

# ELLA SKAAR MURRAY

## Interview by Penny Kielpinski — September 21, 1977

Penny: I'm sitting here in the Stevenson home of Don and Ella Murray on the first day of fall, September 21, 1977. It's a little after two in the afternoon. The sky is heavily clouded with skant patches of blue and a strong West wind promising cooler weather. I'll be talking today with Ella Murray, a vivacious lady of 75, who's been a long-time resident of Skamania County. Her memory has the clarity and tenacity of the veteran school-marm that she is. I'd like to ask Ella to begin with, the chronology of her family's travels to this area and we'll continue from there. Ella . . .

Ella: Well, both sets of my grandparents were born in Norway, and both sets came to the United States in 1866, I believe, into Minnesota and lived fairly close to each other, moving around a great deal, from Minnesota to North Dakota and South Dakota.

My father was born in Minnesota and my mother was born in South Dakota. Mother and father were about thirteen years apart in age, so he was a young man when she was a baby, at least he said when he first saw her that's how he felt, and if anyone told him he was going to marry this baby he would have roared.

They moved; both families moved to Cascade Locks in 1888. They had heard about the work there on the dam, or not the dam, but the Locks, and lots of railroad work, and so both families moved out here. My grandfather Skaar moved across the river to the Stevenson area where he bought a homestead owned by a man by the name of Stone, and that's the place where my brother Lawrence now lives.

My Grandparents Skaalheim, which is my Grandmother's name on my mother's side, stayed in Cascade Locks and my grandpa worked for the railroad. In the year of 1890, there was a very severe storm and the weather was very cold. The river froze over, and everything was just miserably cold. The weather changed, heavy rains came, and there were many, many, washouts along the railroad tracks from Cascade Locks to Vancouver, or I mean Portland. Fifty or something like that washouts, and so, of course, grandpa was very, very busy. With him was his brother-in-law, grandmother's sister's husband who had come

out at the same time, and they were working on the railroad and one morning they boarded a caboose of a work train and headed west to repair the railroad. The truck collapsed and the caboose went into a little canyon and both men were killed. Leaving both their wives pregnant.

My Great-aunt's baby arrived in March, my Grandmother's in July of that same year. They lived in Cascade Locks for another year because they had no other place to go. They were Norwegian, they spoke Norwegian. It was difficult for them. And then they heard of a place over across the river called Home Valley where a number of Norwegians lived. They had named it Home Valley because it reminded them of the valleys at home and so they went across the river to Home Valley and with the insurance money they got from the railroad company the next year, they bought the homestead of Mr. McKegan, and the two women with four children apiece lived in a little log cabin on this homestead for a short while, until they could divide the land and build another home.

They divided and Auntie Frost bought, or took the north part of the farm. I don't know just how many acres, and my Grandmother took the south part, which included about ten acres of rock on Wind Mountain. This was directly west of Wind Mountain. They both lived close together, they were very, very close; they were only two years different in age, and they were very close anyway. And they lived there until both of them died, they spent the rest of their years there.

My Grandmother married again, a fellow by the name of Lars Erickson, whom she had met over in Cascade Locks when she used to row her boat and take her eggs and her vegetables and her fruit and her butter to Cascade Locks to sell, and buy her flour and sugar, and things that she needed. And so he came over and, I think it was in, oh, the late 1890's, when they were married, or middle 1890's, maybe about 1893, or 1894. He evidently had cancer, because he died of something terrible lingering. I remember him in 1905. I was just very, very young, but I remember him, and he had a long illness. They had four children, the eldest died in less than a year, and the other three grew up. My Aunt Anna Erickson, Anna Cheney now, and my Uncle Ed Erickson is still living. Did I say they had four children? They had three children.

Auntie Meneice married a man by the name of Tom Meneice, an

Irishman who was a woodcutter and cut cordwood for the sternwheelers, then he'd haul it down to the river and the steamboats would pick it up. And they had several children, three I think, by their marriage. He died also, quite young as compared to the two women. My grandmother and my aunt were in their late eighties and in their nineties; my Grandmother was past ninety when she died.

My Father was a young man when they came out here. He was about 18, (17 or 18) when they came out and he worked at Bridal Veil, and then he came to Washington. He lived with his father over here. My Grandmother, by the way, was a widower. My Grandmother died when my youngest uncle was just a tiny baby, and the girls of the family, my two aunts, took care of the little ones. And they also lost children the first year that they were over here, because people coming from the prairie country where it was cold and dry in the winter time, weren't used to croup and many of the babies died of croup. My father lived, took a homestead just close to where his father lived, and he worked out at different jobs.

Then, in 1901, he and my mother were married. She was not quite 18, and he was about thirty, thirty-one. And they took over Grandpa's place and that's been in the family ever since. That's where I was born.

Penny: Now this is the house that Lawrence is in?

Ella: Yeah, where Lawrence lives. I was born in a log cabin on that place. I always tell my children that I had something in common with Abraham Lincoln. When they asked if we had anything wonderful happen to our family, I say, well, I was born in a log cabin like Abraham Lincoln .

When I was about three, my father built another house. The log cabin was too small, and it was old, and not very well built, so it was torn down, and the house that he built then is the one that's still being in use. It's been remodeled and changed some, of course. And in that year, the year that I was born, in 1902, was the year of the Yacolt burn, and it took place all over this country. It's called Yacolt burn, I guess, because it started out that area, but it did burn all through Skamania County and even over into Oregon. They said it crossed the river.

I don't remember it, of course, because I was only about 4 months old,

it was in September. But I remember their telling me that they had me in a baby buggy, one of those high wheeled baby carriages, and mother said she put wet blankets over the buggy entirely so I wouldn't choke, so I could breathe. And they just lived in peril that they would burn. The trees were right up to the barn on one side and right up to the creek on the other side and she said it was just a sheet of flame over the house. And a roar that you couldn't imagine for noise. And heat that was terrific, and smoke so thick even with the lamps lit, you could hardly see during the daytime and your eyes burned and your mouth burned, and . . .

Penny: I remember you mentioned the chickens went to roost in the middle of the day.

Ella: Yeah, chickens went to roost. The folks were very lucky, they didn't lose anything excepting a couple of chickens and they had a cow that, after the fire was all over and things had kind of died down, ventured out a little far and stepped in some hot ashes and she burned the hooves of her feet and that was just about the only danger they had - hot ashes. They said there were many places where there would be ashes smoldering.

Penny: You had somebody up on the roof?

Ella: My uncles stayed at our place, at that time, they were younger than my father, and weren't married, and they stayed there and they helped by taking gunny sacks and blankets and old coats and so on and saturating them with water. Kanaka Creek went right by the house, which it still does, and they could get water. Their flume burned that they had the water flumed to the house on, but they could get water from the creek and they had all the barrels and tubs and everything full of water, and they had to be up on the roof to put out the sparks that landed on the roof, and neither barn nor buildings, any of the buildings burned, which was amazing because with all that heat and shingles and at the end of summer everything would have been bone dry. It wouldn't have taken much of a spark to set it all on fire. But it was a horrible thing to go through and I have had a horror of forest fires partially from hearing this and partially from seeing some of my own, later on, but, it was a terrible thing to have.

After the forest fire, everything was black, stumps and trees and snags.

As I grew up that was the scenery around. You just looked out and you saw all this black and all these snags, and, of course, Forestry Departments weren't what they are now, and they didn't come rushing in and say, we must cut these to keep the fire hazard down. But logging companies did move in, and the Wind River Logging Co., which had its big mill over at Cascade Locks, put a camp on the Fosse place, which is now the Stewart place. And they logged all the area around, any timber that was considered worthwhile at that time.

Penny: You said there were pockets of timber that hadn't been touched.

Ella: Yes, there were little spots here and there, for some reason or other would be passed by. Maybe it's nature's way of reseeding again because those trees that were left standing would send their seeds down to reseed. But they also did log some of the burnt trees because it had burned so fast it just burned the bark and burned the limbs and the trees would be good and sound, you see, for a couple of years. So they logged some of that. But there were many, many trees that were felled by the fire and they were just lying there, good solid logs. I know our fire wood for quite some time was often just off this burnt wood, horrible stuff to handle at first.

All the scenery around was real black. But we could see the river, we could see the river and the mountains, and we could see things that happened around, in fact it was many years that we could still see my father coming home from town below the school house when he'd be driving his team and we'd be on the lookout and we'd run to meet him and get a ride part of the way. But you know now you can't see anything cause the trees are grown up so.

The Wind River Logging Company had these logging camps and so did other people, other companies and they'd have a cookhouse and a bunkhouse, and a blacksmith shop, and barns for their horses, because all the logging was done with horses. They used skid-roads, and where there were steep hills to go down, they'd have chutes, and the logs would be hauled by the horses to the top of the chute then let loose down over the chute, and then teams would catch them down at the foot and go on the rest of the way.

The skid road from this area came in to the Columbia River close to the mouth of Kanaka Creek. Parts of it can be found yet, down near the

Simmons Road you can see where it used to be, both in the Lillegard area, and in the Simmons area. It made kind of an indentation in the ground where it was used.

Other logging camps sprang up, until about the 1920's, I think. There weren't any more after that, but all during the teens there were logging camps. There was one on the Kannikiberg place, which is where Sylvia Risjord lives. And right below the schoolhouse, in fact the people who built this house, had a sawmill right below the schoolhouse, the Flynn's. And they moved their camp after they had logged this area. They moved their camp down the hill a little ways, down to what we call the watering trough, which was just below the Keys' road, and then later on, then when they left the country, there were other people that had logging camps and sawmills. They built a little sawmill in each of these places, and sawed their boards and did their logging. There was one over in the Aalvik area, there were several on Rock Creek, in fact the last logging camp on Rock, I think was Ryan-Allen's in the 1920's. But before that there were many, many little logging camps, they were just everywhere where there was a little patch of timber, because they didn't do any logging except with horses. When they began doing logging with donkey engines then they could be a little farther away from their camp. And then of course when trucks came in, that was different too.

Penny: You mentioned Rock Creek. Did you do any swimming as a girl in Rock Creek?

Ella: Rock Creek Fjord, that was the big place in Rock Creek. There was a shallow spot. We went right through the Gropper place, which is where Mr. Ostler lives now, it belongs to Sammy Melonas I believe. There was a road that went right through that place, straight west, and right to Rock Creek and there was a shallow place, you could drive your horses through, so it was called the Fjord. Just above the Fjord, about 100 feet or so, was a nice big swimming hole and just below it was another one. But this place, it seemed like the gravel piled up there, and you could go across, and so it was a wonderful place to be, because the children could play, in that area, the little ones, and then the ones who could swim could go into the holes.

And that's where we always had our picnics, you know. Anything special outside of 4th of July was always held over there. The

Oddfellows and Rebeccas had a picnic there one time, I don't remember what year it was because I wasn't very old, but I remember that when we got there, everybody was saying "There's something horrible around here, there's something horrible around here," and you could smell it, it was just putrid. We had a special place that we always had our lunch, and everybody was spreading out their lunch, and they'd built up tables and things, out of boards and so on, sawhorses.

We had finished our lunch, everybody was sitting around, some of them had gone swimming, when somebody came tearing up, and they'd found a man. There was a man that had committed suicide, had drowned himself. I didn't see the body, cause my parents rushed all of us kids over to one side and got us into the wagon and took us home. But they said he was terribly bloated. That's what we'd been smelling. And I can still smell that horrible smell. They say that once you smell it, you'll know it again, I hope I never smell it again, it was awful.

But we used to have some wonderful times down there. That's the only place we had to go swimming, down on Rock Creek, and kids from town came out, and everybody from the country went there, whenever they could, which wasn't too often for us country kids, that had too many other things to do. Couldn't go swimming every day it was hot just because we felt like it.

Then the roads were always rough. In the winter time, they were terribly muddy and in the summertime they were awfully dusty, and very rutty. All the work on the roads was done with horses, with scrapers and slips and whatever they call them. You know, it was all done by hand, so they didn't accomplish a great deal in one day, not like they do now. And the farmers would go and put rocks and things in the worst holes whenever it began to get muddy. They'd haul a load of rock and dump into it, so they could get through. But it was not unusual to have mud pretty near to the hubs of the wagon wheels, and you didn't walk in the road, you walked on paths alongside of them.

Penny: You mentioned sometimes that you took the skid roads.

Ella: Oh yes, when we walked anywhere. On Sundays when I went to Sunday School, I always took the skid road. From the time I was nine I think, on, I would go to town to Sunday School. We belonged to the

Lutheran Church, and the Lutheran Church at that time was in Norwegian, and the ministers came from other parts, from Clark County somewhere. And they would have service one time in Home Valley and about two weeks later in Stevenson, and usually in somebody's home, until 1915 or 16, when the little church was built down here. But in the meantime, there would be no place to go to Church except the Methodist or Congregational Churches. The Congregational Church wasn't built until I think about 1913, that's the one that the Nazarenes use now. But the Methodist Church was just about where the Post Office is now, just below Ash's Store. It was up on a knoll, you had to go up a flight of stairs to it. And that's where we went to Church or Sunday School.

I would take the skid road down over the hill, that was the shortcut, and stop at my Aunt Kari Lillegard's and her two daughters and I would go on the rest of the way. She used to laugh, because she said, she always had the needle and thread ready, and my uncle always had the shoe last ready because, they said I never got there but what I had, either a torn space in a dress or a heel or something wrong with my shoes, because I ran all the way.

But I wasn't afraid to go alone, because it was the only way I could go. I was the eldest of the family, and if I wanted to go somewhere, that was the way I went. And if I got my chores done in the morning, I could go to Sunday School and Church and sometimes I'd bring somebody home with me and sometimes I'd go home with somebody else. We had fun.

School picnics, we had them occasionally. Not every year. Some years, the last day of school was always a recitation day, you learned your pieces and you spoke your pieces, and all the parents would come to the school, and you were very excited and dressed up in your very best, you know, and everything. But one time, one year, I was in the third grade, I remember, and our teacher's name was Susan Pendleton and she had a very good friend who taught the Nelson Creek School whose name was Miss Moon. I forget her first name. And the two women decided that it would be nice if the two schools would have a picnic together, so they talked it over with their school boards, and both school boards agreed, and they decided that it was always easier to go downhill than up, so we uphill people went downhill, and we went over to the train place to have our picnic in the orchard. And the



train place is where you live now. I don't remember just exactly which orchard it was, whether it was the one that's up by Peggy Heller's house, but there did used to be one up behind. Is it still there?

Penny: On the hillside, no that's gone down.

Ella: And it seemed to me that it was behind the house, but anyway that was my first taste of strawberry ice cream, and oh, how good it was. Trains had a strawberry patch of tame strawberries (we just gathered the wild ones for our use). And I hadn't eaten many tame strawberries, and then this homemade strawberry ice cream! Where they got the ice, I don't know, because it was in the first part of May, and they had to have ice from somewhere. We always made ice cream in the winter, we could use snow or ice to freeze it with, and I had never eaten strawberry ice cream, and I can still taste it, it was so good.

We carried our basketfuls of food, and the mothers and fathers carried the babies, and thought nothing of walking. Must have been two, two and a half miles from up here down to the Train place, through the old Turner place, and down through the Moore place, and over there. You know the roads were just narrow, rutted roads, and so it wasn't very easy traveling. Of course it was all right walking.

But we had a lot of fun. We played games and I remember feeling a little bit embarrassed and a little bit bashful, because it seemed there were so many large children, so many big children in the Nelson Creek school. Of course in our school too, there were children that were 17 years old, going to school. But it was lots of fun. Nowadays I don't think anybody would walk that far for a school picnic.

Roads were usually from one farm to the next and weren't always the straightest way to go. Each farmer built his own road, and you went from one house to the next house, and the first roads were almost through the house lot, you know, or between the barn and the house quite often, because that was the place where you wanted your road to come through so then the next one would join on to it. And it was some time before the road was built down below here. Mr. Flynn was road supervisor when they built that road, and I think it must have been in, oh, 1913 or 14, somewhere in there, when they built this road down through here.

Before that, we went straight down over the hill.

Penny: You mean Kanaka Creek Road, going down the hill?

Ella: Yeah, this Kanaka Creek Road. Before that, we went down through the Stewart place, and then came over. The Kanaka Creek Road was built partway up the hill, but it didn't come up to the schoolhouse this way. We had just a trail that we went to school on.

Penny: Is that building that's there now the very same building that was the original schoolhouse? Is . . .

Ella: It's been changed a little bit, because it was built with a steeple with a bell in it and on top of the steeple was a flagpole with a flag on it. And then there was a little bit of a porch on front. And a big anteroom, and the two doors from the anteroom and the girls always marched through one door, and the boys through the other. You sat on separate sides in the school.

And when I first started to school, we had a great big box heater in the middle of the room. The chimney was at the end of the building, and so the stovepipe went up, and then across underneath to this chimney, and it was wired to keep it from falling down. It was wired all along the ceiling. And those who sat near the stove were plenty warm in the winter time and sometimes too warm, and those who sat near the windows would almost freeze.

Penny: How many children went to the school at any one time?

Ella: I think the most they ever had was about twenty, but it varied from, oh, just a dozen or so up to the twenty, and then toward the end when they finally quit having school there, there was only two or three children left.

Penny: Do you know what the shape of the inside of the building is now? I noticed it's boarded up.

Ella: Oh yes, we still use the building for, well, I guess you'd call it a club room. We have a Cloverdale Club and we meet twice a month with one Saturday evening and one Sunday potluck. Next Sunday is our potluck Sunday. Yes, it's, oh, it's not in good shape, because it's built on soil

that slips and slides, and so the foundations keep slipping out from underneath it. The men have jacked it up several times, and the last time they jacked it up, instead of being able to raise up just the part of the building that was low, it had been out of plumb so long that the whole building raised up, and kept the hump in the center. So when you walk in it, you go downhill part of the way. And it's really awkward when you sit around a table, because maybe if you're sitting on the low side, your chair wants to lean backwards.

But it's still being used, and people have looked at it, and they say, "Oh, don't let anybody destroy that." It belongs to the Skamania, or the Stevenson School District. We were consolidated with Stevenson School District, and they give us right to use it as long as we keep it in reasonable repair, as good as we can.

And when I was little, my father used to make a trip to Stevenson once a week. Very seldom did he have to go oftener than that. And that was the day that he took the butter that mother made, and the eggs, and that kind of stuff to town and sold it. And then he brought home the feed that we might need for the cattle and chickens, and any groceries that we would need. Of course, in the winter time if the snow was deep, sometimes he couldn't take the horses, he walked and carried the eggs and butter- maybe not so many eggs in the winter time because the chickens didn't lay so good then, but always had butter to take to town.

Penny: Now, what would the distance be?

Ella: Well, about the same as it is now, because when he walked he took the straight road, and it's about two miles. And when he had, as I say the other road, the wagon road was more crooked because it zig-zagged up and down the hill, and around, maybe from one house to another and so on I suppose maybe it was three miles by wagon road.

Penny: Coming back it was all uphill. It's nice that he was carrying the load going down.

Ella: Yeah, well sometimes the load came uphill, too, because if he had a load of feed then the wagon would have a load on it. But as I say, we could see my dad coming home when he'd be way below the school house, after they got this road through here, we could see him from our

house, and so we always if . . .

## SIDE TWO

Our work was work in those days. We had to scrub the house from top to toe. Floors had to be scrubbed, all the wooden chairs had to be scrubbed, the baby's highchair was wooden, and it had to be scrubbed real well, and everything spic and span on Saturdays. And Saturday evening then of course was bath night, when we became spic and span. But it was still such a thrill to us to ride home with our dad. It doesn't seem like much of a thrill nowadays. But that was. That's the good old days and I'm glad we don't have them anymore.

Penny: I appreciate very much your taking the time to do this tape for us, Ella, and I'm sure many people will enjoy listening to what you have to say. Thank you.