

INTERVIEW WITH: Vergean Porter
INTERVIEWER: Marsha Holland, SUOHP
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This interview represents one of five interviews taken in the summer of 2007 as part of an effort by Escalante residents, Envision Escalante, and the Southern Utah Oral History Project to collect and make a record of the unique stories and lifestyle of the long time residents of the Escalante area.

Recording made with a Sony DAT recorder. Audio .wav files of recordings are available through the Southern Utah Oral History Project.

VP: I am Vergean Porter. I was born in Escalante with a midwife [attending] in 1926, November the 23rd. I am from a family of eight, four boys and four girls. I was the middle one. My dad was a school teacher, Roland Porter. He started in teaching Boulder, then he moved back to Escalante. He taught school for forty-five years, finishing here in Escalante.

My mother was from Boulder. That was probably the reason he was teaching school over there. Her name was Mina Haws, Frank Haws' daughter, who had all the race horses. In fact, a cousin to Arnold, I am.

MH: The Porters, did they start off in Escalante, as one of the original families?

VP: The Porters came here in 1878, two years after Escalante was settled. They came in here with a saw mill. They operated the first sawmill in Escalante. There was six boys in the family and they run the saw mill. They had several saw mills around here at different times.

2 Vergean Porter

My dad was the only one that went off to school and got an education. My granddad was a blacksmith. He would travel all over the country blacksmithing, going clear into Idaho to do blacksmith work for the farmers up there.

MH: Was there a certain season he would be gone doing that?

VP: He would go in the summertime, as I remember. That was what my dad said, that they would go off in the summer time. They would go to all these little towns around here, but he did go as far as Idaho. One of the reasons he went to Idaho was he had a brother in Idaho.

He had a mill in the Upper Valley and then up in Main Canyon. Everything was Ponderosa that they sawed at that time. It was used locally, most of it.

MH: In 1926, the year you were born, was pre-Depression, and in your memory do you remember when it struck?

VP: I don't remember too much about the Depression. My dad was one of the better-off people in town because he taught school and he had an income every month. Most people who were herding sheep or cattle felt the effects.

MH: So, your dad was a school teacher. Did you live in Boulder?

VP: No, I was born in Escalante; the brother just older than me was borned over to Boulder.

MH: Let's get the name of your brothers and sisters.

VP: Velma was my oldest sister, then Marie, then Haws, then Merrill and me, Maxine, and then my brother Bob, and sister, Yoland, was the baby.

MH: Since you were growing up in a family where your father was a teacher, was there a special emphasis on education for all of you?

3 Vergean Porter

VP: Most of my other brothers and sisters did get an education. I stayed on the farm and worked and didn't go off to school.

MH: What was your family life like then?

VP: Well, we didn't have television then. My dad was a great reader. At nights that was what he would do with us, read. A lot of reading. He would read Zane Grey books and always stopping right at the most important place for the night. He taught just about everything in grade school and went to work at the high school as the athletic director and coach and later came back and was the principal. He was principal before he went into the high school and then later when he come back. This was before he retired from this new building up here.

MH: He saw a lot of changes; one or two room school house to a brand new high school in Escalante.

VP: That is right, he did.

MH: During your life as a child, what were some of the things you remember as the most fun, say in the summertime.

VP: We owned a big ranch up here that we bought in 1939. We bought the old cabin where that Bed and Breakfast is up there now, in the canyon, five miles out. We owned that plus there was 365 acres on that place. We had a big barn and lots of fields with lots of cattle and lots of horses. We would go up there in the summer time. Some winters we would come back here to school, because Dad taught. But, a lot of winters we lived right up there. The little house that Rex has on the back of his Bed and Breakfast is the house we lived in.

MH: You are kidding. I believe that is an historical building.

4 Vergean Porter

VP: Yes. When my dad bought that place, there was 365 acres and it had all the cattle, like thirty-five head or fifty head of sheep, thirty-five horses, harnesses, wagons, things like that. The farm was furnished with chickens and pigs. We just moved on the farm. Five thousand dollars he gave for that and there was fifty-five shares of water on the place. We spent a lot of time up there. It was really pretty when we was up there. It had a big orchard, lots of great big old cottonwood trees where the house used to set. They moved the house from down the bottom where our granary was, up on top just three or four years ago. Then there was a grist mill on it, where they operated that old grist mill, if you just put the water in the ditch, then on the wheel, you could have started that. But, Dad needed the lumber; we tore the building down and used the lumber. He sold the water wheel to Eff Coombs in Boulder. They took it down into Deer Creek and lifted water up. I think the wheel was twenty-five feet across. The wheel is still there on Deer Creek.

MH: Were you there when they were still operating the grist mill?

VP: No, no, I wasn't, but I can remember taking grain there and having it ground.

MH: So, spent a lot of time on the farm. Did you also spend a lot of time on horses?

VP: Yes, we were on horses pretty near all the time. One summer we went up there and the only time we came to town was for the Twenty-Fourth of July. We stayed up there for the full summer. Lots of people and relatives would come out to visit.

MH: Wouldn't that have been part of the thoroughfare over to Widstoe?

5 Vergean Porter

VP: Yes, that is where the old road went, right through Main Canyon and right over the mountain to Widstoe. Always saw travelers coming and going, three or four cars a day. Every car that would pass, we would know who it was.

My dad had cars all the time. The roads were not very good, he always had a car to go to Boulder. We would have to go up and around Pine Creek and up across Hell's Backbone and to Salt Gulch to get into Boulder. This was before the Boulder Road was built. My mother, her transportation back and forth to Boulder, and Dad's, too, when he was courting my mother, would go across Death Hollow by horse. My mother was a jockey, she jockeyed for Grandpa Haws.

MH: Was she part of the same group that would go up to Salt Lake and race?

VP: Yes, she knew a lot about horses, even when she got older she knew about horses. She rode until she was an old lady.

MH: When you learned how to drive, what was that like?

VP: I'll tell you, the first time me and my brother, Mert, we were just fifteen months apart, when we was about thirteen, fourteen years old, Dad took us down in the field with a car and taught us how to drive. Right in the field there was no place that we could run over anything.

MH: Any memories that stood out for you in grade school?

VP: Not really. I knew all the teachers quite well (Laughter).

MH: Did you think there were some more expectations for you because of the fact your dad was a teacher.

VP: I am sure there was. (laughter)

MH: When you went into high school did you participate in sports?

VP: Not very much. When I was in high school, the building was where the DUP is now. The sports team didn't travel too much then. In grade school we used to go to Tropic for a Pentathlon, a field day. They used to go up over the mountain and back in to Tropic in a cattle truck. They would put a tarp over the top of it and have a whole bunch of kids in the back.

MH: What was that like for you? Were some of the folks from Tropic relatives or friends?

VP: We had no relatives in Tropic. Just as a school, the cattle truck hauled the whole school over, so there wasn't too many kids participating.

MH: Was that a day you looked forward to?

VP: Yes.

MH: Ever any other excursions out of the area, Marysvale or St. George?

VP: We owned the grocery store, my dad owned the grocery store up there and he would go to Salt Lake and haul the freight back.

MH: Wow, how did he do that with school?

VP: Well, he would do that in the summer time.

MH: It seemed like if you owned a store around here, basically you became a freighter.

VP: Yes. In them days too, they had people come in to sell you stuff. They called "Drummers" then. They would come in and sell you candy and stuff like that. I suppose it would come to Marysvale on train and a wagon would come in and pick it up and bring it on out to us.

MH: So, there were traveling salesmen that came through, like gypsies? Did they have remedies?

VP: I can't remember.

MH: Did your mother have special things she used if you got sick?

VP: When we would get sick [it would be] mustard plasters. We got an itch one time, called it the Seven Year Itch. They used to feed a tea boiled out of Quaking Asp and sage brush. You would drink that to purify your blood. It was an itch and it took about seven years to scratch it out. They used to have a sulfur powder and lard that they would mix for a suave that went on it.

MH: You had every thing you needed on your farm; beef, pork, mutton...

VP: ...milk. My mother made cheese, lots of cheese. She would put the coloring in it making big rounds of cheese. Always had one outside in a press, it had a big pull out the back of it to press out the whey. The press would be wood. Made lots and lots of soap. She would make butter and she would sell the butter to the stores. We would kill our pigs and cows in the fall of the year, when it was cold, so they would keep. That was the only way we had to keep it. We made lots of sausage and Ma would tamp that sausage into little round bags and we would hang it on the north side of the house where it would keep until spring. She bottled lots of pork, chicken, and beef.

MH: Just above you in the canyon is a reservoir. Has that been there for a while?

VP: North Creek Reservoir, yes, it was there. When I was just a little kid it broke. They didn't do anything with it then. During the WPA days; they went back and built it back.

MH: That was an interesting time because so many new people came into the area and new places were built or opened up.

8 Vergean Porter

VP: I was about fifteen years old when that was built back, and I remember going up there. We had team rented to the scraper up there. One day the driver of the team couldn't show up so Pa sent me up there. Fifteen years old running that big scraper?

MH: Were you nervous?

VP: Well, no, because I had been around horses all my life and it was our team.

MH: That is one of my favorite areas to fish, up at the Barkers. Did you go up there as kids?

VP: We used to leave the ranch with a little jag of hay on the wagon, put a tarp on that and we would all get on the wagon and go up to North Creek. We would go to Long Willow Bottoms where we would always fish. Twitchell Hill, do you know where that is? We used to have to rough lock the old wagon to come down off'n there, usually drag two or three trees behind your wagon to hold it back. We would be up there three or four days.

We didn't have much of a camp. I don't even remember having a tent. We just had some tarps and sometimes we would take a mattress. We used Dutch ovens to cook with.

MH: And the fishing was good?

VP: Fishing was good, great big fish.

MH: After high school what did you decide to do?

VP: I quit high school and went in the service in about 1944. I went in the Navy in '44. I was drafted and no choice. They sent me to Fort Douglas, which is where

everyone was inducted. About five of us went into the Navy; the rest went in the Army. I was relieved to go in the Navy. I liked it.

MH: What were your duties in the Navy?

VP: I worked on the flight deck a takin' in the airplanes... I was on a CVE, airplane carrier. I worked on the flight deck, at a spot when the airplanes would come in and take them down below.

MH: That is a wild place to be. They have done movies about that, you know?

VP: I know it. Our ship has been in a movie or two. CVE 78, (Ship name: USS *Salvo Island*, 1954 movie called *Bridges of Toko-Ri*). We were stationed in the Pacific and then I went over into the Atlantic, through the Panama Canal.

MH: What was the Panama Canal like? Wasn't it a lock system?

VP: Yes, when we went through the Panama Canal we had to stop and have all of our gun turrets cut off, because the guns made it too wide to go through. When we got on the other side, we had to stop and have them welded back on. We had 35mm and 20 mm and a six inch gun on the fantail of the ship.

MH: So, you were also trained to use the artillery, had to?

VP: Yes.

MH: Do you remember a particular time when it was exciting, when they were landing?

VP: Pretty near all the time there was a lot of excitement. A lot of planes run over the side, miss the hooks on the flight deck. A lot of them would crash when they took off, didn't have enough altitude to get off. They had a catapult that shot them off.

MH: You know, I am so impressed to get to meet someone who was on those flight decks. I'm trying to think of all of the things I've seen (in the movies) and ask you about it. It seemed like a really incredible job to have.

VP: It was. I was on that ship, Salvo Island, for eighteen months. We was in the Aleutian Islands when the war was over. And we went from there down into Japan.

MH: I think they signed the treaty on a ship.

VP: Yes, it was one of the big carriers, airplane carriers.

MH: When you finished your tour of duty, how did you make your way back to Escalante?

VP: I got discharged in Boston, Massachusetts. Where ever you got discharged from, they paid your mileage home. So, we decided, me and another kid, that we would hitchhike across the United States and come home, save our money, I think three hundred some odd dollars. Anyway, it was mostly hike, not much hitchin'. When we got in Cleveland, Ohio, an old colored guy let us off there. There was a Greyhound bus depot there and I told this kid I was with, "I don't know what you are going to do, but I am going to get on that bus and go home." He said, "I am, too." We did come on in on the bus. My dad and Mother met me in Salt Lake City and that was how I got home.

MH: Was the train still running between Salt Lake and Marysvale?

VP: Yes, it was running then.

MH: Did any of your other brothers or sisters go into the armed forces?

11 Vergean Porter

VP: There were four of us, all the boys. They were all in the Army. I was the only one in the Navy.

MH: Has there been a time when all four of you have talked about it?

VP: Yes, we did. A few years ago, I had two brothers live in Mesa, Arizona. After I retired from the school district, I went down there and stayed during the winter, me and Carolyn. One winter, my one brother that lived in Orem came down, so there were the four brothers. We sat out in front of the house and visited and had a good enjoyable time.

MH: It seems like there would be a lot of terrifying and life changing things that come to you from a war and it would be good to talk with to people who also experienced the same thing.

VP: Yes. I had a two of my brothers in war, in the heavy fighting. One brother was wounded; he got a Silver Star (or Purple Heart?). He was shot and never did get over that. He died with those wounds. He lived forty years after he got out, but he couldn't do anything.

MH: When did you get out?

VP: I got out in July of '45, made my way back. My parents met me in Salt Lake and I had a sister living in Price and we stopped there for a couple of days and came on home.

MH: Was it an adjustment for you?

VP: Yes, it was, especially with my language. (Laughter)

MH: Yes, life on the ship is different than life with your family. So, now you are back here. You mentioned being in the school district?

12 Vergean Porter

VP: First, I worked down to Glen Canyon. I worked on the dam down there for four years. I came back and got a job with the school district. Actually, I had jobbed around quite a lot. Worked in Provo three or four years, then I got a job with the school district as custodian. I stayed there for twenty-five years and retired from the School District.

MH: A great job, with good benefits.

VP: Yes, I got a State pension besides Social Security. After that we went to Mesa, like I said. We went down there and lived down there during the winter months and come back here in the summer. We aren't doing that now. No, the one brother that we would hook-up our trailer with, he died. It wasn't the same after that. I have one brother left in Mesa.

MH: And how did you meet your wife, Carolyn? Did you know each other all your lives?

VP: No, we didn't. Didn't even know there was such a girl. I came back here, chasin' around and met her. She was still in school and I used to go up and watch her play baseball, next thing you know, well we dated two years, until she got a little older. We have had a good life.

MH: Tell me about your work on the Dam?

VP: I was a high scaler. A high scaler, goes on a boson chair and go down the side of a hill and loose rocks and stuff. Right to the last we were drilling holes back in the ledge to put a big bolt and cement back in there to hold the ledge from sloughing off.

MH: So, you would drill in and put cement in?

13 Vergean Porter

VP: They would pump cement back around the big long bolts; some of them went back in the ledge twenty feet.

MH: So, it became somewhat of a skeleton. High scaler sounds like a dangerous job.

VP: Well, it wasn't, if you was careful. We had one or two kids fall, but they just tried to show off and use one rope to tie from one side to another and their arm give out on them. You was down there and nobody bothered you.

MH: Four years, that's a long time. Was the pay pretty good?

VP: Well, yes, it was pretty good for that time. I believe I went from '60 to '64

MH: What was the idea, what do you think, about that dam being put in? Did you see it as development for the area? Opportunities?

VP: It was.

MH: Had you ever gotten up into those canyons before they were flooded?

VP: Just running cattle down to the Colorado River. I worked for the BLM and we surveyed that all along the river back and forth for years before the dam.

MH: Tell me what the area was like?

VP: It was wild. There wasn't many people down in there. Near Hite, on the river, we camped right at the bottom of that for a number of years, two or three years while we surveyed around there. That was during the uranium [boom] over in White Canyon. We was cutting school sections out of the Townships.

MH: Do those sections still exist even with...

VP: Yes, oh yes, a way to generate funding for the schools.

MH: What would be the value (resources) of that land to generate tax funds?

VP: It wasn't very much. Up here by our old ranch, my Dad had a school section rented there and I think it was only twenty or thirty dollars a year, not very much.

MH: So, this same land near Hite would be leased too?

VP: Some of them made quite a lot of money off them, it would all depend if it was a coal mine, or a gold mine. There was only uranium down in the Circle Cliffs. We cut in all those mines. I was married then and had a family; that was in '55.

MH: It sounds like it was an interesting job.

VP: It was.

MH: Now, the land you surveyed is basically under water?

VP: Yes, Hite is all under water. You don't even have any idea where it was at, and that was down river from where the bridge crosses the Colorado.

MH: There was that time when around Lee's Ferry and north, everyone was still looking for gold. Were they still looking in the fifties?

VP: That was uranium in the fifties, but the gold along the river, we did tie in a lot of those mines, those old gold mines and dredges and stuff they had in there.

MH: What about the ruins, there is so much talk about the ancient ruins that got covered?

VP: They come in four, five, six years before the dam was built and went through all those ruins and collected all the artifacts in there. I have seen some of them.

(Break in recording)

MH: No camera. What were the days like while you were doing the survey work?

VP: We had a crew, the days were long and hot. We lived in tents, had a cook.

When we was down in Circle Cliffs, we would have to travel on our own time. Now, you come to work on their time and travel home on their time. Then we would have to go back down on Sunday and Friday afternoon we would come back home. When we was in the Circle Cliff we would come back up through Notom and the bottom of the river there, there is a highway around now.

MH: Relatively speaking, it is a highway now. What was your mode of transportation?

VP: They had jeeps, which are what we used on the job. We furnished our own transportation to work, so me and my brother, he was working with us, we bought an old car. We would have to clear over to Wayne County and down through to Lee's Ferry. That was five, six hours. We did that every week during the summer. It was a summer job.

MH: Then in the winter you came back to work here. Tell me about your family, yours and Carolyn's.

VP: We had four kids. They are pretty near all school teachers. My oldest son is the principal in Parowan, Kevin Porter. I have a daughter, Vergeania Davenport who lives in Summit. She works for the college at Suu in the Head Start Program. She is the Early Intervention Leader. She works on early intervention, taking care of the babies. Her husband Darryl passed away in 1994.

Kevin, our oldest son, and his wife Shelly, work for the Iron County School District. He is an Elementary Principal. She is a high school teacher. They live in Parowan. Sloane and his wife Veralynn have a landscaping Company, (True Green Co.) which takes care of all the churches' and businesses' landscaping. He employs fifty or more men. She takes care of all the office work and he supervises

the workers. They live in Midway. My youngest son, Clint and his wife Shana live in Cedar City. He works at Valley View Medical Center and she is an R.N. and works in the Dialysis Center. He works at the hospital as maintenance at the new hospital. He works once and a while over here to Panguitch, putting in doors and stuff like that in the new section. His son, Kasen, is sophomore in high school. He is a pretty good athlete. But he is enjoying it here, he is pretty good kid.

MH: So, do your grandkids come in, then frequently to visit in the summers?

VP: Oh, yeah, we have them all summer long. We had forty-three here during the Twenty-Fourth of July. We always have a float in the parade. We have our immediate family reunion here at our house.

MH: Looking around, it seems like you have a lot of hobbies; clocks and horseshoe welding. How did you get involved in doing that?

VP: I used to make a lot of whirly-gigs and birds and this, that, and the other, then I got to making these clocks out of horseshoes and took a group of them over to the County Fair and got three firsts and a sweepstake. I enjoy doing it. I don't just make clocks; I make other things out of them too. I make welcome signs, sunflowers, anything I think of or if anyone gives me an idea.

MH: Does you family still own land in the Esclante area?

VP: We have this piece of land across the street; I have sold my horse here a few years ago. I don't have a horse. I have a few chickens. We have a good garden. I had a big farm out south of town, the ground around the Chynoweth's place, and when I retired from school, then I sold it. But I kept the eight acres across the street. I had

cattle and sheep out there. I sold everything but machinery. I sold it, practically gave it away.

M: The machinery seems like it is the biggest issue for ranchers trying to stay in business because of its cost.

VP: I know it. I bought my own machinery. For years I depended on someone else. When you depend on someone else, your hay would get wet and this and that. So, I did buy machinery; tractor and swather, bailer and all that.

MH: So, would you also work on others' land?

VP: No, I did not do custom work.

MH: It seems like that kind of set-up was more common in the thirties and forties.

Recording ends abruptly. End of interview.

Addendum: Transcribed from hand written paper added to interview after the editing.

I am now 85 years old, in good health and enjoy each day. Carolyn and I have a good life together and have been married 63 years. We enjoy each other's company and take pleasure doing things together. We have twenty grandkids plus nine that have married into the family. Presently, we have nineteen great grandchildren with one on the way. We have a posterity of fifty-five. We are proud of each member of our family.

