Eleanor Little

Great Basin Indian Archive

GBIA 002

Oral History Interview by

Norm Cavanaugh
January 17, 2006
Owyhee, NV

Great Basin College • Great Basin Indian Archives
1500 College Parkway Elko, Nevada 89801
http://www.gbcnv.edu/gbia/
775.738.8493

Produced in partnership with
Barrick Gold of North America

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L: I was born and reared in Miller Creek, Idaho. That's ten miles north of Owyhee. And I was, my grandmother delivered me in a moon house, right by the creek. I was born right there where I live today. Of course, our old house sits in the back, and I had my home built right in front of it. So actually, I'm right at home, where I was born!

Well, in the olden days, when a person was on their menstrual period, they didn't—were not allowed—to live with the rest of the family, and there was always either a little house, or a little tent of some sort just adjacent to the house, where the lady would go and for, during her cycle of being, you know, on her menstrual period. And then when that was over, she came back into the house and lived with the family. The moon house was also utilized for, like, when you had a baby. So my mother went into the moon house when she went into labor, and my grandmother, who was Susie **Nip**, she delivered. She helped my mother deliver me.

Well, from a previous marriage of my mother, she was married to Silas Thomas. And she had about nine children. So I had, like, brothers and sisters from that marriage. And then when my mother's husband died, then she kind of married right into the same family. And out of that marriage, there were three of us: my older sister, she's, her name is Beatrice Allen now; and a brother, who was born, and at the age of 16 he died of tuberculosis; and then, I was the youngest born to that marriage. My father was George Little, and my mother was Jessie Little.

Well, of the Paddy Cap band of Paiutes. They were told by the agents, or the military, to come to Duck Valley. And Paddy Cap brought his band of Paiutes here. Jessie Charles… where I gained a lot of my knowledge was through the older folks, you know? Jessie

Charles told me that, oh, just way, way back, probably just prior to 1880, that there were seven wagons that came from Idaho and all camped out at the Rye Grass Trail, just below the Rye Grass Trail. It's about 2-3 miles just south of Miller Creek, and that's where they camped. Because they didn't have any homes or anything. And later on, they just kind of moved a little bit north, and started making their homes there, in tents. And then later on, they were able to obtain homes. There must have been about, oh, anywheres from ten to thirteen families that eventually made their homes in Miller Creek. It was like homesteading. They just picked a spot where they thought they'd like to live, and… Right today, where I reside, and in the home where I'm in is, this is where my father had picked that place to live. And we had a lot of neighbors.

C: Where did the Paddy Cap band originate from? Were they a roaming band?

L: They were roving, just along the Snake River, and through Weiser, and Boise Valley. And they didn't get captured. Some of them did, and they were all sent to prison up in Washington, the state of Washington. They were imprisoned up there, and then later on released. And then because they were from the Boise Valley area, they returned there. And then Paddy Cap had his band of Paiutes, and didn't really have any place to go. And so they were told to come to Duck Valley. Knowing that part of this reservation had already, three years prior to them coming here, it was given, or set aside—I've heard several stories on it—for the Western Shoshones. But yet, I think it was for other tribes also. Because actually, no one lived in Duck Valley. They,when people started coming here when it was first declared a reservation, by Executive Order in 1877, people came from Paradise Valley, McDermitt, Golconda, Carlin, Elko, and in those areas. They were told that they had a choice, and the choice was either to come to Owyhee or make their

homes somewhere else. So a lot of the people that came here were from those areas that I mentioned. My mother, in particular, she was from Paradise Valley. And the story they told me was that, when she was three years old, they moved from Paradise Valley and came here in a wagon, and made their home here. And she did a lot of, you know, work in the field with a field nurse. And then later married my dad. My father—*his* father came from Warm Springs, Oregon. And they got together, and was rearing their family here.

Well, as I mentioned, my mother, she was—she had a third-grade education. But my mother had learned a lot from the white people. As I mentioned, she worked with the public health nurse, and she learned the English language very well. Was very fluent in her second language, Indian being her first. So she worked. My dad had only gone to school and was a dropout in the first grade, and he really didn't have any skills. But at that time way back, the government gave them sheep, they gave them cattle, and some horses, and some chickens. And so dad went into the cattle business. He had horses to run the ranch and the cattle. So he went into the cattle operation, and had obtained some fields down in Miller Creek that supported him going into the cattle business.

They just went through the superintendent. They had an agent here, placed here. And if they wanted some land, they just said how many cattle they had, and so they were just given the land to operate, and raise hay on for their livestock.

Well, my dad was allowed the 80 acres, two 40s, in Miller Creek, plus he had a standard assignment at the end of Boney Lane. Boney Lane is kind of—the reservation is in three sections: there's China Town, Boney Lane, and Miller Creek. So, he had land up at the end of Boney Lane, and he exchanged land, a standard assignment, with Gus Garrity,

who had a field near Blue Creek. So then, my father had obtained more land in Blue Creek.

I went to school here. Here in, they called it the Swayne School. And just prior to me going to school, a lot of the kids had gone off to boarding schools. I know my sister, she went off to Stewart Indian School. They somehow thought the kids could go to boarding school and get a better education. Way back then, even my father and mother, when they were young, they had day schools. They had one day school here in China Town, just southwest of Owyhee, the city of Owyhee now. And then, they had one over there near Thomas Loop, another day school. And then they had one in Miller Creek. So, I think the older people went to those day schools, like my mother, and her age group. My sister, when she was about 16, they sent her away to a boarding school. I don't know why I didn't get sent away to a boarding school. It's just that, I think back, and I think maybe perhaps the tuberculosis was really getting widespread here on the reservation, and it was taking some lives. And a lot of people were dying from it. I know my brother Norman Little died from tuberculosis at the age of 16. And what happened to me and some others here in Owyhee, we were all shipped off to Lapwai, Idaho. Because in them days, there was really no treatment to treat TB, or tuberculosis. And they just took us up with some of the Elko people and Duck Valley people to Lapwai, Idaho, which is way, way north, in northern Idaho. And Kelly Shaw was a bus driver then, and he took a bunch of us kids. I was three years old when I ended up going to… Maybe that's the reason that I didn't go to school here. I spent three years in a sanatorium. And in them days, there was no treatment for tuberculosis, so it was complete bed rest. So then my brother went along, too, my half-brother. And he sort of looked after me for the duration that I was up there.

And then we later came home. I grew up speaking the Paiute language, and when I went off to Lapwai and spent three years there, I kind of forgot a little bit about my Indian language, and spoke more English. And later on when I returned, it wasn't very hard for me to pick up the language again. And I spoke the Indian language, and just started school here in Owyhee. And that was quite an experience, too, because in those days, if you spoke your Indian language, you got punished for it. Or the teacher would have a ruler and just hit your knuckles with it, you know? And it was terrible. A lot of the kids spoke Indian, and when they went to school, they didn't really know how to speak the Indian [English] language, and they did better in their own language, so when they tried to communicate, they did better in Indian, but then we got punished for it. If the teachers would hear us speaking our language, we got punished, and we weren't allowed to speak our language. So that was an experience, I thought. But it didn't take me long to go back to my Indian language, and I learned to speak it all over again, and even to this day I could speak it. There are not very many people my age… Well, maybe my age, yeah, but I feel the Indian language is slowly fading away. I have granddaughter who I'm trying to teach Indian to, and she's doing very well.

Somewhat. Not a whole lot that I could remember. But they went to the day school and some of them wore uniforms, and they ate there. You know, it was just like a regular school.

I don't know, she didn't say, but she said it was white people that ran the day schools. She didn't really tell me a whole lot about what subjects they took up. I think, I just assumed it was very limited. But that's where she learned to speak English too, as well as going out and working. Because she didn't, as I mentioned before, she went to the third

grade. She said, “Well, I just remember we went and spent quite a bit of time with my grandparents. They lived in Pleasant Valley,” and that’s just west of here, “and they lived in a log cabin and had a dirt floor, and we would have our bed rolls, and there would be a lot of family members,” you know. It was kind of like sleeping bags? And they’d have a stove in there that had a lot of holes in it, so when the fire was burning at night, then you could just see it on the wall of the cabin. And my grandfather used to tell us stories. But you know, I can’t remember any of them, to tell them to this day? Except I remember one about the Coyote, how he threw his eyes out, and you know, and the birds were… There’s a story about the Coyote and his eyes.

Well, I’m not quite sure how the story goes. It was about… The Coyote had to—they were playing a game, and this Coyote had to throw his eyes out, and the other animals were there, throwing their eyes out, too, and come back and catch it, you know? But this Coyote, he threw his eyes out, and it got stuck on the tree. So then, the birds got it and took it away, and then he didn’t have any eyes to see through. And that’s the only part of that Coyote story I can remember! [Laughter] But yes, my grandfather used to—and furthermore, you know, there used to be teachings like, it was sort of like “do unto others and they’d do unto you,” or “treat people right,” and, you know, “there’s bigger rewards,” and it was all good, very positive teachings I could remember. Just be good to people, and don’t criticize, and don’t fight, and those kind of teachings.

Well, my dad, I guess he was pretty well-to-do. He had a Model A. How he obtained that, I don’t know. But my grandparents, they had the wagon. The team of horses. And they used to come from Pleasant Valley. And in those days, you know, people visited one another. They had time. In this space age today, we don’t visit with our neighbors. We’re

just too busy. But in those days, grandma and grandpa used to travel to Miller Creek on a wagon and spend couple nights there and make their visit worthwhile, and then go back home. But they had—a lot of the people had just wagons. And some of the a little bit more well-to-do had Model A Fords, and… But it was mostly wagon, and then wintertime it was big sleds, bobsleds, that was led by horses, team of horses. And that's how people fed their cattle in those days, and not like today. And like I mentioned, it was just, a lot of our people were dying from tuberculosis because they didn't get the proper treatment. But the only treatment that they had given us is complete bed rest. It wasn't complete like all day—I remember we went to church, and there were two religions up there, there was Presbyterians and the Catholics. And then they baptized all the kids that were in school. I was baptized as a Catholic. And some of the kids from here were Presbyterians. But you know, we never had Catholic churches here. We do have a Presbyterian. But…what else did they have up there in the way of treatment? It was, there was times that we had to go to bed. Like, mornings. You had to be on your bed for maybe a couple hours, and get up and do something light. And then in the afternoon, there was naps you had to take. Evenings, you had to go to bed, you know? So, it was a lot of *resting* that one had to do. But then, later on, after our time growing up there, I guess they found out that—is it NIH that treats tuberculosis now? But they didn't have that medication back then.

Well, it was run by one doctor, as I recall, and as the stories my mom told me. They didn't really deliver a lot of babies here at the old hospital—well, before the old hospital, they had just a building, that one doctor operated out of. And he treated people, and then later came the old hospital, which was run by the government. And then, I forget what

year this facility was built, and they just closed down the old hospital. But they had just an old building down there that the doctor worked out of. With field nurses, they had field nurses in them days.

There was traditional medicine men that were here. I think we had—the last of the traditional medicine was Alex Cleveland. And when I moved here in 1970, I came—you know, I was away to school for a while, and I lived on the Fort Hall Reservation for a while—then in 1970 I returned. And Alex Cleveland was the only Indian doctor here. But way back in those days, yeah, people went to see the Indian medicine men. There was several. In fact, there was one in Miller Creek. Called **Ned** Paddy. And then they had Alex Cleveland, he was one of the younger ones. And then they had Tom Adams—or John Adams. He was a medicine man, too. And then… They're the only ones I can remember.

Not from here. We, what I've noticed is there's medicine men that come here from other areas. Like the Navajos, and somebody from South Dakota, and… They were coming quite often back in the, I would say, [19]80s, [19]70s and [19]80s. But I don't hear them coming that often now. And I don't know why that is. I think that everybody's using more or less of the IHS, or the doctors, you know, that's recruited.

Well, the Indians had their own medicine. They had… I can't remember the names of what they would be called in the English language, but they called one particular root, was the *toza*. Which was, they went up in the hills and got, and you had to dig it out. It grows, and it has a white and yellowish blooms, and yellowish color. And they dig that out, and they used *toza* for a lot of things. If they had a sore on their knee, or their leg, they put that *toza* on. And just, they used it for a lot of things. They even used it to boil it

and get the juice and drink it for colds. And just for whatever was ailing you, *toza* was something that they really believed in. And they also drank some tea that they gather in the swamp areas. It's kind of like peppermint. And they boiled that and drank that. And what other things that they used? But I tried sagebrush, boiling that, and that's an awful-tasting stuff that, you know… but they didn't mind, because it really cured their cold, and their ailments. So that was basically what I know of, is the *toza*. But I thought one time, our neighbor had a big cut on his leg, and they took bacon. And they sliced the bacon, and put that bacon on it, and wrapped it up. Bacon, I guess, draws the pus and stuff out of it, the bacteria or whatever, and you know, it's just amazing how that healed. That sore that was on that boy's foot. So they'd use things like that, too. And then the other thing, too, I didn't think of earlier was, a lot of our people, back in the [19]20s, the peyote was brought to this reservation. And very few people—it's, peyote is obtained somewhere in Texas, and it's used in a religious way, and for healing, and they would have prayer sessions with it. It's an all-night activity. You go in, and it really cures, you know, and you've got to use it faithfully, and there's education that comes out of it, too. During the day, they say you shouldn't drink, because drinking can cause a lot of problems in your health, and your family's, and so I think, well, I heard one anthropologist talk about that in a study that he had done in Utah. And he said that was the best thing there was, because what Indians were really getting into back in those days was alcohol. And he said that the teachings out of this prayer meetings that they would have, and using the sacrament, the peyote, was—it wasn't abused or anything, but it was used mostly for healing. And my experience with that is, not only did they use it for healing purposes, but they prayed for people. Prayed for people who were in the service, and prayed for other

people around the nation to be healthy, and, you know. So it wasn't just a certain group that was having the prayer meeting. But that's what I remember, that they prayed for everybody. So in those days, I think, along with the Indian doctoring, and the Indian Health Service which later came into the picture, they still have those prayer sessions. And a lot of our people are more and more into utilizing that type of method for healing purposes.

No, it was that if you had someone who was ill, a family member, and he decided that he'd like to have a prayer meeting, they would have the prayer meeting. The family helped, it was an all-night prayer session, and they get out of their session in the mornings. And then they would stay for a big lunch. And again, there would be prayers with it. And it just seemed like, it's very traditional that the Indian people pray for things. Now, earlier didn't mention any prayers. When you got the roots, the *toza*, you know, and you prayed for it. The fishing that maybe you're doing, you prayed for the fish, and, you know. And you only got what your family needed. And the same way with the plants that you dug up, you pray to it. And the same way, I remember my grandfather would come down and, before we'd eat, he'd pray for the dinner, for the meal that we're about to eat. And the Native American Church is what it's called, the peyote sessions, and so a lot of people belong to that. And they do a lot of praying. They pray for the food, they pray for other people, and it's just something beautiful.

It's referred to as a "button." They get it in Texas. It grows in the ground, and they obtain it. And it's green. It reminds me more of a cactus, type. And it's, they prepare it in certain ways. They can slice it up and dry it. They can eat it fresh. And they don't eat it just to be eating it, it's just handled in prayer session. Or maybe they wouldn't have a meeting, but

maybe some member of the family is very ill, and they would boil it and make tea, and drink the tea, for the sick. Not for the family members, but just for the person who's ill. And so it's dried. But in the prayer meetings, they have it crushed up and kind of like a pudding. But a little bit real thick. Sometimes they have balls, little balls, and they eat that. Or sometimes they can just spoon it. And it's not a whole lot, it's just maybe a bowlful to go around to feed everybody, or, you know, for the ones who want to take the medicine. And most everybody in there, in the prayer meeting, would take some of the medicine.

There's singing. There's a gourd. There's two people. A gourd is held up, and the singer has the gourd. And it kind of makes, there's beads in there, and he shakes it, and he sings, and then beside him is the drummer. There's a, that reminds me of a… it's a kettle, it's an iron piece, and it has buckskin cover over it, and there's water in it. And so the buckskin on top is wet, so then they have a stick, and they kind of do *boop boo boo boo boo*, like that. And the singer is singing. And they have beautiful songs. And they're all, you know, there's a song like—there's four different songs that they sing during the meeting. And it's just like, oh, maybe the Sun Dances they have today. There's a morning song, and there's an evening song, and there's—and so the different types of song are sung at some particular time during the prayer meeting.

Well that's… Yes, there's some people that still strongly believe in that. Probably the thing that I learned as I was growing up was when you were on your period, you didn't eat meat. Or particularly game, if game was obtained, like a brother or a father brought back a deer, then you don't eat that deer meat if you're on your period. And that goes into something that some of the people at the airbase didn't understand, and I was working for

Indian Health Service at this facility back then in the [19]80s. And the healthcare providers at the Mountain Home Air Base just didn't quite understand the behavior of certain—well, particularly our women that went from here to the Air Base to deliver their babies. And there were a lot of things that they didn't understand about why our women wouldn't drink ice water. And the Indian belief was you drink something warm. And their belief is that the cold ice water clots your blood. And you know, you could start passing blood clots. But the warm tea, or warm milk, or warm coffee, or just warm water, just didn't do any clotting. And so there were a lot of other things that they didn't understand, like the cradleboard. And so they had to ask. I can't remember, somebody from here wanted to know if I could do an inservice at the Air Base on birthing, and Indian beliefs, and one of the other things that they said, "Well, we don't understand," and the cradleboard is really something. And they were just amazed that the ladies brought their newborns back in a cradleboard, and so wanted me to do an inservice on it. So I went up there, and I did a short inservice for the providers. And then the nurses wanted to know about the water, the hot water that they wanted to drink after they had given birth, and that was all explained to them, and then I went more into the cradleboard. And I explained it to them like, you know how a baby is newly born, and he comes out and he's shaking, and all of that, and the doctor may slap him on the butt, you know, and then he cries or she cries. And so I explained it—not because I knew all of that, but my grandmother told me that when your baby is inside of you in the womb, they feel very protected. They're warm, they're cuddled, you know, in your womb. But when they come out, you're hitting the air and all that. The cradleboard is something that the baby really likes to be in. It's something very similar to being in the womb. Because

when they're in the cradleboard, they're wrapped up, and they're laced up. And so, you know, babies get really used to that. And back in those days—you don't see it so much now, the ladies don't carry their babies on cradleboards on their back—but they used to have a strap, and the cradleboard is in the back, and the lady could, the mom could go around, doing her housework chores and all that. And they say this is why Indians have a real sharp look, that they can see and spot things, like good hunters, is because they're in the cradleboard, and they get a better view of what's out there, rather than lying flat, or you know, just being in a car seat or something. That their eyes are very sharp, so that they have better vision so that they can… And which is, you know, makes a lot of sense. They're on their mom's back in the cradleboard, looking around. So that type of inservice was given to them, and they just had a lot of questions. And to this day, a lot of our girls, young girls still go to the cradleboard with their babies.

The cradleboard is… A certain time of the year, if you're in—it takes a little skill to make a cradleboard. And some of the elders have taught the younger generation how to make cradleboards. Because I remember there was—Dorothy Wines taught that, and a lot of the younger ladies got in on her class. But there's a particular time or season that you pick the willows. There's a certain type of willows that you get. And you could bend them at a certain time—I can't remember whether it's early spring—you get 'em, and you bend 'em, and you shape 'em, and you make 'em out of willows. Different tribes have different ways of making their cradleboard. I know Fort Hall has a plyboard that they just cut out and shape. Schurz in particular have their willows up and down. And the Shoshone and the Paiutes have it crossways. It's… I'm sure you've seen cradleboards. And they're across. So they're made out of willows. And way back, they didn't have

cloths that they—what the men hunted, the deer, it had deerskin covers. But now, lately, people use the heavy canvas to make the cover to the cradleboard. And so more people are going to canvas now than they are… And then too, they say in the summertime it's real hot for the baby. Wintertime, it's just great. So then it's covered. And then they also make the shade to the cradleboard. And the shade, too, when I did my in-service, was a protection for the baby's head. Because if the cradleboard fell with a baby in it, then if you didn't have the shade over the baby's head, then you could injure the baby. So it was a protection. If the baby fell, then that shade protected it, plus it protects the baby from the sun, sun rays and all. So that's made out of willows, too. And there's a design, there's certain designs on the shade of the cradleboard, to tell you if it's a boy or a girl. Now, of course, blue is for boys and pink is for girls, but they had, the Indians had designs just kind of woven in to their shade that goes to the cradleboard. So if you looked at it, you didn't have to ask if it was a boy or girl. You knew. The Indians knew. That was one method that they had of letting you know whether it was a male or female.

I think a lot of them still use it. I think the problem now is it's getting very scarce. Who makes them? I have to really think when somebody asks me, "Where can I get a cradleboard?" And then I'll really think, "Well, who's available now to do those things?" But there's about five women here on this reservation that knows how to make them. And they are not… They're very expensive these days. They'll sell them to the white people for maybe six, seven hundred dollars. But if the family has requested the cradleboard to be made, so, it's about, oh, two hundred, three hundred dollars now.

Maybe one thing I'd like to bring out. There was a lot of this—they called it the "s" word. The "squaw," the word "squaw." And it's offensive to Indian women. And I think it's an

education that a lot of people don't realize, that you don't call an Indian lady a squaw. That's very offensive, and we just don't think that's very nice. It's like calling a colored or a black person "nigger." You know? And it's not Indian, either, you know? We're Indians. And so there was in the state of Idaho a few years back, where they took it before the legislators and they passed a bill to where they would take out, in the state of Idaho, all the s-words. The "squaw." Like a Squaw Creek, Squaw Lake, Squaw Valley. So the BLM has, and the Forestry, are really working hard on it. I think there's still a few areas that they haven't changed it. But not only Idaho, but several other states have changed that. So it's in the dictionary, but it's a very offensive word. And I was glad to see that being thrown out.

[End of recording]