Jim Brooks oral history interview summary

MT State Historic Preservation Office Project—African American historic places in Helena, MT

With funding from the National Park Service

Total interview time 42 minutes

Summary developed by Alan M. Thompson, Morrell Creek Associates, PO Box 9737, Helena, MT 59604
July 2016

Montana residence affiliation: Big Horn, Custer Counties and Lewis and Clark County (to visit Mother-in-law Lena Thorgramson – Lena was a ranch cook for 30 years to husband Ray B. Thorgramson’s foreman jobs on the Figure 4 Ranch, ND, Van Cleve’s Ranch, Big Timber, MT; Climbing Arrow (CA) Ranch, Three Forks; Kyd Cattle Company, Three Forks, MT feedlot, the Padlock/Scott Land & Livestock of Dayton, WY

1:00 minute-13:00 minutes

-born on a farm near Quitman, GA December 25, 1942 his father was Lorenzo Charles Brooks and his mother was Juanita Brooks

-his family had always worked on farms they later moved to a farm outside of Barrwick, GA (near the Florida border) The farms raised tobacco, corn, lots of cotton, tomatoes.

-Mules were used to work the fields and pull farm implements. Jim learned to drive stock from father and grandfather

- family moved to Trenton, NJ when Jim was 9 years old, Then to Morristown Pa

-Jim’s mother Juanita was part Creek Indian (Georgia)

-“I was lucky because our family lived with the Quaker community. “The family had horses and He believes he became a peaceful person because of his family time with the Brad and Sam Snipes Farm

-He would drive the family to Sunday worship meetings in carriages

- “Horses kept me grounded”

-Jim considered the Snipes family as his “White Parents”

-Jim graduated from high school and college and his mother Juanita was very proud of him

-Ducky Harris, a friend a few years older than Jim had been writing him and just taken a job on the Circle M Horse Ranch on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota.
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1:00 minute to 13:00 minutes (continued)

- After High School graduation Jim travels to South Dakota to find Ducky Harris.
- Jim finds Ducky Harris at the Custer, South Dakota July 4th Rodeo
- Jim has first attempt at riding a Rodeo Saddle Bronc on a big Bay horse named “Scrape Iron” at the Custer, SD rodeo
- “I’d never been on a bucking horse. I was bucked off, quick, fast and in a big hurry”

13:00 minutes-24:00 minutes

- worked a couple of years for the Merrill Ranch on the Pine Ridge Reservation
- First job was that of a ranch hand
- fresh from the east and many Sioux had not seen folks like him other than Ducky Harris
- Quaker peaceful roots put to the test- “Even though I was raised as a Quaker I wasn’t going to let any of the “toughs whip me”
- Met Pedro Bissonette, a Lakota Boxer, eventually became his sparring partner
- Later while Jim lived in Montana Pedro Bissonette and his family came to visit
- Pedro Bissonette returns home to South Dakota and is shot while fixing a wind mill
- Sioux, Cheyenne and Crow people have become close friends of Jim
- Bought and trained first horse at the Merrill Ranch (Circle M-South Dakota)
- Tells experience of riding 20 bucking horses to make money to buy another horse from the Merrills
- “Rainy Day” was the only one of the 20 head that he rode that day at the Bucking Horse sale on the Circle M

24:00 minutes-42:00 minutes

- kept working to learn how to rope and ride better
- became one of the ranch “rough string” bronc riders at Merrill’s Circle M
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24:00 minutes-42:00 minutes (continued)

-got “itchy feet” left South Dakota for the Keeline Ranch in Campbell County Wyoming

-Became rough string rider for the Keeline-stayed for a year

-Journeyed to Padlock Ranch in Montana and Wyoming- worked 5-6 round ups for Padlock

-went to LO ranch near Powderville, MT-broke horses for them- LO was “wild” like Africa because of all the Antelope, deer and wild horses on the range

-Keeline reminded Jim of the Circle M in South Dakota

- “I was a Drifting Cowboy I wasn’t just in Montana- worked for outfits in Arizona, New Mexico, Nevada and even old Mexico

-given opportunity 5-6 years after high school graduation to finish college by the Snipes Family

-Jim credits his father in law Ray Thorgramson as a guiding source of his horse and cattle knowledge

-Others include Bob Hardy (owner of the LO ranch), Bob Pauley his sons Buddy and Bill from Miles City, MT Other contemporary stockman include Tommy Hope, Curtis Coombs

-1965 won the rookie of the year in the Northwest Ranch Rodeo Association

-Married to Connie Thorgramson since 1969-married for 48 years

-Jim and Connie moved to Norco, CA around 1978

-Jim and Connie have conducted “Cowboy Schools” in Hardin, MT, Fallon, Nevada “if it was western we’d teach it”

-2015 City Fathers of Norco, CA made Jim and Connie part of the Norco, CA lore by inviting them to be Parade Marshalls in the city “Day of the Cowboy: Observance

-some of Jim’s favorite working horses include “Jesse Hammer”- circle horse-Padlock Ranch, Keno-big Bay cutting horse, Bay Budd on the Keeline Ranch-WY, and Old Pete

-“Keeping the West Western” is his favorite slogan

End of interview session