

Interview with: Orval Palmer
Interviewer: Jay Haymond
Interview number: 1 of 1
Date of interview: December 3, 1998
Place of interview: In his home in Alton, Utah
Subject of interview: His experience growing up in Alton, stockman, and other things
Transcriber: Vectra Solutions/TD
Date: April 14, 1999 through May 5, 1999

JH: Tell me about the family in which you were born. Apparently your father was a stockman?

OP: Yes.

JH: And so you were—let's say your early education took place with your family business, would that be true?

OP: Yes.

JH: Tell me about your father. What kind of a stockman was he?

OP: His father died when he was about eighteen years old, and he never was very rich. But at the time I knew him he'd had a small herd of cattle and some farm land and he had another farm of an aunt who's husband had died, leased, so we raised our own hay and raised milk cows and we had quite a few horses to do our farmwork plus maybe twenty to thirty head of range beef cows. And we also had some land and school leases in Arizona where these cattle'd be wintered.

We never had a vehicle. I don't think he ever owned one in his life. All of his traveling was done on horseback. And he had eight children. I was the seventh one. The last—well I think all six boys were born here in Alton. And he had moved part of another house up on another lot. That's which we was livin' in. My mother's sister-in-law delivered me and signed my birth certificate.

My father, because of the smallness of his own herd of cattle and business, spent a lot of time not only traveling to Arizona to check on our own stuff but working cowboy and herding sheep for other people. So I really don't remember him real well. He died when I was about eleven years old. But I did go horseback riding and cowboying with him and things like that. He taught me to drive a team of horses. I could plow fields, harrow fields, cut hay.

JH: So you really grew up with draft animals yourself, didn't you.

OP: Yes.

JH: Tell me about your mother. Was she a strict disciplinarian? How did she manage after your father's death?

OP: Well, my wife one time accused me that my mother must have really laid the law down to us. And she knew my brother who was six years older than I was. So when we got together one time I asked him to tell her how my mother did that – what she did. How did your mother discipline Orval? And my brother says she didn't. We were taught to do the right thing and that's all we ever thought about. We had our chores to do and we did 'em.

I remember that I didn't necessarily like to milk cows, but I like horses probably better than the other boys and by my going to the field to round up the work horses they had to milk the cows. I mean, not had to, but that was just their job. And we were expected to do what we needed to do, yes, but as far as strict disciplinarian telling us to do this and to do that, I don't remember it.

JH: Do you remember receiving help from family members to get the family by in this situation after your father's passing?

OP: Very little, if any. I remember one of her brothers, I think he gave her fifty dollars to help with the funeral expenses. And now there might have been others that I didn't know about; but no, we got very little help from other people. See, I had--well, one brother died--so I had three brother's older than me, and the oldest brother took over running the farm and taking care of the cows. I worked with him a lot. The other brothers probably were working a little before they got out of high school but mainly worked and put themselves through college and are on their own.

JH: What did they study?

OP: Well, one studied to be a landscape architect. One of 'em started in mechanics but he went into engineering and went to work for Boeing as soon as he got out of college, designing airplanes.

JH: Probably been there ever since.

OP: Well, he's still there but he retired a couple of years ago.

JH: What about that educational thing? Did you go to college?

OP: Yes.

JH: Did you graduate?

OP: Yes.

JH: Get a Master's Degree?

OP: I got a Bachelors Degree. I joined the Utah State Agricultural College, and graduated in

1954 with a degree in animal husbandry to help me decide what kind of cows to raise and horses to raise.

JH: What kind of cows did you decide to raise?

OP: All kinds.

JH: That was the decision you got out of college, huh?

OP: Well, it's a certain fact that there's a high bred Vigar. If you cross from one breed to another you get certain amount of that. A few years later you have to cross to another breed to keep that high bred Vigar up.

JH: I have heard that there was a sort of fad to have Herefords about the time that you were learning about livestock. . .

OP: Yes, growing up I would have said that Hereford was probably over seventy-five percent of the range cattle. There were a few what we call Durham, or short-horned cows, and some of them were milk cows—they gave a little more milk than a Hereford. So you did see some Durham blood in your . . . But like I say, most the cattle were Herefords.

JH: So you finished college and then came back to Alton. Would that be true?

OP: Yes, but right after I finished college I went in the army for three months and then I went on a two-year mission for the Church.

JH: Where did you serve that mission?

OP: Western Canada.

JH: BC?

OP: No. Saskatchewan and Alberta.

JH: Oh, yeah. Okay, good. Missionaries aren't really supposed to do too much besides proselyting, but did you look at the livestock in passing up there?

OP: Very little. I spent most of my time in Saskatchewan and I don't even remember whether I saw a cow or not. (Laughter)

JH: Blown away by the high desert winds, huh?

OP: There's a lot of grain. I think Saskatchewan produced sixty percent of Canada's grain and Canada was producing sixty percent of the world's grain. Something like that.

JH: Pretty impressive statistics. So you finished your mission and your military service—you didn't get overseas I guess in the military?

OP: No, no.

JH: Well, that was the end of the Korean War. Was there anything in your training that you believe you brought home with you in the way of skills or any of that kind of thing?

OP: From the army?

JH: Mmm-hmm.

OP: Yes. There's one thing I did learn, as I was telling you to start with. We were turned loose knowing what we should do. And going in the army taught me that there needs to

be organization and a boss and cooperation and rules and regulations. But I had an officer chew me out one time and I thanked him because I realized that I needed that. Never in my life had I been told to do it this way and to do it that way. I'd been left to do what needed to be done pretty much my way.

JH: What was his reaction to your thanks?

OP: He just dismissed me. It was new to him.

JH: You came back to Alton at that point and what did you do for a living at that point?

OP: Well, there was a saw mill up here right next to town and I spent most of my summers working for them from high school, during my college days and I went back to work for them after my mission. I guess I stayed there 'till it burned down.

JH: How many years was that?

OP: I can't really tell ya'. Probably fifteen years.

JH: And then what road did you take?

OP: Well, by that time my oldest brother had died. I 'bought out' his wife for all of her cattle and her farm land and then in the cattle summering on the forest I met up with another guy about my age that had bought his uncle out that I had known all my life and he had a summer range about twelve miles away, and I ran it for him in the summer time.

JH: Remind me of where you put them in the winter time. Did you say you had allotments? Is that down on the . . .

OP: I'd go to the Arizona strip with my cows in the winter.

JH: Yeah. Probably still do. Is there any noteworthy change in the business between the time that you knew about it before the sawmill and when you got into it full time?

OP: Not a lot. Except we did start buying pickups to haul our horses around instead of riding.

JH: That meant better roads. How did you get better roads?

OP: Well, taxpayers built them and some of them are not better.

JH: Do you have to do any lobbying with your local representatives to get any of that done or did they do it just . . .

OP: No, it was pretty much taken care of. We don't have much road other than just your public roads. The highway's a hundred feet out here and my winter range is about four miles off a paved road.

JH: Pretty good shape.

OP: So I have very little road problem.

JH: As a stock operator, you have medical problems some times. Do you do the veterinary work?

OP: No, very little of that. I do a lot of minor stuff and give shots to kill infection and stuff, but anything that's surgery of any kind, why I have to go to a veterinarian.

JH: Yeah. And they're available now, aren't they?

OP: Well, there's none in town, but there's one within an hour.

JH: Is that out of Kanab?

OP: Kanab or Panguitch.

JH: You would exclude Kanab and that sort of thing from veterinary problems . . .

OP: I do that myself.

JH: De-horning?

OP: Do that all myself.

JH: Do you shoe horses?

OP: I used to. I'm getting too old with my weak back to do it. I still do. I've shod horses this summer.

JH: What about that proportion of horse-flesh versus beef stock. Has that changed in the period that you've been involved in it?

OP: Well, mainly just the fact that we no longer have to use horses to cut hay and plow fields and we don't need them to ride very far. We probably don't take as good care of a horse cause we don't have to use it as much.

JH: Well, when you turn the livestock on an open forest range, what does it take to go gather them up? You still have to have a horse.

OP: Several days riding your horse. You gotta have a horse if you've got cows.

JH: Is there a breed of horse that you like better than another?

OP: Well, most of my horses are quarter horses for cow sense and I do cross with thoroughbreds to get 'em. Most of the horses now in this country are quarter horses. Maybe not purebred but a lot of quarter horse in 'em.

JH: Does that mean a longer back?

OP: No you don't want a very long back. It is easier to ride, but your horse is not as tough or stout.

JH: Good, a turner, maybe.

OP: But your thoroughbred horses are easier to ride, usually. Not always, but . . .

JH: What do you mean by cow sense?

OP: Well, you learn that real quick if you get on a horse and chasin' a cow down the road that you don't want down there and when you catch up with the cow the horse comes back, whether you do or not. It follows the cow. It watches the cow. You can be driving cows long and if a cow steps off to the side, why the horse will go get it without you doin' anything about it.

JH: Minds your business . . .

OP: Mmm-hmm. They know the business.

JH: Yeah. That's good. It used to be that a cowboy had more or less a uniform when they were doing rough brush work. They had chaps, but always denim jeans, I suppose. Maybe flannel or some kind of such a shirt. A bandana for dust control. Sombrero. What kind of an outfit do you use as a outfit?

OP: Just denim pants and any shirt I can find. I only have had a pair or two of what you'd call cowboy boots, but I had an ankle broken a few times so I couldn't wear boots, so I just wear regular work shoes. I do have chaps, but I don't use 'em very often unless I need to ride in the rain or in a lot of tree country.

JH: The mystique of a cowboy has taken on some interesting dimensions in modern times—as if almost that people don't remember that a cowboy is a working man, or a working person. And the latest trend is for cowboy poetry. Have you gotten in on that work?

OP: Oh, I don't recite poetry. I've interacted. I went on a trip with another guy that wrote a poem up about it that I really liked. I had another cousin that entered a few contests and he did good in them.

JH: Go out to Elko for the meeting in January?

OP: Well, my cousin did for one of 'em. I don't.

JH: Well, they seem to have a lot of fun out there anyway.

OP: They do. You get a bunch of cowboys together and you can enjoy life.

JH: Yeah. Tell me about the cowboy life on a drive of some kind. A line-camp or just on the trail. What's it like to cook for a group or cook for yourself.

OP: Well, that's changed, and still changing. The first time or two when I helped take cows from Utah to Arizona and Arizona to Utah, we'd take all our bed and groceries on a pack horse. And later we bought a truck we'd take it along and haul it. And now there's some neighbors here, they run 800 head of cows or more, and when they take a trip, they probably have three vehicles. One with their bed and food and one with extra horses and one with hay and grain and this is taken to every camp.

JH: And then the stock goes into the hauling equipment, those are the big outfits.

OP: Well, these same people, if they have got cows with little calves they leave them home another week or two then haul them. But with that many cows they figure that it is cheaper for them to trail them. Now, my little herd I just get a truck and haul 'em off nowadays and I don't trail cows very much anymore.

JH: Where do you market your finished animals?

OP: I usually sell them as calves either right here in town or ten miles away. Buyers will come in and you deliver cows to scale and they weigh them and buy them from ya'.

JH: They bring their own scales in and everything?

OP: Well, where the scales are. There's scales right here in town and buyers will come in and buy 'em.

JH: What chance, in that transaction do you have to negotiate with the buyer—or do they just offer you a price and you take it or leave it?

OP: Well, being the small number I've got what you say is true. I have neighbors, like I say, that more usually a buyer will not come just to buy my calves, because I don't have

enough. But he will take mine to finish out a load and in those cases I just have to accept the deal he's made with the other people.

JH: Are you usually satisfied with that?

OP: Yes. A few years it bothers me but it's really not the buyers problem because he's controlled by other factors.

JH: Sure. What's your supply of animals? Do you buy from an auction?

OP: I very seldom buy. I raise my own. Well, like I was tellin' you on what breed I use - I guess I had money in my pocket last June and bought two purebred beef-master with bull calves so I'd have a little mixture of them in with my mixed herd.

JH: Now, beef-master's not really a high-bred, or really it is a high-bred?

OP: Yeah, it's a cross between, I think a Hereford and a Brahma. No, a Hereford and a Durham bred to a Brahma. They did that for enough years now that it's its own separate breed. It's got the three breeds mixed in it.

JH: Describe the advantages that those researchers were working for from those three breeds.

OP: Okay. You're Hereford cow is probably the most versatile for range. You know, it will go out and hunt feed. The Brahma will go further for feed. Usually put on a quicker size. Also there's less calving problem with a Brahma. They're round-hipped and stuff everything. They calve easier. They'll stand a little more hot weather. Your Durham was a husky cow, but like I mentioned before some of the first cows were Durhams because people needed 'em for milk cows and they will give you more milk. I like the three things I mentioned and that's one reason I thought I'd try 'em.

JH: Is there a disease-resistant factor in there too someplace?

OP: Probably a little with your Brahma. I don't know what it is, but I've heard that they're resistant to some problems.

JH: Wasn't there a pink-eye problem with the Hereford at one time?

OP: Yes, but it's also in other breeds. Around our country it's not very prevalent. I guess if you brought a bunch of cows in and put 'em in your corrals, it could be. But I've seen a few cases, but I've never seen it very bad.

JH: Do you call the vet when you see it?

OP: No. There's a powder, if you'll put 'em in and put it on 'em several times when it first starts it'll heal itself.

JH: Some people have talked about it being difficult to deal with when their herd was predominantly Hereford.

OP: Well, they could have been a little more susceptible. Now, see in the Hereford you have a white face and your white pigments are lots more sensitive than other pigments.

JH: Yeah, I'm sure. What does the—where I was headed with the problem of the way the livestock feeds—what is there an operator can do to keep his animals in the right kind of feed? Is that just a matter of what your permit is?

OP: That is a touchy situation. About the only way to keep your animals in good feed is to inherit a lot of money so you can buy hay or cut your herds down on dry years, but that's hard to do 'cause it takes you three or four years to get a calf big enough to be in your

herd.

JH: Yeah, it's a tough road for a small operator then, isn't it?

OP: It is. Well, big operator, too, but he's got more leeway.

JH: Exactly right.

OP: I've had people try to tell me that the stockman—cattleman—could control the markets, you know, by keeping a few of 'em off the market, but if any cattleman that tries to keep one off the market so the price'll go up, he's got nothin' to feed it. He's usually running his maximum and he has no extra feed, so the beef man cannot control the market. When his calves are so big he's gotta sell 'em.

JH: That raises the issue of the competition between the feed lot and the range stock. How do you perceive that contest?

OP: Well, it swings back and forth but the feed yard has the same problem as I do. If I raise twenty calves this summer then I got to sell twenty this fall or enough old cows to make up for it. If he buys them twenty and puts them in his feed yard, when he gets 'em fat he's gotta sell 'em or give 'em away. He can't control the price by holding 'em.

JH: Maybe you could pray for the success of McDonalds? Maybe they'll sell more hamburgers?

OP: Yes, that's true. Maybe not only the success but to be wise in what they do. Don't get themselves in problems and . . .

JH: They sure seem to be the big consumers.

OP: They are. They're big consumers.

JH: Where is the business headed, do you think?

OP: Well, I really can't answer. We have too much political influence. You go clear back to four or five thousand years ago people had to raise meat and they supplied what the people would eat, but now with those scientific inventions and political differences – I don't know. Right now the environmentalists with the government support is making it really rough on a cattleman.

JH: You include yourselves in that type situation?

OP: Yes.

JH: Besides raising cattle, you probably raised a family? Did you feed your family from the revenue from that cattle operation?

OP: That and what little I worked for another one—other cattlemen that had a lot of cows.

JH: So you traded work with them?

OP: Well, I just got money from him and produced my own stuff. I raise a garden.

JH: I noticed the post office sign out in . . .

OP: Yeah, I run a contract post office. I just work out of the postmaster in Glendale and get the mail for up here.

JH: Then you haul it down there?

OP: No, the mail truck leaves it here. But I'm not big enough to be called a post office or a postmaster, I just got a contract with one in Glendale to do this part of the world.

JH: Let's talk about this place as a—I want to say this carefully, I don't want to mislead you into some answer that's off the subject I'm interested in. I'm thinking about Alton as a community that's representative of the communities that we know about around this part of Long Valley. What is there about this community . . .

OP: I'll brag a little—we're better! (Laughter)

JH: In what way?

OP: Well, one of the ways is that we're a little smaller than most of 'em that you can find—any of 'em in Kane County.

End Side 1, Begin Side 2

JH: Okay, we were talking about Alton as a good place.

OP: It's a good place.

JH: You were saying that it might not be any better, but . . .

OP: Well, my heritage is here. One of the things that happened here is these people moved in and they built their houses out on their ranches and it was hard for 'em to get together, especially in the winter. Kids missed a lot of school or had to go stay with their neighbors closer to the schoolhouse. But my grandfather came here in about 1900 and bought about three of the ranches out and by 1910 he got 'em together and moved 'em all into Alton.

JH: He made a community out of them.

OP: Yeah, made a little town. And that might be one reason why I think it's better. Most the people are probably related to me and have the same background as I do and that eliminates a lot of problem.

JH: Did your grandfather and you relate that practice to historical background or was that something that he just decided was a good thing.

OP: Well, I'm a Mormon, and if you go back to Joseph Smith, that's what he taught. If you go read his city planning, it would have eliminated ninety percent of the problems in the world today—of big cities and pollution. He said you should have a community—you should live together so that you associate one with another. Now I see today some of these new subdividers they buy a big ol' ranch out and they put a house on top of every hill. And all your scenery's gone. You have to have hundred times amount of roads to get to them, and so it takes a lot of land out of grazing and scenery and hunting. It's really going to effect the lifestyle of wildlife.

And in theory—not a theory, it's a fact—if you'll get together and build a community, your neighbors can help each other. And you can go out to your farm on the side of town, or your business, or industry. And it really helps. Everybody agrees to it if they ever try it. They do have it. I think Brigham Young said in Salt Lake that he allotted ten-acre blocks. By the time you take your roads out you'd have four two-acre lots. And that way they had their garden and everything. Of course, they don't need them now, they don't use 'em. But that's one thing that's making your pollution and other problems.

Joseph Smith's idea was to have, I think around twenty thousand, the size of your communities. And that would be enough to support what you might call a junior two-year college. Big enough for industries to be around it. Now, that would not work in the

Rocky Mountains like it would back where he started it, but the idea is still right.

JH: You think it could answer some of today's problems?

OP: I know it would.

JH: If you had to list some of the values that a place like Alton harbors for the benefit of the people, what values would you refer to?

OP: You could turn your kid loose out on the street and don't worry about him till it's after bedtime. Maybe a sleepover at the neighbors on top of that. Never lock a house. Very seldom take a key out of your vehicle. You know everybody. It really bothered me when I got eighteen, nineteen years old and I'd go out to the city and visit with somebody and I'd see a couple of kids playing out on their front yard and I'd go "Who's that." "We don't know!" But yet they were next door neighbors. You certainly would change your lifestyle if you knew everybody around ya'.

JH: Do you think there are definite advantages of knowing your neighbors?

OP: Yes. If you need some help you know who you're asking. If you're in a city and you need some help you don't even know your neighbor's name, let alone what kind of guy he is. I have seen it here in town, of people who will get in hurt, or for some reason had to go somewhere else. I remember two or three people have come to me and said will you take care of my chores for four days? Didn't have to tell me a thing about what he was doin'. I knew where his cows and his horses were, his feed was, and when his water turn was.

JH: How should a community perpetuate that situation? Is it possible?

OP: It's rough, because as you raise your children, if you try to keep them in it, you're gonna grow bigger, unless you only have what, a few kids per family. And then you still get a few extra generations in there. And it's rough. It just teaches 'em values. I really think, and I've told this to a few of these people that have subdivided here on Cedar Mountain that I wished they'd gotten together and just built another little town rather than scattering them all over the hills. That way they would have left the scenery. The come here and see our scenery and start building houses in it and we don't have it and they don't have it either.

JH: What's the rationale for doing it that way? Is it just the way that it's been done by people like them elsewhere?

OP: Well, they get in the crowded cities, Los Angeles or New York, and other big places, they just get so crowded they'd like to get out alone. And so they go buy a hundred-million acres and put a house in the middle of it and don't want anybody around 'em. If they grew up in a little community, they'd think different. But you have both the city people and the country people that would like to preserve some scenery, but they're not doing it.

JH: Do you think that they don't know what a neighbor is?

OP: Some of 'em don't.

JH: They don't know how to be one, nor to . . .

OP: Right. They go by themselves. To work they've got a vehicle, they can run down to some town where they want to go. Well, like, when I grew up here I can remember the town of a hundred people plus and I think there were only two vehicles in town when I got old enough to remember. So you didn't run to Orderville or somewhere.

JH: The Forest Service has worked since about the turn of the century to stabilize use of the mountain grazing lands and timber lands. What has been your experience dealing with that government agency?

OP: I'm gonna have to say it's been good. They've got a few rangers in and out once in a while I think were a little ignorant. Maybe being ornery themselves or didn't know the facts, but I find they're being controlled now by bureaucrats somewhere between them and Congress. Congress sets up laws and the time it gets down to us it's nothing like the one they wrote. Somebody, I call 'em bureaucrats, in between. But there are a few of 'em that have been real good and a few 'em that I just soon hadn't have been there.

JH: If I ask that same question about the Bureau of Land Management on the

OP: Same thing. Right now, though, they're being intimidated by radical environmentalists sustained by the government.

JH: When you use the term radical environmentalist, describe what you mean.

OP: Well, they're radical about it. They say don't cut a tree off that hill. We'll that's the most ignorant thing you can do, 'cause it'll die and rot and you won't have any trees. It's a scientific fact that if you let grass grow and leave it, it'll kill itself. Smother itself out with disease and just too tight, you've got to either burn it off or graze it off. The same way with trees. If you have a good forest right now, I'm gonna say within two or three hundred years it probably had a forest fire or else some timber company cleaned out all that dead stuff. And they don't allow that—the environmentalists. And that's what I call radical—doesn't use much wisdom.

JH: Do you think it's misinformation on their part or is it something deliberate?

OP: Deliberate. Ignorant. They get a greed for power. They're gonna be able to tell all these rich cattlemen what they can do and can't do. They get like President Clinton, made a monument. He'd never seen it and he hasn't seen it since. I think it was a very unwise move—even if it was the right thing, it was an unwise move because he didn't know what he was doing.

JH: I don't have any more questions to ask you. What have I left out? What questions should I ask you that would help you tell me some more about your living?

OP: Well, there's one that I read somewhere, Reader's Digest or something, that I guess this psychologist studied that the longer that a person lived in one place, the more stable he was. In other words, people that never move from one city to another, the percentage of 'em were more stable in life than those that kept moving. It's just like we have a cow. The cow thinks the grass is always greener over the fence. But he doesn't know what it's like over the fence, it just thinks that.

But those were the statistics that they presented. The average person that stays where they were born is more stable. It's also a psychological statistic that the more you know about your ancestors the more stable you are. It's just like a tree, the more you know about the root the better it is.

If my grandfather made a living herdin' cows here, and my dad did, why then there's no reason why I can't. But if I go move into the city and change jobs, I'm in an entirely different environment.

JH: Sure. If we were creating this information for your children, what would you add to what you've already said?

OP: Not very much. I got a couple of little girls that think this is heaven just as well as I do.

Page 22
Orval Palmer

JH: You've taught them well, huh? Good.

OP: No, they learned well.

JH: Good.

OP: I've even got a wife that came from the city, Salt Lake. She thinks it's good here.

JH: Even coming from Salt Lake she likes it down here?

OP: She doesn't wanna go back. If she does she'd have to go alone, 'cause I know I wouldn't go.

JH: Thank you very much.

End of Interview

UTAH DIVISION OF STATE HISTORY

Oral History Program

300 Rio Grande

Salt Lake City, UT 84101

ph.(801)533-3574 Fax (801)533-3503

Interview Agreement and Deed of Gift

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

I, Orval Palmer
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 Dec. 3 1998

Primary Subject Experience of growing up in Alton on a Ranch

Other Topics _____

Number of Tapes 1

Signature Orval Palmer
Address 11 N. Main
Alton Utah
84710

Date Oct. 3, 1999
Phone 1-435-648-2384