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OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF
Leo Heilman**

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Date:

8/27/03

Signed:

Leo Heilman
Leo Heilman

INTERVIEWER:

James M. Bailey
James M. Bailey

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Oral History Interview of
Leo Heilman

Bailey: Okay. Go ahead, again. You were born where? I'm sorry about the problem. Hague, North Dakota?

Heilman: Hague, North Dakota.

Bailey: 1923? And you went to school in Hague, North Dakota?

Heilman: Yeah.

Bailey: Okay. How long -- what did you do before you became a ditchrider?

Heilman: I worked the Big-Y Warehouse, apple packinghouse.

Bailey: Try and expand on some of the work that you did. Did you just pack apples?

Heilman: No, I was on a loading dock.

Bailey: When did you move to the Yakima area?

Heilman: In 1942.

Bailey: Did you have any education beyond high school?

Heilman: Eighth grade's as far as I went.

Bailey: Eighth grade.

Heilman: Uhm-hmm.

Bailey: How did you find out about being a ditchrider? How did you, did you answer an ad in the paper?

Heilman: No. When I ... was working down at the warehouse the watermaster come down to the warehouse and asked if I'd be interested. And, I told him, "Yeah, if it pays more money than what I'm doing now, why." So, I agreed to go up there. And that's how I started riding for him.

Bailey: And this was here in Yakima?

Heilman: Here in Yakima. Yeah.

Bailey: And what year did you start doing this?

Heilman: Ditchriding?

Bailey: Yeah.

Heilman: 1956. And I rode ditch . . .

Bailey: I was only one-year-old when you started.

Heilman: I started 1956, and rode ditch for over fifteen years.

Bailey: Fifteen years?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And my duties were keep the ditches clean, to give the water to the farmers, and [?].

Start at seven o'clock in the morning, usually got through by three, and then I was on duty. You were on duty all the while. We were on duty twenty-four hours.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And, after, oh, fifteen years of ditchriding I become watermaster.

Bailey: What year did you become watermaster?

Heilman: In, let's see now. When did I -- let's see, fifteen years. Started in '56?

Bailey: About 1971?

Heilman: Yeah. Somewhere in there.

Bailey: Early '70s?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: Let's go ahead and talk about your career as a watermaster and ditchrider.

Heilman: Well, of course when I was a ditchrider, after the water season ended every year I operated a backhoe. I was cleaning the ditch, and I cleaned in every district. There were eight districts.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And I cleaned in all of them. And, when I become watermaster why I was over all the ditchriders, and my duties were to see that they delivered the water, and just what they ordered, and not anymore. And with less, as little waste of water as possible. And, that was day after day. You go right along to what you got to do the next day.

Bailey: You can go ahead and read some of that stuff off there, if you'd like.

Heilman: I told you most of it I got on here. When I was operating the backhoe, we usually worked until the ground froze too tight. Then when I was the watermaster, whenever a ditchrider got sick it was up to me to deliver the district, do the water. So, that didn't happen too often.

Bailey: What did you like most about your job?

Heilman: Well, I liked it. It's -- one thing about it, you didn't have to wonder what you were going to do the next day. It was always there to start in the morning and . . .

Bailey: So, you're saying it's a consistent job?

Heilman: Yeah.

Bailey: That when you went out to work everyday you knew exactly what you had to do, and

what had to be done?

Heilman: Yeah.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: Everyday. And then, after 32 years, why, I retired.

Bailey: What did you like least about the job?

Heilman: Well, no. There's nothing, really, that I disliked about it. I tried working for them.

And, well there's a few times we had to go up, when we had a canal break. And then we'd have to go and work on that.

Bailey: Expand on that a little bit. What happened when the canal - what did you have to do when a canal broke?

Heilman: Well, it really, water started splashing over, washed the dirt away and the canal just went down the hill, and we had to replace that section.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And, sometimes it'd last us a week, two. So we had to do it as quick as possible to get the water back on. And, but that's about all I can . . .

Bailey: Were you faced with new challenges, as far as technology goes?

Heilman: Well, I remember changes when they changed over to a pressure system.

Bailey: Could you talk about that a little bit?

Heilman: Yeah. That's when they cut from eight ditchriders to four. Then in about ... a couple of years I think we went down to two.

Bailey: What year did they change? When did they change to a pressure system?

Heilman: By gosh, I could't tell you for sure.

Bailey: But, just, it doesn't have to be exact. It can be general. Like, was it mid-'60s, or early '60s?

Heilman: I'd say, I'd say maybe in the late '60s. [Actually mid-1980s]

Bailey: I like to put a little humor in these oral histories, and let people talk about any incidents or any humorous or any kind of "why me" kind of events happened when you were ditchriding. Can you think of any?

Heilman: No. Not really.

Bailey: You can't?

Heilman: When we had the most fun on the ditchriding was when we painted houses for the ditchriders.

Bailey: Would you talk about that a little bit?

Heilman: Yeah. We get about, oh, there's about, get about two or three together and paint one house. And then when we got it done, we went on to the next. That's of course if the manager approved it.

Bailey: Right.

Heilman: It's, about all. That usually was a winter job.

Bailey: I was going to ask you, what did you do in the winter?

Heilman: That's what we did.

Bailey: Basically just maintenance?

Heilman: Oh. If we had a canal that had a lot of willows around it, on the sides of it, we would

cut them. But as far as cleaning it then, we couldn't do any of that with frozen ground.

Bailey: How about challenges? What were some of the biggest challenges that you faced in being a ditchrider and watermaster?

Heilman: Oh. I really didn't have any challenges as far as . . .

Bailey: No challenges?

Heilman: No.

Bailey: No, nothing?

Heilman: It was the same routine, day after day after day.

Bailey: Okay. Were any crops more water-intensive, as far as delivering water to than others?

Heilman: No.

Bailey: Was it pretty consistent across the board?

Heilman: No. Each one had a seven-day schedule.

Bailey: Could you talk about the seven-day schedule?

Heilman: You see the water was on seven days, and it was turned off and another one gets the water for seven days. It's, and there was five schedules a week. See, so much water, every other day so much water was delivered. One day this schedule went off, and another one come on, until, right through the week, and then back, start all over again.

Bailey: Now, which irrigation district did you work on, again?

Heilman: Yakima-Tieton.

Bailey: Ask you about differences in your job between, say, wet years and drought years, whether you noticed -- I know with Reclamation you have storage and exchange reservoirs that tend to, tend to compensate that. But was there any difference between just drought years, and wet years, and normal years?

Heilman: Oh yeah. A drought year, why, you were cut down to a percentage, which was really tough, you know, delivering water. And a farmer was mad because you didn't get all his water. But usually that was in drought years. In wet years you delivered less water. Because the farmer might just say, "Don't turn me on today because I'm wet enough." And, of course, as far as rain, or anything, this is rain or shine. We were out on the ditchbank.

Bailey: When did your hours start? Did you start really early in the morning?

Heilman: Seven in the morning.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And we had to be on the car radio and give us our guage reading, each one had a guage reading, and the water orders we used for the, needed for the following day. And that was seven days a week.

Bailey: Seven days a week. You didn't work seven days a week?

Heilman: Nuh huh. You worked Fridays, when the -- Saturdays we didn't put any schedules out, but we checked Thursday, Tuesday and Thursday's schedule. Went to it and checked to see that there's no obstructions anywhere.

Bailey: How were the farmers to get along with?

Heilman: They were pretty nice.

Bailey: Were they?

Heilman: Well, once in a while you had one that was a little bit rough, but they were pretty nice to get along with.

Bailey: How about Reclamation? Did you get along with them okay?

Heilman: Oh yeah. No problems.

Bailey: Can you speak of any events in your career that stand out as far as you still think about it nowadays? Any specific events that happened big within your [career]?

Heilman: Well, there was one manager we had that, well he gave really a rough time. And, he had a buddy, he worked for the company too, and he wanted him to get my job, when I was watermaster, and he did everything that he could to irritate farmers, get me fired, or, but they wouldn't listen to him. And, I had an awful rough time with him. One night he was up in the office, and I thought, "This is my chance. I'm going to go up there." And I went up there and I called him everything under the sun. And I thought sure I'd be fired, but, no, he never fired me.

Bailey: Someone was after your job and you told him to back off and you thought you were going to get fired because of it?

Heilman: Well, ... he was trying to get another guy to get my job.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And he, but he settled right down, and he was a little bit nicer from then on. But he's, oh he'd go out with one of the ditchriders, and go up to the main headgate and change

it. And that was a no no, by gosh, anytime. And I knew he did it. He denied, but I knew he did it. And, I went up and asked around the farmers, you know. "Did you see any," asked them if they didn't "see anything going on at that headgate?" They said, "Yeah. There was a white pickup there for a while." And that's what he drove. (laugh) So, I knew it's, I had proof that he had. And I told the farmers, "If you don't stop it, why, all I can do is bag it. I mean, I'm going to just leave." They said, "No. You stay right where you are." And I guess they straightened him out.

Bailey: Any other stories like that?

Heilman: No. That's the only one I had. That's the only one I couldn't get along with.

Bailey: Hmm.

Heilman: The rest were all real nice, easy to get along with.

Bailey: Did you see any big changes in your job, when you first started in '56 to when you retired? Was there anything that stands out in your mind as far as technology, or?

Heilman: When the pressure system got in it changed quite a bit.

Bailey: Before the pressure system what did you have to rely on?

Heilman: Well, each had a delivery box, what we called, with a gauge on it that measured the water over. And, when the pressure system went in, why, it started getting easier, because all they did was just turn the valve, then this gauge that you're adjusting, and the farmer's all ready to go.

Bailey: And the delivery system, you had to calculate? Was that just like manual? Just trying to get the difference between the two systems. Before you had pressure, how was the

water delivered?

Heilman: Well, on the pressure system, see everything was on a pressure, everybody's sprinkler. And the water was, mostly, with the open system it was pumping down an irrigation. Not too many farms had sprinklers. And, but when the pressure system went in, boy they went into sprinklers. But the pressure system was a lot easier (Bailey: Okay.) handling than it was an open ditch.

Bailey: So, when did you retire, Leo?

Heilman: In 1988.

Bailey: What did you do between 1971 -- was that when you, you were a ditchrider to '71, right?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: And then you were watermaster?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: Okay. What did you do as a watermaster, Leo? Could you talk about your career doing that?

Heilman: Well, I was, watermaster was over all ditchriders and he, every seven o'clock in the morning he called all ditchriders on the car radio to get their gauge reading, and their water orders for the following day. And during the day he goes out on a project and he checks around, and sees that all the systems are working pretty good. Once in a while we had a break, or had a blowout, we called them, and we'd shut down that section for a while. And, which, about all that there was to a watermaster.

Bailey: So, it was more of a supervisory?

Heilman: Yeah.

Bailey: Was that what it was? You were basically a supervisor?

Heilman: That's what it was, yeah.

Bailey: How many ditchriders did you supervise?

Heilman: With the open ditch was eight.

Bailey: Eight?

Heilman: Eight ditchriders. And when the pressure system went in, why, we cut down to four.

Then after the pressure system was in operation for a couple of years, I think we went down to two. And I think that's all they got up there now is just two.

Bailey: I'm going to be interviewing one of them here on Friday. So. So, I can see a pattern here, even in the past, when you were doing this work in the last couple decades or so, as technology changed, became more advanced, then fewer jobs.

Heilman: Yeah.

Bailey: Did you have any problems with any of the ditchriders? I've heard lots of stories about ditchriders being kind of individualistic, rough and ready.

Heilman: I had to fire one. He was, but he was kind of lazy. (laugh) And, I had so many complaints from farmers. So, I went and talked to him, that his job could be on the line if he don't straighten up. So, when about, oh say, three weeks nothing changed. So I went to the office and told the manager, "I'm going to go fire him." He said, "If he don't do the job, that's what you should do."

Bailey: Was he just lazy?

Heilman: Yeah. He was just lazy.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: If he saw a coyote or something, he'd take after it with the company rig, (laugh) and tried to catch it. And he done a few things like that, so, we had to get rid of him. And so, I had to ride his district until, and break in another one. And that took about, oh, a couple of weeks. Then he was ready to go by his own. (Bailey: Hmm.) That was just about the only excitement I had there.

Bailey: So, you worked as a watermaster until 1988, correct?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: And what have you been doing since then?

Heilman: Just keeping my yard up.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: Just work around the yard, is about all I do. Keep the blood flowing.

Bailey: Do you stay in touch with any of your former workers? Or are they still around?

Heilman: Well, once in a while I run into one. But the fact, I went out to the office one time ... since I retired. That's the only time I've been up there. Otherwise I haven't contacted any of them. Earl's boy and my son's boy played ball. And the manager up there, he had a son on the same team. I met him a few times at the ball games.

Bailey: I'm interviewing him tomorrow.

Heilman: Deeker [spelling]?

Bailey: If you're going to go back and look at your career, and if you would change one thing about how you operated, and both as a ditchrider and a watermaster, what would that be? What would you change? If there was something to make more efficient? Or water delivery systems could change? Or personnel? Think about that for a second.

Heilman: To be honest with you that wouldn't be much that could be changed, anything to make it any easier or more efficient, or. . .

Bailey: Or less frustrating?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: Nothing really, huh?

Heilman: Nothing. It went all pretty smooth.

Bailey: Do you see a future for ditchriders or do you think their jobs are going to be -- do you think this is an endangered job?

Heilman: Well, they have to have ditchriders, just like we got two, and they'll be there all the time. It's, I don't think they could ever change that.

Bailey: So you always have to have a human being around (Heilman: Oh. yeah.) Just to make sure everything works correctly?

Heilman: Yeah. He has to go through and -- and even with this pressure system, we had so many, unsteady flow, and some of it was off seven-day schedule. Now they would have to be changed, so there always have to be a ditchrider around to make the changes.

Bailey: Getting back to this whole pressure system, this changover from open to pressure,

how did you feel about that when that first happened?

Heilman: I thought I was glad to see it come. It's a big water saving. With all them open ditches, you know, we lost a lot of water. We saved thirty percent of the water.

Bailey: So it made your job easier?

Heilman: A lot easier.

Bailey: Were you ready to retire in 1988 or could you have kept on going?

Heilman: No. I was ready.

Bailey: Ready to retire?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: Anything else you'd like to add? Now's your time to talk.

Heilman: No. I really don't know what to add.

Bailey: Any reflections, looking back on your career? Any, were there any times that you just said to yourself, "I really love this job. I hope it never changes." Do you ever find yourself in that position?

Heilman: Well, I still have that feeling. Before the changes, just said they were going to go into the pressure system, why I was, I was glad to see that come. . . Mostly I enjoyed the job ... when I was riding ditch or I was watermaster.

Bailey: It was a good career for you?

Heilman: Uhm hmm.

Bailey: And you retired in 1988?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: And just kind of keeping the lawn maintained since then, huh?

Heilman: Uh huh. (laugh)

Bailey: Okay. Going back to your childhood, when did you leave Hague? When did you leave South Dakota?

Heilman: North Dakota?

Bailey: Or, North Dakota. Sorry.

Heilman: I left in 19 --, let's see it's, I'm not quite sure, but it's either '42 or '44. I think it's '42, when we left Hague.

Bailey: So, you left in the early '40s?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: And did you come directly here?

Heilman: Directly to that.

Bailey: Directly to Yakima.

Heilman: And I had a job when I got here.

Bailey: And that was working for the apple packinghouse, did you say?

Heilman: Yeah. For the apple packinghouse, and I worked on the ranch a while. My dad, he come out, oh, two weeks ahead of time to see what the situation was. And, when he come back he says, "Well, we're going to Yakima." And he all had the jobs lined up. He met with the manager at the warehouse. He said, "Bring your family." he said, "I'll put you to work." (Bailey: Hmm.) So.

Bailey: So you're, I take it then up in North Dakota there just wasn't that much (Heilman:

Hum uhm.) going on at the time.

Heilman: No. My dad was out a long time looking for land to buy a house and fifty acres and couldn't find it.

Bailey: Just more opportunity here in the Yakima area because of the irrigation had expanded, so did the farmland? Okay. Well, we're just about out on this side, here. Unless you have more to add, I really don't see in going on any further.

Heilman: No. I don't. Unless you have anything to add to it.

Bailey: Sounds like you had a pretty consistent career.

Heilman: It was.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1.

BEGINNING OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1.

Bailey: Go ahead and talk about the patrol houses.

Heilman: I lived in a patrol house for the 32 years I worked there. In fact I had to, or I wouldn't work there. They wouldn't let you live [anywhere else] Well, I moved to the [Naches] Heights a year before I retired, in 1987. They allowed me to do it.

Bailey: So, you had to live in the patrol houses?

Heilman: I had to live in the patrol house.

Bailey: You and your wife both lived in the patrol houses?

Heilman: And, they had to be kept up. Every once in a while the manager would come around and look things over. If things didn't look right you heard about it. (laugh)

Bailey: How big were the patrol houses?

Heilman: They were two bedrooms. Until they started building new ones, and then they quit that too. They built, I think, four new ones.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And then they, because when the pressure system went in, why they knew they wouldn't need the houses.

Bailey: So, when the pressure system went in you didn't have to stay in the house? Is that what you're saying?

Heilman: No. We still had to live in the company house.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: But, see we didn't need them. See, we cut them from eight to four. So that was four

houses, empty houses. And some they rented some out, but they only [went] to pot. They didn't take care of them. So they started trying to sell them off. Now, and how many they sold I don't know. See, I was retired before that. When they went to two, there was two more houses. That's when they let the two, they let them stay in there, but they had to pay rent.

Bailey: Kind of like the Forest Service? (Heilman: Uhm-hmm.) You get to live in their houses, but then you still have (Heilman: Something similar.) to pay rent to live in them. Like company housing, then?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: Did you like living in the patrol houses?

Heilman: Yeah. I didn't mind a bit. I still, the last one I lived in, it was pretty well run down. Of course, I fixed it up a lot. If you go to Tieton, you'll probably go by one of them, we called it Four. It's really in a mess now.

Bailey: Really? Okay. Because that's one of the conditions of the State Historic Preservation. They want to make sure that these patrol houses are maintained, because they are historic.

Heilman: Yeah.

Bailey: So, you're saying that the switch from open to pressure also affected housing?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: Well, because you had less ditchriders and less watermasters living in the houses? Okay. Anything else about the houses that you can remember? You said they were

pretty run down? I mean, were they just built poorly?

Heilman: Well, a lot [or them] didn't run down until a ditchrider moved out. And then, they sat empty. And then they put in, and let somebody run it, but he couldn't take care of it all. It was just a place for him stay, I guess. As far as fixing up anything, he, I guess how it become run down so bad.

Bailey: Ditchrider houses, they were Reclamation facilities? Or did they belong to the irrigation district?

Heilman: Yeah. They were Reclamation.

Bailey: How was Reclamation as a landlord? Did they help you maintain the house? Did they do anything to assist you?

Heilman: Well yeah. They allowed us to get any paint we needed to paint the house. Whatever needed to be fixed, why they helped us, gave us the equipment to do it.

Bailey: And you lived in them, basically you lived in these patrol houses from '56, when you started, up until 1987, huh?

Heilman: Uhm-hmm.

Bailey: Okay. And then you got this house and then right when, just before you retired?

Heilman: Yeah. I moved in here like in '87.

Bailey: I guess my final question is, what do you miss most about the job? What do you, when you wake up every morning, or when you starting thinking about, what do you miss most about what you did?

Heilman: When I first retired it was kind of tough because I wanted to go out, no place to go.

Bailey: Okay.

Heilman: And then after a while, why, it got easier. I enjoy retirement, too. I thought 32 years was long enough.

Bailey: It certainly is. Anything else you'd like to add while the tape is still running, about your career? Now is the time to speak.

Heilman: No. In living in the company house, now I got to take that back. At one time, when I was living, yeah, I lived in [?]. But the guy that was after my job, I was next door to him. And boy he gave my kids a rough time. And that went on for a couple years, I guess. Finally I went to the office and told the manager, said, "I'm moving out, with or without a job. I'm going to move into a different house." And, he had a board meeting. The board said, "Let him move."

Bailey: So you moved to another patrol house?

Heilman: So I moved, yeah.

Bailey: To another patrol house?

Heilman: A house up there, it's in Tieton. On Potter road. It was a real nice house. In fact, when he sold it I helped him sell it, because I had it all fixed up.

Bailey: So, you're saying that the guy that wanted, was trying to get your job, or doing the best to try to get someone else to get your job, that you lived next door to him for two years?

Heilman: Uh huh.

Bailey: And put up with it? It'd be hard for me to put up with that for so long.

Heilman: It was rough. Until I got my bellyful. I just told the manager, said "I'm moving with or without this job." So, he said, "Well, I'll have a talk to the board." So they allowed me to move. And they even paid the rent for the [?].

Bailey: Unless you can think of anything else to add into this interview, I want to thank you for your time. (Heilman: No.) Appreciate it. Anything else?

Heilman: No. That's about it, I guess.

Bailey: I'll just take it you enjoyed your career as a ditchrider and watermaster?

Heilman: Uhm-hmm.

Bailey: The job's not going to be around too much longer. So. But, hopefully they'll keep some people on to . . .

Heilman: Well, yeah, they almost have to.

Bailey: Well . . .

Heilman: There's always something come up where you have to have -- you either hire the help or . . .

Bailey: Well, Leo. Thank you.

Heilman: Uhm-hmm.

Bailey: Thank you for your time. I appreciate it very much.

END OF SIDE 2, TAPE 1.
END OF INTERVIEW.

