I could have gone with my husband, like they do now, you know, and a

lot of girls do—a lot women do—but they was running their ranches together with the neighbors. Of course, there were a lot of men there then and boys. So you didn't go out, you just had to sit and play lady. I didn't like it worth a darn. It was altogether out of my line.

MM: So you didn't have much to do?

FG: No.

MM: Then the second year you started cooking?

FG: Yes.

MM: Was it hard to learn how to cook?

FG: Yes.

MM: Have you always enjoyed outdoor work more than cooking?

FG: Yes, I didn't know anything about cooking, but I knew how to work outside.

MM: After that, did you do most of the cooking all the time?

FG: Yes.

MM: Ok, we'll stop there. Thanks a lot Mrs. Geary.

[Break in audio]

MM: Mrs. Geary, do we have your permission to use this information that you've given me in publication without using your name?

FG: Yes, I guess it's okay.

MM: Okay, thank you.

[End of Interview]