

Mecham, Maalen
1998
TROPIC

Southern Utah Oral History Project

The Southern Utah Oral History Project was started in July of 1998. It began with an interest in preserving the cultural history of small towns in southern Utah that border the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The project was managed by Kent Powell, from the Utah Division of State History, who oversaw the collection of oral histories conducted in Boulder, Escalante, Bryce Valley, Long Valley, and Kanab, by Jay Haymond and Suzi Montgomery. Also in cooperation with the state was the Bureau of Land Management and the people of Garfield and Kane counties, with support from the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument. The goals of the project were first to interview long-time local residents and collect information about the people and the land during the first half of the twentieth century. In addition, the interviews were to be transcribed and copies of the transcripts were to be made available to the public at the Utah State Historical Society and at local repositories. Lastly, to build a relationship with state agencies and the local communities and provide a medium for the local communities to express their interest in preserving their own history and culture in the areas that are now included in the GSENM.

Thank you to everyone who took the time to care and share their memories and stories.

INTERVIEW WITH: Malen Mecham
INTERVIEWER: Jay Haymond
INTERVIEW NUMBER:
DATE OF INTERVIEW: September 15, 1998 -
PLACE OF INTERVIEW: His house in Southwest of Tropic
SUBJECT OF INTERVIEW: His experiences in Tropic
TRANSCRIBER: Vectra Solutions/JN
DATE: December 17, 1998

(During this interview, Malen used a scrapbook he had compiled, including pictures of people, places and activities that were a part of his life in Tropic, Utah, to help him recall incidents he wished to tell about.)

MM: This building that I tell you about is the one-room Tropic school house in 1913. The teacher was a 17 year old young lady from Emery County. She told that it took 5 days to get to Tropic from Emery County. She lived with Brother and Sister Frost. She described Tropic as being just a little town where everybody was just alike—no rich or no poor. Their main entertainment was parties in the homes and bonfire parties at night.

This is a picture of A.J. Hansen, an early pioneer, who had a lot to do with the settlement of Tropic. He and others had a meeting in Cannonville and decided they needed more room. Hansen said the first thing they needed to do was to go to see Brother Hatch (my grandfather, who owned and lived on the place where I am now living). Brother Hatch had the user- right on the water he used on the ground from here up into what is now Tropic.

They agreed on the price of \$350. In answer to the question: “How long can we have to pay for it?” Brother Hatch answered, “From now til’ the resurrection.”

People began to buy lots and move into Tropic. I remember the early streets of Tropic were just mud. When it rained or snowed, we just couldn’t get around. If we didn’t have supplies, we just went without until spring or until the horses and wagons could get through. There was another settlement a short distance to the north of us called Lossee Valley of Losseeville. Sextus Johnson (commonly called Six) tells this story: “One time, the people ran out of food. Brother Hatch had two herds of sheep here and had supplies stored here for his sheep herd. Brother Hatch shared with the people as long as he had food. When his wife warned him that the supply was about gone, he said, ‘That’s all right. We can’t turn anybody down. They’ve got to have it.’ They got down to the last bit of food and the snow melted so they could go to Panguitch for food. This was the story Sextus told.

In those days we did much of our courting on horseback. Here is a picture of my wife Angelyn. She was teaching school here. We were married in the Manti Temple, July 11, 1933. In 1937 we bought this home in Tropic. This is the contract. I paid \$10. each month. The cost of the home was \$500.

JH: Who lives in the home now?

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MM. Nobody, I just keep it the way it was, I just couldn't part with it.

During the early part of my life was logging. I started out with a team and skidded logs. I'd roll the logs onto a truck or wagon or sleigh and take them to the saw mill.

This is a picture of my three boys, Stanley, Jerry and Lowell, the oldest.

JH: Good looking boys, what are they doing now?

MM: They have all retired. Lowell went out in education and was principal of the school here. Jerry was project engineer for the State of Utah before he retired. Stan took over the family farm

This is a picture of Brother Richards and me. He was the superintendent of the Sunday School and I was a counselor. I served in the Sunday School for seven-and-a-half years. I then served as Bishop of the Tropic Ward. After that I was a member of the Stake Presidency. These letters are some I received from General Authorities who stayed in our home at times while I served as Bishop and in the Stake Presidency. Here are letters from Joseph Fielding Smith, Spencer W. Kimball, Bishop Vandenburg—Presiding Bishop of the Church, Bishop Simpson and Brother Hunter. I loved these men.

This picture shows the celebration we had when we build the road down Cottonwood Wash. We had a big feed down there.

This is a picture of our ball team. We thought we were really 'punkins'. A Panguitch guy offered to pay all my expenses if I would come to Panguitch High School and play ball for them.

These are pictures of my wife's family. She was an Oak City girl.

These are pictures of my brother Starns. He passed away at age 91. My sister, Viva is 89 and is still living. I am 87.

Here is another letter from Dr. James Mason. I became well acquainted with him when I was on the hospital board. He took good care of me when I was sick in the hospital for so long.

While I was president of the Lion's Club, we arranged a special dinner to honor Dr. Duggins who had been our faithful doctor for many years. This is a picture taken at that time..

My wife, Angelyn, had heart trouble for a long time and died in July 1982.

This is a picture of Dr. Dayton. He was one of my doctors while I was in the hospital for so long. He and his wife are good friends and spend time with us almost every summer.

JH: Is your health generally pretty good, though?

MM: I've got diabetes now, but I passed my driver's test and got my driver's license. Jay, it's been an interesting life. I'll never forget the time we worked on the road.. I thought so much of your dad. Remember, I told you I'd like to work for you. You took me to your dad and he gave me a contract putting the pipe in. I had my boys working with me, then Stan went to work for you guys and I stayed on the pipe job.

I've had a good life since this second marriage. For a time, we spent some time working in the Temple.

JH. This is in the St. George Temple?

MM: Right. It's been a wonderful life. I look back and don't feel like making any changes. Oh, I'd make some changes of things I did when I was young and growing up. I especially loved my Bishop experience.

JH: Let me ask you about some of your experiences growing up in your father's house. Did you help him herd sheep?

MM: Sometimes. I'd go to the herd during holidays, while some of the regular workers would come home for a few days. I worked for 50 cents a day.

I never heard a man that could pray better than my dad. When he got sick and had to quit herding sheep, he started to go to church pretty regular. He got a new suit of clothes, the only suit he ever had in his life. When he quit going to church I said, "Why are you quitting, Dad?"

"Well, I've been going pretty regular and the first thing you know they will call on me to pray."

"You pray good at home. I don't hear anybody give better prayers than you do."

"Yeah, but that's home, not in public."

My grandfather was called here in 1977 and died in 1887 when my dad was nine years old. My dad had to kind of do for himself from then on.

JH: You mentioned the Cottonwood Road. That was made during the construction of the Glen Canyon Dam wasn't it?

MM: Just after.

JH: Tell me about that.

MM: Sam Pollock headed a committee whose purpose was to get a road through Cottonwood Wash–Cottonwood Canyon is what I preferred to call it. I was County Commissioner at the time. They decided to build the road with donated labor. At that time I owned a little TD9 Cat. They got a big Cat—a D8 or something like that from the Soil Conservation and we built the road. The water kept washing the road out. I made drains around it with my Cat which helped to prevent that.

JH: What did they hope to accomplish by that road going down there?

MM: They thought that road would bring more business into this part of the country.

JH: It's changing the town, isn't it?

MM: The town now is not the same place. You can use that route to go to Kanab. You'd be surprised—the people that travel that road. It's a shame that we can't get it oiled. When it rains they are in trouble. In times past I have gone out to help people who have been stranded out there. This environmental deal won't allow us to do any work on the roads. When floods come we could use a little farm tractor and change the course of the water so the road would not wash out.

End of Side One, Tape One

Beginning of Side Two, Tape One

JH: Let's continue talking about the water situation in town. In talking with Lowell last night he remembered while we were building this road towards Cannonville, that one of the equipment operators cut the water line to Cannonville and then he had a funny story about Woody wanting to fix that line and he needed a clamp and he was worried about going to Salt Lake to get a clamp and somebody said, "Well, why don't you just get an inner tube and some bailing wire and fix the line that way. (Laughs) And I remembered the incident because I learned that that line was also their reservoir. I mean they didn't have any other water except what was in that line.

MM: Well, let me tell you about the Cannonville water. The spring that Cannonville's water came from was on my Dad's homestead at that time. They gave Dad a hundred dollars and a tap right there. But at that time there wasn't enough pressure to force the water out of the tap.

Our culinary water in Tropic was piped from a spring through old wooden pipe the town bought when the old oil well was closed. Pres Shakespear, Malen Littlefield, Ursal Ott and myself and

dug all that old pipe out with a big old stubborn wrench and a horse and put it in piles. Wagons hauled it to town. That's the pipeline we had for years. When I was Mayor, I spent a lot of time fixing leaks in that pipeline. We finally got our present pipeline. Our town water is pretty well used up by the motels, etc. If we didn't have this sprinkling system we wouldn't have a chance.

JH: Part of it's that sprinkling system makes that water stretch, isn't it?

MM: Yes. That sprinkling system's brought it right back.

JH: Well, I was thinking a lot of the city's water system. I knew what it was like when I was here 40 years ago. Hearing of the troubles and difficulties of trying to keep water in the system, what's the answer for the community? Have they got to have some leadership?

MM: I think the answer is come now. Tropic, Cannonville and Henrieville are all getting together and are meeting and planning future water. If they could drill wells up above town. I know of two wells up there that are not being used. Cannonville now gets Pahreah River water. If they could get that water up in the canyon and put storage tanks up here they would have really good water.

JH: You're talking about river water.

MM: Yeah. It's not water like those wells.

JH: Is it mineral charged? Does it have minerals in it?

MM: I think there's quite a bit of mineral in it. If these three towns will work together. We have good mayors and they are trying to do something about it. Gene Seiler, our mayor is working hard for the town's benefit and Tropic is really on the map now—a little too much to suit some people (laughs).

JH: Right. I was surprised at the traffic coming along that road. You have been on these community organizations and seen the development, the way they've come along. Would roads be second to water in the community resource?

MM: They would be. If we didn't have roads we just wouldn't have the people. You know, Jay, when you lived here we went out of Tropic Canyon on the old dirt road. If it snowed, you would just stay here.

JH: I can remember one or two nights when that's the way it was. Well, things aren't always the way they seem when we wish for things. Growth is happening almost every place in the state. It seems like it's explosive growth up in Salt Lake. And people are starting to worry about it and

be concerned. Is there that kind of attitude down here now?

MM: It is. It is. When Jacob Hamblin asked Brigham Young to send more people down here, he said to send the toughest and the roughest ones. They'd have to be that way to live here. These little towns have the spirit and the same things are happening that's happening in Salt Lake. I used to be able to drive all over Salt Lake. Now I don't want to go up there. There's so much change. Cedar City is getting there. St. George is getting about like Salt Lake. We've come a long way since we farmed with horses. We didn't know what copper rivets were. We had to wire our tugs together when they'd break. We thought we really had something when we got the rivet machine that you push down. That was just like getting a new automobile. Speaking of cars, there weren't very many in town when I got my first one. The closest doctor was in Cedar City or Richfield. I made a lot of trips taking people to the doctor. When the CC Camp came they had a camp doctor. I took people there sometimes. A lot of people died before their time.

JH: That's quite a stretch to go to Cedar. Did you go over the Bear Valley Road?

MM: No, we usually went around by Zions. In 1937 the snow was so deep you couldn't get to Cedar that way. I don't know what'd be the next concern—places to take care of the people, I guess. And they are getting them, lots of them. I understand that you had a meeting at one of them last night, at Lamar LeFevre's?

JH: What we're trying to do is provide some skills or talk about the skills of collecting information. And the hope is, on my part at least, that the local organization will become the owners of this Bryce Valley culture, so to speak. And the way the Bryce Valley people live will be a point of pride and celebration and if there's opportunity to share it, then the group will do that. It's the way of collecting and preserving that way of life.

MM: That's right. I'm happy with the people here. If you're a bishop for as many years as I was, you know the people.

One time one of the church authorities came down and wanted to talk to me. When he got here he said, "Bishop, I'm supposed to ask you a question."

I said, "Well, shoot."

"The brethren in Salt Lake said that you have one of the best wards in this church—not stake—church. The brethren want to know how you do it."

And I said, "Well, the only thing I can say to you is, I've got that kind of people. I love the people I work with and I'd do anything for them. I didn't do anything for them they wouldn't do

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for me either.”

It's been a good life. I think the world of you and your dad..

JH: Thank you, we reciprocate that feeling. It was a wonderful time down here.

End of Side Two, Tape One

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Interview Agreement and Deed of Gift

In view of the historical value of this oral history interview and my interest in Utah history,

I, Malen A Meckam
please print or type your name

knowingly and voluntarily donate to the Utah Division of State History the audio tapes, any transcription, as well as any and all copyrights and other rights, title and interest that might exist. I also permit the Utah Division of State History full use of this document for whatever purposes they may have.

Interview Description

Date of Interview 15 Sep. 1998

Primary Subject Life in Tropic, Utah

Other Topics Some personal experiences

Number of Tapes 1

Signature Malen A. Meckam Date 22 March 1999

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