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OF ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW OF
Ray Thomas**

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Date: 8-29-03

Signed: Ray Thomas
Ray Thomas

INTERVIEWER:

James M. Bailey

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Oral History Interview of
Ray Thomas

Bailey: This is an oral history interview with Ray Thomas, ditchrider for the Yakima-Tieton Irrigation District, out of Yakima Washington. Thanks for joining me Ray. Could you go ahead and tell me your name and your occupation for the record please?

Thomas: My name is Ray Thomas, and I'm a ditch rider with Yakima-Tieton Irrigation.

Bailey: Now, how long have you worked for Yakima-Tieton?

Thomas: Eight years.

Bailey: Discuss some of your background: where you were born, and your education, and everything like that for the record, Ray.

Thomas: Yeah. I was born here in Yakima. Born and raised.

Bailey: Okay.

Thomas: I was a horseshoer for, right out of high school. Graduated in '83, and I shod horses until eight years ago. Still shoe on the side, some. I graduated from West Valley High School, then started to work here.

Bailey: Talk a little bit about how you got this job.

Thomas: Well, every year I'd pay the water bill and I'd always go in the office and tease the secretaries in there and ask them if they got any openings, and one year they said, "Yeah. They do." And so, they handed me an application, which kind of caught me by surprise. And, so I took it home and filled it out, and turned it in, and a few months later they called me up for an interview.

Bailey: What happened during the interview? Do you remember anything about that? How excited were you about the possibility of becoming a ditch rider?

Thomas: Well, I didn't know what to think. I was kind of, never was used to a full-time job, since I was working for myself. So, didn't know really what to expect. But, did the interview and that went pretty smooth, and they called me up and wanted me see how I liked working up here. So, they put me on a trial basis, and I liked the guys I worked with so, been here ever since.

Bailey: And your grandfather was a ditch rider, was he? For this same irrigation district?

Thomas: Yeah he worked for, he had 25 years in the Bureau, and retired out of that. And then he worked for Titan Irrigation for 25 years.

Bailey: And his name is Reed Thomas?

Thomas: Reed, Reed Thomas. Yeah.

Bailey: Worked for the Bureau?

Thomas: Yeah. Worked for the Bureau for 25 years.

Bailey: Reclamation?

Thomas: Yeah.

Bailey: Okay.

Thomas: And then for Tieton for 25 years. He started here on horseback.

Bailey: Did your father also ditch ride, too, or it was just your grandfather?

Thomas: No. He was -- just my grandpa. And he was head watermaster. My dad worked here a few years, in the new construction plus he worked in the old system too, when they hired me. I guess, burned ditches and stuff like that, cleaned out the canal. He worked then too.

Bailey: Right. Alrighty. So, what were some of the challenges? Talk about some of the challenges you faced when you first got on this job? What did you find most challenging about what you had been put into doing here?

Thomas: Learning the area, where all the lines lay, since we're all underground pressurized. Where all the valves were at. There's a lot of valves, something that just can't be learned in a year. It takes, oh shoot, three, three years at least to learn the valves and how to go by the maps. And then, charging up the system, (Bailey: Yeah.) how to charge up the system without blowing something out of the ground. (Bailey: Okay.) Because it can do it pretty easy if you charge it too fast. Learning where all your air vents are at, and to make sure that they're working.

Bailey: Getting back to, you started this job what year? Do you remember?

Thomas: '95.

Bailey: '95. Okay. How did the rest of your family feel about you getting this job? Were they thrilled?

Thomas: My wife was pretty excited, because it was a steady income, benefits were there, which helped a bunch.

Bailey: Okay. And how did that feel when they called you up and they said, "Ray, you've got the job." You were pretty jeeped up about it, huh?

Thomas: Oh yeah. I was excited. Something different I'd never done.

Bailey: Yeah?

Thomas: Yeah. Nervous, because there was a lot to learn, you know, in dealing with the

growers. And, they got to trust me to set their water. And a lot of them, you know, at first, didn't. You know, I was green. The new guy. So, they always wanted, the guy that retired, Roy Kelly, they always wanted him there too, you know, to make sure I was doing it right. So it was, nervous but made it through.

Bailey: Have you seen any technological changes in the job since you started it? Have there been any in any way, or has it all been the same?

Thomas: No. It's been pretty much the same. And, I don't know what changes they could do, if they were -- besides have laptop computers and maps, that'd be about the only change I can see. But as far as setting flows, delivering the water you're going to have to have the hands-on with the growers to do that. If you didn't and everybody ran on a free flow, there would be no way because there would be no pressures in the line. Everybody would start fighting.

Bailey: Okay. Well, talk about a typical day. Give me beyond what we've seen today and everything like that, why don't you give me a typical day in the life of your job. And, just talk freely about it.

Thomas: Well we start out, or I start out, we get our work orders, and that's for maintenance checks to make sure everybody is getting the right amount of water. Clean a lot of screens, because they get silted up, and the turnouts they don't work right. So, we do a lot of that. We get 'dig orders' what they call for people building. They want to know where our lines are located so they can come in and dig. So, we have to be there and watch them when they cross our lines, so they don't hit them. Get a lot of those. And

those you ... can be all there, all day there on a job to all week, depends on how big the job is that they're doing. Steel lines we really got to watch, because we don't want to dent those in any way, or have -- they got to be a foot above us or below us. And, I really stick to that pretty hard, because, especially with power. They got to be laid in conduit. So that way, if they do hit a line, or we hit a line fixing our line at least we'll bust the conduit first (laugh) instead of just the coating around the wires. And then back to those flow checks, you know, driving and looking through our system. Making sure, we can pretty much tell who's getting too much water and who's not. We try to regulate those and keep everybody up as tight as we can on that, because it does, like I said, it does deplete the pressure in the system then we start getting a lot of calls. So, we try to stay up on delivering the right amount of flow. And then, April, May, June, those months, we do a lot of transfers of water. We change a lot of orifices. That's time consuming. Sometimes it take a couple guys to do. We do a lot of that. So, it depends on the season. What we do. Towards the end of water season it starts slowing down. Everything's running pretty smooth, all the transfers have been done. Then towards, right at the end of water we start getting ready for drainage. Locate all of our valves, get them all ready so we can go through and start shutting down. Then shut-down begins. We shut all the lateral valves off, and then we go through and open all of our blow-offs, start draining water out there. Then we go back through and start each individual turnout, and take them all apart, which is a process. I can do four copper tubing -- you spend about fifteen minutes at each turnout, which has been over all day.

(laugh) And the pulling. So, at the end of the day you're pretty tired. But I like that time of season because it's busy. You're running, trying to beat the cold weather, before they freeze.

Bailey: Speaking of cold weather, what do you, how do you keep your winters occupied since there's no work to do as far as flow regulation or delivery, or anything like that?

Thomas: Actually, in the winter, we're pretty busy. A lot of people don't realize that, but we're really busy in the winter. The crew splits up and we go to different areas. Some of us go up in the hills and we're patching. We try to do that before the hard freeze comes, and a lot of snow comes. Other than that we're down here fixing big mainline valves that we can't do during the summer because we don't want to shut down the water if we can help it. And those valves can take up two or three days to do. And we spend a lot of time doing that and blowoffs. They're widening roads now, so we have to go through and move all of our stuff, turnouts, back. We spend a lot of time doing that, through the winters.

Bailey: How do you see the population boom around here affecting your job, which leads from what you just said about moving your turnouts back?

Thomas: It's growing. I see more farm ground going out, more lawns, yards going in. Developments. Which I think is kind of sad to see for me, because I like the old farms. It's growing pretty fast.

Bailey: More water-intensive lawns, too?

Thomas: Yeah. Smaller turn-outs. Smaller deliveries. Some are what they call -- maybe ten

people share one turnout. Those are usually pretty tough, because one guy usually takes all the water and the other nine are standing there. Then they get us involved in it, and it's kind of a touchy deal, but we try to work them through it and try to get them to rotate their days of water. There's a lot more of that going on.

Bailey: Yeah. Say, if there are any problems associated with this population boom in water delivery, is this typical of one of them?

Thomas: Yeah. It's the usual call we get. Somebody's not getting enough water and they're on a multi-user. Those are tough. And there's getting to be more and more of them.

Bailey: It's like a water party-line.

Thomas: That's right.

Bailey: Okay.

Thomas: So, I always try to talk them into getting their own turnout, and going separate. Some areas they can, and some areas they can't. It depends on the development.

Bailey: What, about this job do you like the best? What do you, when you wake up every morning and say, "I am going to work today to do my thing," what brings you back and keeps you going?

Thomas: Well, you're kind of your own boss, in a way, out in the field. I mean I control pretty much how hard I want to go during the day. Which, I like to go do as much as I can. I like the people I work with. We got a good crew, excellent crew. It's small. Everybody does their stuff. They know their jobs. That's a big help for everybody. Then we all depend on everybody. It's not one guy over the other, or who does what, it's one, you

know it's you know, everybody's got to work together to make the system run. And, we're, like I said it's a small crew. I'm kind of surprised that with such a small crew that it does run as smooth, as smooth as it does.

Bailey: How many ditch riders are there?

Thomas: Just three of us.

Bailey: Three of you?

Thomas: Counting me.

Bailey: Okay.

Thomas: So we got pretty big area to cover with just three.

Bailey: How many acres, estimated, do you think is irrigated?

Thomas: I wouldn't have a clue there.

Bailey: Big area?

Thomas: It's big.

Bailey: I can get those stats from somebody else, maybe up in Reclamation. Okay. And surely, there has to be times, Ray, that come up in your career here where there are things that you don't like about his job. Everyone has something about their job that they don't like. What would be one of those things? And believe me, I am not going to say anything to the boss (laugh) about what you say.

Thomas: Oh no. We got a great boss.

Bailey: Okay.

Thomas: He's good. The only thing I don't like doing is going to a turnout that's on a direct

flow, is what we call it, and it's delivering way more water than it's supposed to be, and having to take that water away. Because I know we're going to get called back. We have to explain to the grower, and he wants to know why and where his water went. That, that's got to be the toughest. But, that's the part I hate.

Bailey: Doing the turnouts? Okay.

Thomas: Yeah. That's the rough part.

Bailey: Is that it?

Thomas: That's pretty much it for -- because you want to give them the water. I mean, you don't want to cut somebody -- you're not cutting them short but, they get used to that water there for a while and you take it, it changes, you know, it can change their whole way of irrigating their place. Plus it could cost them money if they set up for, say, 200 gallons a minute and now they're only getting a hundred. You know, it affects them too. And it's tough, tough on both sides. But, that's why there's ditch riders, to make sure everybody gets a fair, a fair shake.

Bailey: How are your relationships with the people that you give the water to, the farmers and the growers, and everything?

Thomas: Pretty good.

Bailey: Good relationships?

Thomas: Pretty good. Yeah. They're all pretty good. There's a few that are kind of hard to deal with, but most part they're all good guys to work with. Like, you know, we work for the grower. So, I always try to stay on their good side. And we help the grower too,

try to at least. If they have a problem with their system, we try to help them figure it out. You know, we've found leaks for them. Some growers are so big they don't even know where their own water's going. So, we can try to help pinpoint where their water's going, and stuff like that, so, which is good. And we tell them how many gallons they're putting out of their nozzles, which, you know, nozzles do wear out. A lot of them, I'm sure they're aware of it but they don't really want to admit to it that their nozzles are getting hogged out. So we show them, and usually is they change their nozzles it helps. Then we're not the bad guy no more. They realize that it's their systems starting to wear, so they change their nozzles and it gets better.

Bailey: What are the most water-intensive crops around here? What would you say are the top intensive water delivery?

Thomas: Probably for the apples. Like, first part of August the pears are coming off, or about the middle of August, pears are coming off, and it's usually hot. So they want a lot of water to get the size on their apples. And that's usually when all, a lot of calls come in because they want to make sure they get the right amount of water.

Bailey: How do you feel about the security of your job?

Thomas: I think it is, because as long as you're delivering water there's going to have to be somebody on call. And during the water season that's pretty much 24/7. There's got to be somebody around for any problems, blowouts in the line, or on cold nights during frost season. We get called out in the middle of the night to go out because they're not getting their water. So, there's, somebody's going to show up, because they can lose

their crop. So I think, you know, you're going to need the ditch rider, always, to watch the lines for contractors digging, and to deliver the flows, and transfer water.

Bailey: Could you elaborate on frost water for me, please. I heard you talking quite a bit about that earlier. I'm not too clear about frost water. Can you talk about that a little bit?

Thomas: Some growers have frost water, and that's to help protect their orchards from freezing. And usually the frost water, they have more frost water gallons-wise than they do their regular irrigation. So, and we turn that on a couple of weeks earlier than the regular irrigation. On cold nights they turn it on so the crops don't freeze, and that's when we really got to watch and make sure everything's running right and smooth. You know, and that's when we get the calls that the turnout suddenly shuts down, or goes off. We go out. And it's cold. But, you know, we fix the problem and move on.

Bailey: If you were going to give one, if you had to go out and hire a new ditch rider tomorrow, and you had to give him some advice, or her some advice, what would you tell them? What would be the most important thing to tell the new employee?

Thomas: Well, be honest and fair with the grower, because that's who you're working for. Try to work with them. Always give more than what you're supposed to give to them. Never cut them short. And, stay on top of your system, keep it up. Makes it a lot easier.

Bailey: Sounds to me like this job is very heavily customer-service oriented, is that true?

Thomas: Yeah.

Bailey: Keeping the customer happy?

Thomas: Yup.

Bailey: What do you do when you're not working? What are your favorite leisure activities? I know you horseshoe on the side, and everything like that. What do you do for leisure Ray?

Thomas: Well, I like to go up to Lake Chelan water skiing.

Bailey: Okay.

Thomas: And we take the kids. We like to go up in the mountains quite a bit, up to the cabin.

Bailey: Oh, you have a cabin?

Thomas: My father-in-law does. We like to go up there. I like hunting. I take my boy out hunting, fishing, and riding horses.

Bailey: You mentioned you ride rodeo. Where do you ride rodeo?

Thomas: Used to.

Bailey: You used to ride rodeo. What kind of rodeo did you do? What was your speciality?

Thomas: Bareback riding.

Bailey: Bareback riding. See I used to ride Lil' Britches Rodeo when I was a kid. (laugh)
Yeah. Mine was calf roping.

Thomas: There you go.

Bailey: My mother hated that, too.

Thomas: I used to go all over, all over the Northwest just riding. Parts of Oregon, Idaho.

Bailey: Do you think the continued population boom around here will have anything to do with your job? Do you think it will lessen the need for ditch riders if more houses and subdivisions are going up, and resulting in less irrigated land? Or do you think you will

always be able to, there will always be ditch riders there to deliver water?

Thomas: Yeah. I think there'll always be a need for the ditch rider. We see, we get a lot of calls from, I think more calls from people that have yard water versus orchardists. I don't know why there, but we always just go on a lot of calls for them. Well, a lot of them, we go out on quite a few calls of people moving to a new house. They don't know where the valves are at, or how to shut the water off, turn it on. Or, they don't think they're getting their flows. There's a lot of those. And that can be because they put in a new system, or sprinklers are wore out. We go on a lot of those.

Bailey: So you think there will always be a need for someone to handle water? In other words, you do a lot of municipal water duties in a rural irrigation district?

Thomas: Yes. Anytime the water leaves a valve, or our valve, there's always going to be, there is going to have to be a ditch rider there to make sure that they're getting the right amount. And, if something goes wrong, and they're not getting the right amount, to fix it. So that's the ditch rider's duty.

Bailey: Any final thoughts on your job? This is your time to just expand on what you do, and just say what you would like to say. Anything you want to say about it?

Thomas: I like it. I think it's one of the better jobs in the Valley. I like being, like I said, you're kind of your own boss out there. You get your paperwork and run. You got your busy times, your slow times. You got all four seasons. You get to go up in the mountains and work up there. Come down here, downtown, and do work. So, you get a different variety, and that's what I like.

Bailey: Yeah. Just a lot of variety. I mean I saw that today just by going around with you to see that it's not just irrigation for crops, as in most irrigation districts that I've visited, but there's definitely this urban feel to the whole thing. With all the lawns and . . .

Thomas: Golf courses.

Bailey: Golf courses, and everything else.

Thomas: To yards, to hayfields, to pasture, to apples. Grapes, now they're starting to plant up here.

Bailey: They're starting to plant grapes now?

Thomas: They're starting, Gilbert's starting to do some test sites out there for grapes.

Bailey: Good luck.

Thomas: Yeah. (laugh) So. I like it up here.

Bailey: I can tell. I mean you're very happy.

Thomas: That's probably why my grandpa stayed here for fifty years. Had to of.

Bailey: Fifty years. And he worked for the Bureau and then he worked for the district?

Thomas: Yeah.

Bailey: And he's gone right?

Thomas: Yeah. He's passed away.

Bailey: When did he pass away?

Thomas: It was in seventy —

Bailey: It's been a while?

Thomas: Yeah. '73, I think. Somewhere in there.

Bailey: Been a while then? Okay. Anything else you'd like to add before the tape runs out?

Thomas: No. It's just a good bunch of people to work with, and that's another reason. (laugh)

Bailey: That's a big thing.

Thomas: Yeah.

Bailey: Okay. Alright. Well, I think that'll do it for today. Thanks, Ray, for your time. I appreciate it.

Thomas: Thank you.

Bailey: And, I 'll make sure you get a copy of the transcripts when I get them transcribed. And, I think that'll probably do it.

Thomas: Cool. Thanks.

Bailey: Thanks a lot. Appreciate it.

END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1. AUGUST 29, 2003.
END OF INTERVIEW.

