GROWING UP IN CATLOW VALLEY

May Deboy was a Practical Nurse at the Ponderosa Nursing Home for several years and a resident of Merrill, Oregon. In 1982 she was a guest speaker at the Klamath Historical Society Meeting, to tell about her life.

May was born in Oklahoma Indian Territory in 1899 to Esther and Wiley Byran and given the name Glenna May. The family first moved to Kansas and then to Washington where Wiley was a surveyor.

1899 was also the year Austin Deboy and May's brother helped bring a herd of cattle purchased by Pete French from various ranchers around the Medford area, through Linkville and on to his ranch in Harney County.

Early in the 1900's enthusiasm for dry land farming sparked many sales of small acreage farms. In 1909 it took a whole month to drive a team of horses and wagon from The Dalles to Catlow Valley.

In the summer of 1911, Mr. Byran, a son and two sons-in-law homesteaded in Catlow Valley, southwest of Burns, Oregon and just over the hill from the Pete French Ranch, or better known as the "P" Ranch.

The Catlow Valley named for John Catlow, cattle baron, was chosen as a homestead site because there were lots of springs and plenty of moisture then. If a good crop of sagebrush would grow, then the land must be fertile. It also seemed a good climate for May's Mother who suffered from asthma.

May and her Mother were living in Snohomish, Washington and in
February 1912 her Father came for them. They traveled by covered wagon from Snohomish to Vancouver. From there they traveled by train to Bend, Oregon while her brother and brothers-in-law brought the wagon.

They lived in Bend for a month before starting their trip to the Catlow Valley. While there they bought a cow and May's Mother made lots of butter and salted it down for the trip. The cow had to be sold before they left Bend because the trip would have been too hard for her.

From Bend they traveled with the covered wagon and a hack. The hack held all the camping gear and hay for the horses. The covered wagon was crammed with the absolute necessities of living equipment and supplies—enough to last until May's Father could bring in more supplies. There were twelve in the party and most walked the 100 miles. May was between twelve and thirteen years of age at the time.

The weather was cold with blizzards, ice and snow. They stopped occasionally and built a big bonfire with the sage brush to get warm. When the children became too tired to walk further someone in the wagon would get out and walk awhile so the children could rest and get warm beside the little pot-bellied stove. The stove was bolted to the floor of the wagon through its little claw feet so it couldn't tip over.

There wasn't room in the wagon for all to sleep. A canvas was spread on the snow and the heavy blanket lined quilts were laid on top of it. The blankets didn't make the quilts extra warm, just extra heavy. Their shoulders ached from the weight of them by morning. In the morning the canvases were spread on the hack to dry out. May only remembered two full days of sunshine on that trip through.

Inside the wagon there was a full sized bed with storage space under it for extra bedding, suitcases, cooking utensils, food and etc. During the day the bed itself was piled high with bedding and luggage.

Usually May slept in the wagon with her Father and Mother but sometimes they had to sleep outside. Everyone slept in all but their outer clothing so all they had to do was crawl out of bed
and don their outside clothes each morning which they did in a hurry to keep from getting too cold.

A lot of jack rabbits were eaten back then. They were not wormy then as they later became. A camp fire was built and special forked sticks of juniper were place in the ground from which the rabbits were hung to be broiled.

One of the cooking pans brought along was a round one that would hold about nine biscuits. Baking enough biscuits for so many required several bakings. A griddle that fit right down over the top of the stove baked a griddle sized pancake for each person to start the day out with. This is where all that churned butter came in handy.

In those days most groceries were packed in wooden boxes. These same wooden boxes served as chairs and tables.

They had no trouble finding Catlow Valley. May's Father and brother and brothers-in-law had been there before. Mr. Byran being a surveyor and using his compass headed for the Steens Mountains. When they arrived at a point where he could see the Steens, he headed straight for them. Luck was with them too, they hit a wagon trail that took them down the Valley to Clover Swale and from there right to Catlow Valley. May remembered the valley as being seventy-five miles long and thirty-five miles wide.

They were invited to spend the night inside the house at Rock Creek Ranch during a very bad blizzard for which they were very grateful.

A Czek lady, her son and daughter had a homestead three miles south of the Rock Creek Ranch. May's family stayed there a week while their dug out was being made ready. They lived in the dug out until their house was built. The dug out was a pit six to seven feet deep and a tent was stretched over it and tied down securely to keep the wind from penetrating too much. A wood heater kept it warm. There were acres of sagebrush to burn for fuel.

Many other families also chose to live like this and because of all the tents, the cowboys gave this area the nickname of "Ragtown".
May's younger sister and husband had stayed in Bend. On her Father's next trip to Bend he brought them down to Catlow Valley. Then on his third and fourth trips to Bend, he brought his son and daughter-in-law with their two week old baby to the valley.

Water was carried from springs at Three Mile Creek and Home Creek until wells were dug. The springs at that time were really something, May recalled. One day during the month of May, May was driving the hack with her family and a neighbor along. Her Father was taking care of the Three Mile Ranch at the foot of the Steens Mountains. They took a short cut across a field and through a gate when all of a sudden they were in water up to the bed of the hack! That was water just from the springs.

The wells only had to go down 90 to 96 feet. A fellow ran a windlass and hauled up the mud from the bottom, bucket full by bucket full.

May remembered an accident that happened at a well digging site. Billy Carroll and Bob Kuntz were digging their well and fell while digging and were in there seven days before help came. They had started digging the well about four feet across the opening but as they went down, they narrowed it to about three feet.

Bob Kuntz was at the bottom with Billy. Billy had tried to get to the top but had fallen and broken both legs. Bob could dig his feet into the side in "toe holes" and inch his way up by bracing himself against the opposite wall until he got to the wide part. But being of short build, he couldn't reach from one side to the other enough to brace himself to climb on up. So there he hung about fifteen feet below the surface. He hung there for several days before he fell back down on Billy who had fallen the farthest but he tried again.

They had almost given up hope by the time help did arrive. A neighbor had not seen them around for several days and knew they had been working on their well. He went to the house, went in and found food spoiling on the table and went out toward the well. He called out and Bob answered him.

There was Bob almost ready to fall so he took the lines off of the horse's harness and fastened them together and ran the lines
around the windlass. Then took the part that snaps into the bit and fixed it under Bob's arms so he could hold on well enough to be brought on up. Then he rode for help on one of the horses. May's brother-in-law was doing the doctoring in the area so they then went for a fellow who had a model T Ford. They let the top down on the Ford, took the door off of Billy's house and laid it across the back and laid Billy on it and covered him well. Her brother-in-law rode in the back seat to hold him after he had given him some shots to keep him under until they could get him to Burns which was 100 miles away. The weather was very cold and winterish. When they arrived in Burns the Doctor had to amputate both of Billy's legs above the knees. From then on he always walked with the help of two canes. Billy was later elected County Clerk and held that position until he was an old man.

When asked how they kept from freezing their noses in the 60° below weather, May said they wore a home-knitted deal that went over their heads and wrapped their faces up to protect the face and nose.

There were fun times too. They organized a dance band, a banjo, a guitar, a violin and her piano. May had learned to play chords and could accompany the others on most any song they wanted to play. These dances were held in the school house every two week during the winter. Turns were taken in gathering up the neighbors in a hay wagon to bring them to the dances. There was lots of hay in the bottom of the wagon and everyone was bundled up with long-handled underwear under everything else. They took along plenty of comforters to cover up with and as long as there was no wind they didn't suffer too much.

You could hear the squeal of the wagon wheels on the cold snow for miles. Each wagon or family brought food for the midnight supper. The quilts they had brought were used to bed down the youngsters while everyone else danced until daylight. May said, "We were already up when it came time to go to work or do the chores so all we had to do was change our clothes and get to the chores".

Vegetables grew well. One fall day May and her Father were digging the turnips. May dug up one the size of a dinner plate.
It had been hollowed out by a rabbit to make his winter home. They kept that one around for a long time and finally Mr. Byran took it to Burns to show to the County Agent there.

Mirages were a common thing in the Catlow Valley. They happened just before sundown or just at sun up. May told about some of the mirages they would see.

"One evening Dad and Mother and I were working out in the yard and Dad called out, "Oh, come look..." Out there we could see this stallion and his bunch out there drinking. We knew it was from Beatys Butte 15 miles away. Then we could see a dust cloud come down Beatys Butte and Dad said, "Watch, we're going to see some fire works! The other stallion, a rival, met this first one we had seen and we could see both of them come at each other. We could even see their open mouths...but couldn't hear the scream we knew they must be making."

"They would come at each other, back off, come at each other, raring up pawing and striking and whirling and kicking. We watched that mirage for fully 45 minutes. Finally the whipped stallion just quit and took his mares and went back up into the hills,...and he took the mirage with him. But that mirage was just as plain as if those stallions had been right out there in our front yard."

"Another time, Dad called us to come look and there it seemed like the Beckley Store, seven miles away, was right out in our back yard. The fellow that did the chores there to pay the rent on his cabin near the store, was feeding some chickens and we could see him walk into the chicken yard. We could even see his bare feet as he walked in on a board. We watched him pick up a load of wood, hand a stick to his dog and walk back toward his door. We even could see the little chickens that were running around and the way the dog would come and stick his nose right up in the face of the old hen. That lasted 5 minutes or more."

"We could see those mirages most anytime of the year because it was so flat, I guess. It wasn't always the hot times of the year."

Another time Dad called us out to look at the train that seemed to be coming right down the road that ran along the Rim
Rock. That train looked just as if it was choo-chooing along the road with the smoke a flying behind and kicking up dust like an old model "T" going along a dusty road."

There was one time when a mirage helped save a little boy's life. This little boy, about four years old, had been out with his Mother and three of his brothers clipping sage brush. That sage brush was about 6 feet tall there and the little boy wandered away into it. The family hunted and hunted and finally called for help because it was getting near dark. My brother-in-law, the pharmacist-doctor, went to the ranch in his Ford to get some help. So here he came with all the buckaroos, so many that they had to bed them down in the two school houses. My Mother and sister helped to feed them.

At daylight, the next morning, they all got out to begin the hunt. I was riding with my Dad and my older sister. My older sister told Dad that she was going to ride over to the flat. The flat didn't have that great big sage brush, only little low stuff called "Water sage". Down there she saw what she thought was a coyote sitting on his haunches. She galloped off toward it to take a shot at it as long as it was there as a good target. But when she got closer she saw it was not a coyote but the little boy sitting there. He had looked like a coyote in the mirage above the flat. He had wandered over 5 miles from home and had become frightened and started running."

May told of an unforgettable experience that was not a mirage, but real. "In 1915 or 1916, one beautiful moonlit night, my Dad took Mother and my sister and me for a drive to shoot rabbits. We really hated rabbits and helped out in the rabbit drives that were held every now and then. We would get 5¢ a scalp for our bounty and that really mounted up, thick as the rabbits were and as many as were killed in the drives.

But this time we didn't shoot them..."Dad had stopped suddenly and we sat up to look out. There on the dried up lake bed in the middle of a circle of rabbits, two rabbit couples were dancing. They'd hop-hop-touch their paws to the opposite couple, then hop-hop back. Then their partners would hop-hop out and touch paws with opposite couples and go back to the circle and do the
same thing. We sat there and watched those rabbits for a half an hour and never fired a shot...and we came out to shoot rabbits. I'll bet there isn't another person in 10,000 that saw what we saw that night!"

Strep throat was going around the settlement and May had a severe case of it which developed into a boil on her neck with an infection that protruded into her throat. A poultice of bread and milk was the common remedy for infections but it didn't improve May's infection. Without any anesthesia, her brother-in-law, the only doctor of sorts around there, made an incision to drain the infection but accidentally cut the wrong way and severed an important cord in her neck which resulted in having to go through the rest of her life with an uncomfortable tilt of the head.

In 1911 there were hamlets with names like Sageview, Beckley, Delane and Vendugo which consisted of a General Store and Post Office. The area had a population of about 700 dry land farmers who became increasingly disenchanted. Eventually even the old cattle town of Blitzen folded and the Frontier Hotel was moved to French Glen.

Many others left the valley to serve in WWI or to get higher paying jobs. Few returned after the war.

May graduated from high school in 1917 along with eleven other students. In May of that same year May married Austin Deboy who was eighteen years older than she. They moved to his ranch on Deer Creek on Hart Mountain where they lived in a log cabin with a lean-to attached for the kitchen and wash room.

Grain and cattle were raised. Then came the dry years when they lost their crops and pastures. To make matters even worse there was an influx of antelope, literally thousands of them. They were so near starved that they dug up the meadow and the place where they had hayed. They even started eating the roots. That was during the 1917 to 1919 cycle. They had 275 cattle when they sold out in 1919 and moved to Summer Lake. Mr. Deboy suffered from emphysema and could no longer take the grain dust.

There was a little store for sale on the road that leads into Summer Lake just before you come to the Game Commission site and May bought it "much against her husbands wishes". Mr. Deboy died
in 1952. In 1956, May sold the store to her youngest daughter and her husband and moved to Boise, Idaho to study nursing.

May moved to Merrill, Oregon where she had family and drove back and forth to Klamath Falls where she worked for two years at the Ponderosa Nursing Home as a Medical Nurse. She also did Home Nursing. After she quit full time Nursing, May worked one or two years in the Summer Lake country on a Lookout.

After a heart attack, May slowed down and only did occasional nursing.

The time came that May could no longer take care of herself and eventually she became a resident of the Clairmont Nursing Home on Washburn Way where she lived for several years. She died at the age of 93 years on November 5, 1993, survived by two sons, Lloyd and Jack and their wives plus 8 grandchildren and 13 great grandchildren.

From the files of Janis Kafton,
Written for The Trumpeter by Mae L. Smith.
The annual Klamath County Historical Society Tour that was to have gone into the Whiteline Ranch, the Neubert Ranch and the Jenson Ranch in upper Swan Lake has been cancelled.

A tour into the Klamath River Canyon is being tentatively planned for July 24th.

The next meeting of the Historical Society will be on September 22nd. at 7:30 PM. in the Museum Meeting Room on Spring Street.

We keep having inquiries about issues of the Klamath Echoes. Does anyone have a spare copy of No. 1 and No. 5? Please phone 882-1440. Does anyone have an extra copy of No. 12? Please phone 1-545-6369. People doing research are always looking for Klamath Echoes. If you have any that you do not want anymore please contact the Historical Society—884-2899 or 884-0350 or 882-1088 or 884-6363.

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