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Oral History Number: 120-014b
Interviewee: Bessie K. Monroe
Interviewer: May Vallance, unknown
Date of Interview: circa 1978
Project: Bitterroot Historical Society Oral History Project

May Vallance: B.K., I'd like to have you tell us your name.

Bessie Monroe: Bessie Kerlee Monroe.

MV: Yes, and how old are you, Bessie?

BM: I was 94 years old September the 22nd. [She was born in 1888].

MV: Do you know anything about Darby, B.K., and the schools up there?

BM: I certainly do. The first school was organized in 1888, and Marion Overturf, who had settled there with his family had come from nearby, or someplace up there. Anyway, leave that out. Anyway, he had just taken up a farm, or rather he bought a homesteader's out because it was unsurveyed land, and he had a one-room cabin. It was there that this homesteader lived. He decided—and he had three girls and his son, and there was no school for them to go to. Well, that was the year that I was born, so I have to tell you this because this was told to me. Ninety-four years ago was Darby's first school, and Marion Overturf had told the settlers around that he would give them this one-room house he was living in for a school if they would help him fix up another deal. He lived down quite, well—his ranch adjoined them. My father, later acquired, but anyway, they took him up, and they did just that. Darby's first school was Marion Overturf's first residence in the Darby community. He and his two brothers had come in there in the 1880s and settled. There was Jake Overturf, Reese Overturf, and they all had families. The Darby school went on and on and the first teacher happened to be a young man who was out there from the east [unintelligible] hills. Right now I can't remember his name, but I have had it written somewhere. Anyway, he volunteered. I know Maud Gergenber, [Maud Gosmer], she was Mary Overturf's daughter, her mother was a...she told me in later years about this young man carrying on the school so successfully, and of course, they just had three months term, in the spring, and he'd be down on the ground playing marbles with the boys [unintelligible], I think, or something like that. Anyway, then eventually he had to go back east because his wife wanted to go back again. But then, my first teacher was, she was a Mrs. O'Brien then, but later she married W.H. Cameron up the West Fork and was Emma Cameron, well not Emma, but she was Mrs. Cameron, anyway. Mary, I think her name was because she always signed her name M.E. O'Brien, but she was my first teacher.

MV: Was that in this log school building?

BM: In that same building and I went to school in that building until 1902. When I graduated in the first eighth grade class that they got together after they looked over the district school form and they went and had the county superintendent to give out the examination. Of the class that graduated of course, he called, in the early times they went by readers, did the McGuffey readers. There was a primer—first reader, second, third, fourth and fifth. Then after the fifth, there's a history class, so that was another education report. Anyway, there were seven of us who passed the examination successfully. There was Nora Miles, Lucy Ziegler, Magnolia Flannery, (?) and May Miles, and Josie Solleder, and Elmer Overturf, the one lone boy, and myself. I was the youngest. I was 13. I remember the Elmer Overturf had the high mark; he had 90, and me, the little 13 year old was next high with 89.

Unidentified Speaker: Oh, I'll be darned.

BM: Anyway, the rest of them were right up there in the 80s, but we graduated anyway.

MV: That's right, and Nora Smithy was the county superintendent?

BM: No, she was one of our teachers.

MV: Oh, she was the teacher.

BM: The county superintendent was Kitty Ostermyer.

MV: Yes, and what year was this when you graduated?

BM: 1902.

MV: 1902.

BM: I went back in 1903 and they had a little bit of a high school deal. We had, just I think, two or three—we had algebra I remember, and history, and Latin. Then, the next year I went to the Corvallis School.

MV: Was this the same log school building? Was it just the one-room school that you graduated?

BM: That one room school, now, or the last I knew of it, is an office building with one of the lumber companies because it stood right in the middle of that flat just north of our home. When they decided to build the school house on the site where the school is now, they left little building sitting there by itself in the middle of that flat like it did when I first went to school. But eventually, I think it was [unintelligible] for some of the lumber companies. They built a mill around it, you know, that's up there.

MV: Yes.

BM: I'm sure it's still used in some way in office duties. It was a stark log building weather boarded up on the outside.

MV: Did you go to the new school at all? Was that the only school you went to?

BM: Yes, until I went to Corvallis High School. When we lived on the Tin Cup homestead, we walked two miles down the gulch and through Darby; you see that school was north of Darby. Then I went to Corvallis. We had wonderful teachers. We had two or three different men that came in there. I remember two of them, was a Monroe Alford, and they were people that lived in the Corvallis area. But he wasn't very much of a force, and then another one came in there, and I remember he was distinctly southern, but he wanted to be known as Rice S. Ubank (?). He was a big fellow, too, you know, and lazy, but he would sit at his desk and then he'd turn around and sometimes he spit on the floor, and then he'd rub it in with his shoe. He didn't last long.

US: What school was it where you told me one time that the teacher called the kids a bunch of pine tree savages?

BM: That was at the little Darby School.

US: Was it?

BM: That was my brother-in-law, Warner Laird, who lived up the East Fork. He was courting my older sister, and he called us Kerlee youngsters—he loved us all but he always called us pine tree savages. Of course, we had come down from the Tin Cup to the Darby place then, but the Tin Cup was right up against the woods, you know. Logging and all that. It was beautiful up there.

MV: Did you have any programs in the school for the parents?

BM: Oh, the programs, we didn't have to wait until we were in some other town to get real flashy programs. There were different books of the—like the Golden Treasury, Apples of Gold in Pictures of Silver, different ones you know. They had classic poems and we had recitations, you see. They called them recitations. We memorized these poems and then delivered them by heart. There was one I remember, The Last Hymn, you know that? Eda Macoure, (?) she was afterwards Esther Dye's mother, (?). [Esther Dye was born Esther Lamb and her mother was Henrietta McWhirk Holt Lamb] But anyway, she was very talented and her grandmother had been a teacher, and she taught her all the ways of elocution. There was this: "The Sabbath day was ending in a village by the sea, and the uttered benediction touched the people tenderly." Then she went on, and I remember that someone was to sing when you came to this [line in the poem about a] man that was stranded on the ship and sinking. He began to sing "Jesus, Lord of

My Soul” and that has to be sung by somebody in the audience, of course. They came up with a choir instead of that lone man. Anyway, that was the way they did things, but it was good. We always had Christmas programs, we hadn’t ever broken—

US: I was going to ask, did you ever have any box socials or special picnics?

BM: Oh, yes, sure they did. Box socials: my older sisters would spend hours making paper flowers to decorate their baskets. But by the time I was grown up, they didn’t have them very often, and I remembered once or twice they’d have them. But the box socials of the dances were in Miles Hall above his store.

[Break in audio]

US: —Dances over the store.

BM: The dances were ordinarily in Miles Hall, sometimes in Hamden’s Hall where over the company store, but George Miles was a man who mostly saw to it about putting on the dances. There was Thanksgiving, all the holiday dances, they were celebrated. The orchestra that did the most of it, well there was Uncle Ben Erway, as we called him. He was a dear old man that lived with the Miles family. He had the violin, and then Mrs. Gus Solleder—she was Josie White's mother—she always played second on the organ. Then there was Billy Gorham that played the guitar or the banjo, and that was our dance music ordinarily.

US: Was it square dance or was it round dance or did they dance in waltzes or what?

BM: Square dances, of course, but they called them “take your partners for a quadrille.” They never said square dance. Their round dances were beautiful. The French and U.S. (?), and Coming through the Rye, and different things, and then always the waltzes, and finally the two-step came into the picture. I did two-step; I sure loved it.

US: Were they kind of careful about how close you held onto a boy?

BM: What?

US: Were they very careful about how close you held that boy? Did you have to see daylight between the girl and the boy when you did the two-step?

BM: I never got criticized, anyway. Sometimes I had to push the boy back a little bit.

MV: B.K., tell a little bit more about the basket social. Why did they have one, and what did they do?

BM: Well, they had basket socials for benefits for [unintelligible] something like that, but they very nice social events. You see, they only had a few things that they could call really socials. People were always getting together about something. You'd have a Fourth of July show [unintelligible] and all of that, but mostly that was at Lake Como. Anyway, but the basket socials sometimes were held at the schoolhouse, and again they would be held up in the hall, but they were always very—of course, everybody knew who was going with somebody else. Sometimes the bidding would get pretty high when they tried to bid ahead of some fellow that wanted to get his sweetheart's basket.

MV: About how much did they pay? How much did they pay for the baskets?

BM: Sometimes they'd go up as high as ten dollars.

MV: That's very high.

US: That's a lot of money. That's an awful lot of money.

BM: I know, but ten dollars was more then than it was today.

US: That's for sure, right. Did the schools have special Christmas programs?

BM: Always.

US: Could you describe them please?

BM: Yes. Not so much the school. There was a program, all right, but it would be in the Miles Hall. The community Christmas tree was set up there and there was a Santa Claus and there was candy for every child that was there because no names, of course—present. There were presents, too, there, gifts, but our gifts were given in the home. I remember one interesting thing happened there at Darby. This was in later years. They were clearing up after the community tree in the church and J.C. Bill, this was after I was married, was helping to clear up [unintelligible], and he says, "Has anybody here lost a pair of Bible bands?" Somebody had put on a pair of homemade garters, big, made of plain black elastic. The name had come off, but we never forgot it. "Can anybody here claim these Bible bands?" he said. Of course, he was very religious, and he [unintelligible].

MV: Oh, really?

BM: Oh, yes, he never heard of a joke. Everyone. When he held it up there, they were pinned together and—

MV: Did they have to have a school board at that time? Did they have a school board?

BM: A school board?

MV: Yes.

BM: Oh, yes. There would be three trustees, and somebody would be clerk.

MV: Who were some of the people on the school board?

BM: I remember W.H. McCoy was the clerk when my brother and I were doing janitor work. It was that little one-room school. They finally got around so that the teacher didn't have to sweep out. I couldn't remember; there were three others. I think Miles was one of them, and I don't think my father was ever a trustee. I think he always got out of it.

MV: How much did they pay you for your janitor work?

BM: Five dollars a month.

MV: That was a good salary.

BM: Because actually five dollars did more then than it did now.

US: A lot more.

MV: B.K., this has been a marvelous report, and we appreciate it so much. That's a beautiful story.

BM: If you want it, I can [unintelligible] some of my stuff. I've written so much about Darby.

MV: Right.

US: Ok,ay this concludes the interview with B.K. Monroe.

[End of Interview]