



Ellison Jackson

Great Basin Indian Archive

GBIA 003



Oral History Interview by

Norm Cavanaugh and Joe Ducette

January 27, 2006

Owyhee, NV



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J: As I remember, we used to live in a tent when I first remember it. On side of the road, by the Presbyterian Church that's out of town out here. And I remember I lived there in a hard winter. My grandpa used to get up and paw the snow off the tent, so he said it won't break it, it won't rip the tent. We get a lot of snow. And that's what I remember about that.

Well, our Indian diet mostly... meat, dried meat. You know, you make venison, you make a jerky out of it, and a berries that my grandmother and grandfather get, we put it in a patties like a hamburger and grind it. During the winter, eat that. And usually make bread out of a flour, we called Indian bread. You know, they put it in the oven, you know, cook it like that. Or over a open stove, like with a grease, lot of grease. And they call it "grease bread." That's what we loved to eat. And our old-timers, if you set up a table and there's no Indian—we called it Indian bread—if there's no Indian bread, you put a white bread on, they said, "Throw that white bread away! That's no good. We want Indian bread." So the womenfolks usually always making that bread, they don't buy that ready-made bread, Wonderbread.

As I remember first, we used to have a wash tub stove. Like, in a tent? In a wash tub, you cut a hole in there, put a pipe in there, and put a little door in the front. Use that for stove. And they cook on it.

Yes, or sagebrush, or willows. Whatever that you get. My parents were Robert Jackson, and my mom was Lena Jackson. When he first moved to Owyhee—in [19]30s, I guess, I'm not too quick on that—and I was born here in [19]34.

I moved here because my mom's dad, my grandfather, they lived here. They raised horses, cattle, you know. So he move here and work on odd jobs around Owyhee reservation.

Well, we used to grow up playing all the time. In the snow, in the winter; sometime we'd go swimming; and sometime we go hunting, with the slingshot. You know, with the slingshot, we'd go out and kill these squirrels, and we cook them over open fire out there someplace and have it for lunch. That was our life.

I had two sisters and one brother. I'm the second. Second to my sister, my sister was oldest and I'm the second.

School was, they called—what was they call it—Swayne school, I guess. Because I remember, went to kindergarten. I don't know how old I was. I didn't know how to speak English. Maybe “yes” or “no,” as I remember. [Laughter] And I always tell this story when someone ask that question. Said I went to school. And the teacher got a paper, and calling people's name out. So they said, “Raise your hand up when you hear name.” Kids start raising here and there, you look around. And there was lot of people that we don't know everybody, because they come from different areas. And we only knew people in town because we live in town. Surrounding area, we're not too acquainted with these other kids. So I said, “Whose name is that?” Look at them. So pretty soon, the teacher said, “Ellison Jackson.” I was looking around. Who's Ellison Jackson? Nobody raised their hand up. And the teacher pointed at me. And I said, “me?” They say yes. Says, “Raise your hand!” So I raised my hand. It was a funny name, I never did like since! I said growing up, “I hate that name!” Because my Indian name my grandfather gave me was *Bombo*. Everybody called me *Bombo*. So I thought that was my—well, that was my

name. Still they call me that today! [Laughter] They don't use Ellison! I thought that was so funny.

Well, I went to seventh grade. I went to seventh grade here, I go to work on a ranch.

C: And what did you do at the ranch? What was life like?

J: I was a buckaroo. **Horse riding life**, you know, ride a horse? Cowboying for different ranch. Wherever they hire me, I go to work.

Well, generally, it's mostly... You work with cattle. On a horse.

Early. Four in the morning.

Sometime, if you work close to the house, you work long hours. Like, eight hours, nine hours. And sometime you're far away, you don't come home until late, like couple twelve hours in fall. In roundup time, you're busy.

We used to make hundred and quarter a months. It's a room and board. So, I thought that was great.

When you get in in the morning, there's a buckaroo boss there. In the corral, there's a lot of horses. Then you tell the buckaroo boss which horse you're going to ride. You've got about six horses that yours, like they belong to you. You keep them in good shape, you put shoes on them, make sure they're not sick. You feed 'em, take care of them like you really own it. So you tell the buckaroo boss, "This horse I want." So they'll go out there and rope it for you. So you saddle up, get ready for—other cowboys get ready. Then everybody ready, then you go. The cow boss take the lead, so you follow. Like he'd say, "Well, we're going to work that area." Certain area of the hills, mountains, you know.

You're working cattle. You're moving from, move a cattle from different places to different area. Like, fall, spring, summer, then branding time. You know, you do all that.

C: And how many buckaroos would you have on a ranch?

J: It's a big ranch, usually about ten. Small ranch, maybe five.

C: Were they married?

J: Mostly young, young buckaroos. There are about eighteen, seventeen, eighteen, up to twenty young buckaroos. A few of them married, you know.

Well, my dad, he was... He became a operator, cat operator. Later on in years, learn how to run the Cat. The big D... D8 or something like that. Anyway, he worked on a Cat. And he worked as mechanic, here. But he don't—he's always busy, so he don't, he really didn't teach me anything as I remember. But my grandfather, Jim—his name was Jim Cavanaugh. James Cavanaugh. He's the one that give me a lecture on, you know, learn how to work. Mostly ranch work he was talking about. Like fixing fence, stacking hay, being buckaroo, being nice to people, and always be polite at the table. You know, these things which, were never taught that at home. He said, "You go work with these ranchers, you're going eat. Everybody eat together. There be twenty people there, maybe fifteen. So you always say, 'Please.' When you order something, always say 'Please.' Then don't point at things." He taught me all that. Then later on, I learned that my grandfather came from Battle Mountain, that area. They're the people that was called Western Shoshones. And my dad came from Austin, Nevada. They're also Western Shoshone people. Western Shoshone band, I mean.

Well, it's a long story... [Laughter]

C: That's okay!

J: It goes—a legend, way back in legend times, the story goes like... There was a Coyote. They go into Coyote, like this. Well, the Coyote's our father. No, Wolf's our father, and

the Coyote is Wolf's brother. So, us Indians, we're all Coyote's children. So, he was our father. And he had whole bunch of kids, in different race, I guess. But there was only two that he brought home. And to Nevada, I guess, to his home. After he got this woman pregnant. And anyway, so he brought *two* home. Where they live in the mountains, where there was a stream. And, so early in the morning, when he woke up, he thought his little boys need cleaning, like a bath. Stream running, so he got up, and he give them a bath. He use, the Indians use that mud, the fine mud, for soap. [Rubbing hands together] You use that for soap. Put that on them and clean them up. But the two little boys, when they first, when he let them go, after he let them go—they always fighting. You know how boys... They fight each other. So, then the Coyote said, "Well, this not going to work. You're both my boys, you guys fighting." But he said, he put a curse on them, he said, "What I'm going to do is I'm going to separate you two. Apart." So, he took one of his boys, he got to live on the south, and one on the north. So the guy who going to give you a, you be the—well, I don't know where the Shoshone came from, but "you be the..." They call them a *newe*, Indian. Shoshone word means, you're your person, *newe*. And the Paiute separated to the north. But he was your brother, and he was separated from you. Then I don't remember where he get the name Paiute, but they was both *neme*, because they're both brothers, they're both Indians, that's what was given to them. But the curse put on them was, "Whenever you two meet someplace down the trail, no matter where at, since you don't like each other you guys going to fight. The Paiute and the Shoshone, you meet each other on the trail somewheres, you just going to battle it out. You won't like each other." That was the curse put on them. And they said, "The way you can recognize each other is, the Shoshone will have a round eyes, like a owl." Kind of round eyes.

That's a Shoshone. You look at the other guy, he's a Paiute, he'll have a slant eyes. Like, upwards? So that's the way you can recognize each other. So that's the way the story go, end up like that! [Laughter] So, that's where we came from. That's what the legend told us. Yeah, it was kind of interesting. But in life, today, when you tell that to a Paiute, they get hostile. I tell that story lot of times, and they say, "We're all Indians! How come you don't like us, the Shoshones don't like Paiutes?" "But it's a legend!" I said, now, yes, once.

Well, this one I always tell. You ask us where we came from. You know, I always—well, my grandfather said, well, this is... When—we don't say "God." We have our own religious way of live, I guess. Our own belief, the Western Shoshones. So, that's what my grandfather told me.

There was this world. It was up there. There was nothing on it. But that's where they believe that Wolf—they call it a Wolf and a Coyote—that's where they came from. From this, uh... the world was getting made, and that's where they came from. So we, like a Bible say, we came from our Father, the God. And it's similar to that. But in Indian way, that's the way they tell. But they said, "That's where we came from!" And when the, after the world was, people on it already. There's human beings on it. But the sun was going *too* low. Instead of up high. It was *too* low. It was so *hot*. So the people that live on this earth, they live underground. But when he cool off, they'll come out. At night. So, you roam around. So, then they go back underground, when the sun coming out. So the chief decide—they had a chief—but Coyote wasn't **one of it [16:30]**. There was some chief, they had, I can't remember the names. But the mostly animals they talk about. The Indians said, "Well, we should do something about this sun. It's too low, too hot up there.

Why don't we set it up higher, so it won't burn us?" So they decided, "Well, we could do it." Then they said, "Well, how?" Then their chief said, they decide, "Well, we could kill the sun. Because Sun's alive, because he come out every morning. He's alive." So they said, "We'll kill it." Then they said, "Well, if we kill it, it'll come down to earth and burn us," somebody said. Then they said, "Yeah, that's true." Then they said, "Well, we've got to find somebody that could run fast and dig a hole underneath the ground and jump in there before the sun come down to earth, after they shoot it." So the Coyote said, "Pick me!" But they said, "Don't pick Coyote, he'll do something wrong" because, see, they don't trust him, the Coyote. "So what? I could run fast." So they put a test, who could run fast. You know, so many yards, who could run fast that distant. So the people keep trying, Coyote keep saying, "I'm fast!" He'll go up there and come back. Real fast. But they don't trust him. So there was, two people was pick. There was a Cottontail, and the Brush Rabbit that was picked. So they said, "Well, you two kill the sun." So they went out, went to hunt for the sun. So they went to the mountain where the sun came out. They settled to wait for the sun. So the next morning, when they sit up there, the sun didn't come out. [Laughter] He come over the other mountain, across. So they never did caught up to the sun. But keep traveling, keep traveling. But every night when they camp out, or dig a hole where they going to live, under the earth. So, finally, I don't know how long they travel, try to catch the sun, but finally they... One morning the sun came out on top of that mountain where they were staying. Close. It was so hot! So they came out of their hole, and they had a bow and arrow to shot at it. And their bow and arrow just burned. *Pwoosh!* The arrow. They don't had it. Or they shoot it, and it burnt before it reach the sun. It was so hot. So the, they decide, "Well, if we use a medicine"—the Indian people

use certain type of medicine that's strong. So they decide, "Well, we'll just use a sagebrush bark and wrap it real tight around that arrow. And they pray to it. Put their, whatever medicine they have, they put it on and pray to it. And they shot that. And that thing burn, *Pwoosh!* And hit the sun. Once it hit, Sun got hit, he came down. Fall off the sky to the ground. So they took off and jumped under a hole. So the brush rabbit and the cottontail jump in their hole, but that brush rabbit didn't dig a deep hole. And the cottontail, it was a deeper hole. So pretty soon, the Cottontail, he hears his buddy Bush Rabbit crying. Screaming. But it was so hot! The Cottontail put his foot in that hole, where they dig to keep the heat off. So I don't know how long, it took quite a while for it to cool off. So after he cool off, the Cottontail came out of the hole looking at his brother. His brother was all cooked, blacked. Singed. So then he notice, the sun was laying there on the ground. But the sun was still alive. So, then he told the sun that's what's happening. "You're burning us," you know, "You run too low. Why don't you go up higher?" So he grab it and send it up higher, up into the sky. So he won't be traveling close to the earth after this. But he cut his, Brush Rabbit's gut, and use the

[cut in recording from from 21:33 – 21:36]

you travel up there, you make a star. Became a star. And the gut here became a Milky Way. And what else they made out of that? [Laughter] I can't remember—That's what he did! So, like, they say, "Well, today when you look up at the sky, you'll think, 'Well, that's the Brush Rabbit's eyes shining.'" Oh, they made a moon out of the kidney! Throw it up there and made a moon out of it so you could travel at night. You could see the light. So he done all that. So the job was completed. So the next morning, the sun came out

over the mountain, it was up higher. So they done their job. [Laughter] That was legend. So, it was told to me.

Well, the Indians, they get together. It's a get-together. On a big holiday, like that. So at the Indian Colony up in Elko, they had this hand game going. And the womans play cards, and Round Dance every night. And they'll four days, four-five days, and that fair going on. And lot of people, they came in from different areas. And Fourth July, people do the same. They came over to Owyhee. And they do the same thing. Hand game, card games, races, rodeo here. And a Round Dance.

Well, if you work on a ranch, you go with the boss. They usually haul the workers in for holiday. But if somebody had a car, you jump in with them. To Owyhee, if it's short ways. Like if you work in **WP**, or **Flying H Ranch [23:34]**... But other areas, the boss go to town, and jump in with him, and come back to work with, to the ranch with him.

Yeah, there's Indian celebration going on all the time. And there's some singers. You know, they call a Round Dance? People take turns singing a song, about... Singing Indian song is telling a story. Instead of telling a story, you put it into singing. So... And that's whats it's all about, and people enjoy that as celebrations.

Everybody dance together, you know, you hold hands and... Women, old lady, young kids... They just have all kinds of fun.

Yeah, that's how I brought my drum and that. Maybe I'll sing a one song. This is, my dad used to sing that. I remember that. When I was a little kid, he always singing a song. So I always, I pick it up when I was a young kid. So. he always sing a song. So. This talk about a mountain. You know, that big mountain. How the mountain looked, it's kind of blue, all this and that. Put it into song, and he always singed it. It's—he always say, "In

Austin, where I live, there was a big mountain. So that's what my song about."

[Laughter] He always say that! Never been to Austin, so I always remember what he used to say. So this is it:

[sings in Newe at **25:19**]

[song concludes at **26:32**]

So that's that Round Dance song. You could go over, I don't know, two-three difference in, if you've got a good wind here, because you sing it over and over about two, three times, same wording. And people dance to it. When they like that song, they said, "Come on, sing that song again!" Then you have to go over and over. And that's a Round Dance song.

Yes, I did, uh-huh. Made out of a elk hide. So I made that.

Well, you had to have a board inside, and soak the hide. After you scrape the hair off the hide, then you stretch it when it's wet, over this. Then they dry out like that. So got to be tight. So, that's what I made for a trip down Fort Hall. I made some. They invite me over to tell a story, so wanted a, I thought I needed a drum to sing a song. [Laughter] I made one!

Okay, um... When I was a young kid growing up, there was our neighbor. His name was Stanley Gibson. He was cripple. He was in a wheelchair. And used to visit him all the time. I'd carry water for him, he was real nice. He give us nickel now and then for candy. Was growing up, and he'd do rawhide work. Sit in wheelchair and do all that. Talk to us, and laugh, and then we push him out to the store in the wheelchair, and was good friend of ours. So I learned little bit about rawhide from him. So... But as time went on, I always want to work a rawhide because when you work on ranch, somebody know how

to work rawhide. Cowboys, maybe tie a knot, maybe somebody working rawhide. And they willing to teach you. But, as I was growing up, I hate to ask somebody. You know, because they're busy doing something, you hate to ask them. It's so complicated. So, what I did was, my brother-in-law have a ranch south of Elko. His name was Raymond Darrough. I live one winter with him there, helping him, feeding cattle. So he said, "Well, let's make reata, we're going to run horses." Wild horses, mustang. So says, "I'll show you how." So he taught me how to make reata. Slow process, and he'd braid it together, and he use it. So, then he taught me how to braid and tie a few knots. Simple one. But it was so complicated. I keep asking him. And pretty soon he get tired of me, and he said, "Well, this is last time I'm going to tell you. You better pick it up!" So I went so far, and that was it, I kept making mistakes. But later on in years, there's a book called *Cowboy Horse Gear*. It show how to tie a knot, and all the rawhide knots the cowboys use. So, I learned how to tie knots from studying that. Kinda complicated at first. Then I learned how to cut it, how to soak it, how to treat it, everything. Then braid, you do lot of braiding. Hard on your hands, the knot-tying's. You know, on that set arrange that, lot of different knots I put on. And that's the way I learned. Because whoever work rawhide, they don't want to waste time teaching you, because you'll never learn in one day or two days, or a week. Take forever! And the person that teach rawhide, they... You go to school nowadays, I think they cost about, for six week, about \$2000 to attend a class. Just for couple hours a day. So nobody got no time to teach a person. So that's where I learn how to work rawhide, then. And I had some—I donated some to Elko Museum, my work. And it was hanging at Stockman's that one year.

Well, I wouldn't say **don't count it, just...** [31:12] I always say, "Forever!" [Laughter] Because you braid it during the summer. You clean the hide, you braid it during the summer. Cut the strings into fine—fine strings, all even. Then wintertime, you tie the knots. Sit there at night through the cold weather. Slow process. Then complete it finally. And then you're happy. Then you want to look at it, then somebody come along and said, "Hey! How much you want for it?" Say, "Nah, not for sale." But I sell it all the time. [Laughter] So... It's a good art, because then people knew I, since I had my work hanging in Stockman's and people knew my, who I am and what type of work I done, good rawhide work they say, so they want to order. They call me and said, "Hey, make me one!" And I tell them, "Well, if I get around to it, I'll make one, but right now I don't have any." So that's the way I got a **clean up** [32:22] with that.

Growing up is... I don't know how old I was—well, maybe ten or something—but our favorite pastime was hunting, fishing, riding horse, swimming during the summer, and playing all the time. That's all we did. Nothing much. But, I love to ride horse. My grandpa let me ride a horse, I'll ride a horse. My grandpa was real strict on the horses. You can't—he got to be with you, if you ride his horse. He always say, "Don't run your horse to death!" You know, when you're young kid, you just want to run, run, run! [Laughter] You don't want to run slow! So, he said, "I got to be there!" So that was fun part. And he took, grandpa took me fishing. I enjoy that. Go up the river to go catch some fish. Trouts, usually.

[End of recording]