

Conducted at the home of Bill Parsonage on Bar EJ Ranch, northwest of Consul, Saskatchewan

BP = Bill Parsonage: Interviewee

WP = Wilkes Parsonage: Interviewer

AB = Ann Behrman: Interviewer

JP = Joan Parsonage: Videographer

WP: Well, Bill, we'll get started - you tell us where you were born, what your name is and who your parents were.

BP: Well, I'm Bill Parsonage. I was born in Maple Creek in 1929 on the 12th of June to John and Grace Parsonage.

WP: And your brothers and sisters?

BP: Well, there were five kids in the family. There is Margy, Jack, myself and Skimp and Alice. Alice and Jack are dead. [Alice died in 1947 and Jack in 2008.]

WP: Your dad came west in '99 [1899]; he came out of Manitoba in '99. That was pretty early for this part of the country. Did he ever tell anything about his trip west? How he made out and what happened?

BP: You know Dad didn't. Dad never was very great telling about himself. Reddy [Reddy Parsonage was Bill's uncle] talked a bit about it. He said they had a quite a time coming west you know. I guess they had some milk cows with them and they would milk cows morning and night. Grandma would put the cream in under the wagon for the day and she would have butter that night. That's about all I really know about that.

WP: Did they have enough horses so everybody was mounted?

BP: Yeah, I think they were all mounted. I think they were; I'm not sure of that either, Wilkes.

WP: And something else about your dad while we're on it that I've always been interested in—he rode on some of the early-day open-range roundups, didn't he?

BP: He rode on, I think, about three of them; I'm not sure. And those roundups started, I think, at the top of the hills [Cypress Hills] and went down to the Bear Paw Mountains.

WP: That would be about what? 80 miles?

BP: I would guess, about 80 miles. Yeah.

WP: What about your mom; she was pioneer stock, too.

BP: Mom was born in Maple Creek in 1895. Now it's kind of grey, that history of Mom. Her dad had a homestead up on Coulee. I have a picture of Mom as a baby. Now I can't think of the name on the lake there, Adam's Lake. Johnny Adams had a place on the west side of that lake; it is buried in the water now. But Mom and her mother and dad are in the buggy and Johnny Adams is on a horse. And I would guess that would be in about 1886. I think they were on the 4 Mile [Lake] at that time.

WP: So your tribe has been in the country for a long time.

BP: Yeah. [*Bill laughs*].

WP: Then where were you raised at, Bill? Where'd you spend the biggest part of your young days?

BP: Well, until I was 10 I was on Merryflat. I started school at Merryflat. We were on Merryflat until I was about 10 and then we moved to the Worthy Place. There was 45 kids went to that school at Merryflat at that time.

WP: What about those schools down south?

BP: Well, there was about, I guess about a dozen of us, I think. Somewhere in there.

WP: So you would learn to look after yourself pretty good at Merryflat School?

BP: Oh yes. *[Laughter]* Yes, we did.

WP: So then when you guys moved south you did a lot of cattle chasing back and forth between Merryflat and the Worthy Place.

BP: Quite a bit.

WP: You must have had some tough trips then.

BP: Quite a few.

JP: Have him tell where the Worthy Place is because nobody, including me, knows where that is.

WP: Okay. Where's the Worthy Place at Bill?

BP: *[Laughter]* *[Bill coughs.]* Do you want the section number or just where it is?

It was southeast of Senate about 10 miles, I guess, as the crow flies. I think about 10 or 12 miles. We figured it was about 30 miles between the place at Merryflat and the Worthy Place.

WP: And you rode back and forth on a pretty regular basis?

BP: Yes. We did.

WP: You mentioned one time about that Gilchrist outfit moving cattle through there and you rode with them.

BP: Well, I only went for a day with them. They come in there. We got up in the morning and there was about 500 head of yearlings out north of the buildings; Dad wasn't very happy. They borrowed a bunch of bread from Mom and we headed those cattle west.

WP: And you went along?

BP: I went along. Yeah. I went to the other side of Govenlock a ways and that was it. Chay [Gilchrist] picked me up and brought me home.

BP: Back and forth with horses. We moved quite a lot of horses back and forth between the Worthy Place and Merryflat.

WP: Was that work horses? Saddle horses?

BP: Mostly work horses. Yes.

AB: Did you trail cattle over to Altawan to sell to go on the train?

BP: I only ever made one trip to Altawan in my life and that was with Hugh Halladay and Eddy McInerney. We cut a bunch of calves off the cows out of the corrals in the PFRA and chased those calves over to Altawan. We took them straight off the cows.

WP: So how did that go?

BP: Well, they went. We went like hell for the first mile or two. Then they settled down.

WP: So where did you guys ordinarily trail your beef to then Bill?

BP: Pardon me.

WP: Where did you ordinarily trail your beef to?

BP: Maple Creek. Well, quite a bit to Consul from the Worthy Place. We took them to Consul most of the time. Sold them there.

WP: You mentioned one time chasing cows and calves into Consul, shipped the calves and the cows followed the train?

BP: Yes. We took a bunch of cows and calves in there one time, and took the cows off, put the calves on the train, let the cows out and, by golly, those cows followed that train right to Senate. We had cows scattered all over that country. [Laughter] We took a bunch of beef in there one time and I was packing a rifle. When we got to town I put the rifle in the buyer's car; he had a kid with him. About 10 minutes after I left him there was a big bang and the kid come a boring out of the car. [Laughter] He shot a hole in the back end of that car. [Laughter]

WP: The beef buyer, was he pretty shook up?

BP: Well, [Laughter] a little bit. Not as bad as the kid. [Laughter]

WP: So you talk about trailing horses. You got in to supplying rodeo stock for a few years.

BP: Well, we started taking stuff to the rodeo in about I guess '52 or '53, somewhere in there. We went to Maple Creek, Elkwater, and we took horses out to the DB [Dixon Brothers] for a PFRA rodeo. Elkwater was always the big job; it was a long ways. I think I took horses to Elkwater for four years. I'm not sure, but I think I did. I think I had Bruce Bartlett one year and Bob Cochrane, Jim Leslie and Ed Kealey helped me. I forget who was with me the last time. We took quite a few horses to Graburn, too.

WP: I didn't know if you'd started [going to] Graburn before they quit it, of course, and went to Elkwater.

BP: Yeah. We took stuff to Graburn ahead of Elkwater. They used to take a bunch of Ray's horses [Ray Faulkner] and so on to Graburn. We never took buckin' horses up there until the latter years of Graburn. Sonny Montour helped me up there at Graburn one time, too.

WP: How did you travel when you went to Graburn?

BP: Well, we generally went up past - we'd go by Uncle's and then up through Brett's [Brett Gaff] on the west side of the fort [Fort Walsh], up through Montour's, and then up the bottom to Graburn.

JP: How did you get these horses? Did you raise them?

BP: We had them in the field over here and we'd pick them up and take them up.

WP: You raised the horses.

BP: Oh yeah, they were all horses we raised.

WP: You bucked a lot of them old mares, too, didn't you?

BP: We did; we bucked out a lot of old mares, spoiled horses.

WP: A lot of rank stock.

BP: [*Laughter*] [*Cough*] I had to have help taking the horses to a stampede, but I could sure as hell bring them home alone.

WP: Did they line out pretty good once you got them going, Bill?

BP: Oh yeah. They'd string right out. They were quite easy to move. Horses were easy to move especially when you'd been moving them a bunch; they'd trail right out. Generally we really only needed two people - the man behind and somebody on the lead. Coming home, somebody on the lead was all. We took those horses up to the DB [Dixon Brothers] that time and we had to go under the

railroad, and Jim and I found an old trestle; we took the saddles off our horses and led the saddle horses under and the horses followed us. We were luckier than hell that we didn't have a train come along.

WP: So then what else exciting happened in your life about that time, after you were done with the horse thing?

BP: Oh I don't know. Had a lot of hard long winters.

WP: Yeah. What year did you get married, Bill?

BP: In '59. Frances and I got married in '59. The first month we lived here we lived in a little shack until we had our house moved in. We've been busy on this place ever since, I guess.

WP: You mentioned some of the tougher winters. I recall that year that you and Frances got married you did a bunch of Cat [Caterpillar tractor] work for my dad [Graham Parsonage] up there [at the old Grant Ranch].

BP: Yeah.

WP: That was a pretty tough fall.

BP: That fall we got married? A couple of days before we got married your dad sold a bunch of cattle at the Grant Place and I was up there with a Cat opening the road for him.

WP: And as I recall it blew in and you had to open it again.

BP: Yeah.

WP: You and Frances raised a family as well.

BP: Yeah. We had one girl and one boy. Jim is on the place now. Nancy lives in MacNutt in eastern Saskatchewan. She has MS [multiple sclerosis] very bad.

WP: And you have some grandchildren?

BP: Yeah. Three kids down there and two up here.

AB: All girls, Bill?

BP: No, one boy.

AB: One boy.

WP: At what point did you decide you were going to get interested in an airplane?

BP: Well, I always kind of did want to try flying an aircraft. Bobby Cochrane and I were going to buy one down in Havre one time. Old Kate and Clarence [Cochrane] kicked up a hell of a row and we didn't. *[Laughter]*

WP: Bill, where did you take your lessons at?

BP: I took my flying lessons in Medicine Hat from Bar X Aviation.

WP: Just talk a little about your airplane and buying it.

BP: Well, I bought my first aircraft off of Stubby Ross. It was an Aeronca Champ. I kept it about a year and traded it off and I bought another Champ, I guess. I only kept that about a year, traded it off, and got a 120 Cessna and I learned how to drive an airplane. I traded it off and got the Super Cub.

WP: So you went through a fair amount of planes then.

BP: Yeah. I had four of them. I made money on every damn one I had, too. *[Laughter]*

WP: What did you basically do with your airplane?

BP: Oh, not a hell of a lot. It was just fun flying. I looked at the cows quite a lot with the plane.

WP: You and Skimp caught quite a few coyotes.

BP: Oh yeah. We shot quite a few coyotes one winter. Well, we shot a few two winters actually.

JP: Did you have any wrecks?

BP: Well, yeah. Jim and I flew through a telephone line one time and tore up the telephone line. That's the only wreck we ever had. We landed on—hit a rock - with the Super Cub, put a ski on a rock and broke the tower on the ski. We flew it home and we really didn't know we broke it until the next day when I went to take it out. It could bend right in the middle. We had quite a lot of fun shootin' coyotes.

WP: I'll bet.

BP: Oh yeah. We shot one one time, made a hole in him that big around [*indicates a one inch diameter hole*]; we were that close. [*Laughter*]

WP: Why did you decide to get rid of 'er?

BP: Well, my ears were gone to hell for one thing, and I was landing about 10 feet in the air, so I quit. I figured it was time to quit.

WP: Well, you had a good rip at 'er anyway.

BP: Oh yeah. I had a lot of fun doin' it.

WP: You've always been interested in wildlife, Bill. I just kind of wonder—there's all this controversy going on over sage hens right now. What's your take on the whole thing?

BP: Well, I think it's a bunch of B.S. We had lots of sage hens when I was a kid; there was all kinds of them. Dad and Reddy claimed that there were no sage hens when they first moved to this country. They said there were none. But the kit fox, there was a world of kit fox, I guess. When the homesteaders come in they

had chickens, and the kit fox liked chickens, so he got trapped out. That was the end of the kit fox. We got sage hens then. Up until about 1960 when we started getting red fox and coons. Then the sage hens just disappeared from then on. I really believe that the fox and the coons cleaned them.

WP: An interesting take on it. You mentioned as kids you used to run them [the sage hens] into a page wire fence?

BP: Yeah. There was a page wire fence on the east side of the old barn down there, and they would get in the shelter of the barn on a hot day. We'd go in there and scare them. They'd run into that page wire and flap their wings and you could catch them. We never ate them. Those old sage hens were so full of tape worms they weren't worth eating. *[Laughter]*

WP: I'd kind of like to hear what you've got to say about the antelope, too. You've seen the population rise and fall for a long time.

BP: *[Coughs]* Well, the antelope—when we first moved down there, there was a world of antelope. You could ride all day and never be out of sight of antelope. Then the winter of '49 was really a rotten cold winter and it took the antelope really bad! It cut them to practically nothing and they've really never come back since, to that point. Not to the point it was at that time. When we were young, the antelope would pull out in the winter; they'd go south. We wouldn't see many antelope in the winter. They'd string in for a week or two come spring. You'd see antelope stringin' in.

WP: Just generally speakin'—a lot of these things like the sharp tailed grouse, the Hungarian partridge, the sage hen—there's a lot of species that something's

happened to them; they are not here anymore. What's your take on that in a general way?

BP: Well, I don't know. I'll go back to the years when we lived down there [at the Worthy Place]. There was no deer. There was absolutely no deer in that south country. You never seen a deer till you got up into Lindners and in there. There was no deer. Now, these last years there are deer all over that country. As far as the prairie chickens [sharp-tailed grouse], I think they kind of come and go, aren't they? I don't know.

WP: Well, anyway I guess there are still some around. I'd like to know what you think has been the biggest change, the most important change in the cow business since you were a kid till today. What affected your outfit the most?

BP: Well, one of the bigger things we've done—we've got a lot better cattle than we had in those years. Mind you, I don't think they are as tough as the old dogies were at that time, but I think we've improved our herds a whole bunch. We've got a better system of marketing them than we had in them days. The truck has taken away the trailing. Whether it's better or not, I don't know. We have a better understanding, I think, of how to handle the range and so on, too. I really believe that. Because we're running a hell of a lot more cattle on the land we have. Mind you, in them days there was no way we could get feed imported in. It just didn't work.

WP: And they didn't feed that much then either did they?

BP: No, no. They went through the winter pretty scarce.

WP: So as far as the work-saving devices of one sort or another, what do you think? What kind of a thing do you have around here that you think saves the most work?

BP: [*Laughter*] I don't know. Post pounder for one. [*Laughter*] I guess the modern tractor and baler and so on. In a sense, it saved a lot of work, all right.

BP: [I was] horse wrangler for "The Canadians" [a movie filmed by 20th Century Fox in 1960]. We had to take care of the horse herd for "The Canadians". I had, I think, five guys working for me. Then we had all you young fellas around helping us. We had to move those horses wherever they wanted them and everything had to be coordinated, I guess you'd call it. We had halters for each horse; the same halter had to be on the same horse all the time. Saddles were the same. That was basically about what we had to do. We just had to watch everything.

JP: Where did you keep them?

BP: Well, we kept them at the Park [Cypress Hills Interprovincial Park] at Bowles' [Glen Bowles]. We kept the horses at Bowles' most of the time.

AB: That was in 1959?

WP: '60 or '61. It was in the fall.

BP: Yeah, it was in the fall. We had a long real good fall that year.

WP: Yeah, the leaves stayed on forever.

BP: Yeah. They did.

BP: We had to get, uh—how the hell do I put it? We put a bunch of horses down on a kind of a flat and fed them oats. We wanted to get a horse run. So we

put those horses down there and got everything set and we started shootin', and them horses took off. And that was one wild stampede!

WP: They killed three horses out of that.

BP: Yeah. We killed three horses that time. They didn't have a gun to shoot the ones that were crippled, did we. So the police gave me a revolver to shoot horses. Likely a hell of a lot more dangerous to me than it was to the horse.

[*Laughter*]

WP: Those were old range horses.

BP: Yeah. They were old range horses and they were a little wild.

AB: Where did they come from, Bill?

WP: Well, [George] Naismith had a whole bunch of horses and [Russell] Lawrences; I guess that was about it, wasn't it? On those loose horses. It was just Naismiths and Lawrences.

We had horses from Yeasts and Reddy had horses there, and Naismiths had some broke horses in that bunch, too. We had quite a herd of horses. We had to load them damn horses into a semi-trailer, and it was some job sometimes, especially with a horse we called Dick. We'd fight with him every morning and every night.

AB: Did you ride in the movie too? Were you one of the actors?

BP: Well, I did a bit. Not much. I took the part of an Indian for the tail end of the movie.

AB: We should be getting your autograph; you're a movie star then. [*Laughter*]

BP: I guess.

BP: I guess we would leave the Worthy Place and ride to Frames [Hugh and Joyce Frame] and we'd have dinner with Frames and spend the night with them and then go on up to Merryflat. We always stopped at Frames. That was the stopover.

WP: You guys chased cattle from Merryflat out to that place where your mom and dad lived by Maple Creek.

BP: To the Cashmore Place. Yeah. We'd make that in two days. We used to go out there, stop where Dave Guenther lives now and then on the next day. We used to take cows out there in the fall, and pretty much winter them, and pick them up and bring them back and feed them at Merryflat, like over at Uncle's [Fred Parsonage].

I remember going out there with the Cat to pick them cows up. There's a creek bed at Demchenkos—there was quite a lot of snow at that time. I plowed a trail right up to the creek, and I got lookin' and I figured it was a little too deep to plow, so I picked up the dozer and drove across. A couple of days later when I come back there was a big hole in there; somebody had drove out there with a truck and got stuck. [Laughter] We could take them cows behind the hay rack and that Cat; they'd just follow right up. They had no place else to go but the Cat track.

JP: What year would that have been?

BP: Oh, about the '50s; in the early '50s. I guess about '54, maybe '55, somewhere in there. I stayed with Lyle and Meda Wilson the winter of '51 and '52. I went to their place the 1st of January and was never off the place until the 17th

of March, then moved back to Merryflat. It was a hell of a pile of snow that winter. Consul washed out when spring came.

WP: What year did your mom and dad move to town? When did they sell that Cashmore Place?

BP: '59 I think. I think it was '59.

AB: When did they sell the Worthy Place?

BP: Well, Jack took that over.

AB: What year was that?

BP: That was about '53 I think, somewhere in there. I think about 1953.

AB: And how long did they stay there?

BP: They were there 11 years so I guess you could figure - yeah, they moved down there in '39, so '49 - about '52 they pulled north. I know they [Mom and Dad] weren't on the Cashmore Place that winter I stayed at Wilson's; they were down south.

WP: You guys ran cattle on the West Block for a lot of years, too, in fact your outfit still does.

BP: Yeah, well, we went on the West Block about 1950, I think somewhere in there. I'm not sure. I rode on the West Block a couple of years for Carl Spangler before Reddy put cattle up there.

WP: So you probably saw some pretty cold roundups.

BP: Some kind of cool ones, all right! Your dad and I were up there—it was the day before the first day of the roundup—we got a thunder storm. That night we woke up in our beds and it was 20 below [Fahrenheit]. It started to storm and

we shut the roundup down for a week because of the storm and snow. Then we went back up and finished it up.

WP: That was the first day? Did you run one day and then shut it down?

BP: Yeah. We got one day in and then it started to storm. We went down to the Whitemud on the second day and sat around the tent then decided to move down to Nuttall's. Bill Nuttall was cook at that time. [*Coughs*].

AB: Tell us about the roundup, Bill. What were they like?

BP: Well, they were all right. We did a lot of riding [*coughs*] in Roundups. There was three days of pretty steady ridin' and there was a lot of whiskey drank in those three days. [*Laughter*]

WP: You were on the directors for a lot of years, too.

BP: I don't know how long I was on as a director, but I was on for a lot of years.

WP: It must have been a long time.

AB: So you would ride for three days and you had a cook, like a camp and a cook, and everybody stayed around the cook shack at night?

BP: That's right. [*Coughs*]. In the first years, of course, we packed our bed with us and stayed right there. Then when the [horse] trailers come in and pickup truck—well, we went home. Made it a little easier, I guess.

AB: Not nearly as much fun, though, I bet.

BP: [*Laughter*] Well, I don't know.

WP: You guys took your spare horses, too, didn't you?

BP: Yeah. Generally just one. Just one spare horse.

WP: Were you there the time that the dog stole the roast?

BP: Well, I wasn't there but I heard about it. [*Laughter*] The dog got on the chuckwagon and stole the roast. Your dad got the dog stopped.

BP: Uncle [Reddy] was in partnership with Dad. [*Coughs*] Reddy liked his horses. He raised horses all his life, actually. In latter years he went into Appaloosa horses and he sold those colts to an outfit in Iowa. He done that for five, six, seven years anyway. All those Appaloosa colts went south.

Reddy raised a whole bunch of kids. They stayed with Reddy and went to school [at Merryflat]. He even had a school teacher camped in the yard for a year, I guess.

JP: Male or female?

BP: Pardon.

WP: Female, of course.

JP: I said male or female?

BP: Oh. [*Laughter*] Female. I don't think there ever was a male teacher on Merryflat; I really don't.

WP: Well, didn't she have a buddy stay with her, too?

BP: Yeah. She had a girl staying with her.

WP: So you guys rode a lot of those Appaloosa horses, too?

BP: Oh yeah.

WP: Some of them were pretty tough stuff.

BP: Yeah. They were pretty good horses. All the horses in them days would do a little buckin' if you weren't a little careful.

AB: I remember—I don't know what year it was, but—one day Reddy drove in the yard and he had an Appaloosa colt in a truck of some description for the three of us kids. *[Laughter]* It was our job to break it, look after it and ride it.

BP: Yeah. The main horse herd—we trailed them down to the border and met John Cox down there. He sold those horses to John Cox. John was supposed to bring us dinner; he brought us a whole car load of watermelon. I've never ate watermelon since. *[Laughter]*

John would come up to where Mom and Dad lived at the Worthy Place and he'd spend a week with them, buying horses around the country. He had Eddy McInerney and George Pedersen take them to Havre. Gather them up and take them to the quarantine and then take them to Havre.

WP: What would he have been getting for those horses in those days?

BP: Oh gosh, I don't know Wilkes. They didn't get a hell of a lot for them, I don't think. Maybe 20 bucks a head for the damn things. I know Dad took a bunch of horses up in around Tisdale one time, took a car load of broke horses up there, sold them to the farmers up in that country and he never got paid for one team. He sold them on time and never got paid for them.

AB: What were the towns like - Senate and Govenlock? Were they booming towns?

WP: Actually Senate and Govenlock.... Well, Senate had two stores and Charlie Wing had a little restaurant. Nobody ate there but he had it anyhow. *[Laughter]* You know, they weren't really much. Little towns. Govenlock had one store; Govenlock was dying in my time. I guess actually, Senate was, too.

WP: So anyway we have a pretty good cattle market this fall; things are going pretty good, Bill. What do you think the future of the cattle business is? How do you see it as carrying on?

BP: Well, I hope it's good. You know if we can keep up our exports and not have too many cattle, not get back into cattle too much, I think our prices will stay pretty good. I'm hopin' that's what happens anyhow. I'd like to see the cowboy have a good market.

WP: Do you see any change in the breed of cattle or do you think it will keep going the direction it is going with black cattle?

BP: I don't think they'll change too much, I really don't. I think they've come about the end of their line. I think that people are thinking they've got enough weight on these cattle and don't want them any bigger.