

CALIFORNIA STATE COLLEGE, BAKERSFIELD

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

Interview Between

INTERVIEWEE: James Harrison Ward (Age: 70)

INTERVIEWER: Judith Gannon

DATED: January 24, 1981

J.G.: This is an interview with Mr. James Harrison Ward, 640 Cedar Lane, Dinuba, California by Judith Gannon on January 24, 1981 at 3:00 p.m.

J.G.: Okay Mr. Ward why don't you start out by telling me a little bit about your childhood in Oklahoma.

Mr. Ward: Well I was born February 19, 1911 in Rogers County, Oklahoma. We moved to Wagoner County in 1915. I lived there till I was 26 years old and then I came to California. I've been here right here ever since.

J.G.: When you were 26 what year would that have been?

Mr. Ward: It was 1937.

J.G.: Did your family farm in Oklahoma?

Mr. Ward: Yes. Yes. That's all I knew before I came here is farming.

J.G.: Did you own a farm?

Mr. Ward: Yes, my father failed to ever pay for it. He owned one for several years but lost it during the Depression. It's not a very good farming area there anyway. But some years we had real good crops and other years not so good. Last year I was there was a complete failure. Went seventy-two days without a drop of rain and everything just burned up. That's what caused me to come out here.

J.G.: Were you farming with your dad then or did you have a place of your own?

Mr.Ward: I was farming part of the place yes.

J.G.: How many acres did you farm?

Mr.Ward: Oh, in all there was two hundred and ten acres. It all wasn't in cultivation. There was quite a bit of woods pasture there. Oh I guess we had probably one hundred and twenty acres in cultivation something like that.

J.G.: What did you grow?

Mr.Ward: Oh corn and cotton mostly. Raised a few hogs and cattle.

J.G.: What do you remember your family life as being like when you were on the farm in Oklahoma?

Mr.Ward: Well, we always had a abundance of stuff to eat but never very much money. That's what I remember.

J.G.: That seems to be a common theme of the people who were trying to farm in Oklahoma.

Mr.Ward: That's right. Yes. Some years we'd do real well but other years we didn't.

J.G.: Do you remember any of the government policies? I know your wife talked about the killing of the animals that made it tougher for the farmers.

Mr.Ward: Yes, I remember very well about that. And I'll tell how crooked a lot of that stuff was. It was unjust. The year before they started that cholera got in our hogs and killed them all. The next year they started this program. The farm agent came out there and had a meeting in the schoolhouse. He got up telling about the benefits of the program. My father asked him, "What are you going to do with a fella like me? I don't have any hogs. I lost all mine last year from cholera." He says, "You sign a government contract," and he says, "We'll pay you for every one of them hogs." My dad told him, "No," he says, "I'm getting pretty long in years. I never taken anything for nothin' yet and I'm not about to start in now." Then they started where you had to have stamps to sell your cotton. The government policy was that everybody was to share alike in that. Well, they notified everybody to be at a certain place when they was going to give out these stamps to sell your cotton. Our neighbor across the road from us he'd signed up. My dad didn't. We went out there to get our stamps and when they give my father his stamps he looked at

'em and they were just half of what the fella that had signed the contract. Dad asked him about that. "Oh," he says, "You don't have a contract," and I thought my father was going to kill somebody.

J.G.: What did he mean--that he didn't have a contract?

Mr. Ward: Contract for the government on this cutting down on cotton.

J.G.: The government wanted the farmers to sign a contract saying they would not grow more than so many acres?

Mr. Ward: Yeah.

J.G.: And your dad didn't do that.

Mr. Ward: Nope, nope. My dad kept pretty well up on the rules and regulations. He told him what the rules and regulations was. And he bemeaned him there for I guess five or ten minutes, that guy. And finally my dad asked him, "When can I catch you in your office?" He says, "I will be there Thursday." Well Dad says, "I'll be there Thursday too so you better have that straightened up or you're going to go on my mark the rest of your days." We went down. We walked in the door. Boy he met us with a smile says, "I'm getting it straightened out."

J.G.: So your dad got just as many stamps as the other guy had?

Mr. Ward: Oh yes, we got just as many stamps per acre as the other had.

J.G.: How many children were there in your family?

Mr. Ward: Well there were only four of us lived to maturity. I have two brothers and a sister dead. My oldest brother died before I was born. He was kicked by a colt and killed. The other two I don't really know. I was young and I don't know what killed them. Yeah my oldest brother was about eight years old and a pet colt kicked him in the stomach. Course heck there was no hospitals. There was doctors, but none of them operated or anything and consequently I think--as best as I recall--he was kicked one day and died the next.

J.G.: So then in about 1934 you and Mildred were married then--right?

Mr. Ward: Yes, we were married in 1934.

J.G.: 1934. How did you meet your wife?

Mr. Ward: She came down there in our neighborhood to teach school.

J.G.: She was a school teacher and you were one of the farmers in the

nearby area.

Mr. Ward: Yeah, yeah. We got dating once and a while. Just happened.

J.G.: What kinds of things did you do when you were dating and courting during that time?

Mr. Ward: I'll tell you. We didn't have very much because we had no money. No, we very seldom got to go in town to a movie or anything like that because we just couldn't afford it. We'd have country dances and things like that and that's about it.

J.G.: Visiting back and forth or going over to her house and that kind of thing?

Mr. Ward: Oh yeah, oh yeah sure yeah.

J.G.: So then you were married in 1934 and you still were farming in partnership with your dad.

Mr. Ward: There was just no work. Nobody had any money to hire anybody with. If you did you would make about fifty cents or a buck a day. That was good wages then.

J.G.: As I understand from your wife you came out here a year before she did.

Mr. Ward: I came out in 1937. Her parents came out and I came out with them. I was coming anyway and so when they decided they would come, I came out with them. That was how I landed here the fourteenth of March 1937. In May the wife came out on a train. She spent the summer here. She had a contract with a school and went back that fall to teach school. I stayed up until I believe it was November when the work was about all done then I went back to Oklahoma. We came back here in spring of 1938 to live.

J.G.: When you and her parents came out who had the car and how did you finance your trip?

Mr. Ward: Her father had a car. I sold my car to get money to come out here, and we shared expenses. When we first got here we went to a little auto court and rented a cabin and stayed out there for awhile.

J.G.: We were talking about when you sold your car to come to California.

Mr. Ward: Yeah. What I done when I first got here. Went to looking for work, and then when the wife came out I got this job

on this little farm out near Cutler and there was a house there on it. You might say just a cabin. We lived in that for the summer. Just before school started she took a train back to Oklahoma. I stayed on till November--sometime in November--don't remember the date. Then I went back and stayed back there and then came back in 1938 and we've been right here in this town ever since.

J.G.: You spent the winter back in Oklahoma?

Mr. Ward: Um hmmm.

J.G.: What did you do that winter?

Mr. Ward: I worked about nine weeks I think. I got a job in a garage. Got to where there was nobody coming in the garage, course they couldn't keep me. I was making a buck-and-a-half a day.

J.G.: What kind of work did you do on the farm that first summer that you were here?

Mr. Ward: Well he [employer] had a bunch of young vines that I kept tied up and irrigated and sulphured and hauled some fertilizer. Later in the summer when there wasn't too much to do out on the farm I went over to Reedley and got a job in a packing house packing peaches. That fall I picked some grapes and then when that was done I went over here to Sun Maid--they had a receiving station here--and worked there receiving raisins till that was finished. Then I went back to Oklahoma because there wasn't much left to do around here but pick cotton. I couldn't make enough pay for a sack.

J.G.: Picking cotton wasn't your strong point.

Mr. Ward: Nope, nope that's one thing I couldn't do. I've tried it but I couldn't make anything at it.

J.G.: So then you went back to Oklahoma and after school was out in 1938 then you came back. Then what happened?

Mr. Ward: Well I'll tell you that was the roughest year I've ever had. There was less work seemed like in 1938 than there was in 1937 and 1939 was a little better. When the War broke out in Europe why things went to picking up then just a little bit. You could work all you wanted. War broke out in September 1939 wasn't it, well in 1940 it was pretty good then. I worked pretty steady all the time.

J.G.: So in 1938 and 1939 those were really tough years.

Mr. Ward: They were certainly rough. Yes they were.

J.G.: What were you doing at that time? What kinds of work were you

doing?

Mr. Ward: Anything I could get. Anything I could get.

J.G.: You had one child, right? Or was it two?

Mr. Ward: Well we had our second child in April 1939.

J.G.: How did you manage with your checks so few and far between?

Mr. Ward: Well we didn't spend anything we didn't have to. One thing that Depression done to me is made a conservative out of me. Lot more so than it did my wife.

J.G.: When you say conservative do you mean if you don't have the money you don't buy the item?

Mr. Ward: As a general rule, yes. The first thing I went in debt for out here was in 1940. We didn't have a refrigerator up till then and McMahan's in Fresno was advertising over the radio. We had a little old two dollar radio. They were advertising no down payments. So I saw things was picking up so I told the wife, "Let's go up there and see if our credit's any good." We went in there and I bought a new refrigerator, a used couch and a chair. I said, "It will have to be on payments," and they said, "How much do you want to pay down on it?" I said, "Just as little as possible." He said, "Can you pay the sales tax today?"

So I paid the sales tax down on it. I had a little more money than that but I wanted to hang on to it. So I bought that and in the summertime when work was good I'd make payments ahead so I wouldn't have to pay anything through the winter months.

J.G.: During those two really hard years did you live in a cabin on a ranch?

Mr. Ward: No we had a little house right here in town. Small two rooms and a kitchen and a bath and I think we paid eight dollars a month for it.

J.G.: But you had the conveniences?

END OF TAPE 2, SIDE 2

J.G.: This is a continuation of a taped interview with Mr. James Ward of Dinuba, California. We were talking about those two years of 1938 and 1939 and I believe you just said you had a house here in town. Did it have running water?

Mr. Ward: Yes. We had that. We lived there I think for two years. Then

we got another house--little better house--on down the street. Well the fella that owned that he wanted the use of the house for himself for some reason or other and I got a chance to get another house and we lived right on that street from 1938 to 1947. Then we bought a place just out the edge of town with an acre of ground. Lived up there for thirteen years. In the meantime the wife started teaching and things were looking up pretty good. Of course we had three kids and we didn't have a lot of money but we was doing pretty well considering.

J.G.: After those two years where you picked up any kind of work that you could get working in the fields or whatever--what kind of work did you do after that?

Mr. Ward: Well I believe it was 1940 or 1941 I don't remember which it was my father-in-law and I we went out here and bought a hay baler and got to doing custom hay baling. It was fairly good but it was something I didn't care too much about so I got out of it. Sometimes I worked some for him. We'd usually go out to work before daylight of a morning, be there as soon as there was light enough to work and we worked till about noon when it got so hot and the hay got so dry. I'd come home and go up town and work in the garage. I wound up working there steady for five or six years until another fella took over the shop.

In 1950 I had a chance to go to work for this sawmill up in the woods. I worked three months at the mill but the pay wasn't too good. It was away from home and kind of expensive so I quit that and came back down here and drove a truck all fall. I worked in the garage as they'd need me. In the meantime a fella across the street had a shop and he was looking for somebody. He and the fella that owned the truck was pretty good buddies so as soon as the trucking season was finished he told me, "You can go to work over here for Ernie Payne if you're interested in the job." Well I got to work somewhere. So he picked up the phone and Ernie came over. He wanted to find out when I wanted to go to work. "Well Ernie," I said, "I don't know anything about you. You don't know anything about me." I says, "I'll come over and work a week. If you're satisfied and I'm satisfied then we'll talk about wages." I stayed there for a little over five years. When I got a chance to go back to a better job up in the woods I went back up there and stayed there seventeen years. I spent five, six years in the woods during the summertime and down at the mill in winter. Finally, I went to work at the mill all year and I worked there until I retired.

J.G.: What kind of work did you do when you were in the woods?

Mr. Ward: Well the first year I was up there I piled brush. They had to clean up so far back from all the roads. That's what I didn't like. The next time I went back up there I went to work

building roads. I was powder man. I worked there for only a short time when the regular powder man quit, so one morning they come out and told me you're the new powder man.

J.G.: That's dangerous work isn't it?

Mr. Ward: Naw. I thought it was before I knew about it. It's not dangerous. The only danger is fooling with it if it's stormy and lightening. If you'll get up hill, above your shot, you've got very little to worry about. I never put off but two shots up there that scared me at all.

J.G.: Did somebody teach you this skill when he walked off the job or did you have to pick it up on your own?

Mr. Ward: I learned a little bit from the other fella that was there when I first came and that's all I knew.

J.G.: How and when did you get down to see your family?

Mr. Ward: I'd come home weekends. I got a trailer and pulled it up there and lived in it.

J.G.: And your family lived in the house here in Dinuba?

Mr. Ward: Yeah. The kids were pretty good sized and she got along fine. One year I went to Wasco and loaded potatoes.

J.G.: What year was that?

Mr. Ward: Oh I don't remember 1941 maybe. I worked for the same fella both years. It was Emal Penner at Arvin. They wanted me back the next year but I went down there and looked it over and I didn't want it that year.

J.G.: Why not?

Mr. Ward: Why not? Well, there weren't too many good guys around. Before when we loaded those cars we put three hundred sacks of potatoes in a car. We had to stand them up six rows through the cars double 'em up two sacks on top of that out five from the end of the car then you dropped down to a single. You had to put them in there where they'd just come out to three hundred sacks to the car.

J.G.: Is that a railroad car?

Mr. Ward: Yeah. A railroad car. And they had a bunch of kids in there they was lettin' 'em truck 'em there and they just bumped up against each other. They was in the way and that's when I said I don't want it. It would have been easier if I had a good

partner for the two of us to do it. Because me and my buddy could load a car sometimes in thirty minutes. We didn't walk.

We had a nine car spot, three cars long, three cars wide. On that outside car you really had to move. Go in there and hand stack four sacks of potatoes and get back before they had four ready for you to go.

J.G.: It sounds like hard work.

Mr. Ward: It was hard work but I was pretty young then. It didn't hurt me.

J.G.: How you did you find out about where there was work?

Mr. Ward: Oh just hear people talking. Wherever I'd hear of anything if I wasn't working I'd go see about it.

J.G.: Did you ever find that you went someplace and there was nothing there?

Mr. Ward: Oh yes. Many times. Yes. Well the job was filled or something, yes.

J.G.: So that you'd kind of have to waste your gas and go down there?

Mr. Ward: That's right. Well gas was cheap though then.

J.G.: The pay checks were a lot smaller too.

Mr. Ward: Yah, yah, yah, that's right.

J.G.: I remember that yesterday or it was Monday, when I was here that you said something about you didn't think that having gone through this experience had much affect on you. You didn't look back on it as having been a real terribly hard time.

Mr. Ward: The only thing it's done to me that I can think of is since then I have been careful how I spent my money. We don't owe anybody a dime and we've got a little money stashed away.

J.G.: I think a lot of people that lived through the Depression now are finding it hard even now to spend. They're really very very careful with their money.

Mr. Ward: I was very reluctant to buy this place when I did. But I got a good deal. I knew it was a good deal. I got a lot more out of my other house than it was worth. I only went in debt sixty-six hundred dollars when we bought this place.

J.G.: You did good huh. What do you think about the term "Okie"? What do you think that means?

- Mr. Ward: Well, in my estimation it was overblown too much. The wife don't agree with me. But I found out on the job that regardless of where you was from somebody would make a joke about it, and it was all in fun. It wasn't the reflection on me because I was an Okie. They did it about the Arkies or wherever you was from.
- J.G.: So you don't see Okie as necessarily meaning anything derogatory?
- Mr. Ward: No I don't think anything about it.
- J.G.: Did you ever feel like you were discriminated against or there was hostility on the part of the local people because you were a migrant from Oklahoma?
- Mr. Ward: No. No. I never did.
- J.G.: You never felt like anybody looked down on you or anything like that?
- Mr. Ward: They might have thought that about me, but I didn't feel it.
- J.G.: How about the way that you were treated by the growers or the people that you worked for on the ranches?
- Mr. Ward: I was always treated very well other than awfully low pay. Now here's one little item I want to mention. This goes back to the first year we was here. I worked for a fella on a little ranch near Cutler. Everybody told me he was wealthy because he had a plumbing shop in Dinuba. He was a Scotchman so he held on to his money. He'd always come out of a Saturday evening and he'd pay me in cash. My wages came out to sixteen dollars and twenty cents a week. One day he couldn't make the exact change and he gave me sixteen dollars and a quarter. The next payday he held that nickle out and reminded he had overpaid me a nickle last week.
- J.G.: Oh no. He was going to make sure that he got every penny's worth.
- Mr. Ward: That's right. That's right. The work got slow out there and when I left there he got awful mad. It was the only time I ever heard anyone say anything about an Oklahoman. He only wanted me to work about two or three days a week. Well, heck, I couldn't do that. I had to find something else. When I left he said he'd never hire another fella from Oklahoma. I said, "That's your privilege buddy. You don't have to."
- J.G.: What did you think of Roosevelt?
- Mr. Ward: Roosevelt was the worse thing that ever happened to the United States of America. Yup, that's what I think. He was to my

estimation a dishonest crook.

J.G.: Would you like to talk a little bit more about why you think that?

Mr. Ward: Well, he started the country on a spending spree and it snowballed. When the War broke out in Europe, well, he was dishonest there. He said, "We'll sell to anybody who comes here with the money." Little bit later England ran out of money. So it was lend lease. First it was cash and carry then it was lend lease.

I've read and I've heard too and it's never been disputed that Roosevelt knew about Pearl Harbor a week before it happened. He told three or four of his cabinet members, "We're going to be in war Sunday, December the seventh," but he didn't notify his war people.

J.G.: His people in Pearl Harbor?

Mr. Ward: In Pearl Harbor or anywhere else, no. He wanted war, and I'll tell you why. He'd run his all of these programs and times wasn't too much better. He wanted to get the country into war to get everybody to work. No, I think the country would have been in a lot better shape today if Roosevelt or anyone like him had never been President. I never did vote for the man and I wouldn't.

J.G.: Did you ever work on any of the programs?

Mr. Ward: WPA or anything, nope, never did.

J.G.: Just because you were opposed to it or because it didn't happen to work out?

Mr. Ward: Well it never worked out right for me. I never even tried to get on it. Back there in Oklahoma I knew people that owned their farms and one case they had two or three little oil wells on it, 'course oil was cheap and not too big of producers. Anyhow, that fella and his whole family was on WPA. He had several grown sons and every darn one of 'em was on that. I don't think that it was all Roosevelt's fault. It was the administrators he had in the programs. I know when they started this farm program back in Oklahoma there was a guy in the Federal penitentiary in Levinworth, Kansas for counterfeiting liquor stamps. They got him out and put him to head one of those programs.

J.G.: You're kidding, isn't that something!

Mr. Ward: You're darn right. No sir, you can go back there and ask some of the old timers if old Fayette Wertz wasn't in the

Federal penitentiary.

J.G.: What was the guy's name?

Mr. Ward: Fayette Wertz, W-E-R-T-Z.

J.G.: Well that is something there.

Mr. Ward: Course now Roosevelt didn't know him, but his henchman around over the country did. Oh, that was the most terrible thing, I think, that ever happened when they started all that stuff.

J.G.: Did you ever know or talk to any people or hear anything about the camps that the government set up during the late thirties or early forties--the places where the migrant farm workers could live in these government camps?

Mr. Ward: I'd heard something about it yes but I never run on to any of them.

J.G.: So none of the people that you knew had ever lived in one or anything like that?

Mr. Ward: No, none that I've personally come in contact with.

J.G.: Apparently the reason the government camps came into being was that there was a lot of flack about the growers not providing any kind of place for their laborers to live, that they were living in such squalor.

Mr. Ward: Well, that was probably true. I've seen people living in tents here working. I never did myself, but I've seen it.

J.G.: That was in the late thirties.

Mr. Ward: Yeah. Over here around Orange Cove there was a lot of tents in there and then I knew one fella he was from the same area we was from. He lived out here in a tent one summer.

J.G.: Did they ever have any ditch camps around here--the people that pitched their tents on the irrigation canals?

Mr. Ward: Well this one fella out here was right close to an irrigation canal, but that's the only one I ever knew. I was out to his camp once. I think when you first went to Orange Cove there was quite a few tents over there.

Ward: There were a lot of tents over there then.

Mr. Ward: Right there in town or right at the edge of town, I don't know whether it was in the city limits or not.

J.G.: You started to talk earlier about your impression of The Grapes of Wrath. I'd like you to talk a little about that.

Mr. Ward: Well like my wife told you, there was a part of it true but there was a lot of it exaggeration to make it interesting.

J.G.: What parts of it do you think were true? What was pretty much the way it was?

Mr. Ward: Well I'll tell you it's been so long since I've read it or even saw the film that I don't recall much about what they said. As my wife said about that fella dying and burying him alongside the road and all, I knew that was a lie when it started, but a lot of other capers well I thought was just put in there for fun.

Ward: But the way the people lived on the way out here and after they got here I think it was a pretty accurate story.

Mr. Ward: Well possibly so I don't know, but I never did put too much stock in a lot of it.

J.G.: Did you ever hear any stories about or were you involved in any attempts to organize the laborers at that time?

Mr. Ward: I never was involved. I've heard a little about it but no I never did. I've stayed clear of any of that because I wanted to work. When I was working in a cannery it went union. They told us we all had to go out through a certain door and vote whether to go union or not.

J.G.: What cannery was that?

Mr. Ward: Libby's in Selma.

J.G.: What year was that?

Mr. Ward: I couldn't tell you. I don't remember. This was in the forties though. They said they would close the cannery down. I could make more money there in a short period of time than I could anyplace I'd ever worked. I could go in there--I've worked in a warehouse trucking, stacking cans, worked piece work--and I'd go in there and make double hours--double the hourly pay. 'Course we worked twice as hard too but you'd go in there six-eight weeks and I could make some pretty decent checks. I sure didn't want them to shut it down. So I didn't want to vote yes or no. So I slipped out and got by and never voted either way. Well, as it went it did go union. It did make a little better place out of it to work because your seniority counted, but as far as wages it didn't help us too much. Wages was on the rise anyhow at the time.

J.G.: Is there anything that you can think of as you have been talking about this whole period that you would like to mention that I may have forgotten to ask you?

Mr. Ward: No I can't think of anything right now.

J.G.: Okay why don't we stop there.

Mr. Ward: Fine with me.

END OF TAPE 3, SIDE 1

END OF INTERVIEW

Nathan Franklin Morris
b. 1880, Shannon County,
Missouri
[His parents from Missouri]

Arua Lenora Cobler
b. 1890, Kansas
[Her parents from Kansas]

Mildred Lenora Morris Ward
b. 1907, Wagoner County,
Indian Territory
Education: some college
Church: Protestant

m. 1934 →

James Harrison Ward
b. 1911, Rogers County,
Oklahoma

James Harrison Ward, Jr.
b. 1935
Secondary teacher

Wylodean Saracino
b. 1939
Elementary teacher

Twyla Stanislawsky
b. 1943
Social worker

Charlie Ward
b. 1871, Springfield,
Missouri
[His parents from Ohio
and Pennsylvania]

Minnie Lee Ritchey
b. 1878, Council Grove,
Kansas

[Her parents from Kentucky]

James Harrison Ward

b. 1911, Rogers County,
Oklahoma

Education: grade school

Church: Protestant

m. 1934

Mildred Lenora Morris
b. 1907, Wagoner County,
Indian Territory

James Harrison Ward, Jr.
b. 1935
Secondary teacher

Wylodean Saracino
b. 1939
Elementary teacher

Twyla Stanislawsky
b. 1943
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