

California State College, Bakersfield

San Joaquin Valley Oral History Project

Recorded History

INTERVIEWEE: Oscar Whittington  
PLACE OF BIRTH: Oklahoma  
INTERVIEWER: Jana Jae Greif  
DATE OF INTERVIEW: November 7, 1976  
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JJG: ...J, and I'm here at Democrat Hot Springs with Oscar Whittington, who is a Kern County resident for a long, long time. And, he has a great place up here. It's kind of a hide-away, you can get away from everything, and enjoy a lot of good scenery and good food and relaxation. And, I just heard their band play and he had a lot of fun jamming with them. And I wanted to ask Oscar a little bit about his background, and let him relate to us what some of the things that he remembers about Kern County, and the early music – the early country western music that he remembers. Oscar, where were you raised?

OW: Well, that's a question that – up until I was 16 years old, I was raised in Oklahoma. And we moved up in Wyoming for a while. Well, us poor folks, kinda had to move around. But, after - when I was 16 – then I came to Bakersfield, and I've been here in Kern County ever since. Except for going down the road with different bands, and what have you.

JJG: Well, how did you first become interested in music?

OW: Well, back home in Oklahoma, you know, this was before television. All we had was just the radio. And, Bob Wills, he used to just – I just used to wait to hear his noon program, when he was in Tulsa, and I got very interested in that type of music – the western swing dip.

JJG: He has really turned on a lot of people, musically, hasn't he?

OW: Mhm [agrees]. He has. My dad was an old time hoedown type fiddle player, and a very good one.

JJG: Oklahoma is full of those good fiddlers, I know!

OW: Oh gosh, really.

JJG: Did you first start playing the fiddle, then? Was that your first instrument?

OW: Yes, it was my first instrument, and there's a little story behind it. Well, dad had a fiddle, and I played that. And, Mr. McClain, our neighbor, he had a fiddle, and I really liked it. He had this here fiddle and bow, but he had no case for it. But he only wanted six dollars for this fiddle

and bow, and he told me if I picked six dollars in cotton for him, he'd give me this fiddle. And I thought I'd never live to get six dollars worth of cotton picked, but I finally did it.

JJG: Did you put rocks in the bottom of his bag? [laughs]

OW: Not really. [chuckles] You know they raised us to be a little bit honest, and besides, if daddy'd caught me he'd have tanned my hid pretty good. Anyway, I finally got the fiddle. That was my first fiddle. I didn't have a case for it, but mama had ordered some stuff in the war that they – some of the stuff – it come in a box that's just exactly the right length and width for this fiddle. So, I made me a fiddle case out of it. But it was too short for the bow.

JJG: Oh dear.

OW: So, I cut a hole in the box, and the bow stuck out.

JJG: Well, that served its purpose anyway. So, your daddy played. Did he teach you?

OW: Well, he – yeah, he taught me my first tune "Mama likes little shortnin" – how's that go? "Mama loves shortnin bread?"

JJG: Yeah.

OW: (Hums the tune then Oscar and Jana sing together) – love that shortnin bread. (OW continues) Shortnin bread, that's right.

JJG: And then, how about the other instruments? I noticed you played mandolin tonight, and you probably play guitar.

OW: Yeah. Well, the mandolin came later. And, you know, course, you're playing the five string fiddle now.

JJG: Right.

OW: I think all the way, and this is a five string mandolin I'm playing just like a – just like a fiddle.

JJG: I've never seen one of those. Well, I guess I did tonight, and I didn't realize that was five strings.

OW: I enjoy playing with the mandolin – it's kinda like a toy to me. I've been playing it too long.

JJG: It's a nice sound. Do you play guitar too? Have you done, like, back-up work? Or -?

OW: Not – not to speak of.

JJG: You stick with the fiddle pretty well.

OW: Pretty much, stick to the fiddle.

JJG: You can get turned on the fiddle, and it gets hard to –

OW: Ain't it so?

JJG: - hard to turn to anything else, really.

OW: Mm-hm.

JJG: Well, you came to Bakersfield when you were – Kern County when you were sixteen, and what was the musical scene here? What was going on musically?

OW: Well? Bakersfield at that time really, as far as country music is concerned, to me – well, it was mostly beer joints, and – well, I don't like to say "dive" because there's a lot of good, decent beer joints, you know? But, anyway, that's where most of the country boys were playing.

JJG: And dance halls? Were there dance halls?

OW: Yeah. Yeah, they had Beardsley Ballroom that was going then. And then we had the one on Stine Road. I'm trying to remember the name. But, "The Barn." "The Barn" on Stine Road. And, they were going then, and they were booking in the main bands. And, I remember when they booked Bob Wills in at Beardsley. I could hardly wait to get out there.

JJG: I bet.

OW: That's the first place I seen Bob Wills. And, I always loved his music. And everybody that walked in, "I wanna know, is that Bob Wills?" All these musicians, I didn't know who Bob Wills was. But, man, we had a lot of good times. And, of course, Spade Cooley, he was playing strong then.

JJG: Did he come, also, to Bakersfield?

OW: Oh, yes.

JJG: Who were – can you think of some of the other people who came, with names like that? Or were there very many –

OW: Well?

JJG: - into the ballrooms?

OW: Yeah, well, over a period of time. Of course, they had Lefty Frizzell, and all the guys – the main guys booked-in in Bakersfield – Hank Williams, and – well? Just about all of them. I couldn't think of any of the main bands, then, that wasn't booked in, here in Bakersfield.

JJG: And, so did you hear them a lot? Did you go to them all the time? Or were you busy working, yourself?

OW: Well? A good part of the time, I was in the house-band ballrooms. And then they'd book'em in, you know, and not have a double-band deal. Of course, Bob Wills never did that

because when he played bands, then he'd play the whole thing. You know, but a lot of times I'd book a guy, and he didn't have a backup band, well, we'd back him up.

JJG: Yeah.

OW: So.

JJG: So, in other words, you got to meet a lot of the main –

OW: Yes, we did.

JJG: - main people, then.

OW: Yeah – met a lot of them, and – it's just been really interesting to me to see, more or less, how the whole scene has changed, you know?

JJG: Uh-huh.

OW: And, I don't think anything can ever stand still.

JJG: Right.

OW: You know, it's got to be a constant change, and the trend that country music has taken is very interesting to me too because I hear some of the bands now – what, well – what they call "modern country" –

JJG: Mm-hmm.

OW: If you put them in back then they would have been booed out of town. It wouldn't have been country at all.

JJG: Right. The Bakersfield, really, is pretty – it's a country place, wouldn't you say? The majority of people like country music when they were – way back then, they went to ballrooms, and wasn't that –

OW: Yes. Yes, Bakersfield has always been known for – its - I'll say country roots.

JJG: Mm-hmm.

OW: You know, Oklahoma and Texas – people out of the Mid-west that liked that type of music. A lot of them settled in Bakersfield. And, of course, now, then, the kids, you know, they have came along, and dad and ma's from Oklahoma, but they're not, and I think that's where the scene changes a little bit.

JJG: Mm-hmm. Second generation.

OW: Yeah, the second generation. They are probably going through a little bit more modern style country sound.

JJG: Well, a lot of people – Bakersfield is really well known, of course, because of Buck Owens and Merle Haggard, primarily. The two –

OW: Those are the greats.

JJG: - probably biggest names. But a lot of other people have gotten their start in Bakersfield, wouldn't you say? Or have – at least the Bakersfield area has contributed to their music. Like you said, the country roots - .

OW: Yes, that's very definite, Jana, because, well, you've got Tommy Collins. You know, that Tommy was probably underestimated in his song writing, relatively. You know, he's put out some –

JJG: Great –

OW: Real songs - great songs. And then, of course, Ferlin Husky, never really got a start, until he came to Bakersfield, and I had the pleasure of having the back-up for him, behind him. And, also, we toured, and I was – managed the band while we was touring, and everything. And, Jean Sheppard is another one.

JJG: Mm-hmm.

OW: And, came along Dallas Frazier. We'd discovered Dallas in a talent contest at the Rainbow Gardens.

JJG: Is that right?

OW: Yeah, he was – used to be called "Little-bitty Tiger." Then, Ferlin always had this neckerchief around his neck, you know, and he'd take his neckerchief and see-saw it. [laughter] [Owis Mettler?] had this here talent contest, and Dallas come up here and entered it. And, well, he went right down to finals and won. And he's got this here neckerchief around his neck, sawing it just like Ferlin did his, you know, and – So, it's very interesting to see these guys come along like Dallas. Dallas is a good writer too, you know.

JJG: Yeah. Yeah, he is.

OW: And. Just really proud for him.

JJG: Right. There are a lot of – lot of people who've touched Bakersfield, anyway. And, did you keep working where you - have you worked pretty much all the time, musically, since you've been in Bakersfield?

OW: Yes, if not full time, always, on a part-time basis. My family is bricklayers all down the line, and I went into brick contracting business in 1957, and I was in the contracting business for quite a long time. But, I never got away from the music scene. I'd always have something going on the weekends, or something, you know.

JJG: And you toured then, a lot, too, like with Ferlin. You said you toured.

OW: Yeah. We toured quite a bit.

JJG: Did you play fiddle for him, primarily?

OW: Yes.

JJG: And, you mentioned Joey Sanders.

OW: Yeah, Joey went on a trip with us, and, I guess, that was probably the most fun I had. Me and Joey, we'd just fiddled up strong. We just really had a ball.

JJG: Twin fiddles are really –

OW: Yeah, I love twin fiddles.

JJG: - And, of course, Joey is from this area too, isn't he? Or, he has been here for quite a while.

OW: He's been here quite a while. Actually, when I first met Joey, he was living in Porterville.

JJG: Mhm.

OW: And, well, I was working with Ferlin Husky at the time, and Ferlin always liked two fiddles. And we had a fella by the name of Jean Oldham, which, incidentally, is still in Bakersfield, and a fine musician. But, anyway, he and I were playing double fiddles, and, when we was going on the road – on the tours, back when "A Dear John Letter" was hot.

JJG: Oh, yeah.

OW: Ferlin and Jean Sheppard did that?

JJG: Yeah.

OW: Well, Jean didn't want to go on the road. But, Ferlin asked me if I – I knew anybody I could get to play fiddle with me. And, I met Joey one time. He had a radio show in Delano that – I can't think of the station right now, but, anyway, I heard him play on that, and I could tell by the way he played that we could play double fiddles, you know.

JJG: Sure.

OW: So, I told him – I said, "Well, this fella out in Porterville, by the name of Joey Sanders that I could play with, if we can get a hold of him." And, so, at three o' clock in the morning we called Joey.

JJG: Oh, my gosh!

OW: And, asked him if he'd like to go on the road with us. And, he says, "Yeah," he'd be interested because he had just quit the radio station up there – quit that show, and he didn't have anything to do, and he would like to go. So, anyway, that was –

JJG: Got the band started.

OW: Started Joey and I's relationship.

JJG: I know that you worked to get it from time to time since then too, haven't you? In [?].

OW: Yeah, we cut quite a few records sessions, for different people, together – and everything.

JJG: That's great.

OW: Of course, Joey, every chance he gets, comes up here Democrat, and we fiddle up start. Have a good time.

JJG: How about Jimmy Thomason. That's another local name that a lot of people know, and associate with Country Western music.

OW: Yeah, Jimmy has been around Bakersfield for a long time. He, if I remember correctly, came to Bakersfield back in '48 or '49. And, at the time, he organized a band. And, well, he had been the governor, Jimmy Davis, of Louisiana. And, so, I went to work for Jimmy, playing double fiddles with him.

JJG: He had a T.V. show then too, didn't he?

OW: Yeah. Jimmy –

JJG: And radio?

OW: Yeah. Jimmy probably won most of the popular radio shows ever, in Bakesfield. And then, he had a – oh, several T.V. shows. And, I know a few different shows I worked with him on at three different times. And, he done real good.

JJG: That kept you pretty busy.

OW: Yes.

JJG: Were you around when that came to town?

OW: Yes, I was.

JJG: Or, when?

OW: Yeah. Course, you know, who anybody gets real popular, you can hear a thousand stories, you know, about'em and everything. But I was working with Jimmy Thomason at the Rainbow Garden, and Buck comes down, and, so, the fella that we had playin' guitar for us had quit. So, Jimmy was asking me if I knew anybody that'd play guitar and sing. So, it just so happens, the night before, I'd met Buck at a place he called [Mall Scotts?], just on South Union, up in the Rainbow Gardens. And, he was looking for a job, so I told Jimmy about Buck, and was all – Jimmy says, "Well, can you get a hold of him?" And, I says, "Yeah." I says, "I think he's staying over in Oildale with his folks," - over there. So, I went over to Oildale, and Buck

had given me his address, and I went over there, and, so, told Buck he could work with us at the Rainbow Gardens at Saturday night. And told him, "Well, wear a white shirt and a black neckerchief, and that's our band dress."

JJG: So that was really his first job –

OW: Yes.

JJG: - in Bakersfield. It's really interesting to hear all the different people, you know –

OW: Yeah.

JJG: - who contributed. How they started.

OW: I heard stories that he worked for, up at the – I know that was Buck's first job.

JJG: Very first job. Now, that started a nice long career, and of course we – we know that he's done a lot for putting the name, Bakersfield in, kinda, the public eye.

OW: Yeah. He's – he's just, something else.

JJG: Well, then Merle came along pretty soon. He was here after Buck, wasn't he? I mean, he came to town –

OW: Yeah.

JJG: - after Buck?

OW: Right. Well, I don't know was it Merle that came to town after Buck or not. But, my claims is that Merle came after – after that.

JJG: On the musical scene –

OW: Right.

JJG: - before he showed up a little bit later.

OW: Right. And, we worked casual jobs together, and what have you. And, you know the funny thing about it is everybody recognized Merle for the great talent that he was, but there was nobody could – he was kinda lazy. You know, nobody'd get him out of bed except Fuzzy Owens. So, that's how Merle come [dealing capital?]. Fuzzy has a knack for getting Merle going, and so.

JJG: Did you ever make that long trip down to L.A., and work on sessions down there?

OW: Yes.

JJG: Did you?

OW: We have.

JJG: There were – it seems like a lot of the Bakersfield people did do that.

OW: Well, at one time, all the major studios was down there that were recording country, and the – Bakersfield gets the musicians.

JJG: Is that right?

OW: Which speaks very well for Bakersfield.

JJG: Right. Did – when people talked about Bakersfield as the music capital of the West, why do you think it gotten that title “Nashville in the West,” or whatever? Do -

OW: Jana, I think it's due mostly to the fine musicians that's come out of Bakersfield. And, well, like you said, Merle Haggard, and all these guys – and Roy Nichols, who's such a fine musician – and Bakersfield produced so many good musicians – so much good talent – that it just couldn't hardly help but get the name. That's kinda the way I get –

JJG: It seems like it's a well-deserved name, even though it's not as big as Nashville. And, the recording – actually, a lot of the recording – well, there isn't as much recording going on in Bakersfield, but it's probably primarily the musicians, like you say.

OW: Yup. Yeah, I think definitely that's what it is -

JGG: Right.

OW: - because there's just been so many good ones, that's come out.

JJG: Now, what are you doing right now, and what do you plan to do – you have a band out here, and what else are you doing on the musical scene? Just whatever comes up?

OW: Well, yeah. Right now it's mostly whatever comes up. And, we'll go down and make a recording session once in a while, and –

JJG: And, that's to keep you busy.

OW: Yeah. Enough to keep – I don't want to get too busy because –

JJG: Sure. [laughter]

OW: You don't have enough time to fish!

JJG: You have a nice place up here to enjoy.

OW: I do.

JJG: Well, what about the future? Do you have any special plans? Or –

OW: Well, yes and no.

JJG: You don't want to commit yourself, right now.

OW: Not really, right now. I'm going to do some road work with Red Simpson up in Nevada. I still work up there with him.

JJG: Red's another one who's been around here -

OW: Aw, Red.

JJG: - who's done very well.

OW: He has done so good, and, you know, Red – course I know you know from Buck, and Buck's early career – Red wrote so many of Buck's tunes.

JJG: Sure.

OW: His hit tunes. And, I think Red is a very much underrated writer –

JJG: Right? He's coming into –

OW: - and performer too.

JJG: Right? He's coming into his own a little bit more all the time, don'tcha think?

OW: Yes, and the first time I – he, you know – earlier I mentioned Mall Scotts –

JJG: Mhm.

OW: - on South Union? That's where I first met Red Simpson. He was just a little, bitty tiger, and had this little shine-box. And, so, he had a little shine stand –

JJG: I'll be darned!

OW: - outside the place, and, so, had this old guitar, and, so, he'd sing you a song or shine your shoes or anything. [laughter]

JJG: So, you've really seen the whole musical scene progress, then –

OW: Yes, I have.

JJG: - in Bakersfield. And, do you feel like it's grown? Do you think it's going to continue to grow? Or do you think it's about reached its limit?

OW: No, I don't think it's reached its limit at all. I think Bakersfield's probably going along with the trend. I think the style is changing. And, I think we are losing our outright country-music musician, so to speak. He's gone more modern. But, after all, it's that way all with country.

JJG: Progressive country.

OW: Right.

JJG: Well, I think too, it'll continue to grow, and just change with the times, but I think Bakersfield is probably on the map for good as "Nashville West." I don't think that's going to change very easily.

OW: It's got to be – you know, I don't know of any other town on the west coast that's been more popular than Bakersfield, as far as country music goes.

JJG: That's true. Well, we look forward to hearing you on a lot of records, and hope you make your own. And, we really appreciate the time you've given us, and all the contributions you have made to country music in Kern County.

OW: Well, thank you Jana. It's been a pleasure talking to you.

JJG: Thank you.

[Interview continues at same location. Jana was able to get Red Simpson to comment]

JJG: I couldn't resist this opportunity because – yeah, I know – because Red Simpson just drove by, and so we grabbed him by the collar, and got him in here to say just a few words. Red, how long have you been in Bakersfield?

RS: About a week. [laughter from OW, JJG] I was raised in Bakersfield since I was three years old.

JJG: And, how'd you get started in music?

RS: Well? I got tired of washing cars. I was a [?] in the car wash for a long time. And, well, I was kinda raised into it. My whole family were musicians; bunch of bums. [laughter]

JJG: You didn't tell me he was a comedian too. [laughter]

RS: Well, I was going to be, but everybody laughed at me. [laughter from JJG and OW] But, I kinda grew into it, and I'd do a hitch in the navy and when I got out I started working with Buck Owens. I wasn't working with him. I just was writin' a few songs.

JJG: A lot of hit songs.

RS: Well, this was a [?] –

JJG: Tell us some of the names of the songs that you remember you know, as kinda highlights.

RS: I think the first biggest one that I wrote – that got me on the road was "Close Up the Honky Tonks," which Buck put on the album, and Charlie Walker had a hit single on. And, then it seemed that everything just went wild. I was writin' so many songs, and I was getting anywhere from three to six on each album that Buck was recording. And, I had – I think called "Sam's Place," and I had the other side of that one.

JJG: You know that is still a favorite. Everybody replays it –

RS: Yeah?

JJG: - every place we go, they want to hear "Sam's Place."

RS: And another two sided one we had was "Kansas City Song." Which we wrote both sides of that. Buck has recorded about thirty-five of the songs I wrote. And –

JJG: [sounds like Annual Peru?]

RS: Yeah, I'm working on thirty-six.

JJG: You helped him a lot.

RS: Aw, not really. He didn't need no help.

JJG: Aww!

RS: He's a [horse?]

JJG: He'd be the first one to, you know, thank every body who's contributed to his success.

RS: Yeah, well, that's what we call him around Bakersfield, "Big-hearted Buck." Some of us call him that. And some of us call him a golfer. Buddy Allen calls him a golfer. And then – well, I started recording in '66, and went on the road with Buck, and we worked at Carnegie Hall and a lot of big places like Gorman, Lamont, - [laughter from JJG and OW]. And, then I went on the road with Merle Haggard. And, then I started on my own. And –

JJG: What are you doing right now? Some pretty good stuff, but I want you to call it that.

RS: Yeah, well, I've got a new record out, "Truck Driver's Heaven," which is sittin' right there.

JJG: [Real big?]

RS: And, still writin' a lot of songs, and we're fixin' to go into Nevada. Oscar's leavin' with his band, and then we're going to go over and doin' a show.

JJG: I saw a little bit of that tonight, and I'll tell ya, it was great!

RS: Well, thank you.

JJG: Really great. Besides being able to sing and kick and write songs you can really make the audience laugh, and it's – a lot of good imitations I cracked up, like Elvis Presley and Johnny Cash.

RS: I didn't want to tell you, I play fiddle too.

JJG: Uh oh! [laughter]

RS: Doug Kershaw

JJG: You – oh my goodness. Well, I missed out on that. I'll have to hear that next time.

RS: Oscar's been helping me out on fiddle, but –

JJG: More twin fiddles.

RS: Well, what was that thing I was playin'? That big one?

OW: Viola.

RS: Viola. I played viola. I know a bunch of Violas, but it was the first viola, you know. But it really gives you a good sound. He's got his son playin' the fiddle, you know. And he plays fiddle, and I play the viola. Gives it a good sound. We do stuff like "Flight of the Bumblebee" and [?] swing, and stuff later on.

JJG: I'll have to hear more about that. I just learned "Flight of the Bumblebee" myself, and I'll tell you, that was some flight. [laughter] Well, I'll tell you, we really appreciate your saying a few words to us, and we're all looking for bigger and better things all the time from you. You're really well on the road now, and you've had a long career – and a long, outstanding career – and you're really coming into your own, now, and I think it's just great. And, we're all behind you, and I'm sure all Bakersfield-county residents are proud of you. We're glad you're a part of our history. Musical history.

RS: Well, thank you for having us with you, and we enjoy it.

JJG: Thank you.