Excerpts from
ELSIE M. NELSON
First and Second Interviews

Interviewed by:
Laura Schrager

Oral History Project
Latah County Museum Society

I. Index
II. Transcript

I. Index

ELSIE M. NELSON

Moscow; b. 1890

raised on a farm near Moscow; graduate from U. of I.; worked 27 years as Director of Foods at the Hotel Moscow; author of Today is Ours 1.5 hours

minute		
Side A		
00		Reasons for writing Today is Ours. Researching for the book and trips to Europe rediscovering her ancestors' background.
06		Father partly came to the U.S. to get away from plagues. Origin of the Passion Play. Problems of today and togetherness on the farm.
17		Lieuallen's store and mail box on Mountain View Road. The government built a log cabin post office nearby. "Paradise City." Moscow's Main Street was a logging road used to haul logs from Moscow Mountain and H.R. Barton's sawmill.
28		Moscow named after Moscow, Pennsylvania. Early businesses on Main Street: Lieuallen's grocery store, Barton's Boarding House (which burned in 1887).
Side B		
00		Concern for the gamblers and women when Barton House burned.
02		Mining in Idaho.
07		Major people interested in attracting the university to Moscow: Sweet, McConnell (lumber hauled for his mansion from Walla Walla), Dr. Blake, Dr. Mc[illegible]
16	2	Father excavated railroad bed for the Northern Pacific from Spokane to Juliaetta.
17		Shields owned first electric plant. Del Norte Hotel, Civic Center (now McCoy Apt. House) and Fry Hotel. Her family never ate out. Rural people never stayed in hotels. They served meals family style.
23		Dust and mud. Rails put in sinkholes on Main Street. Boardwalks. Walking to town and school. Driven to school in bad weather.

Elsie M. Nelson

minute		
Side C		
00		Southern Idaho gets the state pen - they forgot they don't have a good alumni.
03		The four homesteads which made up Moscow. Wanted to put the University near the railroad because that's where students would arrive. Deakin sold 20 acreas for $4,000.
12	5	Johnsons lived on Paradise Ridge and walked to town for groceries. After one trip to town Mrs. Johnson gives birth to a child the following day.
19		Father only worked for the railroad contract in the summer.
20	6	Mrs. Maguire recalls an early winter when they saved one cow by emptying the straw out of their mattresses.

with Laura Schrager
March 14, 1974

II. Transcript

(Side B: minute 16)

ELSIE NELSON: ...The Northern Pacific Railroad which my dad did all the excavating for, all through Moscow, all the way from Spokane down to Juliaetta. The reason that his contract ended at Juliaetta was because the Nez Perce, reservation had just been created by Congress in Washington and they couldn't go into that Nez Perce reservation with the railroad until a number of years later when they built the railroad into Lewiston. And their passengers, the passengers from Lewiston were taken by team usually not to Juliaetta, because that was, oh, a crooked and long railroad down that canyon, and steep canyon, you know what it's like, and they took 'em to Genesee. And for a number of years, until they built that railroad into Lewiston, they had to come from Lewiston up to Genesee if they wanted to go to Spokane or someplace like that.

Now let's see. Now about the beginning of the University. There was old M. J. Shields who owned the first electric plant and a lumber mill down in the center of Moscow, right east of Moscow's Main Street, oh just due east of where the hospital is now. And that old hospital was remodeled from the old McGregor House, which was a boarding house that the homesteader McGregor had built. So there was McGregor House, and Barton House and then there was, later and very early, Del Norte Hotel which is where Moscow Manor now is. And that was a very ritzy hotel for a small town. And then they had...

LAURA SCHRAGER: What was that like when it was...

E N: Oh it was just like it is now, except they put I don't know how many coats of paint and plaster on it. But it was just about as big as it is now. The Del Norte Hotel. They had a very, very nice dining room, now Homer David

remembers that. I didn't get to go to hotels or go to town very much. But he was ten years older than I was. He can remember about how he walked, walked up to the University. And if they wanted to have a date and they'd take their dates down to this Del Norte Hotel and down to the "city..." (Oh what did they call that, "civic center" or something. It was the beginning of the first Chamber of Commerce, really.) But they had a building, what is now the McCoy apartment house. And that was a very, very swanky, for those days, a very swanky hostelry where they entertained. Oh, they had gambling or drinking and that and a bar. Because it wasn't dry until the prohibition days you know. I remember all about that. And...

LAURA: Did you ever eat out in town when you went to town?

E N: No, never. You asked me if I ate in town, of course we didn't--our big family--we didn't eat out. Not very many other people did. And not very many people who came from the little towns around like Troy and Bovill and Genesee and all those places, those farmers and the homesteaders they never thought about staying in a hotel or even at the boarding house like the Frye. The Frye hotel was owned by the Carters, the old Carters. It's still there, the old Carter boarding house, and that's on the corner of Jackson and Third. It was very unusual for people to eat at hotels, you know.

And all the hotels, including the Moscow Hotel at first, I didn't remember it, but by mother did and my father, that they had family style serving of food. They didn't have individual tables, they just had tables, long tables, and they served it family style. And whoever came in, why they sat with these other people. And that's the way they got acquainted and that was the way they conversed. And then they had the benches outside, outside the hotel there was always a bench for the people that were...Oh, the old men and boys who didn't have a job in the summertime would sit on those benches, and converse, and watch the traffic go by on the dirt road, and the dust in the

summer was inches' thick.

And in the winter it was mud, deep mud, oh just like very thick soup! And I can remember seeing the old rails, they'd stick 'em in the sink holes so that the people coming by in wagons wouldn't, their horses wouldn't step into those sink holes and be drowned, you might say, or stuck so they couldn't get 'em out. And I remember that now. I remember, I had started college before they paved Main Street, and Washington Street, first Main Street and then Washington Street. And that was 1911 that they paved those streets. We thought we was now living in a city at that time. And...

LAURA: What were the boardwalks like?

E N: Oh they were just board, and they were maybe made out of 2 by 2's or 2 by 4's maybe, kinda wide boards, more like planks you know. On Main Street they had heavier sidewalks, and then of course they had to have sidewalks on all the streets in town later. Like any little village, why they didn't have sidewalks at first, but then later they were required. Had picket fences along the houses and board sidewalks and they were narrower in the town but they were wider on Main Street.

LAURA: Were they off the ground or did the planks?

E N: Oh yeah, they had to make them higher than the ground level because we had a lot of rain, a lot of mud, a lot of dust, and so it was feasable to make the sidewalks higher. Not only that, there was lots of rain here lots of water pools. Down by the railroad tracks on southern Main Street why they were deep runs or creeks or water bodies under the sidewalks. And they had high sidewalks, they were raised up maybe five or six feet, at least five or six feet.

And I remember when we went to school, we lived three-quarters of a mile south of that crosswalk. And we walked that three-quarters of a mile to school and I mean walk. Read my book and you'll learn about how we walked

to school. And how we walked when we were four years old to town with our folks many and many a time. It was easier for my father and my mother in those days when they were young to walk to Moscow, than to go out and hitch up the team, and take a lumber wagon or a hack and go to town.

But on certain occasions when the weather was bad and the snow was deep, why we were taken to school by our dad. And we thought that was a rare treat when it happened to be snow and we could ride in the sleigh to school. And we were fortunate in having a cutter, and I mean a cutter, a double seated cutter with upholstered in broadcloth, dark green broadcloth, had a nice dash board. We had a driving team, always a driving team, that was kept groomed very, very well, and sleigh bells when it was snow. And that was a treat to get to go to school in that, and have other kids envy us because we got to ride in a cutter to school. But we also rode in the hack in the mud, when the mud went clear up to the bottom of the hack in the spring. And no sand, no paving, nothing but mud, mud, mud. And Moscow's noted, they bet there wasn't one pair of clean shoes in Moscow during the winters, early winters, and that's about right.

(Break)

(Side C: minute 12)

E N: There were other people that came later, like a man we called Chipmunk Johnson that was a Norwegian. He had a little acreage on top of the Paradise Mountain and it's still there, but I don't know who lives there, he's been dead years. He made the little water trough that we used for the horses, made it out of the wood that he got off of his farm up there. They had a big family, and they'd walk from the tip of that Paradise Mountain, walk down and walk over our land. My dad always let them do that, and they'd nearly always stop and get a drink of water, but mother usually had something

to give them to eat like coffee and rolls and maybe a feed. And then they'd walk to town and walk back all in one day. They'd shop, he'd have a gunny sack, and she would have a big bag that she'd had made out of old material I suppose. And they'd but their groceries and carry them on their back, home to their family.

Because what I remember, when I wasn't very big was that she was going to have another baby, and not very far away either. And they came, and she walked to town. And she had her baby, I think the next day. And she'd walked to town and walked back.

And he made this tub we called it or cup, some of them call it cup, for the watering trough. He built our first barn; he was a carpenter. And he rolled it down from Paradise Mountain, he rolled it down over our farm, our whole farm, see there look at that picture and you can tell, get an idea about the hills and that, that he rolled that over and down.

(Break)

(Side C: minute 20)

LAURA: So what's the story about Mrs. Maguire?

E N: Oh yeah, you still didn't get that. All right, Mrs. Maguire was one of the homesteaders, see. And she said that one of the first winters they came here, they had a lot of cattle and they'd done like the Northrupp's in there, they'd built a big barn and had cattle and was gonna to make a good living there. And there'd been people that hadn't even been farmers back east came over in wagons in 1871, I think. And so cattle just plain died you know, they just died, and they just couldn't save 'em cause they didn't have any grass. It was just too cold, it froze, and I guess they didn't haul the hay in, I don't know about that.

But anyhow, she said, when she came over when I was born, she came over

to help. That's the they used to do, you know. They did have the doctor though. My mother had a doctor, but all of our ten children were born on the farm in that bed there instead of in a hospital. And Mrs. Maguire said "We saved one cow, but we finally, before the very last," she said "we had to empty the straw out of all our mattresses to keep that cow living." And they did it. They had three cows. The others died, but one cow survived. And they emptied the mattresses, the straw or hay or whatever they called it, it was dry hay you know in the mattress. And she survived on that. And they managed to have some milk, you know. And oh, it was tough, it was really rough.

She said "Well," she said, "you think you've got it bad now," she told my mother. But then by that time they'd already even got the railroad in here, by the time I was born, and things were getting a lot better.