

Palisade Historical Society
Oral and Video History Project
Interview

Oral History #11

Place: Bill Beckwith's - 3871 Granada Drive, Palisade

Interviewee: John "Jack" Hickman

Interviewer : Bill Beckwith

Videographer: Ralph Branch

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Length: 50:38

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Education and Career

John, better known as "Jack," graduated from Palisade High School in 1953 and attended Mesa College when it was a two-year school. He went to Ft. Collins and got his degree from Colorado State University. His only job offer was in Chicago, and he did not want to go to the big city. His mother discouraged him from farming because there were too many crop failures from hail and frosts.

After graduation from Ft. Collins, he went to Arco, Idaho and was employed at the National Reactor Testing Station. The Phillips Petroleum Company had contracts for operating the Materials Testing Reactor, Engineering Test Reactor, and the Chemical Processing Plant where they took fuel elements from the reactor, dissolved them and separated the liquid into different radioisotopes. Some being plutonium, uranium and iodine. The iodine was used in medical research. Because of the various applications, some being military, it was a classified area. The Chemical Processing plant was hazardous because the dissolved fuel elements could result in a nuclear reaction if the concentrate was not closely regulated during the process .

The 50 mile ride from Idaho Falls to the Reservation Arco, was on an uncomfortable bus not made for mountainous, snowy country. Sometimes the snow would get sucked into the engine and the bus would stop, so we had to wait for another bus. One night, it took three buses to make the trip from Arco to Idaho Falls. The temperature that year was 50 below with five feet of snow at Arco, so he left Idaho and went to Sacramento to work for the Aero Jet Corporation which produced Polaris and Minuteman missiles. It had a liquid plant which developed the engines used to launch satellites. The jobs were not secure, as the company was constantly competing for contracts.

He then went to work for University of California Davis. First, he took care of their hazardous waste program and conducted analyses to make sure the drinking water was safe. When the Nuclear Research Program expanded, he became the radiation safety officer for the campus for 19 years. When the Medical School was built, the nuclear accelerator was used to develop different radioisotopes to be used in the nuclear medicine department.

He left the university and worked for the California State Health Department at various jobs. One interesting job was the environmental monitoring. When Chernobyl blew up, California wanted to monitor the exposure from radioactive fallout. The monitoring program was from Crescent City to San Diego. He collected monitors and determined how much radiation was in the air.

Fortunately, California never received much contamination from Chernobyl. Prior to retiring from the State Health , he supervised the licensing of radioisotopes in hospitals. This allowed me to see the research as well as the use and was a very rewarding job. Sealed sources of radioisotopes were used to destroy tumors in the brain and this was accomplished by using a specially designed helmet that was fitted to the head securely and the radiation from various angles would penetrate the tumor. It took a sophisticated machine, and operators had to prove their ability to make accurate calculations to assure the proper tumor dose. He stayed there for 17 years and retired.

During this time, John and Shirley lived in Winters, a sister city to Palisade with apricots and almonds, and raised three kids and in the small community. They then moved to Elk Grove, south of Sacramento, another small community until developers found it, and it became fastest growing area in Sacramento. Now they live on a small parcel of land in the foothills east of Sacramento where deer and fox come. Shirley feeds birds and hummingbirds. They try to grow fruit, but gray squirrels and possums eat the fruit first.

Family - Married to Shirley Hocker for 56 years. Her family was well known throughout Grand Junction, as her mother, Elsie, worked at J C Penneys for years. Children: Vicki, oldest, was a teachers aid in a Christian School, and now works for the County and takes care of a handicapped woman. Grandson hired at Beal Air Force Base to work on drones. Granddaughter graduated from Master's College in Southern College in three years and got into a job working at a Mission in Southern California, and now is a teenage advocate for the County helping teenagers in trouble. Oldest son, Steve, owns a gas station at Lake Tahoe. He started in computers with Microsoft and then went on a contract basis with fewer benefits. He looked at a number of franchises and invested in the gas station three years ago which is a learning experience. Youngest son, Tim, works for a Dodge Dealership. One of the first auto mechanic technicians trained in computers. He went to a Junior College and received computer training which helped him at the Dodge. Steve and Tim are not married.

Family History

Frank Hickman, his great grandfather, came from England. He came over on a ship as a cabin boy, or as the ship owner. He met Mary Ann Lloyd, on the ship. She was from Wales. Frank married her and adopted her children, Henry and Elizabeth, from a previous marriage. They may have gone to Pennsylvania first, as the Lloyds had been miners in Wales.

Frank may have worked in the Crested Butte and Ouray mines. Mary Ann was the cook for the miners. Later he came to Palisade and purchased a large parcel or sections of land including Island Ranch - he and developed it - and the other side of the River. He worked in the Cameo mine and may have been a co owner. He developed the Mt. Lincoln Mine on top of the bookcliffs, including blasting the Devil's slide area to bring down the coal. He created the "Stagecoach Trail" to get mining supplies up to the entrance. Frank and Mary Ann lived in the house on the edge looking over Palisade and the River. Later it was bought by the Bancrofts.

Frank built another, the two story house, on what is now identified as Hickman Road. John was raised there. Frank's driveway came through the barn on that property. There was a coal shed and other storage areas that had been used when the mine was in operation. Mules were kept in the

barn and hay stored behind. The miners would ride the mules to the top of the mountain to the mine every day - a long ride. Another area was dug into the side of the mountain adjacent to the shed and it had a dirt roof. He called it the "cave" and was where the miners slept. Mary Ann cooked the meals for the miners.

Frank developed a number of mines. Not sure how many, but at least four mines, though they were not all good producers. The Mt. Lincoln mine on the top was not a good production mine. Two others in the area - one was named Last Chance. He was quite successful as a businessman. Put several peach orchards into production. There was no way to irrigate the orchards except by filling 50 gallon wine kegs with water from the River and bring them on a horse drawn wagon and water the trees by hand.

The packing shed located adjacent to the railroad was developed by Frank and taken over by Henry, his adopted son. Henry owned a number of acres from the River up to the mountain and as far east as the Distefano orchard bordering Henry's and the parcel of land by the State Bridge. Henry shipped his own fruit, had his own siding for the railroad to come in to place cars, and his own salesman who went to Chicago to find markets. He shipped a large number of carloads of fruit.

When Henry died, Virgil and his sister, Mary Brooks, and Evelyn Campbell ran the ranch for three years and sold it. Virgil purchased five acres below the house and another 28 acres on Orchard Mesa. He lost the 28 acres, but made a good living on the five acres. He sold the orchard when his health didn't allow him to keep up with the work and retained the house and land around it - two acres.

When Highway 6 and 24 widened through Vineland, they made a gravel pit behind the house and there was rock left over. John helped his mother, Edithe, create rock terraces and plant 75 rose bushes. Behind the house was an garden which produced zucchinis and vegetables in surplus amounts. It was a hard decision to give up the house his great grandfather built when they moved to the Atrium to live.

From the orchard on Orchard Mesa, Virgil produced 23,000 boxes of fruit and more in bushels. Every summer, John and Norma, his sister, would make 23,000 boxes with the Paxton nailing machine. The boxes were stored in the loft on the upper part of the shed. They hauled shook from the United and loaded it into a system that used a tractor to pulled the machine and shook up to the loft. In harvest, the nailing machine was used for lids.

Harvest and harvest help

The bunkhouse had room for 15 pickers. Two little tent cabins and space for a big Army tent to house and feed 150 harvest help. There was a cook shack and a dining area. It was a challenge to get a cook from Mesa or Collbran who were experienced at cooking for haying crews to come for harvest.

During World War II, there were sugar and flour rations. You could only get so many pounds of each, though Farmers got a little extra. One morning, the wonderful aroma coming from the cook house was cinnamon rolls - which used sugar so there was a shortage of sugar after that.

Cooking was a challenge. The cook stove was wood fired, but the cooks were capable. There was no shortage of meat as Virgil would have good quality meat butchered. Workers were served family style with meat, potatoes, vegetables, and always a dessert, but not often cinnamon rolls.

Water came from a cistern. Joe Hampton would deliver the water. A hand pump was used to get the water which the cooks used for cooking and cleaning. The cooks didn't get credit for all the work they did. Generally, a younger girl, maybe a granddaughter or other relative, would stay with them and had quarters off the kitchen and she would help with the meals.

Virgil did not own a large truck, so he would hire a truck and owner, Gene Hart in Cedaredge, to take the packed boxes of fruit to the United Fruit Growers Association platform where it was shipped on railroad box cars. John remembers pitching the 16 pound boxes from the storage area to the truck. Gene had lost a hand in a farming accident, so throwing and catching the boxes was a challenge for him. He would put a sock over the stub of his arm for protection. John had to learn how to throw and catch boxes.

John learned chores as a kid on the ranch. As the water boy in the orchard, he would fill water sacks for the pickers. More than one person drank from the water sack, which would be frowned on by the Health Department now. Graduating to basket boy, he would put empty baskets under the trees for the pickers to put the peaches in. A big time graduation was to drive a tractor and wagon to haul filled baskets to the packing shed. At the packing shed, fruit was dumped onto the grader, separated into different sizes, passed through the defuzzer, and sorted by four women on the grader who would throw out cull fruit. The rollers that made up the grader were small to large so same sized fruit could be more easily packed in boxes by the packers. Packers also sorted bruised, ripe, and culls, putting them on a belt to carry the culls away.

The graduation from driving the tractor was to work in the packing shed. It was easier in some respects, but included emptying the fuzz bin with six or seven bushel baskets of peach fuzz every morning and dumping it to get the shed ready for operations. The packers would come at 9:00. John ran the nailing machine to put lids on the packed boxes. He would look at each pack to make sure the fruit was not "stack packed", but offset, so peaches were not on top of each other. The packed and lidded boxes would be stacked and loaded out on the last truck to the United at 9 p.m. He would get into bed by 10 or 12 at night and get ready for the next day. Harvest was a hectic 10 - 20 days depending on how long the harvest went.

Packers were susceptible to the "pink flu." They got sick and the Palisade Drug Store had a supply of pink medicine. They kept dosing them with the medicine to keep the packers healthy so they could get the peaches packed.