

California State University, Bakersfield

San Joaquin Valley Oral History Project

Recorded History

INTERVIEWEE:	Lillian Haggard Rea
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Oklahoma
INTERVIEWER:	Curt Asher
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	November 20, 2014
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Curt Asher: This is Curt Asher and I'm interviewing Ms. Lillian Haggard Rea at her home in Bakersfield at 12pm on Thursday, November 20, 2014.

Lillian can you please state and spell your name for me?

Lillian Rea: My name is Lillian, L-I-L-L-I-A-N, Rea, R-E-A.

C.A.: Where and when were you born Lillian?

L.R.: I was born January 28, 1921 in Oklahoma.

C.A.: Can you describe your family's move to Bakersfield?

L.R.: The move to Bakersfield?

C.A.: Yeah.

L.R.: It's a very long story.

C.A.: That's good. That's what we want.

L.R.: I am forever, it seems, trying to correct what is already in print about our family. Because it sort of coincides with the Dust Bowl Era it has been stated many, many times that we were a Dust Bowl family. That's not true at all. We had absolutely nothing to do with it. Not that there's anything wrong with it, just the facts are the facts. My family did live in Oklahoma but we lived in Eastern Oklahoma and I never saw a dust storm. We were in the "green-belt" so to speak.

I don't know how many people know this, but just for the record Oklahoma, near Muskogee, has a deep water port.

C.A.: Oh really?

L.R.: Yes. Everyone says that, "oh really." It's true because Oklahoma is known for its dust storm but if you look at the map of the Dust Bowl Era it was the small little part of Oklahoma that goes into Kansas and then into Colorado. Very little of Oklahoma was actually involved in that. But what was involved, it was really disastrous.

The eastern part of Oklahoma is really a green-belt. You would be surprised at how many rivers and lakes there are in Oklahoma. I should have made a note of it but I do have the history of all that which is just amazing. Anyway, that's where we lived and at the time the actual Dust Bowl took place, we owned our own home and lived here in Bakersfield. And how we come to be in Bakersfield starts in 19 and 24. I was three years old. My mother gave birth to our third—the third child and this is a very sad story and it's never really been stated. I even hesitate to state it now, but it's true. The doctor who assisted was drinking and he used forceps. He killed the baby and he almost killed mother. The baby was an eight pound girl, perfectly healthy. Mother's health was damaged so badly she couldn't even get out of bed to care for us. At that time in 1924 we were living on a farm a long way from the city with medical help.

C.A.: Was that here or was that in Oklahoma?

L.R.: That's Oklahoma. Yes, McIntosh County, Oklahoma. We lived quite a long way, probably twenty miles from a major hospital. There were no blood transfusions for her and she had to regain what health she had and taking care of two small children, my brother and me. So, it was a very difficult thing. My father realized right away that he had to leave the farm because a woman is very important to farm life. She has to be a strong person. It's a difficult life for a woman. So he started thinking about leaving the farm and seeking some other kind of employment. As time went by they became interested in going to the factories in Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. He was very clever. I would say he was a mechanic but he didn't call himself a mechanic. He immediately became employed with Hill and Hubble Steel. They were doing some very interesting work at that time. They had developed a machine that would apply hot asphalt and paper around pipes and then—at different lengths—that was for underground work. I don't know what they put in it—oil, gasoline, whatever—but these were machines and the company had different shops—Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, Ohio—and so my father became very efficient at this and he was the foreman over that particular machine. So, he would set one up in one city—company—then they would send him to another. That's why I mentioned the states. We lived in all of those states while he was working.

C.A.: And those were Ohio, Illinois, Indiana?

L.R.: Illinois, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Ohio. But you're asking me questions about how we got here.

C.A.: Right.

L.R.: It's a long story. Do you really want it?

C.A.: I do. I want to know the whole story.

L.R.: Ok. So, while he was in Pennsylvania—of course, in those days there was no such thing as, what is the rule about working long hours? I've forgotten the name of it at the moment. OSHA.

C.A.: Oh, OSHA.

L.R.: There was no OSHA at that time. So, he worked very long hours and as a result he became careless and he wore gloves that came up to his elbows that were to protect him from the heat and the asphalt and all that. Well he got too close to the asphalt and it filled his glove and it was so bad that there was a time when the doctor thought we were going to have to amputate his arm. But my mother was a very determined lady and she was a 24-7 nurse for him at home afterwards. One day the doctor came in and said we'll make up our mind today, tomorrow, whether we're going to amputate. When he came he felt there was definitely an improvement and as a result of my mother's care my father had no follow-up injuries. He didn't lose any use of his hand. There were no scars. But this had gotten—we are talking about finding a place where my mother's health could improve and he thought that this would be the place. No one thought about the climate. Even though Oklahoma has snow in the winter and so on, it is not really a really cold place. The Great Lakes, around Lake Michigan and Eerie and so on, where all of these states are situated and these companies, the doctor there said "you really need a warmer climate for this woman." By this time my parents were not too happy with moving from state to state because my brother and I were not in school very much. As much as I thought about it, I cannot remember classes, teachers, names, because we were in and out so fast. They were asking my dad to go to Wisconsin next. They took a vacation and there is a place in Oklahoma which is the most wonderful place on the planet and that was my grandfather's farm. We always vacationed on the farm. My brother and I had spent time in flats and...

C.A.: Was that farm...what county was that in?

L.R.: Pardon?

C.A.: Where was that farm located?

L.R.: My grandparents' farm? It was on an incredible place called Mount Nebo. This is why I was talking about the water—the deep water port—it was only a few miles west of

the Arkansas River and the Arkansas River was were the deep port was. This farm was secluded and it was just the ideal place for children and we always loved it.

So we went home for a vacation and there we met my mother's sister and her husband who were living in California already. The conversation went "so your mother needs a warmer climate why not go to California with us?" They were there vacationing as well. So we did. We came to California, September, 1929. Now, any Californian knows that Bakersfield, Kern County, can be very hot in September. So, we're coming straight from the Great Lakes and the cool, cool weather to this hot country where I'm not aware that anyone knew about swamp coolers in those days. So we had no coolers. My mother really did not feel well here. So we stayed for about—what three months—September to December and on December the 18<sup>th</sup>, I think it was, 192...we were here in October when the stock market crashed, October 29, 1929. Yes, so we stayed until December and I have my little school release slip, check out slip, from Vineland School, December 18<sup>th</sup> I think it was, 1929, we checked out and we went back to Oklahoma. My dad leased a farm and went back to farming. Mother's health was still fragile but she had improved a lot.

We were influenced by circumstances beyond our control. It was an amazing—how these events took place—well, we were farming—we kids, my brother and I loved the farm because we had a dog and we could walk in the country lanes and not be in danger in streets like downtown Chicago or any of the eastern cities. So, we really liked the country. We had this wonderful farm and we had a brand new Ford touring car. On the farm it's just regular, storing your car, you do not have a garage; you put it in the barn with the hay and the animals. This was March and dad had the spring planting seeds, ready for the spring when the rains stopped and the winter and the snow cleared. So, we were having probably something close to a tornado. It was a very severe rain storm night. In the middle of it one of the neighbors—we did not know him but a man that lived in the community—came to the house wanting to borrow my dad's car to take his wife ten miles to the doctor. My dad said "well, you wouldn't be able to drive on these roads. You'd get stuck in the mud, but I'll be glad to take the team and wagon if it's this serious." Well, he refused that. And in about three months—my bedroom window oversaw the barn and that area of the farm—I was awaken in the middle of the night with flames coming out the barn. By the time my dad got there the animals that had been inside with the doors closed, had broken loose and were safe. The cows had some burns on their back but the horses were the most frightened though they weren't hurt. It took a long time to get them under control. But we lost the car and he lost all of the seed planting for the spring.

So, my parents always were wise and talked things out seriously. They talked about should we, should we go into debt and replace all that we lost or should we leave the

farm again. They had experience away from the farm and so they were not, you know, totally afraid of doing it but they really liked the farm life. After some discussion they moved into the local small community of Checotah. And dad and one of his old friends decided that they needed a service station in town. They were just getting ready to open the service station for business when my dad had to have an appendectomy. As I say circumstances determined our whole life. The doctor in town—we were about twenty miles from a major hospital as I told you—the doctor put his hand on his horn that was the siren, the ambulance, and drove through town with my dad on the way to the hospital. That was very fortunate because penicillin was now the new drug and he recovered quickly and completely. But here the decision was—he had been thinking while he's recovering—he had seen California and he liked California even though my mother didn't. While he was recovering the conversation is “you know I'd really like to make a real change. I'd really like to go back to California.” Of course, he was a very good salesman. He convinced my mother that this was the right thing to do. So, on July the 20<sup>th</sup>—no the 15<sup>th</sup>, July the 15<sup>th</sup>, 1935—we left Oklahoma and arrived in Bakersfield on the 20<sup>th</sup> five days later.

My dad was an incredibly industrious man. We rented a house on 6<sup>th</sup> Street. He was applying for jobs as well but we rented a house and were settled there. Then he came home and he said “I have gotten a job on a small dairy and it furnishes a house.” So, we were at this place less than a month and we moved to the dairy where it had a house. He was managing a very small dairy. He was still applying for other jobs. In conjunction with that he got a job with the Santa Fe Railroad. So, now he gets up at four o'clock in the morning, takes care of the dairy, works at Santa Fe all day, comes home, takes care of the cows in the evening. Well we had always gone to church and we found lovely little church over at Palm and “A” which is still there, looks very much the same.

C.A.: What kind of church was that?

L.R.: Brethren.

C.A.: A Brethren Church.

L.R.: Brethren Church. So, we started going to church there. Of course, we were the new people in the church, being introduced and where are you from and who are you and that sort of thing. There was this charming school teacher lady who heard my father say that he worked for Santa Fe. Her name was Mariana Bohna. Since you're a new comer in town do you know what that name means?

C.A.: No.

L.R.: Well, Marianna Bohna's grandfather, Henry, was the first settler in Bakersfield. He built a very primitive little house over about where Mill Creek Park is, in that area. Then they had a flood—Kern River flooded—and also they were having some illnesses. So the Bohna's sold the property to Baker. So, Baker wasn't the first...

C.A.: I didn't know that. That's very interesting.

L.R.: Yes, so the Bohna's left and went to Oregon for a few years and then came back and resettled out—and right now I can't remember the name of the area out sort of north-west of town; it's an old community and stayed here forever—and so she was interested in my dad's working for the railroad because, she said to my dad, "I have a boxcar sitting on some property out in Oildale and I'd like to make a house out of it, do you think you could do that?" Well, she had, in her meeting him, had sort of insulted him in an innocent way. She asked him "where are you from?" And he said "Oklahoma." She was an elegant lady—tall, blue-eyed, and she and my dad were about the same height—and she said "I heard that people from Oklahoma won't work." And he looked at her and her blue eyes with his blue eyes and said very clearly "and I never met one who wouldn't." So, that was the beginning of an interesting friendship and relationship. He told her "I'll take a look at it." He and my mom drove out after church on a Sunday and sure enough here's this boxcar sitting there all by itself, no houses around, completely alone with weeds about waist high. It looked very much out of place.

C.A.: Did it have wheels? The wheels were off?

L.R.: You know I guess I don't remember wheels so it must have had some sort of blocks under it. I don't remember. He told her "yes I can do this; I can build a house out of that." So now he's working at the dairy, working at Santa Fe and trying to find time to turn a boxcar into a living house. As he proceeded with this business—he had Saturday, Sunday afternoon—it started taking shape, you know, because he did not have any electrical tools. This was all saws and hammers and whatever.

C.A.: Hand tools.

L.R.: Yes. He looks at the boxcar and "now where should we put a kitchen in this place. Well let's put it here. We'll have to cut a hole in the wall for the window around the sink." He took the doors off of it to extend, make another living room or a room anyway at the time. He didn't know what it was going to be. But he was very clever and it started taking shape. So, he said to my mother "you know," because it's sitting on the back of the lot; one can build a proper house on the front. So, he said to my mom "I think we should buy this and we can live in it until we build a house on the front." This was before housing loans could be had easily. If you didn't have the money you don't build and that was the way they lived. They did not buy if they didn't have the money. They didn't go

into debt for things. So, Miss Bohna said "sure." She sold it to them for \$500 at ten dollars a month.

September the 15<sup>th</sup>—I remind you, I told you we left Oklahoma on July the 15<sup>th</sup>—July, August, September, September the 15<sup>th</sup> we moved into that boxcar house. It wasn't finished yet, they didn't have the cook stove in yet, but they had the pipe in; the gas just had to be run into it and it was in within short time, maybe a week or so. We settled into this interesting house with the plans to build a proper house. He started buying the lumber for the new house because there were no houses around us. He was just putting it on the vacant lot next to us. Everyone wonders, you know, why would you want to live in a boxcar? Well, believe it or not, it's very efficient. The walls are thick. They're cool in the summer and warm in the winter. My mother used to say "I can heat the whole house with one gas jet on the cook stove." We're talking about country music but we'll get there.

Then my mother's health was in issue about all of this and she was improving amazingly and she had a garden. She had roses on the fence. They had a grape arbor on the back of this little boxcar house. Everyone forgot it was a boxcar. My mother did Thanksgiving dinner for twenty-two people in it once, of course, they took turns eating but it was an amazing event. She was about to be thirty-five years old and her health was better and my brother and I were in school staying in the same school all year long. We were all very happy. One day she said to us, with her budding teenage children listening, "I'm pregnant." She was embarrassed, a woman with two teenaged children and having a baby. Well, when she got over the shock of it, we all got excited about it. On April the 6<sup>th</sup>, 1937 Merle was born and our life changed forever after that. He was so much fun. He had a great sense of humor even as a toddler. One day mother and I were listening to what was called Western Music in those days on the radio. We had a radio. We even had an organ. Miss Bohna and my parents became such good friends, Miss Bohna gave her an organ, an old fashioned organ and a beautiful mirror. I have the mirror. Mother later sold the organ and....

C.A.: Was it an electric organ that you plug in?

L.R.: An old fashioned pedal and mother sold it and later bought herself a piano because she preferred that at that time.

C.A.: Did she play the piano, your mother?

L.R.: I took lesson, yes, I played the piano, badly but mother played very well. She played for church. We were listening to country music one day—It wasn't called country music, it was just western music—and Merle was probably—it's hard to say how old he was; he was somewhere around three months old—but he was lying in his bassinette at

that moment and mother and I noticed that he was keeping time with his feet to this music and when stopped and we watched him and I turned the radio to a more modern music—pop music; I don't think it was called pop then; I don't know what it was called but it wasn't country—and the feet stopped. So we turned back on the western music and he started again. My mom looked at me and said "well, he's got it." And what she was talking about was the Haggard music because all of my dad and his brothers and sister played stringed instruments. They played for—they didn't play in the music halls or dance halls—but in country family parties they were the musicians.

C.A.: So this is your father and his brothers?

L.R.: My father, uh-huh, my father and his dad, yes.

C.A.: Could we have a copy of this?

L.R.: Yes you can.

C.A.: Thank you.

L.R.: So....

C.A.: And then the other guys? They are also relatives?

L.R.: Those are his brothers.

C.A.: They're all brothers.

L.R.: And he had his two sisters they just weren't in this picture. They all played.

C.A.: I see.

L.R.: Music was important to my dad. He—I didn't mention this but when we lived in Oklahoma—Sunday afternoons were for music and his friends would come over to the house and they would just play music, whatever kind. He also sang bass in a gospel quartet.

C.A.: This is your dad?

L.R.: My dad, yes. Music was there. My mother played organ for church so and I actually sang...[laughter]

C.A.: You sang?

L.R.: Yes but not publicly, just in church, yes. I sang in a trio here in Bakersfield with a church group every Sunday on radio. Not television, radio.

C.A.: Was it local radio, a local radio station?

L.R.: A local radio church service on Sunday morning, a trio. Anyway, so music....

C.A.: What was the name of the trio?

L.R.: Pardon me?

C.A.: Do you remember what the name trio was that you sang with?

L.R.: We didn't have a trio.

C.A.: You didn't have a name?

L.R.: It was just three girls singing. We didn't know you could make money at these things. You just sang for church. That was the beginning. Mother knew that this child had inherited the Haggard musical talent. So, when he was seven years old she enrolled him in a violin class. She was going to have him play proper, you know, not from just from the ears. This was questionably successful because the teacher came to mother and said "Mrs. Haggard, I'm sorry but you are wasting your money." She would give the children their assignment and then they were supposed to practice. Well instead of practicing Merle was taking advantage of the situation and entertaining and playing by ear what he had heard at home. So she says "he doesn't want to play what I want to teach him. He wants to play what he wants to play." So, mother took him out of the class and he went on playing the way he wanted to play and then one day said "I want a guitar." So, mother bought him a guitar...

C.A.: How old was he then?

L.R.: ... and taught him one chord. She couldn't play the strings but she knew the chords and so she taught him his first chord.

C.A.: Do you know how old he was when that happened?

L.R.: Oh, he was eight, nine. He was "eightish" because his father died when he was nine and that changed his life forever. All of his problems that have occurred in his life to this moment are still his problems because he couldn't ever accept his father's death.

C.A.: What happened to his father?

L.R.: Dad had a stroke.

C.A.: He was young though right?

L.R.: Forty-six.

C.A.: Thirty-six?

L.R.: Forty-six. Still young. Yes, he died when he was forty-six. He told me—I rode to school—he went to Santa Fe and I went to Bakersfield High School—I rode to school with him and he told me one day “I have something wrong with me.” He said “I have to shut my one eye when I see a car coming because I see two cars.”

C.A.: Your dad said that?

L.R.: Mmm-hmm, but he didn’t go to the doctor. I don’t know how long that had been going on until one day he had a stroke and my brother and my mother and Merle took him to Los Angeles. Santa Fe Hospital because he worked for Santa Fe and they had their own hospital so, they took him there. On the way down he was well enough that they enjoyed a picnic lunch. When they arrived at the hospital nurse brought out a wheel chair to the car and my dad said “I don’t need that; I can walk” and she said “but I want you to sit in it.” So he obediently sat. As he sat down in that wheel chair he had a massive hemorrhage, a stroke, and never regained consciousness.

C.A.: And Merle was there with him when that happened?

L.R.: No, Merle was not—well, yes, I guess, he was there—I wasn’t there. It was my brother and Merle and my mother. He was in the hospital for one week and died. Trying to make Merle understand what had happened—he started, well, you know a lot of it was our fault, the adults’ fault. But grief therapy was not in our vocabulary. I’m not sure it was in anybody’s vocabulary in 1947 whatever that year was, ‘6 or ‘7; I have to figure that out. We adults understood and we adults could not discuss it because it was too painful. So, this child was absorbing our pain and our quietness and no one saying anything, so he decided it was all his fault.

I went to his studio about three years ago to record our family history for him and I told him all about our grandparents both, all four of them. Where they came from in Arkansas and how they came to the Indian Territory before it was Oklahoma. There is a lot of history in the family. Five of our grandfathers were killed by Bushwhackers during the Civil War because they were Unionists, murdered in their homes in front of their families. So I was telling him all of this history of the family and when I reached the point to start to talk about our dad he looked at the technician and said “turn it off.” We have never gotten back to that story. I saw him recently and he said “we got to finish that story one day.” I said “anytime you’re ready.” He’ll soon be eighty years old and he’s still not ready. My dad was his idol and he was the kind of a dad every boy needed. He took Merle fishing on the Kern River. When Merle was first making money in his new career he bought the land that he walked across with my dad and built his first home there. But that did not cure the pain that he carried and everybody wonders why did he leave

Bakersfield? Why didn't he, you know, he built this lovely home, but he didn't stay? When he bought his first office, he bought it across from Greenlawn in direct view of his father's grave. That didn't last either because that didn't make him feel any better so he moved to Redding and moved his office there. That's why he doesn't live in Bakersfield. People wonder that.

C.A.: That's very interesting.

L.R.: Dad was, as I said, the kind of father that boys enjoyed, you know, taking him hunting, taking him fishing. Merle can tell you by every detail about his dad taking him to get his first dog, a little fox-terrier. It's a very painful thing. Our family has still not dealt with it properly. My mother's now gone. My brother's gone. My other brother—I had two brothers—we were very close, so now, it's just Merle and me. He called me—he was coming through a couple of nights ago and he called—I keep telling him, you know "I'm 93 years old; if you don't stay in touch, one day you're going to read about me in the obits." I tease him. So he called "hello, hello, how are you." "I'm fine." "Just checking you out, ok talk to you later." That's about the best I get from him.

C.A.: So you said you had two brothers?

L.R.: Yes.

C.A.: What were their names?

L.R.: Lowell. James Lowell. We never used James. Dad was James. Lowell was Lowell.

C.A.: He was the older brother?

L.R.: I'm the oldest.

C.A.: Oh, you're the oldest.

L.R.: He's eighteen months younger than I. We were very close.

C.A.: So, three kids in the family.

L.R.: Well actually four. The girl that was...

C.A.: As an older sister, would you describe yourself as an authority figure in your family's life later?

L.R.: Not really. Not Really.

C.A.: Did Merle look to you sort of as a...I mean you are quite a bit older than he is.

L.R.: Oh, fifteen years. Yes. I was never a baby sitter though. People all think “oh, you were his baby sitter.” My mother was his care taker. She thoroughly enjoyed it.

C.A.: You know a lot of Merle’s songs were pretty political so I’m wondering, were your parents, did they have political views that you want to discuss? Did he get those from...I mean it’s kind of an interesting mix with Merle Haggard’s music...

L.R.: It’s very. It is isn’t it? It is. I’m sure politics is the only thing that he never discussed with his parents. Of course, at nine years old when my dad died, politics would not have been part of their interests I’m sure. I just think that he was an observer of things. My father was a Democrat. My grandfather was a Republican.

C.A.: Your grandfather on the farm in Oklahoma was a Republican?

L.R.: Yes. My farmer grandfather, yes. He was a Republican. So we always laughed about mother marrying a Democrat. You know, that’s some pretty serious business.

C.A.: A lot of the questions I have here you have answered so I’m going, moving down the row here. One of the things you answered but you might want to articulate it a little more was: you’ve described how Merle was growing up a lot already. My question was can you describe what your brother Merle was like growing up and did he always like to perform? You’ve sort of answered that already but if you want to say any more about that.

L.R.: Well I think his performing—I know very little about because—everyone assumes that with his country music talent and fame that we were all into country music. Well we were but we weren’t. I mean, music as I’ve stated was country before country was country. But they were just musicians and played stringed instruments. I don’t really know what they called this kind of music in that day and age of my father’s youth and so on.

C.A.: It was kind of a bluegrass sound wasn’t it?

L.R.: No. But it would be more like that than country. I doubt that you know much about all of this country music or have you studied it?

C.A.: Well, I’m kind of a fan of country music and I listen to it a lot and I do know a lot.

L.R.: Did you ever heard of the song called the “Eighth of January”?

C.A.: The Eighth of...no I don’t know that one.

L.R.: Ok. Well you do know about it whether you do know about it as a song. You know about the Battle of New Orleans, the song, the music.

C.A.: The song by Johnny Horton? Johnny Horton. "The Battle of New Orleans," is that what you're talking about?

L.R.: Yes. That was a real battle that was fought in New Orleans. The English lost. Was it two thousand and the Americans lost thirteen? Something like that? Well when I was a child one of the songs that my dad played a lot was this "Eighth of January" it's called. That's the date of that battle. It's historic in its message and very interesting in its sound, musical sound. But I had no idea when I heard my dad playing this song that he's playing history you know as a child. I'm trying to remember some of the names of the songs that these people played. One I remember was called "Buffalo Gal."

C.A.: Oh yeah. I know that song.

L.R.: You remember that? Well that's old and there's others.

C.A.: So a lot of folk music really.

L.R.: It's very close to folk music. It really is.

C.A.: You were saying that you didn't know much about his performing though?

L.R.: Oh, well the stories have been told to me about how he played for some particular artist the first time and of course, my husband Bill Rea was in the background, more influential than people knew. He spoke to Cousin Herb Benson and said I've got a young brother-in-law that you should have on the program sometime. Well that's the first time he appeared on the Cousin Herb Show was because Bill promoted it.

C.A.: What was Bill's job?

L.R.: Bill was public relations for PG&E.

C.A.: For PG&E, okay. Does Merle read music—I know he writes songs—but a lot of musicians around here, they don't read music.

L.R.: I don't think so. I don't think he does. If he does, I'm not aware of it but...

C.A.: So he really learned by playing and performing, right?

L.R.: He had thirteen minutes of lessons when the teacher found out he wasn't going to obey her.

C.A.: So you think he had a natural gift for playing?

L.R.: Oh, absolutely. The sound.

C.A.: What a gift he has.

L.R.: It's unbelievable because I did not get any of it.

C.A.: Really?

L.R.: No

C.A.: Well you sang in a trio.

L.R.: Well singing but playing, I did not have the ear to play. I had to have the paper and the notes and all...

C.A.: Oh playing, a different matter. Do you still sing anywhere? So you read music?

L.R.: Yes, I do.

C.A.: Do you still sing or anything?

L.R.: No.

C.A.: Like you said, these guys, your family, they were musicians. They weren't country music necessarily.

L.R.: No.

C.A.: But how did Merle get interested in playing country music as opposed to just other types of music?

L.R.: It was a natural. It was his, like I told you in the bassinet listening to one music and the other. He responded to one but not the other. It was just natural. I don't even think my father played music that much for him at that time. I don't remember it. He was just—it was just a natural gift and he was absorbed by it. It was like he didn't think about anything else. When he and Bonnie [Bonnie Owens] were married, she was such a wonderful companion for him. She was never without a pencil and paper because at any moment he might come up with a song thought that needed to be recorded immediately. She was there with pencil and paper. It's like—have you heard the story about, they don't, what is it? They don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee, Muskogee, Oklahoma, U.S.A.

C.A.: Yes, I know the song.

L.R.: Well the bus was traveling through Oklahoma and something was said—they were talking about San Francisco, whatever the story was about marijuana; I don't know what it was like. I didn't listen to the news about that sort of thing—but something was said about it as they were traveling along and whether they passed the sign Muskogee, or what, but Merle was walking through the bus and he just said "well they don't smoke

marijuana in Muskogee." Fifteen minutes late the lyrics to that song was on a brown paper bag.

C.A.: That's amazing! Would you think Merle is a poet as much as a musician?

L.R.: Well, he has to be. Yes.

C.A.: You just think it's innate in him? It's something that he was born with?

L.R.: Abslolutely.

C.A.: I'm going to change the subject a little bit. Can you tell me about Bakersfield in the fifties? There was a big music scene in Bakersfield in the 1950s. There was music venues all over town. Do you remember anything about that? You may not have been involved in going to those clubs or anything but you must have heard about them, right? Because your brother was playing there.

L.R.: I wasn't. This will shock the world, but I never set foot in a honky-tonk or a club or anything. The first time I did was last year. I took some friends to Trout's to hear Red Simpson. That's the first time I ever went on my own to a country music place.

I was married to a very interesting man, Bill Rea. He was extremely busy in the city and I also worked. So, I shared with him his life, what he did, and he was busy forming clubs like the Antique Automobile Club, The Magicians' Club, he was president of the Historical Society. His lists of interests were many and I shared all that. We did not go to country music venues.

C.A.: So you had other interests besides that?

L.R.: Yes.

C.A.: Did you know a lot of musicians that played at those?

L.R.: I did not. Because of my brother—I'm trying, oh yes—one time we were having a Christmas party at school—school vacation, the employees—and I said to them, "I think I'll call Jelly Sanders and see if he'll come down and play for our Christmas party." I didn't even know him, but I called him and he came down and played.

C.A.: Now who was this? Jelly Sanders?

L.R.: Jelly Sanders. Well, he was a very popular person at that time.

C.A.: Was he a country music singer?

L.R.: Yes.

C.A.: Was he from Bakersfield?

L.R.: Well, as from Bakersfield as any of the others. I think he had been born probably in Texas or Oklahoma or Arkansas. I don't really know where Jelly was from but he was very tall, like you and played the guitar very well and was very cordial and very sweet to come out and play for the school secretaries.

C.A.: That's fantastic. Do you think the fact that Bakersfield had a lot of migrants from Oklahoma, the southwest, the plains states, you know, because—there was a big migration here—do you think that helped make the music scene here as what it became? Do you have any ideas about that?

L.R.: That's a very good question and I really don't know the answer to it except that I do believe, I do believe that this kind of music that my grandfather played and my dad was—I thought when I was growing up that everybody played music like that in the country, but obviously that's not true. But it is true that there was a culture of—what did you call it earlier? It's like folk music, but it's a little different down in the Deep South.

C.A.: Like Bluegrass?

L.R.: Bluegrass, all of those are somehow entwined in the culture. This business about Bakersfield Sound really fascinates me. I've done a lot of thinking about it and a lot of discussing it with people like, for instance, Simpson, I asked him one time, "tell me, what is the Bakersfield Sound?" And he looked at me very seriously but—he has a great sense of humor—so he leaned over and whispered in my ear and said "it's a secret." I said "the secret is that no one can really identify it and explain it."

C.A.: Well I asked him today the same question and he said "it's just a bunch of people getting together playing music."

L.R.: I've asked Merle about it and his answer was very interesting and I don't know that I can repeat it exactly what he said but I think it's probably more accurate—certainly not a secret, too many people play it—but he talked about the telecaster guitar. There is a talent in playing these guitars and it's the way they play them. Now, in saying that only a musician would know what I'm talking about. Anyone can play the piano. Anyone that can play the piano, plays it kind of personally especially if they play by ear they add notes, they change the timing of them a little bit and that's what happens to the telecaster guitar. It's what they do with it. Everyone can play it but it doesn't sound the same from every hand that plays it. I think the Bakersfield musicians hit on something extraordinary when they developed this sound that's being attributed to them. I don't think Nashville would be very happy to share that but I'm absolutely certain that the

musicians here developed it and it is definitely the way they played the telecaster guitar is what creates the Bakersfield Sound.

C.A.: Ok. This question you may not want to answer this but I will ask it anyway. Could you talk about Merle's troubles with the law and authority in his youth and how that helped him find a path to success?

L.R.: I feel I'm one of the people that set him off into that path.

C.A.: Oh really?

L.R.: Yes, I am. The pain that I have suffered over the years is real. He was enrolled to start attending Bakersfield High School and his counselor was Fred Robinson and Merle was cutting school. Well, how to handle that, because this is a child who's suffering and needing grieve counseling and no one has explained it to him. No one can. He's just not focused. He isn't focused where he should be focused. His focus is still on why my dad died. Am I the cause? Et cetera. So I—Fred came over to my office and said one day "Merle's cutting class. What do you think about us picking him up and putting him in juvie for the weekend?" Well, I agreed with him and that was his first escape—if I had said "no," I don't know if there would have been a difference or not—that started the pattern of doing things that would require discipline and then the discipline would fail because he would just walk away. He did not do something that required San Quentin. It was the place chosen that he could not walk away from. That was the only reason.

C.A.: Because he walked away from a youth authority camp?

L.R.: Every place he was put he just left. Climbed out the window, walked...

C.A.: So he escaped a lot of places?

L.R.: Pardon?

C.A.: He escaped, basically.

L.R.: He was incredibly good at it. There was a situation at the police department here that almost—if one wanted to blame the policeman, which I can very easily—they set it up for him to escape. That is a mouthful that has never been said out loud. I'm on record, that's ok, he walked right out of the police station having been arrested. By doing that, that added to the whatever...

C.A.: ...the list of things that he had done.

L.R.: Yes. That was a biggie. That gave them something really to charge him with because what he was there for in the first place was minor.

C.A.: What was—so that was that with the San Quentin thing?

L.R.: No, that wasn't.

C.A.: What led to that? I don't even know. I don't know.

L.R.: I don't know. I don't know either. I don't have any idea what it was because after a while I just stopped counting and just prayed that he didn't get hurt.

C.A.: Well, I guess having those kind of rebellious things happen when he was a youth led him to kind of develop this music that comes out of him now in a way too. So it had a positive effect. Right? In the long-term it was a good thing or it could have been looked at that way?

L.R.: I suppose.

C.A.: Hard to go through maybe.

L.R.: It would certainly give you time to think about something and I don't know how much of his music and lyrics one could even count as having come from that source. I tell people that I do not sit and listen to his music and they think "you don't like it?" I love it, but it's very emotional for me because I can pick out the line in the lyric, in the words, that built the song. I know the pain that was in his heart that brought the song to life. One, you know, just one line like a more happy thought is about the song "Today I Started Loving you Again." His and Bonnie's which is so popular. He told me how that happened. They were walking through an airport to get on a plane and—or to get off; one or the other—and they had a little tiff, kind of not friendly, and they were walking through this airport and all of the sudden he said "today, I started loving you again." In other words, whatever the problem was it gone, today I started loving you again. When I hear that song, I know there'd been pain.

C.A.: Radio and television played a big role in the development of the west coast country music. Do you know if he had any experience with that?

L.R.: Radio and television?

C.A.: Yeah.

L.R.: His first experience on a televised program was Billy Mize show that Billy did down south. That was the first. He was very young in the business at that time.

C.A.: He must have been quite young. Early '20s?

L.R.: I don't have the dates on that. That was—he and Bonnie had—let's see I'm not even sure they were married at the time that they appeared on that show together. I'm

not sure they were. So one could check it out, the date of their marriage and then you'd know it was before that, I'm not sure.

C.A.: Can you tell me about Merle and your family's relations with other musicians, including Buck Owens? Were he and Buck friends?

L.R.: Yes. Yes they were. There was lots of, I guess you could call it gossip, that there was this competition between the two of them. Then when they each married the same woman that really—but no, they had a very good relationship. As a matter of fact I know of two things that prove that. One was that Buck flew—Merle was entertaining in the Seattle area, I'm not sure exactly where but that's where he was playing—and Buck flew up just to go to Merle's show and during their careers, Buck wrote Merle a letter telling him how much he enjoyed his music and a really personal letter of friendship. I asked Merle to give that letter to me, because I have a feeling that it may have disappeared because he's not known for being wise about keeping valuable things. No, he and Buck had a—I've been in Buck's office with the two of them.

C.A.: So they were good friends? That's great to know.

L.R.: Yes. Much better than anyone would imagine.

C.A.: That's really great to know. Who do you think had the biggest influence on Merle as a man and as a musician?

L.R.: As a musician?

C.A.: Both. As a man and as a musician.

L.R.: A man and a musician, oh, you know, you should have given me these questions ahead of time. Let me think about it because I'd look up some names. Well we know that—right now I'm trying to remember their names—Bob Wills. Bob Wills was very influential on him.

C.A.: Did he know Bob Wills?

L.R.: He gave Bob Wills a party here at this house when he lived here.

C.A.: Here?

L.R.: Brought him out here. Bob, yes.

C.A.: This house?

L.R.: Not this house, the one that Merle built. Merle's house. By the creek; by the canyon.

C.A.: Up in the bluffs area?

L.R.: Yes. He brought Bob out and Bob was older. Of course, I guess one would have to say—I have trouble with remembering the names of these people because this is not what I dwell on—the first one that he sang and mimicked him was name I can't think of.<sup>1</sup>

C.A.: Was it Jimmy Rogers?

L.R.: No, no, not Jimmy Rogers. Oh dear. It might come to me but as a young person note even known to anyone yet he went to the show and his friend who took him to the show had the courage to say to the artist, he said “this guy, Merle, can sing just like you.” The artist was impressed just by the statements so when the manager said “time for the show,” the artist said “I won’t go on until this kid sings.” There was a little confrontation between the owner of the theater and this artist because Merle was not supposed to be on stage, you see, but he got his way and Merle went out and sang his songs and he was very impressed. And Merle could, he could mimic whatever the song is. He could sing like other people. It was amazing how he could do that.

C.A.: Was it Ernest Tubb?

L.R.: I can’t remember the name.

C.A.: Ernest Tubb?

L.R.: No. Not Ernest Tubb.

C.A.: I hope you remember that because that’s a good story.

L.R.: It’s a great story and I’m sorry.

C.A.: If you can remember it later could you tell me? You have my card. I could plug it in parenthesis in the transcript.

L.R.: Ok.

C.A.: What about as a man? That was as a musician, Bob Wills, and things like that. You said—of course, what’s the biggest influence on Merle as a musician—what about just as a person, just generally, what do you think?

L.R.: Oh, Johnny Cash. Johnny Cash had more influence on Merle than any other musician, as a man.

C.A.: Were they friends? Did they know each other?

<sup>1</sup> It was determined to be William Orville “Lefty” Frizzell.

L.R.: Yes, yes. Oh, Johnny Cash is the person who said to Merle, when Merle was the young kid still finding his way into the business; he met Cash and Merle did not want to discuss having been in San Quentin. You know that Johnny played in San Quentin?

C.A.: Right.

L.R.: Well Merle was in the audience.

C.A.: Is that right? I didn't know that.

L.R.: I believe I'm correct. Well, Johnny said to Merle "you tell your story. Don't let someone else tell it. You tell your story and then you have nothing to hide." And that's how that all happened, Johnny Cash.

C.A.: That's amazing.

L.R.: Yes, he adored him.

C.A.: What are the main differences between—this is not about music so much but it's about the community the music came from—what differences do you see between the Bakersfield of today and the Bakersfield of the past?

L.R.: In the music?

C.A.: No. The town.

L.R.: The town?

C.A.: Besides the growth, I mean, the obvious stuff is the growth, but I mean is there a change in the culture? Are there changes in things that—I mean the music grew out of the culture and there was a culture in Bakersfield, is that culture still here? Do you see it? Do you think there's...

L.R.: That is an enormous question and a very serious one. It's different. It's different now. I think it—I wish I could express really what I think about this because I do know there is a great difference—I've seen some very good writings about it, articles in the paper and the local magazines and stuff that you could take the history of the Dust Bowl and use it as an example because the people that came here that—we'll use the Dust Bowl years, the '35, '34 to '36—there's been some good writings about that, about the people who came with nothing, but they were ambitious, hardworking and some of them are big in our farm names around the community today. I think that's where you see it more easily is in the development of the community. Of course, when I went to work at Bakersfield High School, Bakersfield College was on our campus.

C.A.: What year was that?

L.R.: I went to work there in '49 and we were—my office at that time was upstairs where the current cafeteria is. That was the main administration building that we had the earthquake and that building had to be torn down and while the earthquake—while we suffered the misery of trying to figure out where to put a desk, we moved into what was called the band room and it was in the junior college building. That is where the administrative office is today. That was the old Bakersfield College building. Where Bakersfield College sits today, I used to go target practicing there at the city dump. Yes, we would go out and set up glass bottles and shoot them, you know, just for fun. That used to be the city dump. Then our campus was growing. The population as you're talking about was growing. We had Bakersfield High School and East Bakersfield High School and we had Bakersfield College on our campus. Then they built the college and moved out on the hill and we were so glad to get rid of them because they kept, they could have a little more control about kids smoking on campus.

C.A.: Because when they're in college they are old enough to smoke.

L.R.: Yes, the kids were older, you know, and you just couldn't do anything about it. No, I was—the growth of the schools is the growth of the community because there was Bakersfield and East Bakersfield and then, I can't remember if Arvin was number three or number four and North High was number three or four. Which one of those I forgot and now they got all these others. I don't even know their names. There is so many of them around.

C.A.: That's true. There's a lot of high schools here now.

L.R.: But that's the growth of the city has been enormous with all of these schools we have.

C.A.: I forgot to ask you one thing about Merle. Did he finish high school?

L.R.: No.

C.A.: Which of Merle's songs are your favorites and why? Did he ever tell you about how he came to write that song? You talked about "Today I started Loving You Again." Is there another one you liked?

L.R.: I like, gee, there's a lot of good ones. I like "My Favorite Memories."

C.A.: There's one about—I can't remember the name of the song, I'm sorry—but it's about a black, white and I wonder how that song came to be. Do you know?

L.R.: Let's see, what's her name? The black...

C.A.: You mean the character in the song?

L.R.: Yes. I know how it came to be but—I think I know it came to be—because she's upstairs, the black one. When he was about five, mother took him shopping and he wanted this little black doll.

C.A.: It's slipped my mind.

L.R.: He wrote this love song and my mother says well that's the doll, the black doll. It's his doll! Oh, what the heck is her name? I've forgotten it. I'm not good today.

C.A.: No, you're great. This has been a fantastic interview. Can you think of anything I haven't asked you that you would like to talk about?

L.R.: Not really. I think.

C.A.: Do you think there are some other people you would recommend I talk to for this project on the Bakersfield Sound?

L.R.: On Bakersfield Sound?

C.A.: On this music?

L.R.: On the music? Yes, but I can't think of their names. I have a book that one of them wrote and I wonder where it is.

C.A.: Well I think that will do it for our interview. Thank you so much.

L.R.: You may have already talked to these.

C.A.: You are the second person I've talked to.

L.R.: You need to talk to this man.

C.A.: Thank you very much and this concludes our interview.

L.R.: Ok.

[END OF RECORDING]