

INTERVIEW WITH: Neal Liston
INTERVIEWER: Jay Haymond
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SUBJECT OF INTERVIEW: Experiences living in Escalante
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JH: Tell me a little bit about yourself. You said that you were born here in Escalante.

NL: Yeah, right around this corner, just before they built this home.

JH: 1909?

NL: Yes

JH: Tell me about your family, your father and mother and brothers and sisters.

NL: My mother died when she was in her late thirties. She had an operation that killed her and he had an operation later then that, prostate operation, and a blood clot broke loose and hit his heart and killed him. And I've lived right here, I was born here in 1909 in a little log house we had here and when I was about five, six years old, they tore it down and built this house here and I've been right here ever since. I lived here just after my parents died and I got married and we'd been married for sixty-eight years and I lost my wife last year, in June.

JH: Tell me what you've done throughout your life as a wage earner or as a businessman.
What have you done?

NL: I've just been a cowboy all my life. Ever since I was big enough to ride, ever since I was

about ten, eleven years old I've been on a horse.

JH: Did you have your own permits?

NL: Yes, we had our own permits and our own cattle; we run them on the desert in the winter time and up on the Canaan Mountain in the summer. And at the ranch, we had ranches up in the upper valley there. Maybe you noticed the meadows when you came through there.

JH: You've seen a lot of changes in the cattle industry?

NL: Yes, I have. Yeah, a lot of changes in that and a lot of changes in the town.

JH: Was the Canaan properly on the forest, in other words did you get permits from the Forest Service to graze up there?

NL: Yes sir, yeah, we got them from the Forest. It wasn't when my dad and them started to running cattle there because it wasn't in the forest then. But he went to Ogden to the office up there and had it put in the Forest Service to do away with the transients that come in the country.

JH: Where were they coming from?

NL: They was coming from clear out to Fillmore and Parowan.

JH: Were these people that you knew that were transient herders, or were they just...

NL: We knew them after they got here.

JH: (Laughs) Yeah, I'm sure you did. But it was an attempt to control the grazing, correct?

NL: Yeah, there was a man here that owned sheep on part of it and we owned cattle on the other part. And these was transients that was coming in, just kept a crowding us off. So they had put it under the forest.

JH: About when did this happen, do you remember... It sounds like there was something that was disrupting the normal pattern of grazing to force them down here.

NL: Well, it was just good grazing country. The desert was an extra good grazing and the forest was too and they'd just bring them here and turn them loose. And they'd go wherever they wanted to until they got a change and then they had to pull their cattle and sheep out and leave. But the man that owned sheep here, they just sold them here a few years back.

JH: When you'd gather those cattle in the fall, you'd probably bring them right through town didn't you?

NL: Yeah, we'd keep right out on the range out there until we got them about all gathered and got our calves weaned, cause we had to keep our calves home and turn our dry cattle out. But we'd just drive them down almost to town and then we'd go around town.

JH: To the south?

NL: Yeah, we never even come through town with them. And sometimes it would take, oh, a good month gathering them off the mountain because they'd drift in different places so bad. And it was the same way on the desert, they'd drift clear to Hole in the Rock, to the Colorado River and then we'd go to the lower end and push them back up the desert and segregate them on the mountain.

JH: When you went to the desert, you didn't have to have permits, did you?

NL: Yeah, they did when the Bureau of Land Management come in to work, you know. They didn't come in, I forgot the year that they come in, but it was in the 30s, wasn't it?

JH: Well, the Taylor Grazing Act was passed in '34 but it took a couple of years before...

NL: Well, that's what it was, the Taylor Grazing.

JH: And do you remember the firsts permits that you got on that?

NL: Yeah, I do. Yeah.

JH: Who was in charge of land management, the BLM, but do you remember the individual that was in charge?

NL: Well, no I don't, I can't remember his name. He was a fellow from over to Tropic who was kinda' over it.

JH: Was it Elijah Moore?

NL: No, Elijah Moore come into a little after they put it into the Taylor Grazing. He come out and he got his scatter. I remember he went down what they call Warm Creeks and down that country. And the old fellow that was kinda' over the Taylor Grazing lived in Manti and I can't tell you his name. But I remember when he started, that's when we got our permit.

JH: What difference did it make in the way you ran your stock when you had to have those

desert permits?

NL: Well, we had to run them on the permits because we didn't raise enough hay in the country to feed them. There wasn't a lot of farming them days but it come in a lot better afterwards and now there's a lot of them feeds part of their cattle and they still run down in the desert.

JH: You can remember when they didn't have sprinkling irrigation so they got a good crop...

NL: Oh yeah, yeah, we hadn't had that very many years, you know. The spring thing, we've got two reservoirs to hold the water back in and this year, right now, it's been a good enough year that their big reservoir up here above town is clear full of water. And we need a place to put it but don't have another reservoir.

JH: That seems like a hurtful thing, to turn that water loose, doesn't it?

NL: Yeah, it does. Yeah, in the spring you take another month from now the reservoir will be full and all the overflow's gotta' go down the river. They're trying right now to get another reservoir on its way, but I don't know, it might be a couple of years before we get it.

JH: That's usually the pattern, isn't it? Most of the time.

NL: The last two years have been real good hay years, we've raised lots of hay, shipped a lot of it out and fed lots of cattle.

JH: What kind of cattle are most often used on the permits that you had?

NL: Hereford cattle.

JH: Hereford. Are those your favorites?

NL: Yeah, those are favorite cattle. Only kind we ever did run until that got... Oh, in the last year or two they kinda' mixed the herds up a little bit with the Angus and brown cattle, but mostly, it's mostly Hereford cattle, red bally.

JH: How do you control the pink eye on the Hereford?

NL: Well, we just watch them and if they happen to get the pink eye we have to doctor it, you can doctor it. But take the black cattle, they never get pink eye.

JH: Have you done a lot of doctoring, in other words, are you a old hand at doctoring stock?

NL: Well, I was some but my son does a lot of it now. He even operates on cows, takes their calf. If they can't calve, you know.

JH: Sounds like a big job to me.

NL: Yeah, it is. We've just about got rid of all of ours now. He's got a few down here below town in the pasture.

JH: So he doesn't go down the desert with the stock any more?

NL: No. No I quit, or I quit about in '83 or '84. I just kinda retired.

JH: Sometimes cowboy's best helper's his horse. Did you ever have any special horses?

NL: You bet, we had a lot of good horses. Good horses and good dogs -- we used lots of dogs. Good dogs. `Cause cattle them days, if they drift out away from their main places, you know, they'd get wild. Then you'd have to have good dogs to get the cattle. But we did have good horses.

JH: Tell me about a favorite or two.

NL: Favorite horse? Well, in my day I had a brown horse, he was out of an old race horse stud that they had in the country, called him Old Brady. That's what he was out of. Then I had a pinto mare that I used all the time and I had a bay horse or quarter horse and he was special, he was one of the best.

JH: Was he fast?

NL: Yeah. And you could do anything on him. If you had to rope wild cattle you could pull them or tie them to a tree, whatever you wanted to do.

JH: Was he quick on the turns?

NL: Yeah. Yeah, he'd lay right onto a cow if you was trying to rope her. And he was real good in the corral when we had big benches of cattle in the corral.

JH: Tell me what it was like to rope a big yearling on this horse and how did he react once you got a rope dabbed on that cow.

NL: Well, he was real handy to catch just a yearling but these were old cows or big steers.

JH: Even wild ones.

NL: And the wild ones and tie them up. We'd have to tie them to a tree maybe for a couple of nights and then we would cut the horns off and then you could lead them.

JH: What was a partnership with a good horse like you're talking about under those circumstances that were...

NL: You mean the care of him?

JH: Well, how he acted, how he helped.

NL: Oh, he was just... He knew about as much as a man knew. We roped a lot of wild ones and they watch the rope. Horse gets so experienced they watch the rope. And if it tightens up then he sets back on it.

JH: Right. That's an important form of help, isn't it?

NL: You bet.

JH: Keep tension on that rope.

NL: Yup, yeah, he always kept tension on the rope, specially if I tied them up they'd usually set back until you'd get them all tied, if you had to cut the horns off then one of the other fellers had to catch the heels, you know, and throw them and we'd cut the horns off.

JH: What did you carry to cut the horns off with?

NL: We carried a little saw, about that long.

JH: How did you get them to hold their head still while you did that?

NL: Just set him on him.

JH: Yeah, two or three cowboys, huh, and hold his head.

NL: Yeah, one man on the ground and a couple on horses.

JH: I'll bet they didn't like that

NL: No, naw, it'd get pretty mad but you tie them up for a couple of nights of nights and they'd kinda' settle down get to where they don't tighten the rope and then you could lead them where you wanted them to go.

JH: I've heard of a breed of dog called the Boulder Heeler. Did you ever have a Boulder Heeler?

NL: Well, you mean from Boulder or... Yeah, yeah, we had one or two but the best dogs I had I got them over to Wayne County, over in Loa, man raised them over there. I had two black dogs that were just perfect.

JH: What did they call them, what kind of a breed did they call them?

NL: I don't know, just dogs.

JH: Just good dogs, huh?

NL: Uh-huh, good dog.

JH: Were they expensive?

NL: No, mine didn't cost me anything. (Laughter) I just got them when they was pups, you know. Brought them home and took care of them and they were really good dogs. Yeah, a dog and a horse, that's your two main helpers to have.

JH: I've heard others say the same thing. Glad to have them. Hate to try to get along without them.

NL: You couldn't, not then. Now they don't... Cattle now days, you never... You don't have wild ones. We used to have quite a lot of wild ones, they'd drift away, you know, and then you'd have to rope'em, and tie them up and lead them to the ranch or leave them alone. Or else, sometimes, they just put a bullet in their head and leave them. Yep.

JH: Besides being out on the range, you lived here in town. I remember there being Leo Unson had a store not too far from here.

NL: Down on the corner.

JH: Did you trade with Leo?

NL: Yeah. Yeah, all the time.

JH: What did he have that was useful for you?

NL: Well, just general merchandise. He just had anything you needed to buy. If you needed a new saddle you could order it from him, he'd order it for you. Or if you needed anything

else, he was a ... Used to buy our boots there and... But he was a good merchant, Leo was, real good one.

JH: What about those boots? What kind of boots did you think were best for a cowboy?

NL: I used to wear Nicoma boots. Some feller wore the Newton but I didn't wear them, they was a little to heavy for me. I just bought Nicoma boots and they was good ones.

JH: Well, the Newton double-thickness, did I remember them being heavy like that?

NL: The what?

JH: Were the Newton boots double-thick?

NL: Yeah. Yeah, they was heavy leather. Thick soles and...

JH: Was the rationale that they could stand more abuse if they were heavier.

NL: Yeah, Yeah.

JH: But you didn't think it was justified because you could do well on the Nicoma.

NL: Yeah. Yeah, I get around a lot better. But some fellows that wore the Newton boots, there was fellows that run on what they call 50-Mile Mountain down there, and they used to have lots of wild cattle down there. But their's got them kinda` trimmed out by now.

JH: Tell me about some of the other things that a cowboy wore. Tell me about a hat, that seems like an important piece of equipment.

NL: Yeah, they had to have the Stetson hat. Yeah, but they've gone up now, you can't buy a good Stetson no more for less than \$200.

JH: How wide of a brim did you prefer?

NL: Oh, about 3-1/2 inches. You get them too wide a brim, then the wind takes them. But we all wore Stetson hats and the first Stetson hat I bought, I got it for ten dollars. That was the first one. I was just starting to ride then. My dad bought it for me.

JH: Probably brand new.

NL: Yeah. There's an old store over on the corner over there, maybe you've seen it, and they used to carry things like that.

JH: How did you shape the crown so that it suited your preference?

NL: Well, I'd have to get it, I put a crease right through the middle, then just a little dent on each side.

JH: Oh yeah, I know what you mean. How was the brim shaped? Would you bring it...

NL: It was usually rolled up just a little bit in front, kinda` just the way I handled it I guess, it'd get shaped that way. I've got a \$200 hat in there now that my daughter bought down in Texas and sent to me.

JH: Good. That's a lot of affection coming through there. Your daughter's telling you that she loves you.

NL: (Laughter) Yeah. Yeah, they live in Austin, Texas. She was up here last summer until, oh for about a month after her mother died. Now she's... I turned the home over to her the other day, give it to her, and they're coming back in July, she's going to retire down there. They're coming back here to live in the summer time.

JH: My, my. Well, Texas is pretty warm in the summer time, so this will be a real relief.

NL: Yeah, she's had it nice down there now.

JH: Tell me about your perception of the cattle industry now. It seems to be -- I want to say declining -- is that true?

NL: Well, it is, yeah. There's not near the cattle that there used to be. And sheep. I remember when they used to shear 30,000 head of sheep out here and then I remember when there was at least 2,000 cattle in the country. Yeah, you know, we used to wear Levi's all the time when I was, oh, about, started riding. I wore the old bibs when I was a kid. When I started buying Levi's we got them for 90 cents a pair. You could buy them, there's a fellow here that would take the orders for them, if people wanted them he'd order and then he'd send to the company and buy them, Levi Strauss. And so we'd just order Levi's from him and you could get them days for 90 cents a pair.

JH: Cost you \$30 now.

NL: Oh yeah, yeah, that's about what they cost, all the way from \$25-30.

JH: Makes you wonder what happened to our country, gone to heck like that.

NL: Yeah. Yeah.

JH: Course, the price of beef has kept up, hasn't it?

NL: Yeah, pretty well. It's staying up pretty well right now.

JH: Have you done anything in the community in the way of community service? Have you had any..?

NL: Well, I was the brand inspector here, inspected cattle as a brand inspector for 18 years here. Then I was on the water board, irrigation water board for several years. But I enjoyed the brand inspection `till I got... oh, I decided I'd quit it.

JH: Did you have any trouble with anyone?

NL; Nope. Time or two, you know, they'd kind of taken it in their own hands and gonna take cattle out without an inspection and I had to stop that. But I never did have any trouble with anybody.

JH: We talked to Melvin Alvey and he was the water master for a good while.

NL: Yeah, and he was on the water board. I was on the water board with him for several years.

JH: Yeah, that's good. That's a position people feel that they have to trust those involved.

NL: Yeah, I was the water boss part of one summer. The water boss that they had to start with that summer quit and left the country and I had to take it over for him, but I was just in there for about three months, two or three months. I didn't like that. (Laughter)

JH: That sounds like a dairy farmer, when you have to be a water master, all hours of the day.

NL: We've got a good water master, he's Pat Coughlin, he lives on a ranch up here by town. He's a good one.

JH: The community's pretty lucky to have a good water master.

NL: Yeah, my grandson lives out on the ranch out there. He's president of the water board. We got three barns out there and all three of them's full of hay. We had a good crop of hay this summer. In fact we just built a brand new barn, it cost us around \$3,000.

JH: So what will you do with that hay? Did I hear you say you gave up your stock?

NL: Yeah, we'll sell it, ship it out.

JH: There's a good market for hay, is there?

NL: Yeah, you can ship down to St. George or Vegas or down to Arizona. These parks they take it for their mules and horses, you know.

JH: I hear there's more livestock in the way of horses, maybe even mules, than ever. In other words there's a big market out there.

NL: Yeah, yeah. This fellow down to Grand Canyon, has just about straight mules. [Uses them] to go down in the canyon and out.

JH: Well, I've really enjoyed talking with you today. Thank you for letting us come in and

take advantage of your hospitality.

NL: Well, you's welcome.

JH: Good. Thank you.

NL: Yup.

End of interview.