

Forest History Foundation, Inc.  
St. Paul, Minnesota

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

with

Orrin W. Sinclair  
Ellensburg, Washington  
1954

by John Larson

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by John Larson, Forest History Foundation, Inc.

(Mr. Sinclair, I wonder if you'd tell me where your parents and grandparents came from if you can remember that?)

Well, my grandfather's folks died when he was young, and I'm quite sure that this Mark Hopkins in San Francisco was his cousin. Now whether this is true or not, I don't know, but anyway, my grandfather was what they called "bound out". Some of the neighbors took him to raise him, or some of his distant relations.

(That was your mother's father?)

Yes, that's right - my mother's father. Somewhere in Vermont. How he got out here I don't know. But his father (that's my mother's grandfather) came out to St. Paul in the early days, and the only way to get out there in those days was to come down the Ohio River to Galena, Illinois, and come up to St. Paul on a steamboat. Why they came up there I don't know. But he came up there and he located a homestead there. It straddled the river there; part of it was on this side of the river, where the depot is today, and they sold 80 acres where all the railroads are, north of the depot, to Jim Hill. They first built the railroads to Minneapolis, and all they had to haul was mostly cordwood, and I suppose some grain and hay and stuff like that. Anyway, when they started to build the line further west, they bought these 80 acres for railroad yards, and my grandfather said they paid \$50,000 for it. That was a whole lot of money in those days, you know.

(This was a piece of land that your great-grandfather homesteaded? What year would you think that was that he came out?)

Well, his first name was Daniel, and he was born November 15, 1795.

(This is the grandfather that made the claim, Daniel Hopkins?)

Yes. Grandpa was Daniel, Jr., born January 1, 1820. There are books in the Minnesota Historical Society telling about them. If you want me to copy it for you, I will be glad to do it. I read that Mark Hopkins was grandfather's cousin. There are also books at Stanford University, Palo Alto, California, and at Huntington Library, San Marino, California. Have you read the "Big Four"? See, I've got that book there.

(He would be your mother's father. When did he finally come to Minnesota?)

He came to Minnesota - oh, let me think - well, I'm 78 years old, and he came about 35 years before that.

(Well, it must have been in the '50s - the 1850s.)

Oh, I think it was later than that. Did you ever hear of the Tozers? All right, old man Tozer came out first, and my father's mother was old man Tozer's sister, you see.

(I see.)

And they all came to Stillwater. In the summer time Grandfather had 800 acres of land at Rice Creek, 15 miles north of St. Paul. You know where Bald Eagle is?

(Yes.)

Well, it's six miles further up the railroad. You know the Northern Pacific Railroad that runs to Duluth?

(Yes.)

All right, he had 800 acres, most of it on that side of the railroad. And there was 300 acres of meadow - natural meadow - and a good big creek ran down there. In those days they had to cut the hay by hand, with scythes. And my father - in the summer time he wasn't doing much of anything - and he'd hire out. It took about 8 or 10 men to cut the 300 acres of meadow by hand.

(Who had the land? Tozer?)

No. My grandfather.

(And your father went to help?)

Yes. Anyway, you know the way Grandfather got that land was rather interesting too. When they had that general store there, they used to trust everyone, and some fellow owed them a grocery bill and couldn't pay it. They got after him, and he said, "Well, now I'll tell you. I don't have the money but I've got 40 acres of ground up on Rice Creek and I'll give you the deed to it if you want it." And my grandfather said, "I'll tell you what I'll do." It was in the fall. He said, "We'll drive up there with the covered wagon and camp out for a day or two." And it was awful good hunting. Oh boy, there were millions of prairie chickens!

(Does Rice Creek run into the St. Croix?)

No. It runs into the Mississippi somewhere. Anyway, he went up there with his family and they camped out on this Rice Creek. Well, he got up there at twilight, and here was this deer coming out of the woods. They had the finest stand of hardwood there I've ever seen. My God, they had white oak trees pretty near six feet in diameter - 60 feet to the first limb. The ground was awful rich, and I never saw such fine hardwood in my life. There was white oak and basswood and tamarack, and oh, a lot of trees there. They liked this place; they stayed there about a week. The deer would come down every night, you know, and drink out of this creek. Prairie chickens were as thick as blackbirds would be around St. Paul today, I suppose. You know, when I was a kid I used to go up and spend my summer vacations at my grandfather's farm.

(Was this your father's father or your mother's father?)

My mother's father. Their buildings were about a half a mile from the Duluth branch of the Northern Pacific Railroad. They have all burned down since I left there. But anyway, right across was a meadow and in the spring this meadow would overflow from Rice Creek. It would be a regular lake, probably about half a mile wide and I don't know how far up and down, but there were millions and millions of ducks and geese there for about, oh, four or five weeks. Oh boy, I never saw so many ducks and geese in any one spot in my whole life. And prairie chickens. I know one of the neighbors was quite an expert hunter, and he went out one day in one of the fields there - they used to raise some wheat. He had a good hunting dog, and he shot 38 times and got 36 prairie chickens, so you know they were pretty darn thick.

(Now, you were saying that your grandfather got this land from someone who owed him some money at the store.)

Yes, 40 acres. He tried to buy 1,000 acres more but he never got over 800.

(Where did he have his store, Mr. Sinclair?)

Oh, it must have been on this land, probably where the depot is.

(Oh, I see. He had a general store there?)

Just like Hudson Bay. They had a little of everything. The price of a rifle was otterskins laid flatways to the top of the barrel. Mother said that Indians would come down from Canada every summer with their winter cache of furs, and they lived out towards Fort Snelling, a little beyond the Capitol today. But anyway, there was a natural meadow there, and the Indians came down there with two-wheel carts. I don't know where they learned to make those carts, but everything was all right but they

didn't know enough to grease those gosh-damned wheels and you could hear them squeak for twenty miles. And the Indians, the way they do, you know, they put the carts in circles and camped in this circle. They do this for protection, you know. But they stayed there about a month, and the Indians would go down to the stores in St. Paul. Every day there'd be a few go down with an armful of furs, and they'd buy a little at a time. It'd take about a month for them to trade off all their furs and get ready to go back to Manitoba, and then they'd start off across the prairie - oh, I don't know how many wagons they had. They must have had probably fifty or sixty wagons, something like that.

(Your mother told you these stories, didn't she? Did she remember them from when her father had the store?)

Yes. But the thread, they used to get a lot of thread from the Indians, and they'd take the sinews - tendons, you know - and unravel some of it, but anything sewed with threads would never rot or break. It would wear forever. All these clothes, buffalo robes, and coats and caps and gloves, were sewn with buffalo sinew.

(I didn't quite understand the relationship with Tozer.)

That's through my father.

(And he came out and worked ...?)

He worked for Tozer in Stillwater.

(I see. Had he known him back in Vermont?)

Oh, no.

(Then he worked in the winter, I suppose, in the woods and in the summers happened to go working on your mother's father's farm? Is that right?)

Yes. And you know, they used to raft the logs at Stillwater, and from there they were towed down the Mississippi River. There was an old fellow there at Stillwater - boy, you ought to get some of his history. Mr. Slaughter probably could steer you to some of this. I tell you he was one of the first river pilots that ran along the Mississippi River before they had boats, and they had great long oars about twenty-four feet long, and the logs would float down the river all right until they came to Lake Pepin, and from there they had to just take these long oars and get across the lake with those, you know. But he was a great big fellow, and his name was Joe Perro. Anyway, he was born and raised in New Orleans, and I would think he was about a quarter Indian, but he was a hell of a fine man, oh a fine man! God, talk about a strong man - he certainly was one! I know when we were kids there, he had a dairy farm about a mile from where we

were raised, and one day he went across the forty-acre field there. He never paid any attention to it but he got out into the middle of the field and here comes his bull with his tail up in the air bellowing away, going after him, you know. And the old man didn't have anything available, no clubs handy or anything, but he picked up a rock (I don't know how big the rock was) but I'll be damned if he didn't hit the bull between the eyes and knock him cold. But anyway, one incident about him going down the river with a raft of logs. They were bringing logs out of the Chippewa River in Wisconsin, you know, and they boomed those up down below Lake Pepin a little ways at a place called Beef Slough. Weyerhaeuser finally ran that big operation. But anyway, Joe Perro was going down with his raft of logs, and when they got to the Chippewa River, why there's a raft comes out of the Chippewa there, and a great big Frenchman came aboard and he says - he was liquored up quite a bit - and he says, "Joe, I'm the best man in our crew." And he says, "I'd like to fight with the best son-of-a-bitch you fellows have got." "Well," Joe says, "I'll tell you. We're getting a bonus for getting these logs to St. Louis at a certain date, and we haven't got any time to fight you. You go on about your business and let us alone." And he got abusive, you know, and tried to scare them a little, and he got kind of troublesome so Joe says, "Well, if you're going to fight, all right, let's fight." Joe knocked him down and took him by the back of the coat here, in the seat of the pants, and he walked over to the edge of the raft and threw him in head first. That ended the fight. Boy, I don't suppose there's any of his ancestors left there. I know he had two boys, one come out west. I know he worked on the Great Northern Railroad in Montana and that's the last I ever heard of him. He's surely dead a long time. You know, there was a millionaire in Stillwater at that time. His name was Staples. You know where the old prison is? He had a stone house right up on the hill just back of the prison there, but he was the richest man in that county at that time. When he got old he had a lingering illness, and in those days he had a carriage and coachman and he'd send down where Joe lived down below Oak Park there about a mile or two, but he'd send his coachman down every day to get old Joe to come up and entertain him with stories of the river. He'd send for him every day.

(I take it then that after your mother and father were married, they settled down in Stillwater. And what kind of business was your father in?)

He worked in logging camps until he got to be a small operator himself. In later life he was a timber cruiser; he learned surveying some way or other. I don't know how in the hell he ever did it because he never went to a school more than three or four months in his life. But there was a lumber company had a sawmill at Burlington, Iowa. You know, it's down in the southern part of the state. But anyway, he looked after its logging operations. They first bought logs on the St. Croix River, but afterwards they bought a big tract of timber on the upper Mississippi. His headquarters was Hibbing for, oh, about ten or twelve years, and he did their

cruising and surveyed their timber and looked after the cutting in the winter to see that they cut the way the logs should have been. The logs were floated down the Mississippi River and they boomed them at St. Paul and towed them to the mill at Burlington.

(Then he later became independent and had a mill of his own?)

No. He stayed at that job until I came out West here, and then he got so he couldn't work as he had rheumatism so that he couldn't work any more. So I sent for him out here; I had a house up on 9th Street here and I built a house for them right along side of me and he and my mother spent the rest of their life there.

(How was it that you happened to leave Minnesota to come out here? What was the reason for that?)

Oh, there was a fellow in Yakima by the name of George Rankin. George Rankin had been a tinner in Stillwater; I think the Bronson family had a hardware store there. I know they had a grocery store. But anyway this Rankin had been working as a tinner in Stillwater, and he got acquainted with Fred Pennington who was a pretty good size logger in Stillwater. His house that he lived in - you know the Court House - well, it's down south a little ways and over on 2nd Street. I suppose if I was back there I could find his house yet. Anyway, this George Rankin finally went out to work for the hardware store in Yakima. Gee, that was a funny thing too the way it turned out. There was a fellow in Stillwater named Sawyer who started a hardware store, the Yakima Hardware Company in Yakima. The store's there yet. But this got to be a whale of a good big thing. But at the early start, Fred Pennington furnished, I guess, about three quarters of the money. Fred was still logging back there, you know, and doing pretty well. They'd have an annual meeting along in January every year, you know, and every year Fred'd come out and they'd read the report and show a deficit, and they owed so many bills, and they'd say, "Now, Fred, we've just got to have 10,000 dollars more or we might as well fold up." And he did that for three different years and finally then they began to make money. And they wrote him two or three letters along in the middle of the summer to be sure to come out to the annual meeting next January because they had a dividend for him and they wanted to talk to him about some expansion. And Fred never came out and he never answered their letters. It went on for three years like that so finally they sent him a wire and asked Fred to come out to the annual meeting on the 10th of January, "Be sure and come out because we have three dividends for you." So Fred hopped on a train and came out there, and the first thing Rankin - Rankin was running the business; he'd been running it ever since he went out there. It got to be an awful big business. Anyway when Pennington got out there, he said, "Fred, why didn't you answer our letters?" And they'd sent him some telegrams which he didn't answer. "Well," Fred said, "I'll tell you, George. The truth of the matter is that all your letters before that had been telling about how

much money you had lost, and you wanted another 10,000 dollars, and I thought you wanted another touch so I burned the damn things as soon as I got them, never even looked at them." But when I come out here shortly afterwards, they had 27 clerks in that store.

(How did it happen that you came out at all?)

Well, Rankin got Fred Pennington out here to show him all the timber here. There were no sawmills up here at all. And Yakima was booming and Toppenish was growing, and all the way down to the Columbia River. And George Rankin - oh, he was smart - he had a list of all the number of cars of lumber that came into each one of these towns, you know, and got Fred out here and took him out to look over all this timber. They were experienced log drivers and all that sort of thing, and he says, "George, by God, that looks like a good opportunity." And so he went back to Stillwater and got ahold of Mr. Slaughter. His partner at that time was Henry Svendsen. He was president at first when they built the mill here. Well, they decided they were going to come out here and build a mill and start manufacturing lumber. And Robert Slaughter and I were kids together, you know, and I was working at Tozer sawmill in south Stillwater, and later I happened to be up in Cloquet and was sales manager of one of the big mills up there and was getting along fine. Well, then Rob and Mr. Svendsen took an interest in it, and they wanted a manager and Rob says, "Well, I don't know," and they talked it over and thought maybe I'd be all right to start in that business up there so they asked me to come to Stillwater. I think I was up at Cloquet near Duluth. So I went down there and they said, "We're talking about building a mill out there at Yakima and we were just wondering if you'd like to come out there and start the thing." And boy, I was just happy to do that.

(How old a man were you about that time?)

Well, let's see. I was born in '75 and that was about 1901.

(About 26?)

Yes. So that's how I came out.

(Do you remember any of the details of the journey?)

I'll tell you about it. I came out on the train. I left Duluth; I was living in Duluth at the time. There was a couple of feet of ice on the harbor at that time, and oh boy, it was cold there. And I got out into North Dakota and went through a snow storm. It was the 2nd of May. Anyway, I got up early in the morning and the train was just crossing the Columbia River. Three quarters of the land was sage brush and it looked like the Sahara Desert to me. When I got to Yakima, why I had a letter of introduction to George Rankin. And George would come down to the hotel every night and we'd talk about things.



(That was the hotel you told me about?)

The old Bartholet Hotel, I think. You know where Yakima Avenue is, and the road from Ellensburg goes down there? Well, just before it gets to Yakima - it's in that block there. Right in the middle of the block. Well, anyway, we started to build the mill. Oh, we had a hell of a time. Well, you wouldn't be interested in that, but they thought they'd drive the logs down the river, you know, and they drove a string of piling diagonally across the river, and it was in the winter time, you know. And my God, talk about fish! They drove piling all winter across there, and I was out there every day.

(You were working driving piling, or what?)

Well, they had a contractor that time, and I used to go out to see how the work was coming along, and the whitefish were so thick, sometimes it was so thick in the bottom you couldn't see - the water was clear, you know - and you couldn't see the bottom. Black, covered with fish, millions of them. Nowadays, there's probably one thousandth as many whitefish coming up the river as there was those days. Anyway, we drove piling across that river and along in February the snow was deep in the mountains and there comes a long rain and it rained and thawed - you know, the action of the wind, warm wind in the winter time. Anyway, the river began to raise to beat hell, and the Naches, which comes in there from the West, there had been sloughs there where the water was maybe eight inches deep and the winters hadn't been so cold for a spell, and the doggone cold weather would freeze these sloughs and the ice would freeze to the rocks down below there. In about three or four days great big chunks of ice came floating down the Naches River, and there were so many rocks that the ice, instead of floating on top of the river, slid down the bottom of the river and hit these pilings and knocked them down like they was ten pins in a bowling alley.

(In other words, had they come out here expecting to log pretty much as they had in Minnesota?)

Yes, sure. Oh, they afterwards overcome that by building what we called a "fin boom". Nothing I'd ever heard of, but those loggers from Stillwater knew how to build one.

(What was your job to be, Mr. Sinclair?)

I was to manage the thing, but when I saw this gosh-darn piling there go out, I thought we were licked. So I sold out.

(But then you came over here eventually?)

Yes, and started just a little thing; it was just a little small mill then, but boy, I made a lot of money out of it.

(That's this mill here?)

Yes.

(You had the advantage of benefiting by the mistakes they made over at the other mill.)

Yes, that's right. Well, to go back to Yakima. They tried it for two or three years but the logs they lost the first year were worth \$60,000. Some of them went underneath the boom, you know. But they overcome that. Damn them, those fellows from Stillwater - they knew things they didn't know out West. These fellows told me to go over to Tacoma and get - I don't know how many carloads of timber we bought. They were 12x16s, and we built a boom out of them like that, and we broke joints, see. It was three feet wide, and this was diagonal across the river. They put on some things called a "fin boom"; they were hinged right here. They were 4x24 - 4 inch plank and 24 inches wide - and they were about 24 or 26 inches long. And they put those things out there. Then they put a wire rope down here, a whole length of it, and they put a windlass up here on a cottonwood tree up on the bank. When you wind this windlass up and pull these up, why the current would go against that and shove the boom out so that when you pull it up far enough, it would pull the lower end of the boom clear across the river. That wasn't all; they lost a lot of logs underneath that. But then, looking at it up and down, looking at it endways - they took some iron, about 1x4 iron, and they cut notches in that timber and they bent it over here. Now the water was here, and on this side they were - they put some plank on here. Now here were those three timbers which made this thing, you see. And they put some plank on the face of these, a couple of plank about 4x12, I believe, so that the log couldn't go underneath. Get the idea?

(Sure.)

The water was coming down this way, you see, and the water was up to here. They couldn't go underneath then and they drove successfully. Then the logs come down here and they couldn't dive underneath. The water was pretty swift in the spring when it was high. There were no dams up here in the river at all to control the flood. That was the way they made the damn thing go, after a while. But they had a lot of trouble.

(How long did you stay with the mill over in Yakima?)

Oh, about a year and a half.

(Then you decided it would be best to go in business for yourself?)

Yes, with all I had. I came out here with \$3,000 - all I had. And when I had \$5,000 worth of stock - I bought it on a shoe string - I don't know how I managed that but I did some way or other. Then Rob's partner, Mr. Svendsen, came out here and he took charge of Yakima, and he made a go of it. Boy, they started with \$100,000 capital and before they got through, before they got the mill half built, I said, "Our money's going to run pretty

short. You'd better try to raise \$50,000 right quick." Before they got through they had \$400,000 in the mill there. I must tell you about old Kingsbury. He had long red whiskers . . .

(This was one of the boys at the hotel - Kingsbury?)

This was the fellow, the surveyor, that located the Northern Pacific along the Yakima River. I wish someone would write about that old devil's life. After I came out here he moved to Olympia. He had a daughter and he lived in Olympia about 25 years and died there. But I never heard of anyone mentioning it, nothing in the papers that I ever saw.