

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY
The 1930s Migration to the Southern San Joaquin ValleyOral History Program

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: Earl Butler

PLACE OF BIRTH: Missouri

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATES OF INTERVIEWS: February 3 and March 7, 1981

PLACE OF INTERVIEWS: Lindsay, Tulare County

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PREFACE

Mr. Butler came to California as a youngster and his interview gives a good view of his experience as a child of a migrant. In the last interview he talks about his feeling of a "lack of polish" which resulted from his early history.

Judith Gannon
Interviewer

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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INTERVIEWEE: Earl Butler (Age: 52)

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATED: February 3, 1981

J.G.: This is an interview with Earl Butler for the California State College, Bakersfield CALIFORNIA ODYSSEY Project by Judith Gannon at Lindsay, California on February 3, 1981 at 1:00 p.m.

J.G.: Why don't we begin with your telling me a little bit about your childhood in Missouri and then we'll work forward. Just go along and recollect as you can.

Butler: My recollection is not really that good but I remember that we lived out near the woods on a small acreage. We always lived in big, old houses. There were six of us kids and we grew vegetables, had beef, pigs, chickens and work horses. I remember my dad and my older brother going hunting and setting small traps. One thing that I always remember is when they would butcher the pigs and boil the water outside and hang them out. I remember an awful lot of snakes, seemed like every type, every variety. I also remember every place had a smokehouse where you kept your meat. There were no refrigerators.

J.G.: Your dad was a small farmer in Missouri?

Butler: Yes.

J.G.: Did he own his own farm?

Butler: Yes. I think he owned all of them. He would buy them and most of the time would lose in the process if we had a bad year, but even though we were poor we always had good food and lots of food, maybe not the type that we wanted. My mother always made bread, something that you'd like now. Then we would have given anything to have bought bread.

When I was about six or seven we moved to town, a place called El Dorado Springs, Missouri. We lived right in town. It changed our lives. At that time the Depression was on and nobody had any money. I remember

one incident when we charged stuff at the grocery store. My father had come out here ahead of the rest of us to find work, maybe to make some money and send for the family. Anyway, we had a charge account at the store and another boy and I went and charged 11¢ worth of candy. Eleven cents bought a lot and the grocer kind of looked at me funny and said, "Are you sure your mother said this is all right?" I said, "Yes." My mother hadn't said it was all right and it turned out bad.

In the country we went to a one-room schoolhouse and all grades, one through eight, were in the same room. We used to walk no matter what the weather was. In town the school was much larger. I forget how big it was but it was different. We got into more of a difference of kids and different kinds of people. Possibly, we were having a little trouble getting used to living in town versus living in the country.

J.G.: What brought about the move to town?

Butler: I don't really know, probably because my father couldn't make the payments on the place. In the country Dad would farm with a horse and a plow. I guess it would be what you call river bottom land. I remember when we lived there they would put big fish baskets in the river or creeks. They called everything creeks back there. We had lots of fish too, probably catfish. Back in Missouri, even though we were dirt poor, with very few clothes, we ate tenderloin of pork better than any that you'd get out here. Plus, you had your own butter and eggs, but we had no money.

One Christmas, when I was five years old, I got a log car from my brother. He was probably about thirteen or fourteen and had worked and made his own money and bought a little metal car about ten inches long. He'd just bought it so Christmas morning that was my only present. I thought Santa had taken it from him and given it to me. Whether you were in Missouri or here, in that age or this age, you'd still remember it.

In Missouri kids played hide-and-go-seek, looked for fireflies and every place had a barn with a hayloft. The hens ran loose and nested in the mangers of the barn. I remember more than once coming out and seeking snakes eating the eggs. Another toy that we played with was the hoops off of the wagon wheels. Even though many people had a Model T or Model A cars most all of them had wagons and at least one or two horses to pull the wagons, but we would use a stick for a handle with a cross piece on it and roll those hoops all over the place.

I also remember the tornadoes. Once you saw a cloud you'd better head for the cellar fast. Most families would try to round up the horses and cattle first and chickens if possible.

J.G.: You said that when you moved to town your father came to California at that time.

Butler: I believe, when he went to town, even thought he wasn't educated, he

went into real estate with somebody. Whatever money we had was soon gone and we were right back where we started from. I just recall that he'd gone into real estate which had been completely out of his line of work and so we were probably in El Dorado Springs a year or less than two years. Somewhere during that time, possibly in January or February of that year, he came to California. In 1937, he came back to California to Lindsay. Lindsay was a place that he and my mother had lived before and he'd worked on a ranch. When my mother was pregnant with my twin sister and me they decided to go back to Missouri so all the kids would be born there.

J.G.: So your father, before your birth, came to Lindsay and worked here? Do you know what year that might have been?

Butler: It would have had to have been in 1928. I don't know how long he was here but all of us, all six of the children plus one that died at birth, were born in an eight year span, so I would imagine it would have been in 1928. He probably went back in 1928 right before the Crash. In 1928 he worked for a man by the name of Mr. Crouch and at that time had a small new house furnished out east of town. For the times, he was probably doing all right but then he decided to go back and farm. Lots of people did that. It seemed like they would come out here but they couldn't break the ties that they'd had and they ended up going back.

When he did return in 1937 there was nothing. He picked fruit for a penny a box or two cents a box. I think it was October 1937 that we came back. It was after school started. I remember we lived in an orange grove. The house had an outside toilet and no running water. It was a small house with a big screened in porch.

I don't know how many oranges six kids could do away with but it just seemed like it took forever and ever before you got your fill of oranges. Back in Missouri the only thing you ever saw in the market was a little, small orange and you just craved oranges so when we came out here we would pick them by the sack full or box full, maybe do it two or three times a day and eat all of them. I don't know how long it took before that many kids got their fill.

J.G.: Your father was working then in the orange groves here in Lindsay?

Butler: He was working for a contractor just as a picker, an orange picker. He would go out and cut wood. If a grower decided to do away with a plum or peach orchard or a grape vineyard he would go and cut down the trees. I think he had a trailer and all of us kids cutting with a crosscut saw. I don't know. I don't know what the deal was, I'm sure there was no money involved, other than he got the wood. Us kids spent many Saturdays cutting wood, two of us on crosscut and one of the little ones sitting on top of the saw holding it down. The house had electricity, one light in the room, but since you had no money you had to watch how long you kept the light on. It seems strange now, but at that time it wasn't that strange because an awful lot of people were in the same

fix. Even as a kid you could see that the people who had a steady job were doing good, but the people that didn't have a steady income weren't doing so well. The people from the east tended to stick together and most of the time they would work together and get a job through one of their people that they knew and so most of your association was with people who came from the same area.

J.G.: When you came out to meet your father did you come out by car or did he come back to get you?

Butler: No, we came out in a 1929 Buick. They were a classy car in their day. It had a luggage carrier or extension rack on the back and I remember that was loaded down, probably with mattresses and things like everybody else. We probably came Route 66, the way everybody came. I do remember seeing people along the road. At night we stopped where other cars were stopped. We would stop at night and build a fire. It was real crowded so we must have slept outside on pallets.

It was people all in the same boat whether they were from Texas, Missouri, Oklahoma or Arkansas, they were all headed for a better life. In most cases, most of them would have probably been better off if they'd stayed put. It was a case of GO WEST. The future was there, the work plentiful and the wages good. It wasn't that way when you got there. If you lived in the country you were poor, but you had some of your own food. Out here you didn't. Also, when you got out here people tended to treat you similar to the way some of the wetbacks are treated now. There's somebody ready to relieve you of that dollar if you've got it. Most of the people were farm people and didn't really know the ways of the world.

I do remember, I think it was called the SRA [State Relief Administration]. At the time I wasn't even familiar with canned foods because my mother canned and everything was in a jar and meat was fresh from the store or from the smokehouse when we were in the country. Anyway, this SRA had given us some apples and some canned meat, probably roast beef. I got so tired of eating that, but that's all we had.

J.G.: When was that? When you first got to Lindsay?

Butler: No that was on our trip out here. This must have been from Missouri.

J.G.: Security Relief Administration, was that the name of the organization?

Butler: Probably so.

J.G.: Do you remember how people got the idea that there were so many jobs in California?

Butler: I was small then but all you heard back there was that California was rich, the work was plentiful. In fact, the word was that they were

cried for help. Everybody was ready to make a move but if you were on the bottom and had nothing you were apt to pull up stakes and gamble and go elsewhere because their thinking was it couldn't be any worse than what it was in Missouri. People all had the attitude of what did they have to lose and they might have something to gain by doing this. My mother, with all those kids, worked as a dish washer in a restaurant after my dad came to California. They would let her bring home any food that was left over which really helped.

J.G.: How long a period was it between the time your father left to come to Lindsay and the family left?

Butler: I think it was probably about seven or eight months, I'm not really sure.

J.G.: How did you get the money together to make that trip?

Butler: My dad must have sent the money. My dad had been wounded in the service and got a \$33 a month government pension check and sometimes that was what probably sustained us. I remember when I was in the fourth or fifth grade in the Lindsay schools, at the top of the Depression, the teacher saying that a family of four couldn't get by on \$125 a month. I was thinking to myself that my dad had a \$33 a month pension and was maybe working for 25¢ or 30¢ an hour in the packing house. That \$125 was more money than our family of eight had by quite a bit. I remember my dad and my uncle saying that if they were guaranteed \$125 a month for the rest of their lives they could live good. See how times have changed?

J.G.: You came to Lindsay because you had relatives here?

Butler: Yes. We had relatives here. I don't know what brought my dad here to start with but it was a logical place to return to because he had ties where he'd worked before. When he came back he may have thought that he would get another job on a ranch. When he had left it was prior to the Depression and when he came back it was in the middle of the Depression. Times had completely changed.

J.G.: Did your family stay right here in Lindsay and he worked the fruit around this area or did the family follow the crops too?

Butler: He stayed here and worked. When I was fourteen, about 1943, he went to Sebastopol and worked in the packing house in apples and I went with him and worked. It was after the War and I don't care what people tell you, it wasn't until they started gearing up for the war before times got better. I'm not so sure they weren't getting worse there as the 1930s rolled along. I might also add that my dad hated President Roosevelt with a passion, most of the people did even though he takes credit and Hoover gets all the blame for the Depression. Roosevelt gets credit for pulling it out.

J.G.: You're not the first one who has said that.

Butler: Another thing I remember, this goes back to the farm, I think because of some disease or something, such as anthrax, farmers had to kill off all of their cattle. Maybe they got a small subsidy from the government.

J.G.: Many people have told me about killing cattle that were not diseased at all, but the government was trying to increase prices by killing animals and also destroying crops. The government would pay a small subsidy if the farmer would just kill the animals and not grow crops.

Butler: The first subsidized farming wasn't it. Anyway, as I say, my dad was not a lover of President Roosevelt.

J.G.: You had just gone to Sebastopol.

Butler: Prior to that, when I was thirteen years old, I got a job during school vacation in a Lindsay packing house and it seemed like it paid 75¢ an hour. Then I went to Sebastopol and worked there during the summer. We rented an apartment at Santa Rosa. That was my first time ever out of this area. We worked ten hours a day, six days a week and I made 90¢ an hour, \$54 a week. It seemed like a fortune.

END OF TAPE 1, SIDE 1

Butler: My first year there I started learning how to drive. My dad had an older car, it may have been a 1929 or 1930 Chevrolet. I remember we were coming back from work on a busy two lane highway, Interstate Highway 12. My dad just pulled over to the side and said, "Okay, Son, you drive." There was a guy with us from Missouri who said, "I thought he was going to get killed." But that was a pretty good summer for me. Prior to that I'd done what yard work and anything I could do. I remember that anybody that needed any work done was usually at the rate of 25¢ an hour, like cleaning out chicken houses. Anything that you could do to earn a little money.

J.G.: The money that you earned that summer, was that considered a part of the family income that you contributed or was that your money?

Butler: It was my money that I was free to do with as I wished. I paid a portion or maybe my share of expenses there and the rest of it I kept. I bought my mother a watch and I bought my own clothes and had some spending money. I was to earn money for school clothes but the rest of it was mine.

Anyway, that was in 1943 and I rode the bus back when school started. My dad stayed in Sebastopol and came back to work in the citrus around Lindsay in October or November. The next year, I believe it was in February 1944, my dad and mother split up and he went back to Missouri supposedly on a visit. He ended up staying there. They got a divorce and he remarried and lived back there until 1965 when he died. He left my mother with no support. At that time we lived out in the country in a big, ugly two story house. I think the house had four rooms upstairs

and running water inside but an outside toilet. The house caught on fire and burned. At that time my brother was in the service. I had one sister married at that time. Her husband and my brother were in the service and they had some of their clothes stored there. Also, one of my sisters was pregnant and her husband was in the service. She was just coming up the steps and she says, "I smell smoke." I was coming downstairs. I don't even think I had a shirt on and I remember we looked up and smoke was coming out of the middle part of the house. It burned all of the top story and we had no phone so I rode my bicycle down a quarter of a mile to some people who called the fire department. It burned the whole top story and everything that I had was lost. I had a lot of books and stuff, nothing of any real value, but it was all gone. Downstairs some of it was moved out and just water damaged. There was a cardboard box on a shelf in the room that was singed and slightly water soaked but the Bible in it wasn't damaged.

For a while we lived out in the yard and later we moved to town which was the first time I'd lived in town since we came to California. I was fourteen and my mother rented a duplex. It was the biggest part of a house and there was another apartment on one side. It was right in downtown Lindsay. I got my first taste of town living which wasn't too bad. In order to make a living she stayed with people's kids at their homes. It was kind of a struggle. I can't remember if we were on welfare or not. I don't think we were. I think they wanted to put the minors in foster homes and she said, "No!" It's kind of something that you don't appreciate until it's all over and done with, then you think what a sacrifice.

She started to babysit in her house. Of course, us kids were in school. Three of us were at home. The rest of them were married. The sister who was pregnant moved to Colorado with her husband. Mother babysat in her home. At that time there were all kinds of demands for babysitters and you could take as many children as you wanted to. Lots of women whose husbands were in the service were running around and wanted to leave their kids and you might have them two or three nights. I would work after school to buy my own clothes and maybe help some but I didn't really contribute to her [income]. She babysat and paid down on a house which was in a better neighborhood. She paid \$3,000 for that house and she was so proud of it because she paid \$1,000 down and somebody here in Lindsay carried the mortage for \$2,000. She was proud of that house. It didn't have the cement foundation. It was two bedrooms, one bath, big living room--old style living and dining room combined with a kind of an archway in the middle, a screened in porch and a kitchen with lots of windows. It was on a big lot. When we first moved there I was a sophomore or junior in high school and she paid for that house before I was out of high school.

J.G.: That's quite a tribute to that lady's money management to be able to do that on babysitting income.

Butler: Yes. There were many mouths to feed. It's something that you don't

truly appreciate until you become an adult. Most of the time it was all right but there were times when you were resentful of being poor. You were resentful because some little kid would wet on your new couch. I think all poor kids go through a lot of that. I know, I went through a lot of it. I resented bringing people there because there were kids all over the yard, but it was her way of making a living, the only way that she felt she knew how.

J.G.: What did you do after you graduated from high school?

Butler: Back to Sebastopol, I loved that country, especially in the summertime. It's a beautiful place. I went back and started fruit tramping. I got my first taste of it and so in the summer about the middle of July I'd go up there and I'd have to be back by September before school started. I'd go up and rent a room and work in the packing house. I didn't have a car so I had to ride the bus home. I did that even after I was married. I got married in 1949 when I was twenty and I did that for two or three more years.

I had packing house experience and I think the first job I had in the packing house I titrated the citrus at the Hillside Packing House in Lindsay. That's where you test the sugar acid ratio. When I was eighteen a friend of mine said, "Let's get a job picking olives." We threw more olives than we picked. We worked about a day or two at that and he said, "Let's get a job at the Lindsay Olive Plant." We went over and signed up. It was in October when they needed help and I think we were hired either on the spot or the next day. That started me at the olive plant and I kept my ties with the packing house too and at the olive plant. My first year I did whatever they told me to do. Then some guy who was working in the office quit so I asked for that job, maybe it was the next year I asked for it.

At that time it was seasonal and these other guys would go for a nickel more an hour and I thought, "No, I'm going for the long pull and learn this job and try to do better"--so that's the route I took. I think my starting pay was \$1.25 an hour at that time in 1948.

I couldn't make up my mind. I still went up north in the summertime in the next two years. It seemed like in April you'd be laid off and we'd spray the orchards and you could get a job spraying. I just hated that. You got that stuff all over you but at that time there was not much going on. In 1951 then the Lindsay-Ripe payroll job was offered to me. It started at \$225 a month and I could work by the hour and make more than that, especially during the harvest time, but I took it. There was suppose to be a 15% bonus with it after three or six months and I got a \$25 raise. I was fast starving to death. I was married and had one child so I stayed until the bonus came through then I told them I couldn't afford to stay at those wages. I went back and started by the hour. In 1952 I went to work in a packing house as a foreman trainee in a place called Vineberg. My wife and her brother had also followed the fruit, in fact, I'd seen her at Sebastopol before I ever knew who she was. She didn't

like the kind of life. She didn't like the packing house too well. Our oldest boy was less than a year old when I was at this little packing house in Vineberg near Sonoma. I worked twelve or thirteen hours a day with a chance to learn something. She didn't like it at all and we almost split up over it. I decided I'd sever my ties with the packing house and concentrate on the olive plant. A better job came up and I worked in the lab. Then I think in 1954 I was subforeman and in 1960 I became a foreman over three departments. I figured that was going to be my lifelong work. It didn't stay that way. I was on the wrong side of a political battle. First time I ever saw a political struggle where somebody takes over from somebody else. They had merged with the cannery in 1966 which was probably about 10% as large as they were and they loaded the board. To make a long story short their ex-general manager in a few years soon became our general manager and knocked people down in the process. First time I'd ever seen it and hope it's the last. After about 22 years I was looking for a job so I didn't know what I was going to do. In fact, I didn't do anything for about five weeks except look. I forgot what I was making at the time, seems like I was making \$800 a month. All I had was a high school education. I'd taken one night class, I think business administration. I thought it would be easy to find a job and really it wasn't easy at all. I ended up selling life insurance for a while. It would have probably worked out all right in the long pull but at the time, 1970, I had two kids and a wife to support and payments. I just couldn't make it so I inspected fruit for federal/state inspection that summer and made good wages for the time. It was for only nine months a year until you got a regular appointment. It has since changed but that's the way it was set up at that time plus you would be moving. So I didn't stay with that I took a job as a field man in a packing house at Lemon Cove which is about twenty miles from here. I stayed at it ten months. From there I went into the job that I'm now in for the lemon pro-rate and I've been at it for ten years. It's a fair job, not real high pay, not real low pay. I'd say middle of the line and a job that I like very much.

J.G.: What do you do exactly?

Butler: Our office is in Los Angeles. It's a federal marketing order that governs the shipments of domestic lemons. The purpose of it is more orderly shipping and also at a better return on the lemon. There's a committee of twelve people represented by growers and handlers that meet in Los Angeles once a week and sets the prorated carloads for the following week. We have a field man. I cover central California. We also have field men in other areas like Arizona and California. We're kind of the middle men between our office and the handlers that handle lemons.

I loved my job at the olive plant. You were tied down and you got more and more into double shifts where you were working long hours. I mean you were not required but if you did your job you had to come back to check some on the night shift. If you were going to town they had to know how to reach you. It was kind of like being tied down even though I lived close to work. On this job you hardly ever see your boss except two

or three times a year and you've got more freedom than you could ever ask for in most jobs.

J.G.: When you looked back over the period that you lived in California, what would you say was the hardest time for you and your family as far as making ends meet.

Butler: You mean as an adult or as a child?

J.G.: Over your whole life span when do you remember being the hardest time?

Butler: I don't think I can really answer you. I know what you're saying but I don't recall any specific time. When we were small it was just a way of life. You were poor and you enjoyed life. You did with what you had. I guess you just accepted that you were poor. So I can't really pinpoint any certain area even as a child or as an adult that was real bad. I remember one thing when I went to Jefferson School in Lindsay. I wanted to go out for basketball but there was just no way to buy shorts. I don't know whether you had to buy your jerseys and shoes too but there just wasn't the money for it so, consequently, I think you lost sometimes on things like that. If you're active in sports at an early age your chances are better to get along with other people; I got along okay with people anyway.

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J.G.: A lot of other people whom I've interviewed have talked about feeling that they were treated differently in school because they were migrants from the midwest. Did you ever have any of that feeling?

Butler: Yes, they definitely were. To start with, they call it the X-room or the opportunity room. I remember I was in the third grade and it was much easier for me than it was for my sisters because a boy can wear patched jeans or whatever and get by with it, whereas, at that time all the girls wore dresses and it was more noticeable. I always felt that they were more at a disadvantage than I was. In Missouri it was fashionable to wear lace boots up to your knees and I think overalls, probably the blue overalls. Even though some kids out here wore them it wasn't that fashionable. I remember more than once friends would tease you or pick a fight with you over your dress. There was no question of changing because you couldn't afford to buy anything else. I'm sure it hurt the girls more.

Another fact about being poor, I remember in the third or fourth grade we used to play a game in which one guy would be up and you'd catch flies and then you'd get to be up. If I got to be up I'd give this guy my ups just to use his mit. So you pay a certain price for being poor.

J.G.: When you say the X-room or the opportunities room, were the migrant kids put in one particular room?

Butler: I don't think it was all the migrants. The opportunity, if I recall, was for slower learners. I think you were put in the X-room which was probably for extra because at that time there wasn't nearly as many Mexican people as there are now but there were some Mexicans. In fact, I still see some that I went from grade three on with that still live around here. About the only thing you had going for you and I don't think the girls had this but in Missouri they teach at a faster rate than they do out here or at least they did at that time. They stick more to basics of reading, writing and arithmetic. These people might hate your guts and kids can be cruel, don't let anybody tell you that they can't because they can be real, real cruel. You know a lot of these kids' parents were from the east, maybe ten or twenty years earlier but then they're natives now you know. They've established themselves and had a steady job. The one thing that I had going for me was spelling and arithmetic. They used to have spelling bees in the same way as the arithmetic bees but you were one of the first ones if not the first one chosen because you could do it.

They gave you books a lot. I think probably in this X-room you went at your own speed which I liked. I always like school. I think fourth grade was my first full year here. From the fourth grade I don't think I missed a day or was tardy a day. They used to give those little certificates.

In junior high school my attitude changed. I think if it wasn't for being smarter than some of those other people they probably would have killed you. There is a guy, I think he's dead now, his name was Leonard Woolsey. He was a custodian at Jefferson School. I saw him, probably after I'd been out of school ten or fifteen years he says, "You know, they'd have killed you if it hadn't been for me." I kind of think it was. You were something to be laughed at if you came from the east and something different and probably something that they were a little bit scared of because it could happen to them. I think that's normal but your ways are different. Back east it was always "aye" and "thee", out here it was "uh" and "thuh" and the teacher would correct me. I'd say, "No, it's that other way." She'd say, "It's not out here."

I also remember this, I think a guy would remember whatever he was or wherever he was but they gave a multiple choice quiz. I think I was in the third or fourth grade and it asked how many hours of sleep an adult person should have. I think I put eight hours a night. I'm sure this is just the dumbness of a teacher correcting papers. So I went to her and asked what the answer was. She looked it up and said that it was ten hours every day and ten hours every night. I said, "Well, that can't be right." She said, "Yes, it is. That's what the book says." I was still wrong. This could happen anywhere but she let me know in short order who was right and that was the way it was. Also, it was a case of an ignorant kid trying to tell the teacher but things like that stick in your mind.

School was easy for me and enjoyable. We used to walk to school. We lived about two miles out. One time we rode the bus. I think the buses came into being somewhere in the 1940s. It must have been earlier, maybe in the 1930s, but it was just a way of life. It's funny, you get used to whatever you are and whatever the people around you are and if you don't know any different you're satisfied. I guess as you learn then you become more uncomfortable, then you want more, but when you don't have it you don't miss it.

J.G.: There has been a lot of discussion about an organization of workers during [the late 1930s].

Butler: The WPA [Works Progress Administration]?

J.G.: Not necessarily the WPA but actually the labor organizations unionizing the workers during that time. Were you involved in any of the labor activities?

Butler: No, not really. Wasn't it 1936 when Roosevelt gave people the right to organize? I forgot what they call the law, but it seemed like in the cities there was more labor movement earlier but in these fruit towns there was no industry at all and it seemed it was just more of a survival. People didn't organize to the best of my knowledge. I remember the WPA, but it seemed like the labor movement didn't start until the early 1940s after 1938 or 1939 when they started in some of the defense industries.

J.G.: You mentioned the WPA. Did you ever work on the WPA or have any involvement with it?

Butler: No, because I would have been too young, but we have a real picturesque city hall, fire department and police department which were all built by the WPA. After I was an adult I heard some of the people talk about working on what they called the Lindsay Ditch. Prior to the Friant-Kern Canal which runs through here there was a smaller ditch that brought water from somewhere and they worked on that. It was all cement lined. They were the lucky ones. It wasn't real good pay, but it was considered a plum if a guy could get a job on it. At that time even some people who were highly educated weren't making good and thinking back, a lot of these people were farm types with on a fourth or fifth or sixth grade education so if they got a job that was steady with a regular income they were lucky.

J.G.: It sounds like your family never lived in the government or grower camps or anything like that during that time.

Butler: There was one over at Woodville and I think there's one over by Farmersville. No, I didn't know anything about that other than reading about it. It was a case of where the government took care of you, I guess. Looking back on it it seems like the economy really didn't start changing at least until Hitler went on a rampage. It created a demand

for more goods and it also tended to create knowledge where people could learn more and build more. Prior to that, it just seemed like this country was going down the same road if not a little faster pace than what it had before. The New Deal as such may have saved a lot of them, but it seemed like in those days graft and corruption were a part of everything. It seemed like everybody that had any kind of public office was tainted with graft and payola even more so than I think it is now.

J.G.: Do you have something specific in mind when you were talking about that or are you just talking in general?

Butler: Mostly just talking in general, but it seemed like in the case of prostitution the officials would look the other way to leave a house open. It seemed like all your towns were wide open and even though there were regulations forebidding it the police chief or sheriff or whatever was probably being paid not to see it. It was something that even if you agreed or disagreed with you didn't say too much, even if you thought it you still didn't say too much because that guy was powerful and he could get you. It seemed like police departments had lots of power, maybe it was just looking at it through the eyes of a kid, I don't know. They commanded more authority, maybe that was it, they used that authority. There was not much regard for people's rights at that time. Now we may have gone too far the other way where there's too much regard for the individual's rights and not enough common sense. Maybe the right way to say it would be at that time an Arkie or Okie or Missourian didn't have any rights.

The same way back east, I've heard my people say more than once, if a guy was colored--they'd say nigger--don't let the sun set on you here. They meant it. I mean it wasn't a case of if he did, he's in trouble. If he did he was either dead or tarred and feathered. It was more of a lawless time, I guess. That's not the right word either. If they thought something was wrong they dealt with it rather severely, I guess.

J.G.: If I'm understanding you, you got the idea from your parents that being from Missouri or Oklahoma or Arkansas during that time you had very few rights. You had to do pretty much what you were told or suffer the consequences.

Butler: I think that would be true. I think it would also be true for the kids in school. It's the same old story. You're not going to tolerate from this Okie kid what you would from somebody that may be your neighbor. It didn't matter if you were in Missouri or out here. People didn't have any individual rights. Maybe it's just the time they lived in. Everybody was hurting for money.

It was a way of life back east for people to make their own whiskey. The country was dry then so people bootlegged liquor. They caught maybe five percent of the bootleggers and 95% of them they didn't.

Every once and a while somebody got killed on poison whiskey. I think a lot of it was just the times that we lived in.

J.G.: The statistics that I've read indicate that many of the migrants were only able to find work about 50% of the year. During the height of the hard times was your dad generally able to find work?

Butler: It seemed like he would usually try to find work. Maybe there'd be some time off in between, but I can't really recall. I do know that the citrus around Lindsay is spread throughout the year now. Summer may be the real slow part but at least there's something going on at that time. Up to the early 1950s the navel season, which is our big orange season, was over usually the first week in January and the Valencia season didn't start until the first part of May and lasted about five weeks. After that, they were through. So what you're saying is possibly true. Of course, that may have been the time where he was out cutting wood. I do know it was a struggle just to put beans and potatoes on the table. Ammunition must have been cheap because every family had a rifle or shot gun. My dad would go out to the orange grove and shoot jackrabbits which were plentiful. I wouldn't eat one now, but we ate lots and lots of jack rabbits. You learn what to look for to know if they're healthy or not. It's the same old story, if you're used to that there's nothing wrong with it. In fact, they were doggone good.

J.G.: I think it's a commentary on the times. If it's choosing between starving and eating jack rabbits, I don't think that there's much choice.

Butler: No, there wouldn't be. It was just accepted. We were used to eating rabbits. Back east we ate possum and sweet potatoes. Possum is one of the worst scavengers of all animals.

J.G.: That's kind of a greasy animal.

Butler: They're an ugly animal, but anyway it was just a way of life. An expression that you hear a lot is grits. I still don't know what grits are. I think it must have come from further back like east Kentucky.

J.G.: Do you remember or did you ever hear your dad talk about the way the growers treated their workers? Some people whom I've interviewed have said that you had to watch them every minute because they would cheat you and others said they were treated like family.

Butler: My brother came to California in his junior year in high school and never finished. He went to work picking fruit with my dad and I think their relationships were good to excellent.

J.G.: With the growers?

Butler: With the growers. They usually worked for a contractor named Setella. I think that even though they were picking fruit they were picking

in their own area. As far as I know for the times they were treated real good. I think where so many people run into problems was when they would migrate from Lindsay to work the cherries or apricots. There used to be a lot of apricots or pears around San Jose and Santa Clara and a lot of people went from here to there and then on to the apples. I think a lot of problems began when people left their territory. Then not only are you a fruit picker but you're really unwanted. You don't do anything for a town. Let's face it, if you're a fruit picker and you go to town you don't help the climate of that town any with your appearance, even though they need you. It's kind of like us needing the Mexican nationals. People resent you.

I think there were a lot of dishonest growers. I don't know any. I just heard people talk. Yes, I think some of them were cheated and I do know that it was a way of life. They wanted a full day's work and there were no rest periods. It was all part of the times.

J.G.: Speaking of the times, there was quite a furor when Steinbeck's The Grapes of Wrath was published during that time. What was your opinion of that book?

Butler: Well, I didn't really know too much about it until I saw the movie in 1940. I've heard people from the east comment on it. They felt that, other than the sex part of it, it was pretty true to life, it was a way of life. If I remember right those Okies didn't have any rights either did they?

I think that that was a way of life. This another thing, if you stay in your natural habitat, Missouri or wherever, you may not be Mr. Rich and you may not be Mr. Poor, but you may be the middle class of that town and socially acceptable. You leave that and, doggone it, you're not acceptable. You're at the bottom of the heap again, even if they want and need you, you're not really wanted. People look at it as a threat to their own way of life. Something I noticed was the people who were transplants from Missouri or wherever became Mr. So-and-So of Lindsay or Porterville and forgot their own background.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 1

Session Two March 7, 1981

J.G.: At one point last time you commented that your father really had a dislike for Roosevelt and that there were other people who felt like that. Could you tell me a little bit about what it was that they objected to in Roosevelt's policies.

Butler: All I remember is the incident where they had to kill the cattle. I think part of it was just to stabilize the market. I talked to one of my sisters after my interview and she said she didn't think the cattle were diseased. It was just a matter of the government deciding to

eliminate so many animals. She didn't think that they even paid for the killing of the cattle. I don't know whether he was for or against Roosevelt before the killing of the cattle, but I do know that after that he hated him with a passion. Roosevelt took credit for so many things that he didn't deserve the credit for.

J.G.: Like what for example?

Butler: He took credit for straightening the economy out and people living a better life. This really didn't happen until the war time. I don't think there was very much about him that we did like. I was young but looking back I feel the same way which I guess is normal.

J.G.: So what you're saying is that it really was the war that cause the economy to take an upward swing?

Butler: To create a better life. I agree in 1936 and 1937 when some of the laws were inacted, starting social security and the advent of cooperatives and protection for them, turned out to be good, so I can't say it was all bad but he was known as the savior of everything. The Republicans blamed the Democrats for ever getting there in the first place.

J.G.: Hoover really was the one who got the blame?

Butler: He was the fall guy.

J.G.: Could you tell me a little bit about how you met your wife?

Butler: She was from Exeter. I don't know whether I met her here or in Sebastopol but it was right after I got out of high school. She had gone up there with her brother and his wife and her sister to work. I guess I probably met her there and then worked with her here. There's not too much to tell. We just knew each other, went together and finally decided that was the direction we wanted to go.

J.G.: What year were you married?

Butler: I was married when I was 20 in 1949 and we have two children. She's a good woman so I'd say it's my fault that we didn't stay married. I'd say most of it would be my fault. Sometimes the grass looks greener on the other side and when you get there it's not green at all.

J.G.: You have two children?

Butler: Two children.

J.G.: Do your children live around here?

Butler: One lives between Porterville and Terra Bella. The other one lives on the east coast in Savage, Maryland. He's going to Australia this summer on his job. He'll be over there for six months.

J.G.: What does he do?

Butler: He works for RCA [Radio Corporation of America].

J.G.: Your kids went to school out here in Lindsay?

Butler: Both of them graduated from Lindsay High School and the youngest works for Tulare County now. He didn't go to college. My oldest son almost has his Associate of Arts degree from the College of the Sequoias. He quit in May to go to the service but he is back in school and will probably be able to pick up the Associate of Arts degree this time.

J.G.: Is your mother still living in this area?

Butler: No, my mother died in 1957 and my father died, I think, in 1965. I was just thinking about that yesterday. I was 27 when my mother died, and even though you're a pretty good age you feel like you were a little bit cheated because your grandkids don't have time to know their grandparents, one of the few advantages of having your children at a younger age.

My wife has since remarried and the relationship seems to be good. I still see her. In fact, she still works here in Lindsay. I meet her on the road and wave and stuff like that. It isn't the same. If I had it to do over again I'm sure I wouldn't go that route because once you split up a family your relationships change. My relationship and her relationship with the kids is good but it still is a lot different, a lot lacking.

J.G.: When you look back over your youth in particular, I know you talked about in school that being poor the kids were sometimes cruel, I wonder if you ever heard your parents talk about feeling that the local people were hostile toward the people who were migrating here from Missouri or Oklahoma and other eastern states?

Butler: I'm sure that they were but I can't recall anything specific. There's a tendency to protect what you've got and the people who were here had something and here are outsiders coming in by the droves so it's bound to change their way of life. I'm sure that there was a lot of hostility.

In the summers we used to go to Sebastopol fruit tramping. Even though you were needed to work they were still kind of hostile toward you because you were a different breed. You might be the same as what they were, but you're moving around. In answer to your question, I'm sure there was a lot of hostility.

J.G.: You didn't really follow the crops. You went to Sebastopol to work the summers and came back here and pretty much settled in Lindsay and stayed with the packing houses and things around here.

Butler: Yes. I worked the olive plant and the packing houses and other jobs anything to keep going.

J.G.: You said as you left Missouri you got can goods and things like that from the government. Do you ever remember any other times while you were in Lindsay that you were the recipients of commodities or any of the government programs that were suppose to be helping the migrants?

Butler: I'm sure probably we were at different times. It seems like I remember one time at Christmas we got a bag of groceries from a church group. We probably were but I can't recall very much of it. There was a WPA program and it was pretty active here. I think that was if a guy was lucky enough to be on the WPA during that time he was considered as having a steady job and a little higher class of people.

J.G.: I have talked to some people that have vivid memories of having stood in line for various commodities that were being given by the government. Do you remember any incidents like that when you were growing up?

Butler: It seems like I do but I can't really recall them. I do know that we had almost zero money when we first came out. We had orange boxes for chairs and I don't know where the table came from but we had a table. We had beds such as they were. I remember how proud my mother was when she ordered six chairs at \$2 a piece, I mean, that was the proudest thing of all.

Earlier you asked me why so many people came out here in the early 1930s when in the late 1920s the work was extra plentiful. There was work for everyone, then, when the Crash came, it completely changed the complexion of things. That can answer a question as to why so many people may have come out here in the 1930s because she said in the late 1920s when my folks were first out here there was just work galore. Of course, the economy changed around too. It was in a terrific heyday. I remember back east that California was a golden land of opportunity.

J.G.: Do you remember your parents ever talking about seeing fliers advertising for field workers?

Butler: I think I remember. I think there were advertisements and promises. It seemed like during that period of time there were all kinds of ruses to get people, to really build something up as an opportunity for work and when you got there it would be nothing or real cheap labor. I think I do recall something like that, in fact, I think there was quite a bit of that.

J.G.: In 1937 some people have spoken about inspections at the border and problems getting across the California border. Do you recollect as you came across the border that you had to go through a strict inspection or had any trouble getting into California that time?

Butler: Maybe a little bit more than what you would have now. I think we had some apples and they were confiscated. It seemed like you had to open up some of your luggage but as far as I can remember it was conducted very well. There was no bitterness or whatever against us. I think we only had

nine people in the car and a cat so if they were going to get mad at somebody they should have gotten mad at us.

J.G.: I remember a couple of incidents where people had to take their car apart and they were inspected for bed bugs and head lice and underwent a very demeaning kind of search.

Butler: I remember people talking about what you just said about lice and fleas just like they were animals, but I don't think it happened to us.

J.G.: Your father went back to Missouri when he and your mother separated and that was what year?

Butler: 1943 or 1944, I was 14.

J.G.: How did his life go for him? Do you think, as you look back on it, that had he stayed here things would have been better for him or did it work out for him back in Missouri?

Butler: Probably for him it was always six of one and half a dozen of another. I think his life wasn't all bad by going back there. He did remarry, in fact, when his wife died he remarried again. I never went back there until he died. I'd write back and forth. He went back to the Missouri way of life, of course. He was older then but I'd say he pretty well enjoyed life and people back there. I've always heard the expression "those dumb Missourians" or "those dumb Arkies" or "dumb Okies". When we were back there for my dad's funeral I thought to myself they have got that thing reversed because they ought feel sorry for the Californians. It's a different way of life back there, at least in the smaller towns. I've heard my wife say, "Stay for dinner," when I knew she really didn't want to fix dinner for someone, but back there when they say, "Stay for dinner," they really want you to stay. They are probably more direct, a lot slower paced, and probably a lot more honest than we are here.

J.G.: You mentioned "dumb Missourian" or "Okie", do you remember in your childhood or young adult years having anyone call you that.

Butler: Oh, I'm sure in grade school, yeah, especially those high boots that come clear to your knee and those overalls. I'm sure that they did.

J.G.: As you look back over this whole experience of having come out here as a youngster and having lived through the Depression here, those years of hard times, do you think that this experience had any lasting effect on your personality as it is today?

Butler: Yes. I'm sure it did. In fact, two things I like now is having money in my billfold. I don't mean \$50. I mean \$200 to \$300 or more. Also, I still remember the one light, the 40 watt light in the bedroom with all us kids crowded in there trying to read or do our homework, so I like plenty of light. In all honesty, I think maybe it might give you

an inferiority complex of some sort, I don't know.

J.G.: Talk a little bit more about that.

Butler: I don't really know. I mean I was just thinking about it. I don't feel inferior but sometimes I think it gives you a leaning toward it.

J.G.: Do you mean being a little different than the rest of the people, particularly as a kid, makes you a little less self-confident as an adult?

Butler: Maybe you just don't have as much polish or finesse as you would have otherwise, like sports. If you start at a younger age, you've learned the basics earlier whereas, if you learned it two or three years later you're just that much further behind. I'm not even sure the statement is true but I think it would be more in the line of what I call polish or presenting yourself or something like that.

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2

J.G.: Let's backtrack a little. I wondered if you felt that the growers treated their workers fairly or if you really had to keep an eye on them to keep them from taking advantage?

Butler: I didn't pick fruit other than when I went to high school. I picked plums and oranges a little bit, anything to work but back to times that you're talking of I don't recall. I recall hearing people talk about them but I don't recall it happening in our family. I think that we were probably treated good. You've got to remember that life was completely different then. Everything was different from what it is now and what you might think of as way out of the ordinary now would be completely ordinary at that time. In answer to your question, as far as I know they were treated fairly.

J.G.: Did any of your family members ever follow the crops or stay primarily in the field work or in the packing houses?

Butler: My brother, who's seven years older than I am, did. He went into Medford, Oregon and places like that and then he came back and was a packing house foreman, then a manager. He's got his own ranch out there now. They stayed with it for a few years, but then all of this changed too in the 1950s when the season started stretching out longer and longer. Before there was a need for seasonal help that you could use right now, a fast short season and turn them loose so you didn't have the overhead and so forth. Now a lot of packing houses contracted with Betz Packing which was based somewhere in the south. They actually used fruit tramps that went from the oranges to the apples to the pears. They ran the jobs complete with a foreman and furnished the crews and used some local people. This was during the war and after wages weren't that good and help was hard to get. There was a vacuum there and they filled that

vacuum. Then when the oranges started stretching out to where they were full year-round jobs then there was no longer the demand for that seasonal help. You wanted to take somebody that was going to work for you full time and it's the same old concept, if they're working for you they're going to be better help than if they're working for somebody else who's contracting their labor out to you. It changes the whole way of doing things. The picking would change too because there would be work available here whereas before to get to work you would have to go from here to wherever the next crop was. This came about in the early 1950s and started changing just from the standpoint of more and more citrus being planted.

J.G.: Did you have any other recollections or thoughts you'd like to share?

Butler: Just the two that I was thinking about, the light bulb and the money.

END OF INTERVIEW

Olin Edwin Butler
b. 1895, Missouri

Mary Emma Simpson Butler
b. 1891, Missouri

Earl Dee Butler
b. 1929, Missouri
Education: high school
Church: Methodist

m. 1949 → (divorced) Mildred Louise Staton
b. 1927, Texas

Mark Earl Butler
b. 1950
Engineer

Brett Allen Butler
b. 1954
Heavy Equipment
Operator, Tulare Co.

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