

**--Cottonwood Uranium Mining Project--**

Sponsored by Bureau of Land Management and USDA Forest  
Service

In cooperation with *Blue Mountain Shadows* and Utah Division  
of Oil, Gas, and Mining

INTERVIEWEE: O. Frost Black

INTERVIEWER: Steve Wilcox

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PLACE: Home of O. Frost Black, Blanding, Utah

TOPICS DISCUSSED: Road Building

TRANSCRIBER: Kimberly Hiatt

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W: Go ahead and tell us about your involvement with the roads in Cottonwood and the time period when you first started.

B: Well in 1955 (or was in 1945?), I believe I'll have to look that up. I believe it was 1955. My brother, Dave, and I bid on an old caterpillar that the forest was putting out for bids and we got it. We got the bid. And so I took it out and started to work with it. There was so much work that came up. I was a good friend with Charlie Redd. We had lots in common. He said, "If you want to go get yourself a new machine, I'll stake you on it." So I went up to Salt Lake and bought a new TD-14 international. First, I was cleaning reservoirs around the country for the cowmen and the like. Then I went out to Cottonwood. Asa Laws was working for me at the time and he had a mine up in there they called High Hopes, High Hope Mine. We build a road up to that. I'm not right sure just where that was but I think it was around the head of Cottonwood somewhere. I can't remember for sure.

W: Here's a map here. I don't know if that would help you or not.

B: I doubt it would.

W: Ok.

B: I got involved with the Shumways and went down into Montezuma Canyon and built some roads around there in those mines. Then I went from that to Elk Mountain and was out there for several years, I guess, two or three years anyway.

W: Now the roads you built in Cottonwood, did you have to do any blasting or cutting in the rocks or did you just push dirt?

B: No we just pushed the dirt. Oh, occasionally we'd have a rock we'd have to shoot. We always carried blasting material with us. But that wasn't very often. We'd move them out of the way and go on. But when we got on the Elk Mountain, we did quite a bit of shooting. In fact, I was with Merwin Shumway when he got his eyes put out. I was blasting as we were building a road off Elk Mountain up there kind of on the east side of the rim that comes down off of Elk Mountain. We had a big fire that we'd pitched a bunch of trees in and Merwin was getting ready to set off a blast there and he had this cap in his hand just ready to put on the fuse and a spark came down from that fire and laid in that cap and set it off. It blew his fingers off and one of his eyes out. We were way up in the mountains there and there was no way to get to our outfit except to go way back around because we were building a road down to the bottom. But we were a long ways from being down to the bottom. It seemed like we just worked our way down though and got down to where my pickup was and started to Blanding.

W: Did you bring him down on the cat?

B: No. We just got down on foot.

W: Was he able to walk?

B: Yes. He was able to walk. But he was bleeding pretty badly all that time. When we started home, he was really bleeding. We stopped and gave him a blessing and it stopped his blood almost that quick. And we came down here to the doctor. I believe it was Dr. Bayles. And he fixed him up.

W: Do you remember what year this was, approximately?

B: It would be around 1960, in that neighborhood.

W: Now were you hired by the miners to build the road?

B: Yes. The miners just hired me.

W: You were working privately. So did they pay you by the hour or by the day?

B: By the hour most of the time. Sometimes contracted jobs weren't paid by the hour.

W: What were the hourly rates running a cat at that time?

B: I got \$5.00 an hour for the cat and me.

W: Five dollars an hour, huh? Ok, that's kind of interesting.

B: I paid \$12,000 for that cat. Charlie Redd backed me up on it; he paid for it and

then I just paid him off. Then I came from there and went out here to Verdure and built a road down off of Dodge Point into Verdure canyon. But we broke down while we were down in there and some guys came down from Salt Lake. The car was still on warranty and they came down and worked on it day and night for two or three days. It was snowing all the time. They got it fixed and I went ahead and finished that road and we went in with team and sleigh, traveling back and forth. At that time we were coming home nights too. But when we were out here we stayed out there all the time and camped out.

W: What did you use as camping facilities?

B: I had a trailer house that I bought. It was an old one. I can't remember who I bought it from. It was a pretty good old trailer house. I had it right out here. And I had my brother, Arch, to come down and work for me. He and his wife were living in it. And it caught on fire and burned down. So I bought another one and it was quite a bit nicer. I had it all the time.

W: Would any of your family stay out with you when you were out there working at Cottonwood?

B: Well my boys helped me a little, not too much though. Arvid was with me some and Pete was with me some. Ramon was with me some. They all took a turn. But I hired Palmer's son, the brother younger than Alma. I can't remember his name. He was a good man and worked with me a long time. We stayed out all the time. We stayed in this trailer. Then I hired Boag Bayles and he worked for me for several years and we camped out all the time, too. We just came home on weekends.

W: Who did the cooking for you and where would you get your supplies?

B: We would just take them with us when we'd go on Monday and take what we needed for the week. Boug was a good cook when he was with me. Lynn was a good cook when he was with me, but we did our own cooking. We kind of worked shifts, you know, so we were kind of by ourselves all the time.

W: This was Lynn Palmer?

B: Lynn. Yes, Lynn Palmer. I hired Asa Laws to start with and he got killed out there in that mine in that vat. I guess you've heard the story?

W: If I have, I don't remember.

B: He was working out in that mill out here in Cottonwood Canyon. I never can remember names anymore. Anyway they put up a mill out there and ran it for quite a long time. And Asa was working there and he fell in that hot vat. It just scalded him to pieces. He died. After that I hired Lynn Palmer.

W: So Asa was actually working for you at the time?

B: No he had gone to work for the mill out there. Lynn helped me for a long time. He was a good man, Lynn was, a good man.

W: Do you remember much about the landscape when you first started working in the Cottonwood area? What kind of impact did the mining have on the landscape out in Cottonwood?

B: Well, right through Cottonwood where those mines were made quite a change. Lots of material was hauled out of the mines, you know, and dumped along there in big piles. But, the roads were just dirt everywhere. There weren't any paved roads anyplace from here to out there or anywhere else. There were just dirt roads. I never really did have a whole lot to do there (Cottonwood). I did work some. I built a road that went up the ridge there up to the road that comes from town across there. I built that road up there. That's really about the only road I built right in there, the road over in the head of the canyon there up to High Hope mine. Until we went out to Elk Mountain and we built roads all over that country. I've been hunting now and I've been down those roads that they built in Redd Canyon and we built those roads over there. It was quite an undertaking to do that.

W: What did you do for drinking water when you were working out there?

B: I had a big steel barrel, a really heavy barrel, that I carried water in all the time. I had a spout in it and would just lay it down in the bottom of my pick up and just drain the water out of that.

W: What sized barrel was it?

B: It was a 55-gallon barrel.

W: So you just filled that up here in town?

B: I'd fill it here in town and take it with me. It did us all week. That's what we had for water most of the time.

W: On your supplies, what store did you buy your supplies from?

B: Well, I don't remember too much. Parley Redd Merc I guess, mostly. Blanding Mercantile. They had a store down there. Let's see, who bought that. A fellow came in here, what was his name? George Sitton bought that. He had a store down there where that root beer station is now. We would trade with them a lot. My wife would always make us a nice big cake and boil us some meat and stuff that we'd take with us. And we had eggs. We raised our own chickens and had eggs all the time. Occasionally we'd buy bacon. Then it got so high we even quit buying bacon.

W: Do you remember how much bacon was back then?

B: First I remember of turning it down was out in Colorado there in...boy, why can't I remember names? I went in the store a while to get some and it was \$2.67 a pound, if I can remember correctly. And I said, "Oh we can't afford to eat bacon at that price." And we didn't buy any. Of course we raised a lot of our own in those days, too. We raised hogs, great big ones, you know.

W: Did you cure your own meat and make your own bacons and hams and things like that?

B: We did that a lot back in years past.

W: What impact do you think the uranium industry had on San Juan County?

B: Oh, it had a great impact. Blanding has been a town, like I was telling the folks here the other day, when we were talking about how many home there are vacant here and for sale and the like. I said, "Oh well that's all right, we're used to it." We've down that a hundred times in my lifetime. (laughter) We've just spent a few years with nothing and then we'd have a few years of prosperity and really go places. And this uranium boom was one of the times when we were really kind of down and out here in Blanding. There wasn't much going on. And when the uranium came in and started up and that mill started up there and the Kimmerle's built that mill out in Cottonwood there was lots of mining going on over the country. It really put Blanding on a boom. Things began to pick up and really go places. Taxes raised a little bit and things shaped up pretty well.

W: So most of your work, well, in fact all of your work, you just did as a private individual and the county didn't have any responsibility for those roads?

B: No. I did a little work for the county a few times. But most of my work was just personal individual. I got beat out of some of my money two or three times. I built a big reservoir down here for the Indians down in Montezuma and never did get the money for it. It cost me a lot of money and I couldn't afford it either. And down in Montezuma Creek I built a road around the ledges there. Boy, I wouldn't do anything that way now days. For the Shumways I never did get my money, the Moab Shumways. I never did get the money for it. That was the day when I was paying for the machinery and really needing the money but I didn't get it.

W: You did have the recourse that you could have taken them to court if you wanted to?

B: Yes but we didn't do things that way in those days. We do now, but we didn't then.

W: Well I think that pretty much covers most of the questions that I have. Do you

have anything else that you can think of?

B: I had lots of different kinds of experiences and we went back and forth.

W: How long would you say that you worked out in Cottonwood totally on the roads?

B: Oh, with those mines and everything, I'd say six years or such a matter, anyway. In the 1960's, I did a lot of road work for the Shumways on the Elk Mountain on the east side of North Elk. I uncovered the Pay Day mine that made the Shumways rich. I don't know if they still mine it or not, but I don't believe they do. I built the road over the Blue Mountain from North Indian Creek to the tunnel and on down to Camp Johnson. That was done for the Blanding Irrigation Company and the Public Roads Commission and a lot of donation.

W: Alright. Thank you.