

California State College, Bakersfield  
San Joaquin Valley Oral History Project

Recorded History

INTERVIEWEE:	Minnie Hallum
INTERVIEWER:	Phillip L. Baird
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Philip Baird: This tape is an interview with Mrs. Minnie Hallum at her home 1409 Royal Street in Arvin California. The date is February 28, 1975 and my name is Phillip L. Baird. I feel it's necessary to preface this interview with a few remarks. Mrs. Hallum migrated from Oklahoma to Kern County during the years of the great depression. This migration was dramatized by the great author John Steinbeck in his novel *The Grapes of Wrath*. Now, some people might take a dim view of this subject or by its very nature it is somewhat negative. Granted, Kern County is rich in history, part of this rich history in this people that came to Kern County. If history is to be objective this interview is no less viable.

P.B.: I guess a good place to start would be what part of Oklahoma did you come from?

M.H.: Stidham, McIntosh County.

P.B.: McIntosh County? Where is that in Oklahoma? Is that North or South?

M.H.: I guess it's South of Skogee [Muskogee], I don't know.

P.B.: When did you come to California?

M.H.: 1937.

P.B.: 1937. Now you said that Vernon your husband came here before you did. Why did he come here before you did?

M.H.: Well, he thought maybe it'd be better; we could do better out here.

P.B.: He wasn't sure what he could find out here? Is that why he came first?

M.H.: He just came to pick cotton.

P.B.: Anybody come out with him?

M.H.: My brother Buddy.

P.B.: Buddy, Buddy Downum then?

P.B.: How many brothers did you have?

M.H.: Eight brothers and two sisters.

P.B.: Eight brothers....that's a pretty big family!

M.H.: Yeah.

P.B.: A lot of them are out here now aren't they?

M.H.: Yes. Let's see. Charles, Jessie, and Betty and, that my brothers, three brothers and then Dolly and Bernadine. Bernadine's in Reno, Nevada.

P.B.: Why did you come to California? Was it really bad in Oklahoma? Was life really hard?

M.H.: Life was hard. You worked from sun up to sun down for fifty or seventy-five cents a day.

P.B.: Is that right?

M.H.: That's right. My husband was Lefty and he got seventy-five cents a day and his lunch.

P.B.: That was Vernon, huh?

M.H.: most people worked for fifty cents a day from sun up to sun down.

P.B.: Is that right? That was about 1937 then?

M.H.: '37, uh-huh.

P.B.: Is that right? Son of a gun. Well, what made you think life would be easier here in California?

M.H.: Well, because I heard a lot of people back there came here. We heard things, people talk about California. So we came out and see what it was like.

P.B.: Who came with you when you came out? You said Vernon your husband was already out here when you came.

M.H.: Johnnie, Johnnie Mae our daughter.

P.B.: Johnnie did?

M.H.: Yes, she was about two months old.

P.B.: Ok, who else came with you?

M.H.: That was all. We came on the bus.

P.B.: Just you two came on the bus? Was it a Greyhound?

M.H.: Yeah, Greyhound.

P.B.: Greyhound in those days?

M.H.: She had got tired and she kicked her boot off and she knew what she was doing when we got here with here with her. I asked what did you do on the bus? She said I “ticked” my boot off.

P.B.: Is that right?

M.H.: [laughter]

P.B.: what did you find when you got here? In other words, did you come right to Arvin from Oklahoma?

M.H.: Yeah, I stopped at the bus station and then got a taxi on out to Arvin.

P.B.: What bus station? You mean the bus station in Bakersfield?

M.H.: Yes, the Greyhound.

P.B.: You got a taxi all the way out to Arvin?

M.H.: I didn't even know where this was, Pomeroy and Jewett Ranch and I didn't even know where Pomeroy and Jewett Ranch was or anything. I knew it was south of Arvin and we had a picture; we had some pictures and we got there about six o'clock in the morning and smoke was getting up and coming outside their tents and everything.

P.B.: You mean you didn't actually know what the address was you just had a picture? Did Vernon send you a picture in the mail?

M.H.: Yeah, but I don't know—I was supposed to call and come get me I think but we didn't have a telephone. I don't remember.

P.B.: Did Vernon live in a tent then?

M.H.: Uh-huh.

P.B.: How long did you live in a tent?

M.H.: I can't remember. Until some of the cotton pickers left we live in a tent for from when we first got here for a while and then when some of the people left we got a tent and a cabin and a tent to put out washing machine in.

P.B.: Do you remember where that tent was now?

M.H.: Uh-huh. Yeah, I could show you right out there where it was at.

P.B.: Was it right here in Arvin?

M.H.: Uh-huh, it was right here in Arvin, right out south of town.

P.B.: Not too far from the house here then?

M.H.: Uh-huh, it's up on Pomeroy-Jewett Ranch out south of town. It's still out there.

P.B.: Well, tell me this. What did Arvin look like when you first came out? Do you still remember? Were the streets paved or what?

M.H.: Arvin was, I don't know, wasn't a very big place. I can't remember how many stores there were. But I know it wasn't—I can't remember what it was like.

P.B.: Was Bear Mountain Blvd. paved then?

M.H.: Part of it probably was. I don't know. There was sagebrush. That's what we—we had a wood stove and we went out and cut sagebrush, chased rabbits [laughter].

P.B.: You used sagebrush for making fires?

M.H.: Yes, can you imagine how long that would last?

P.B.: How about Jack Rabbits? Did you eat a lot of Jack Rabbits?

M.H.: No, we was afraid to eat them. Someone said they was poison but they was everywhere.

P.B.: Really?

M.H.: Out in the sagebrush.

P.B.: How about Bakersfield? Do you remember what Bakersfield looked like?

M.H.: Well, Bakersfield—I can't really—it was a pretty good sized town but I Arvin wasn't very big—I can't really remember. The post office, you know, has moved now and there is another big store.

P.B.: What, in Bakersfield?

M.H.: The post office in Arvin has moved to another part of town. It was right down on Main Street when we first came and another big store up on the other end. There wasn't too many stores in Arvin. I can remember what exactly it looked like.

P.B.: Well let's see you've raised how many children now since you live in Arvin?

M.H.: Um, five.

P.B.: Five children?

M.H.: See, I have Johnnie. One older than Johnnie died, a little girl. And then Johnnie did and then another little girl died when she was a baby and then well there's seven if you put them all together but there is five living and two dead.

P.B.: Is there anything that really stands out in your mind that you really remember a lot when you first arrived? Something that happened or the way certain things were? I know life was pretty hard in those days. I just wonder if there were things you might remember. You mentioned to me about you having electricity? Remember?

M.H.: I remember. Never had electricity before. We got a washing machine. We lived in a cabin and put the washing machine in a tent and we had a cord that went from the cabin to the tent and we had a garden in between, some tomatoes. I was watering and...[?] so we could irrigate, I was irrigating the tomatoes and had my washing machine plugged in and it had come unplugged and fell in the water. I was standing there bare-feet and I didn't know not to take it out. And I picked it up to plug it in and I dropped it again and I picked it up again and, you know, my hand just [?] to it and I couldn't drop it or couldn't and I saw a man standing across the street and I couldn't say anything or anything?

P.B.: What finally happened?

M.H.: Finally, I got loose from it somehow, I don't know how but it said if it been high voltage it would have killed me. Standing that water, you know, grounded it and that had it my hand.

P.B.: You had no electricity in Oklahoma?

M.H.: We didn't. Some people did, but we didn't. We had kerosene lamps and still were burning wood and everything.

P.B.: I was talking to your son Larry not too long ago and he said he can still remember taking a bath in an old tub. Is that right? Is he telling the truth?

M.H.: [laughter] He's telling the truth.

P.B.: You didn't have a bath tub in the old days?

M.H.: No, we didn't have a bath tub. Even when we came to Arvin for a little while we didn't.

P.B.: You used to live right in the back here didn't you? That's the old house. When did you build the one you're in now?

M.H.: 1958.

P.B.: 1958? Big difference, huh? I'll bet you like moving in here?

M.H.: Yes, this one is pretty nice.

P.B.: Were you one of the first people here on Royal Street?

M.H.: No, there was a few houses here. Not too many.

P.B.: Do you remember how many? Just a couple?

M.H.: There was probably more than that. I can't remember just how many houses. There used to be one house, this little house sits and it's been here about one of the first houses that they left permanent. This road used to be an orchard, a plum orchard here and the boys used to run across here play in the orchard when they started making this road they called this road the New Road.

P.B.: The road was called the New Road?

M.H.: The New Road. They didn't call it the straight [?] and everything.

P.B.: Now did you... You picked cotton too didn't you?

M.H.: Well, no I didn't pick much cotton. See when I came to California we was expecting our other baby. And Vernon picked cotton and we went to the, went out to the field with him a few times. I picked cotton then. I picked cotton, well, let's see, about '52 I guess I went out and picked when I wanted to, you know, for a little extra spending money. I picked about two hundred a day and then I quit.

P.B.: Did you ever know who Vernon works for then? The name of the company or the man he works for?

M.H.: When he first came?

P.B.: Yeah.

M.H.: Pomerroy and Jewett. Frank.

P.B.: Pomerroy and Jewett?

M.H.: Pomerroy. P-O-M-E-R-R-O-Y and J....

P.B.: Is that a pretty big outfit here?

M.H.: Well, now they still have ranches. They still have the two ranches [?] up here Pomerroy and Jewett out here south of Arvin and up West of Arvin. Jewett is in Visail [Visalia].

P.B.: You know some people have written books on what life was like, you know, in this area around 1937. How unfair and how mean the land owners or the ranchers or the farmers were. Do you remember any of this? Did you have a lot of trouble?

M.H.: I don't remember but I know if you was from Oklahoma they thought you was trash. I mean Oklahoma was really a bad word because they wrote *The Grapes of Wrath*, you know, and I can remember the government camp over here very active. I remember some of that stuff about what life was like. They made it worse than it really was. But the government camp for

people, you know, who came from Oklahoma and everywhere really did was some of that was just like it was and I remember that government camp and how it had those dances and things over there. A few people did come out and, you know, they made hard on the name of Oklahoma. They thought Oklahoma was just really trash. They thought, most thought they were nothing. They thought all Oklahoma people were just people that came out here with a bunch of jugs on the back of the car and springs and all kind of junk and all this stuff. But now I think that they don't look well on the Oklahoma people. They call them "Okies" and I think we're just as good as any of them.

P.B.: Did you see that movie "Grapes of Wrath"?

M.H.: Um-hm.

P.B.: What did you think of that? Did you think there was a lot of truth to that?

M.H.: I think it made me sick. It made me sick, really. There was a few poor people came in. Some of the things probably really happened. Probably kids did run around flushing the toilets [?] but I mean some just—I thought it was ridiculous.

P.B.: In other words you thought it was kind of played out.

M.H.: I think it played up a lot. I mean...

P.B.: How about the—remember the little houses they lived in? Do you think that was about the way it was? The little houses they lived in?

M.H.: Um-hm. That's probably the kind we lived in.

P.B.: Do you remember actually any big problems between the ranchers and the workers? In the movie they showed where there were riots. I just wondered if this was really the [case]?

M.H.: I don't think there really were in Arvin. I think the ranchers—Pomeroy and Jewett—they were nice to the people. I think that they—not around Arvin—I think that was more or less up north more when that happened. I don't think that was around Bakersfield.

P.B.: So even though the story was written about Bakersfield maybe you think something else was on his mind? A different place? It wasn't really as bad as the movie indicated?

M.H.: No. It wasn't that bad. It wasn't that bad.

P.B.: Have people changed much? Do you think they are less friendly than they were in the old days?

M.H.: Well people's in too big of a hurry anymore. Too big a hurry and they don't care about getting involved. I mean like you see an accident or someone hurt or something—many people, I think, want to take too much time—I don't want to get involved; I don't want to help. In the older days—still in Oklahoma I think they would and back there—but you hear people; yeah, I think it



has really changed. Well people still are friendly but you know you said Phil, everyone is in a hurry. They don't have time for all this.

P.B.: Did you ever go to Los Angeles? Go over the Ridge Route?

M.H.: Yeah, all the time.

P.B.: That's changed a lot hasn't it? It didn't use to be a big four lane highway was it? Remember how big it was?

What kind of car did you have then?

M.H.: Well we didn't have one when we first came. Let's see. Was it a Model A? Model T. What kind of—I want to say a coop—A model A I believe. I believe it was the first one we had. I think it's Model A, 1937.

P.B.: No friends came out with you? You came out by yourself then? You and your baby Johnnie?

M.H.: Um-hm.

P.B.: And you had to go around looking for Vernon. Did you have any trouble finding him?

M.H.: We was south of Arvin on a ranch that was such a bare space. There wasn't very much.

P.B.: On the ranch?

M.H.: Yeah, Pomeroy-Jewett Ranch. We drove out south of Arvin and we saw some little tents and cabins in the field there so we thought that must be it. And we drove up and sure enough there was some of them coming out of their tents, you know, cabins. They was just getting up, getting ready to go to work at six o'clock in the morning. Marla and somebody saw us. Anyway they hollered "here's your wife and your baby."

P.B.: What did Vernon say?

M.H.: He just run up and grabbed us. [Laughter]

P.B.: You should have quite a few memories of your family back in Oklahoma, don't you?

M.H.: Yeah, I have—I can't remember; let's see—Charles [?], Lester, Milton [?], [inaudible]

P.B.: You got quite of few.

M.H.: Yeah, quite of few. I'd have to count them. I have one brother in Abilene, Texas. Plus everyone around Stidham.

P.B.: That was kind of a brave thing for you to do, to come out here all by yourself. Were you scared?

M.H.: Yeah. We didn't have to change but about, I think about once or twice. I guess the bus driver kind of watched after us. I never traveled to anyplace or anything. I was only about nineteen.

P.B.: You were that young? How long was Vernon out here before you came out?

M.H.: How long had Vernon been here? I think he'd been here about a month and a half or two months or something like that. He sent after us.

P.B.: I guess that was kind of frightening wasn't it? That's a long way to come on a bus.

M.H.: That's a long ways.

P.B.: Is there anything else you would like to say? Anything that might be unique or some kind of memory that you've got that might be interesting to somebody else?

M.H.: I can't think of anything right now.

P.B.: You really can't remember how big Arvin was?

M.H.: I wish I really could remember. It was quite different than it is now. I can't remember if they had stores on both sides of the street or if it was just one side. I can't remember. I know it wasn't a very big place. I can't remember. But the post office was—do you know where Main Street is now? Down there where [?] station is that is where the post office was down in the east end of town.

P.B.: Where did kids go to school then?

M.H.: Well here in Arvin they had a school. I guess it was some—probably where Haven Drive is—it's a small school. I can't remember it.

P.B.: Did all the kids go into Bakersfield for high school?

M.H.: Um-hm, until 1951. That's the first high school we had here. They build the school—was it 1951? It might be 1951. They had to go to Bakersfield for high school before that.

[END OF INTERVIEW]