California State College, Bakersfield

San Joaquin Valley Oral History Project

Recorded History

INTERVIEWEE:	Isabell Powers
PLACE OF BIRTH:	Colorado
INTERVIEWER:	Patricia Wood
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	April 27, 1974
PLACE OF INTERVIEW:	Bakersfield, California
NUMBER OF TAPES:	1
TRANSCRIBER:	Chris Livingston
FILE IDENTIFIER(S):	Powers_001

California State College, Bakersfield

San Joaquin Valley Oral History Project

Recorded History

INTERVIEWEE:	Isabell Powers
INTERVIEWER:	Patricia Woods
DATE OF INTERVIEW:	April 27, 1974

Patricia Wood: Date of interview – April 27, 1974. Place of interview – Hilltop Convalescent home. Full name of interviewee – Mrs. Isabell Powers. Full address of interviewing – Room 123, Hilltop Convalescent Home, Bakersfield, CA, Height St.

Isabell Powers: I'm Isabell Powers, living in the Hilltop Convalescent Home, and I came to California in 1917 from Colorado. And, we came from Petaluma, and we had a friend that was going to high school, in Petaluma, from the South Fork, from the Kern Valley. And she invited me to come up and spend the summer on their ranch – the Smith ranch. And that's how I first came to the South Fork Valley.

There at the Smith ranch I met Marvin Powers, Patty Smith's cousin. And we became good friends, and later become engaged, and we were married in 1919. And, at about the same year –about 1920 – we bought a small ranch. And there, my husband Marvin, bought a few head of cattle, and started a herd, and ran his cattle on the desert; on the open range. He farmed on this little ranch, and we had four children. Our first one died at birth, and we raised our three sons there. I have many happy memories on that little ranch. We had very little entertainment. There was a little church down the road between Onyx and Weldon. And, we called it the little church by the side of the road. And there we attended church every Sunday, and my children went to Sunday school. And we had some other entertainment; the women's club, which was there for a number of years – gave a dance, once a month, and that was about the extent of the entertainment. My husband and I felt that home and bed was the place for little ones, so after our children were babies we stayed at home and put our children to bed. We could barely catch them out, it was impossible to get babysitters in those days.

As I was saying, Marvin and I had a very happy life, and many wonderful memories. And I – we enjoyed being at home, our work, and being together. And we'd – all the other young people would go to the dance, and we went once or twice, and took our oldest son. He was just a baby. There was a cloak room in this dancing hall, and they had a shelf with the maids around it, a wide shelf for hats, or anything like that, and a lot of hooks around the room for the coats and racks. The people were coming in a hurry,

anxious to get to dancing and they would throw their cloaks on that shelf, and not bother to hang them up. There were some people who put their babies to bed on this shelf. And we'd go in there sometimes and they would be covered, almost smothered with coats and racks. And we said we'd never do that. We'll just stay home and put our babies to bed. We wouldn't take a chance. But we didn't take in very many dances too before our children came. My husband was the one that's the dancer, but I didn't dance. Never did get to dancing very well, but he was full of rhythm and fun. Oh, that man. Just full of [?] and happiness.

I'll never forget, when I was telling you, when early morning, he'd get up at day light - was he a worker. He was working at the [Noan?] ranch, as [Harley Noan?] was coming down. Fences were there leaning, laying on the ground; a full picket fence for at least a half a mile down, and halfway down, and up, and all the way down the road. And Marvin went to work cutting down an old dead trees – we had two orchards, and many, many trees were dead – cutting down trees and putting up new fences – putting up new fences. And went to work early in the mornings. And sometimes wouldn't even stop for gates. He would put his hands on the post and jump over the fence. So he was always on the run. And always was singing. And then I'd wake in the early hours, and, just getting light, I'd find a cup of cold coffee sitting on the bed. Maybe a fried egg, that was curled. Fried 'til it was just curled, and that's the way he loved his eggs. And the cream and the scum floating on a cup cold coffee. Always seeing that I'd have my coffee, but he wouldn't wake me up. And I'd hear him singing. Oh, those wonderful memories.

And he sang – this is one – it's "Memories, Memories; Childhood days, wildhood days". Have you ever heard it?

P.W.: Uh-huh.

I.P.: And, he would sing that. And he would sing that song "Sweetheart, sweetheart". And he had a lovely tenor voice, but you could never get him to sing in a choir, or in a group. He just wouldn't. Just too timid about it.

And we'd put up food together. He'd help me whenever we canned fruit. We'd can a hundred quarts at a time, and he would peel. Peel the peaches or fruit, and help me with my washings, and help me at home with my babies, when they were little. He would always get up in the night, if there was any walking to do in the night. He was the one to hold them. None like him.

You know that I told you that I first came to the Smith ranch; Patty Ham's home, where her mother and father lived, and grandfather and grandmother lived. And then, later on, their son's wife came there to live, and she's still living there in the home down, near Onyx. And they had more farming land down there, so they moved down there, and took up a homestead. And with Thomas Smith. Not Thomas. It was [Hooper] Smith. That was the grandfather. And that home was called the Cottage Grove home. And that's why the little graveyard above that was called the Cottage Grove. It was on that ranch, a part of

the ranch. And there was a little school, the first school my husband ever went to was across, almost across from the cemetery; up a little ways. And there's a grove – there's some trees there where the little school house used to be. My husband started his school there, and I remember him tellin' – I always thought it was so cute – was the first day he went to school he had a pair of rubber – of red cowboy boots he planned on wearing to school. Well, Marvin's mother died with her last child; which was the fourteenth, and he was four years old when she died. So, his first day of school he planned on wearing these little rubber – his cowboy boots. And, of course, all those children and no mother got into a scramble, of course. The father was a ranger and he was gone quite a bit. But there were older sisters – older girls – that took over. But he only could find one red boot. And I can almost see him going up that road to school with only one red boot on and a shoe, and a little lard bucket for a lunch pail. And, my husband and four of the – four men – four other ranchers for years ran cattle on government – free range up in Fish Creek country. And there was Jim Robertson, and Bill Alexander, and Stanley Smith, and my husband. And they worked together, and ran their cattle, and sometimes would drive their cattle. And it was about, maybe, eighty miles all the way up to the drive in from the ranch; up to Fish creek. And they each had their own leased meadow from the government, up there. And just that you'll end up taking them up – wait – what is that canyon?

P.W.: Nine Mile

I.P.: Nine Mile canyon. While as you get to the top in the valley you see little – what look like white cottages dotted around on the hill. And there a man by the name of [Vales?], John [Vales?] - I think his name was – he had taken his bride up there, and they had lived there all their lives. And raised his oldest boy, who was eighteen years old, and they had never went to school. It was in Tulare County. And the men, some of them spoke to the authorities and the authorities of Tulare County – about them not going to school. So they got after him. And Mr. [Vale?] was a wonderful carpenter, but very odd – strange man. He had been injured in the war, and his mind wasn't just right – wasn't right at all. And he built a school house. He – yard equipment was just perfect with the yard, and he put the mother in there and she couldn't even speak to him as a teacher, and they let him go with that. And whenever he see anyone coming he'd say, "Get in the school house and start studying." He had a little store.

But he seemed to get more queer as the years went – go by and do different things that just didn't seem normal. And he was cruel to his family, and these girls. And he build a nice looking home that just looks awfully nice from the outside. It looked like a nice, sprawling ranch house, and lovely porches on it, and everything. But they say that he wouldn't have a door in the house, and not even the bathroom because he was afraid – He knew he wasn't doing right, lots of times, and he was very underhanded, and teaching his boys to be deceitful. So he felt he had to watch everybody. He was so cruel, and as the little girls got in their teen ages, and the boys – they just determined they had to get away from him.

P.W.: Tell about Bobby.

I.P.: Bobby. And this one time – well, I'll – So, the boys ran away. I mean, two of the girls ran away, and went down to a compound, compound where Stanley Smith was – had. He took them down the hill, and found Mr. Vales coming back towards them. And the boys and the girls got down in the bottom of the car to hide. He took them to the police station, and they never went back again – never had to go back again. The authorities looked into it, and the stories the girls – the children would tell. And Johnny, the oldest boy, were just terrible – the things he did. And one time they seen a body, when they got up early in the morning, of a young girl on a cot, and then it disappeared. And a young girl – a young girl had disappeared up in that part of the country, and she was going to go see them. Go see the Vales. That's what she said. So, Johnny [Galandal?] – no, not Johnny [Galandal?] – What's his name –

P.W.: Vales?

I.P.: What is that steak place?

P.W.: McNally.

I.P.: McNally, John McNally was sheriff for the Tulare County. And he got a woman from the police department, and two other policemen, and went up there armed to take him. And he didn't have any – wasn't suspicious at all that time he walked out. Just as friendly, and they all had their guns on him. And they took him in a car, and put the wrist – wrist cuffs on him, and chained him to the bottom of the floor, and just wasn't taking any chances. He's right – this time he's in an institution, and I'm sure he'll be there the rest of his life. He said he would kill her. Of course, she and the children testified against him, and they were able to sell this land and get the money.

P.W.: How many children did they have?

I.P.: Musta had six or seven.

P.W.: Well, what about that baby?

I.P.: Well, their first born was – died at birth, and it was buried up there without any notice, or calling a coroner, or anything out on the farm. Of course, it's about ninety miles from there to Ridgecrest, I think.

And there was a lot of wild times. Wild things and exciting things have happened up in that valley. The Walker brothers were hard drinkers. There were down below Isabella and they would go to – now really, their original home was Keyesville. They were miners. The boys would drink really heavy, and then they would get into fights. They never harmed one another. There was one that killed somebody, and took him to the penitentiary, and no one's ever heard of him anymore. There's – now I'm not sure – three or four – three or four of them that went into a mine, and they were drinking, and they killed every one of them. They killed one another until they were all dead. The last

one was injured so much that he died. One brother, before he died, took another brother that was dead, and put him in a wheel jar – wheel barrel – that's right, it was a wheel barrel – and dumped him over a bank.

When I first went up there, I went on the mail stage. We – the canyon road wasn't built. We went over Walker's – not Walker's – Walker's Basin over in Caliente – through Caliente, and then down. They bought these [shelves?]. When we got our first Ford – my husband – we had our first Ford from the time we were married – my husband got interested – he loved to get new cars. He was interested in having a car. Only – he was just twenty-five, but still, he was just like a young kid when it came to a car. The day we were to marry, he went downtown – he didn't tell me, but he was gonna get a new car. I was sitting on the porch, waiting, and we were way late for our wedding. He come up with a new car. A new Ford car with white walled wheels, which was something – the thing those days. The top was an ivory [?] curtains you could snap on.

P.W.: Who had the first car up there?

I.P.: Patty Hand. Patty Smith – Mrs. Hand – Mrs. Lever-Hand, now. She met me at Isabella in their first car that came into the valley was a Cadillac. Patty Hand is a daughter of Thomas Smith, and Stanley Smith and Patty were brother and sister. She gave birth to seven children, and they were all right at home on the ranch. I am – wouldn't go to a hospital with my first child, when I got to my first child, and my mother just begged me to go to the hospital. Said it's safer to go for the first time – to be in a hospital, and I said we were just starting, and I couldn't afford it. So I lost my baby, and – but Patty gave birth to seven, and often times, the doctor wasn't there. She never lost a baby from her first to five.

P.W.: What about the picnics on the fourth of July?

I.P.: And then, the church would have an ice cream social, of course I forgot about that, once a year. And then always on fourth of July, it was always big day. Ever since I was a child, even back in Colorado, we had our celebrational – looking forward to the fourth of July, with the firecrackers, and – but in South Fork, we'd go up on Greenhorn with our several gallons of ice cream and the watermelons and old-timers and youngsters and all would have a wonderful picnic.

P.W.: Take any watermelons?

I.P.: Watermelons, yes. Watermelons, ice cream. Lever-Hand almost [unintelligible].

It was against the law, of course, to sell any kind of liquor, or beer, to the Indians, but the party that had Weldon post office – they – the post office had been there for many, many years. The boys – the Indians would come in and buy all of the vanilla that was on the shelf – we couldn't keep vanilla. So we started to sell beer – bought a license – and sell beer. I don't know if we ever thought – realized you can't sell any kind of liquor or hard drinks, even beer. I guess you have to be so far from the post office. So then the man

that – it was a one party – decided to start a store up above Onyx, and he saw what this party was doing, and thought they weren't doing right, almost doing. He just decided to put in an application to the post office, and the report him. He got the post office. Well this made for the other party – and this was in at the post office – very, very angry, and so he made up his mind to get even, and he had quite a few Indians that had – a couple of them – there was two different places they had a small Rancheria; one on one side of the river and one on the other side of the river. And they were on his land. He took those Indians cabins and shacks, and he put them right across from this new store the –

P.W.: Builder's Emporium?

I.P.: Emporium. What is it?

P.W.: Builder's Emporium?

I.P.: Builder's Emporium. But finally, the Indians moved away, and all clear. They left their shacks there, though I guess at times, different one's are being taken away, because they are disappearing. Some interesting things happened in those days. But, now, in my old age, I can look back and – only I'm so thankful that I can remember the good things, and not – there was hardships, but all the happy times we had together in the closeness. I'm so grateful for it. My memories.

P.W.: When you stayed in the summer time, up there around Canyon Meadows, how did you sleep, and eat and bathe and everything?

I.P.: Well, we usually took a wash tub or two with us because we had to wash clothes. I stayed there one summer, all summer – two months up at Fish Creek. We had to carry water up a real steep hill from a spring and wash our clothes on a wash board. Believe me, they got dirty too. The children banging that black soil underneath the pine trees. We had – well they built open fireplaces – cook places with rocks and cement and put tin over the top – and that was the top of the stove – stove pipe sticking up from the back. You got – even then you got smoke in your eyes all the time, when you're cooking. Then we did our baking, and – can't think of the pots?–

P.W.: Dutch oven.

I.P.: Dutch ovens. Out of the ground sometimes, and then we made hot biscuits in the Dutch oven. We'd build a fire – dig a hole and build a fire in it. A small hole at the top, and get it sizzling hot, and with some nice coals in this place. And then we'd scoop out the coals and put on the lid. And put our shortening in the pot. That's - the men did most of that. And they would make their biscuits in the top of a sack. That's when the boys were cooking for themselves – long drives. Sometimes they were up there when the snow was falling, bringing the last of their cattle out. They moved from place to place, coming down, and wake up many mornings with their canvas - bed canvases covered with snow – and everything wet.

P.W.: Did you always have fresh meat?

I.P.: Always. We – they took turns, killing a fat heifer – each of the – man at the camps. We would share, each time. Then we would hang it out at night. In the day time they'd have a thick, heavy – really heavy, white muslin sacks, and put it in these muslin sacks, and then wrap it in other canvases, and then they'd lay it on their bed in their cabin, and bring the rest of the bed and mattress back over it, and the meat would be just ice cold at night. That's the way we kept our meat. And we also made jerky. You know how to make it? Cut it in strips and dip it, or roll it in pepper and salt, and then just let it sit overnight. And then the next day just hang it on a line or a fence – draped over, strips of this meat. That would keep the flies and the wasps away. And–because of the salt—and why the boys so often carried jerky in their pockets. Sometimes when they didn't get home at noon – rode all day.

Before I came down here I was living in what we called the New Kernville. We lived for thirty – thirty years over on the South Fork before we sold the ranch. And then we decided we wanted to live in a town where we'd be near the doctors and the markets – the little stores. And we'd be close neighbors – have close neighbors. My husband said that if we wanted to find a place with a fireplace and a pine tree in the yard. And we found it. And it was an old house, brought from old Kernville, when they – before they put the [recording cuts out].