

I N T E R V I E W O F E A R L B R I T T O N

(Best of the Breed)

Hannah Nordhagen

Montana History

Professor Bob Harrington

December 7, 1999

INTERVIEW WITH EARL BRITTON

MONTANA LIVESTOCK AUCTION

BUTTE, MONTANA

DECEMBER 1, 1999

- - -

MS. NORDHAGEN: My name is Hannah Nordhagen and I'm interviewing Mr. Earl Britton.

Okay, probably I would like to start out with maybe where you grew up and how you first got into this business.

MR. BRITTON: I grew up in Iowa. My father was a farmer back there in northwest Iowa. He farmed a lot of ground and he fattened cattle and sold them, also fattened hogs. So that was my background. I was born and raised on an Iowa farm.

MS. NORDHAGEN: When did you move to Montana?

MR. BRITTON: We moved to Montana in about 1948. And it's a strange situation why we ended up out here because we were farming at home and getting along fine and everything. But some people, a large company had purchased some cattle out here and they wanted me to come out and help load them, and so on.

And after I put in a season here, I just liked the country, so my wife and I moved out.

MS. NORDHAGEN: I don't blame you.

How did you come across to purchase the stockyards in Butte?

MR. BRITTON: You know, this is strange. I guess it all dates back to when I was a 15-year-old kid. I went to the first cattle auction that was ever held in Montana, which was held in Billings. My uncle took me there.

A big old fat auctioneer sitting up there and selling, and I said to myself, "When I grow up, I hope I can run one of these stockyards."

Well, then later on in the years, we were in the livestock brokerage business here in Butte, Montana, and the stockyards came up for sale, so four of us purchased the stockyards.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Okay. Compared to when you started your business and now, what do you see the differences that the cattle under industry have taken, the different turns, maybe like the problems that they faced then versus the problems they face now or, you know, just --

MR. BRITTON: Really, as we progressed through the years, naturally some problems are solved and other problems arise. In the old days, it never cost ranchers near as much to produce those cattle as what it does today. And actually, in one sense of the word, they

really, in a way, made an easier living than what they do today, because our biggest problem that we're facing right now is the fact that cattle prices, yes, they have increased and they've risen through the years, but the cost of operation has risen much higher than the cattle prices themselves.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Do you see any of that as being a problem with the Canadian cattle coming in?

MR. BRITTON: Yes. You know, some of our big professionals, I should say like our judges and court and the likes of that, they say, "Sure, these Canadian cattle aren't hurting anything." But they are. Some of these big slaughter plants that are perhaps slaughtering, we'll just say roughly, 5,000 cattle a week, 1,000 of them are Canadian cattle out of those 5,000.

So you can see that a lot of these places, maybe 20 percent of the slaughter, or at least in even smaller plants, 10 percent of the slaughter are Canadian cattle.

MS. NORDHAGEN: In my history class, we talked about weather in the winter, like harsh winters being a problem. Is that still a problem that ranchers --

MR. BRITTON: Oh, it is, but not a serious problem. These cattle are born outside, they're raised outside. The only maybe protection they have are, oh, groves of trees, maybe, you know, they'll get in canyons,

or something like that, to get out of the wind.

So what I'm trying to say is this: These cattle, they're born in the outside, they're tough. So really, the severe winters don't bother them any as long as they have plenty of hay to eat.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Okay. Let's see here, what's the difference, say, in the life-style between ranchers today and when they first started out, besides the income? Is it easier for them today with more of the technology now or is it a harsher life?

MR. BRITTON: Well, I would say this, that it's more difficult for a rancher to actually show a legitimate profit now than it was in the old days, because like I told you before, the price of operation has risen a lot more than the price of his product that he's selling. But these people, they're good operators and they still do a good job of it. But really, on a ranch today, it is more difficult to make a living than it was, say, 30 or 40 years ago.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Do you think that, do you see that as a form of, do you see it going -- let's see, how do I word this. I don't know if it's really a job, but I guess a lifestyle. Do you see that becoming less and less apparent in Montana?

MR. BRITTON: Yes, I hate to say this, but as

time goes on, there will be fewer ranchers in Montana. This makes me feel bad to say that, but we have several situations that are staring them in the face that aren't good.

First of all, about all these ranchers that have ran cattle here in the mountains, why, they had certain forest permits that they could depend on and they also had state ground that they could lease from the government.

Well, now, because of the environmentalists and also the Fish and Game Department, this ground is gradually being taken away from the ranchers. They don't want cattle, I mean the environmentalists don't want cattle running up in the mountains and everything. They say that's detrimental to the grass and everything.

Well, this is all wrong because if anything, cattle benefit the grass. I mean, you know the manure, the droppings and everything else helps to fertilize the grass.

And so it's a case where actually, if you want to really know the truth of it, the average rancher is being squeezed off of the property that he's used for so many years.

MS. NORDHAGEN: What effect do you think this will have on Montana?

MR. BRITTON: Well, sometime, somewhere, you'll

crowd enough of these ranchers off of the ground. And when I talk about ranchers, I'm not just exactly talking about a rancher. I'm also taking about farmers, I mean people that farm and till the soil.

You'll crowd enough of them off of there that it will hurt the general public. We're to the place right today where there's 4 percent of the, you might say, ranchers and farmers that are furnishing feed for the other 96 percent of the population.

Now, if you squeeze them away from that so that they can't raise these cattle and they can't raise, say, the corn, the wheat, the oats, the grain and everything that goes with it, why, then pretty soon it's going to put a squeeze on the public in general so that they're not going to get enough food, either. And then maybe what food they do get, it costs them so much that that is not good for them, either.

MS. NORDHAGEN: So the same people who are ruining the cattle business are going to suffer from the consequences.

MR. BRITTON: In a way, they will. In a way, they will. They don't think that they will. They don't look on it that way, but you're exactly right. Those people, maybe not in their generation, but in the next and so on down the line, it will hurt them, yeah.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Okay. Could you tell me maybe a little bit about the people. Just, I don't know, do you have maybe a story?

MR. BRITTON: Yeah. It's kind of interesting when I look back and I think about the number of years that I've been in business, and I saw a man and I was over in Bozeman to the livestock sale here the other day. And he was visiting with me. He was kind of an old-timer in the business. In the early days when I first came out here, I bought cattle from him and so on like that. And I hadn't seen the man for several years.

And he said, "Earl, I want to ask you a question. Lots of times you call up people over the phone and if you can agree on the price, you buy the cattle from them."

"Yeah."

"Now," he said, "There's no contract or anything else. There's your word against the other man's word." He said, "Now, through the years that you've done business, have any of those fellows actually backed out of the deal after they have agreed to, you know, sell their cattle to you at such a price?"

I said, "Let's talk since 1950, so we're talking about 50 years time, there's only been two fellows that have ever backed out of their contract or their

understanding that we had."

And I said, "Then, one of those fellows, after he backed out, he called me up and he said, 'Earl, I am sincerely sorry.' He said, 'I shouldn't have done that.' So he said, 'I'll tell you what I want to do. You have your trucks here in the morning and I'll have my cattle here ready to go with the deal that we agreed on here a couple weeks ago.'"

So I said, "Actually, you go back to that and you think, golly, everyone depends on their word. If your word is no good, you're no good for the industry." So I said, "Really, we don't worry about people backing out, we just all do what we've agreed to do."

So I hope that kind of answers your question.

MS. NORDHAGEN: It would be nice if everybody was that --

MR. BRITTON: Well, this is right. And, you know, it's also interesting, Hannah, in other businesses, people don't have that kind of, you might say, luck about dealing with people in those businesses like they do in the livestock business.

It seems to me that people are just not as honest there. They're more trying to -- well, sure, we all want to make a buck, we have to make a living, but if they can get away with something, well, lots of times they

do it.

So when I talk about the livestock business, especially the cattle business, I talk about it in a way that I'm extremely proud of it because of the class of people that we have to deal with.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Okay. Maybe just could you explain a little bit on how the whole business works, how people just bring their cattle in and like exactly maybe what you did owning the stockyards?

MR. BRITTON: Yeah, yeah. Let me put it to you this way: I guess we ran a stockyards for about 40 years and there's probably two-thirds of the population or the people that own cattle that would rather sell their cattle through the stockyards than to sell them like at private treaty out in the country. But there are certain people, especially these people with large numbers of cattle, maybe some guy will have, oh, 500 or 600 yearling steers and so some of those people like to sell them at home. They have a large enough number so that they can get a good price at home.

And so with us, we've dealt with people both ways. If we knew people absolutely didn't want to bring their cattle to market, why, then we tried to deal with them directly at home and then bought them on order for maybe some cattle feeder in the Midwest.

So there are two classes of people and it all depends the kind of person you are, how you like to do it and so on like that. And we never try to change a person's ways. If they like, if they'd rather bring them through the market, we'd say, "Fine." If they would rather sell them direct to the country, fine. So we try to deal with the customers the way they want to do it.

MR. NORDHAGEN: Okay. And you would go out and you would look at people's cattle for them to see if -- what was that for? To see if they were good to sell?

MR. BRITTON: Yes. You see, many times, Hannah, we get calls. And maybe a man has, we'll just say roughly speaking, 200 head of yearling steers to sell.

And he'll say to us, "Earl, I would rather sell them on the market, but I don't know close enough to what they weigh, or anything, or I don't know enough about the prices to know what I can expect on the market. So would you be kind enough to come out on our ranch, our premises? And then you can tell us about what the cattle weigh and about what we could expect off of the market if we brought them in there."

So many times we get calls where we have to go out and do that. And we give these people, you know, an estimate of what they could expect bringing them in on the market.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Okay. Are you retired now? Is that right?

MR. BRITTON: No, no.

MS. NORDHAGEN: No, never?

MR. BRITTON: I guess maybe I don't do quite as much business as I used to, but I'm not retired.

A man said to me the other day, "Earl, when are you going to retire?"

I said, "When I'm 90, I'm going to slow down a little, but," I said, "I'm not going to retire."

(Pause in interview.)

MS. NORDHAGEN: So how long have you owned the stockyards in Butte? How long has that been in years?

MR. BRITTON: How long did we own it?

MS. NORDHAGEN: Yeah.

MR. BRITTON: Well, we've owned it for, well, we purchased the yards in 1958 and we only sold it a year or so ago, so that would be about 40 years that we owned it.

MS. NORDHAGEN: What was your fondest memory that you can think of over that time?

MR. BRITTON: Well, I would say this: There are many, many fond memories. I guess you have to think about just the loyalty of the people that you did business with and also just the type of people that they were. And then, too, we just learned so much during those years.

You know, I could just go on and on about things that happened and so on like that, but really, the type of people that we did business with and all that, I think those are the things that meant the most to us. And then, too, when we had big sales and it worked out so that we received, you know, real good prices for these ranchers, why, these memories are fond because we knew that we were doing a good job for the public.

MS. NORDHAGEN: That must have been hard when you wanted to get good prices and you couldn't.

MR. BRITTON: Yeah.

MR. NORDHAGEN: I think that would be very hard.

MR. BRITTON: Well, this is difficult. And then, too, you know, there's some things you can't do. You can't change the market. I mean we as individuals can't change it. The market is governed by supply and demand. And if the demand isn't there, why, then naturally, the cattle are going to be bringing lower and lower prices.

But there are little things that happen, too. I mean when after we had sold the yards and they went in there with a couple big Cats and they were tearing them down and everything, and I had this famous dog called "Maggie" and perhaps you've seen her. She's been out to Joan's quite a little. She was a red border collie and

she had sorted cattle there for years.

And we were down there one day and she saw these big Cats tearing up these pens. Well, golly, she looked at me to say, "Don't let them do that, this is our working ground." And she kept poking me in the leg with her nose and she didn't want me to let them do that, tear down those pens. And finally, why, she just went crazy and she started to howl like a wolf, and everything. So this was a sad time for me, too, because I could see that it broke my dog's heart.

So all these things are memories, you know, and there is a lot of humorous happenings, too, that are so precious.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Do you have a funny story that you can remember?

MR. BRITTON: Well, I'll tell you a funny one, and I'll always remember this. We had probably about a 700-pound steer that came in through the ring there one day and the auctioneer was selling him. And all of a sudden, why, the steer jumped over the high cables and jumped out of the ring and he ran up with the crowd.

And here was a woman sitting clear up on top. And this steer kind of tried to get around her and she wanted to let the steer get around her, too, because she didn't want any contact with him. And finally, the steer

tried to go one way, then he tried to go another, and he would make a run for it and she'd jump out of the way.

And finally, the steer made a run for it but he got his head between her legs. And he never did tip her over, but he pushed her a long ways over across, over across the seats, and one thing or another. And then he started to back up away from her. But he had horns, and these horns were hooked in her legs and he couldn't back away from her.

And finally, I said, "Oh, my God, this is going to turn into a lawsuit, you know, she's going to get hurt."

But finally, the steer got loose and he ran around the other side and he jumped back in the sales ring and the auctioneer sold him. But then I stopped the sale for a while. I went up there to where this woman was because I was concerned about her. I didn't want her to be hurt.

So I put my hand up over her shoulder. And I didn't know her well, but I was concerned about her, you know. And I said, "I hope you're all right."

And she was a woman that had worked around livestock, horses and cattle a lot so she was pretty tough. She says, "Earl, I'm all right, but," she said, "do you know what?"

I said, "What?"

She says, "I've got on pantyhose and he's just ripped these pantyhose all to hell." And she says, "Earl, if you would be kind enough to buy me a new pair of pantyhose, we'll call everything even."

And I often think about that time and I think about how I worried about it, you know, I might have a lawsuit, and one thing and another like that. And then I think, Well, what a wonderful woman she was. And I bought her the new pantyhose and she was happy. And she wasn't hurt, so, you know, when you stop and think of it now --

MS. NORDHAGEN: It's funny.

MR. BRITTON: It's funny, yeah.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Okay. Well, I think that's about all the questions I have, so is there anything else that you wanted to say, or that I've missed out on something important?

MR. BRITTON: Oh, offhand, I just can't think of anything else. I think of just all the nice people that we've dealt with through the years and what they have done and so on.

There was four families up in the Big Hole. These four people were brothers and they, each one of them, had a family, had children, and each one of them was a rancher. And their name was Bacon. That was their last

name.

And I spent hours and hours with these people doing business with them and helping them sort cattle and everything like that. And of all the hours that I've spent with them, I've never heard these people complain about a situation or criticize another.

And so I always said to myself, I wish that I was more that kind of a man so that I could say that I never criticized situations that we had to cope with, or I never, you know, found fault with another.

And because, you know, the best of us, sometimes we criticize our friends and other people, and this is so wrong because we all have our faults. And so I look on people like the Bacons, where they've gone and never found fault with anything nor criticized another, I think those people have a lot to be proud of. So these are people that I shall always remember.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Yes, and it's sad that an industry with so many good people, that these people are becoming fewer and fewer in the industry.

MR. BRITTON: It is, it is. And one of the sad parts about it is that wealthy people from the East and California are coming in and they're buying some of this ranching ground. And they are not interested in buying ground that will raise cattle. They are interested in

buying ground that's good for hunting and fishing, and the likes of that. They like to buy a ranch that's on a river.

And these people do not have the good characteristics like our ranchers do here. But these ranchers that were born and raised in this country, they truly have top characteristics to them.

And I said to a group one time, they asked me to talk to quite a large group and I explained a little bit about the ranchers and so on that live here. And I said, "You know, I guess maybe if I'm ever fortunate after I die to get to heaven," I said, "I think the people that I see there will be the ordinary people of today like our good ranchers. They won't be the famous people that get the write-ups in the paper or the famous politicians or anything, but the good, what I call them the 'good, vanilla-type people'", I said, "I think those will be the kind of people that will have the best place in heaven."

MS. NORDHAGEN: Okay. Well, thank you very much for your taking your time with me today.

MR. BRITTON: You bet. I've enjoyed visiting with you.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Yeah, me, too.

MR. BRITTON: And so it's been good. I'm sure it's been good for both of us.

MS. NORDHAGEN: Great. Thank you very much.

MR. BRITTON: Yeah, okay.

(This concludes the interview of Earl Britton.)

* * * * *